

Towards an optimal employment strategy for people seeking asylum in Victoria

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for people seeking asylum in Victoria,*
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Foreword

A message from the CEO and Founder of the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, Kon Karapanagiotidis OAM

I want to start by acknowledging the incredible vision and generosity of the Shine On Foundation in commissioning and supporting this research, alongside our research partner, The Centre for Social Impact at Swinburne University. None of this would have been possible without them.

The Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC) embarked on this journey because of our unwavering faith in the boundless potential and capability of people seeking asylum. We know that refugees have within their DNA an extraordinary resilience, work ethic, courage and determination; that's how they have survived war and conflict and still found a way to keep themselves and their families safe from harm's way.

I am the son of migrants, the first to go to high school in my family. My parents arrived without a word of English, but they

had the opportunity to contribute and build a better life and I stand on their shoulders through their hard work and sacrifices. That's all people seeking asylum want - a fair go and a chance at a better life for their families.

As an organisation we have always, as part of our mission, existed to address the service gaps and critical, unmet needs of people seeking asylum in Victoria. We also fight to free the 'trapped' potential of our members - to support not only their needs, but also their goals, and what they hope to contribute to this nation.

Despite their capabilities and resilience, people seeking asylum are forcibly de-skilled upon arrival in Australia, due to the barriers imposed on them throughout their visa application process by the Australian government. What is lost is not just this incredible potential, skills and talent but a continuation of our great multicultural success story when we don't let people give and be their best in our country.



Some were denied the right to work for up to three years, acquiring an unavoidable gap in their employment history - itself a barrier to finding work.

Others have struggled with the complexities of finding stable housing, legal representation and health care; learning a new language; enrolling their children in school; dealing with separation from family members, as well as the long-term health effects of trauma, social isolation and exclusion. These challenges are intensified for those with lower levels of English and/or disrupted education due to conflict or persecution in their home countries.

In addition to these challenges, the federal government's cuts to the Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) safety net have increased the need for people seeking asylum to find work (any work) without adequate support to develop their capacity to do so, or adequate guards against their exploitation in the local labour market.

Mainstream federal employment services are not accessible to people seeking asylum, and State-funded services like Jobs Victoria, do not support individuals with English below level three, referring them to long-term EAL classes which many can no longer afford to attend.

Those unable to find stable work will quickly face heightened pressure to return to danger in their home countries, due to forced destitution as a consequence of the SRSS cuts. Local services providing emergency relief, food, welfare, health and housing support have been overwhelmed by demand from individuals and families denied basic income support. Homelessness will further erode these individuals' capacity to find and keep a job, reinforcing their reliance on community agencies.

Close to 270 jobs have been secured by ASRC members this financial year, a 25% increase on 2017 thanks to additional support from our funders. We are the most cost-effective employment service for people seeking asylum in Victoria (one third of the cost of State government funded employment programs), sourcing roles with higher than average pay rates for our participants. And 40% of these roles were secured by women. We are equally proud of our pilot Pathways to Employment program, which has been developed to promote English acquisition and work readiness in people seeking asylum with English below level three.

A job provides a return on many levels - both tangible and intangible, for the individual, their families and their wider

community, as well as for the services they engage with for support. We may never know the full, positive difference made by the right job, secured by the right person, at the right time in their lives. It is a form of practical justice, in the face of the systematic denial of individuals' rights.

At the same time, we recognise that work readiness requires more than just English. It also requires intercultural fluency, health and agency, establishing personal and professional networks, and being able to demonstrate the essential technical and transferable 'soft skills' that we all need to find, and keep, a job.

This is why holistic, integrated service delivery is essential for people seeking asylum, as reflected in the structure and function of the ASRC Innovation Hub and wider ASRC programs.

Together, the ASRC provides a model of cohesive, multi-disciplinary service delivery - a place-based intervention which combines and magnifies the efforts of our staff, members, volunteers, employers, external service partners, funders and State and local government support.

This approach has enabled responsiveness in the face of a rapidly changing and increasingly punitive policy environment. It has facilitated thought leadership and service innovation, with global implications. At the heart of our model is the simple belief that we all deserve to thrive, not simply survive, and that we all have something we long to contribute.

We are more than the sum of our parts. This applies to individuals in community, and to agencies operating as part of a wider sector ecosystem. If we are to provide best practice employment support to people seeking asylum, now more than ever, we will need to do it together.

We must stop seeing the imaginary risk and burden of refugees and instead see their skills, shared values, commitment to building a better life for their families and the talent they are ready to unleash if simply given the opportunity to shine and be seen. Our challenge as a community is to keep investing in the human, cultural and social capital of refugees and to invest early, build on their capabilities, take a strengths based approach and open up pathways and policies to enable full participation in education and the workforce.

Let's continue our powerful Australian success story by nurturing the talent and believing in our next generation of great Australians.

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- Sam Buczynskyj, Candidate Care and Program Impact;
- Sonia Mackie, Employment Program Coordinator, ASRC Dandenong; and
- Moin Zafar, Coordinator, Professional Mentoring Program.

We would also like to thank the many ASRC members (people seeking asylum) and employers who willingly shared their experiences with us through their participation in the surveys.

We hope this report strengthens the ASRC's future work and makes a valuable contribution to supporting people seeking asylum in Victoria by providing evidence both to policy-makers and practitioners.

Kiros Hiruy

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Executive summary

Australia is one of the most successful multicultural and migrant nations in the world (Ozdowski 2013), with 46% of its population having either foreign-born parents or being foreign-born themselves (OECD 2018). Part of this foreign-born population either are, or have once been, people seeking asylum and refugees. Reports from the Australian Government Department of Home Affairs (2018) indicate that there was a total of 64,805 people seeking asylum in Australia (36,874 who had arrived by boat and 27,931 people who arrived by plane over the last few years). Of these, many were granted Bridging Visas and a large proportion have made Victoria their home. Finding a job is crucial for stabilising the circumstances of people seeking asylum while they await the outcome of their application for protection. However, people seeking asylum face a range of barriers to finding 'decent employment'¹, many of which are exacerbated by Federal and State Government policies.

This research was commissioned by the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC) to understand the challenges faced by people seeking asylum with finding employment in Victoria, and to propose practical policy recommendations to improve their employment outcomes and social participation pathways. Data was collected primarily through desktop research, and supplemented by surveys of ASRC program participants (n=59) and employers of people seeking asylum (n=9), along with interviews with ASRC program managers and volunteers (n=3). An economic analysis of 'targeted employment support' programs was carried out - including the New South Wales Government's Refugee Employment Settlement Program (RESP); the Victorian Government's Jobs Victoria Employment Network (JVEN); the Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) Given the Chance for Asylum Seekers (GtCAS) Program and the ASRC Employment Program - to understand the overall economic costs and benefits of each of the programs. This was followed by a qualitative analysis of the survey and interview data.

Our economic analysis suggests that:

- The ASRC Employment Program is less costly than the JVEN, with a total economic impact (gross output) valued at over \$4 million and raising the employment rate of people seeking asylum by 33% during the period the program was undertaken.
- The cost of the ASRC Employment Program is significantly lower per participant (\$1,602) than JVEN (\$4,333). This is true even when the in-kind contribution of ASRC is included (\$2,519).
- The survey results suggest that the reported income levels of people seeking asylum who found work through the ASRC Employment Program were higher than BSL's GtCAS Program.

Survey and interview findings suggest that:

- Over 40% of people seeking asylum felt that the lack of local contacts, friends, or community networks was a key barrier to finding employment. A lack of personal or professional networks upon first arriving in Australia creates obstacles both in finding and contacting prospective employers and in sourcing professional referees.
- The complexity and ambiguity of the current visa framework creates barriers to accessing work for people seeking asylum in Victoria. The survey and interview data illustrated that the visa status determination process and the eligibility restrictions for government-funded services (most notably the recent cuts to Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS)²) exacerbate stress, economic insecurity and housing instability for people seeking asylum. This seems to create a difficult base from which to find and keep work.

1 Decent work 'involves opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men' (ILO 2019)

2 Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) is the program that supports vulnerable people seeking asylum who are waiting for the government's decision on a visa application. The program provides a basic living allowance (typically 89% of Newstart allowance, or approximately \$250 per week), casework support and access to torture and trauma counselling. Cutting this support from people seeking asylum will likely leave more than 7,500 people hungry and homeless (Refugee Council of Australia 2018).

- **People seeking asylum are exposed to discrimination and exploitation in the local labour market.** The combination of restrictive and inconsistent visa conditions and the lack of government-funded support to those who cannot work appears to have given rise to a culture of exploitation of people seeking asylum by some employers. The current visa system has also created a precarious labour market for people seeking asylum and their prospective employers, who perceived employing somebody on a temporary visa as 'risky'.
 - **The expectation for people seeking asylum to transition straight into employment and the lack of social and health supports may have a detrimental impact on their settlement.** Many people seeking asylum require social and health support for their immediate needs, such as trauma counselling, before they transition into the workforce.
 - **Unemployment is a persistent challenge for people seeking asylum.** Finding decent work is a challenge for most people seeking asylum, who often have to accept lower paid 'survival jobs' regardless of their previous qualifications and work experience.
- Our policy analysis suggests that:
- **People seeking asylum in Victoria face a range of barriers to finding decent employment and these are exacerbated by current policies that restrict their access to basic services.** However, studies have shown that gaining decent employment is important to people seeking asylum both economically and in improving their health and wellbeing. It is also vital for their longer-term successful settlement.
 - **Whilst the current government-funded programs seem to be helpful in facilitating employment, there are two cohorts of people seeking asylum who are left to 'fall through the cracks':** those who are most disadvantaged (low-skilled entrants, and those with lower-level English); and those with professional or trades qualifications, who are effectively 'de-skilled' upon entering Australia.
 - **The outsourcing and marketisation of employment services appear to have disadvantaged people seeking asylum and other marginalised groups.** Evidence suggests that current arrangements with employment services have inadvertently created the tendency for employment service providers to 'park' and 'churn' employment seekers to maximise the financial benefits claimable under the terms of their service contracts. The literature indicates that employment service providers pay more attention to 'job-ready' job seekers than people who face greater labour market disadvantage.
 - **A targeted, integrated and holistic program focused on people seeking asylum can fill existing policy and program gaps in addressing employment challenges faced by this group and contribute significantly to the local economy.**
 - **Collaborative and inclusive strategies and policies – "joined-up" policy thinking and action – are required to reform the macro-conditions that reinforce the exclusion of people seeking asylum from workforce participation and contribution.** Collaborative and inclusive State government policy reform, which includes greater public investment in employment programs, is likely to have a positive effect on the economic participation of people seeking asylum, which is beneficial both for individuals and their families, and the wider economic and social vitality of Victoria.

“I faced lots of racist people who took advantage of me and recruited me under lower pay because I am an asylum seeker.”



Intake Room 4

1 Introduction

Australia is one of the most successful multicultural and migrant nations in the world (Ozdowski 2013) with 46% of its population having either foreign-born parents or being foreign-born themselves (OECD 2018). Migration has been an important component of Australia's population, economy and social life since 1788. Migrant Australians – including refugees and people seeking asylum – are significant economic contributors and play a substantial role in shaping Australia's social fabric. According to the estimates of the Migration Council of Australia, Australia's projected population will be 38 million by 2050 and migration will be contributing \$1,625 billion to Australia's GDP (Migration Council of Australia 2015). Australian multiculturalism has enabled the nation to gain not only cosmopolitan attitudes and experiences, but also benefits from diverse inputs of bilingual skills, cultural 'know-how' and contacts facilitating international trade, entrepreneurial activity, and technological and artistic creativity (Carrington, McIntosh & Walmsley 2007). This, in turn, has enriched Australian living standards and enhanced Australia's international profile.

Australia accepted its first intake of refugees in 1938, in response to the displacement of Jewish Europeans caused by the Holocaust (Rutland 2003). Since then, Australia has accepted successive waves of refugees and people seeking asylum. Many refugees and people seeking asylum are determined and energetic in that they move very quickly from a position of receiving social support to working, opening businesses, paying mortgages, practising their art and engaging in their local communities. Like other Australians, people seeking asylum and refugees contribute greatly to the Australian economy. For instance, five of Australia's eight billionaires in 2000 were people whose families originally came to this country as refugees (Refugee Council of Australia 2010). Families from refugee backgrounds have also become some of Australia's most prominent philanthropists.

People seeking refuge arrive in Australia in one of three different ways: by plane on short-term visas before seeking protection upon arrival in Australia; and as humanitarian entrants through Australia's offshore resettlement program; or by boat without any Australian visa (Jesuit Social Services 2015). In the Australian policy context, people seeking asylum and refugees are defined differently. A refugee is someone who has been recognised under the 1951 Convention relating to the status of refugees and has been granted refugee status. In contrast, 'people seeking asylum' refers to those who have lodged a claim for protection but whose refugee status has not yet been determined. Based on their mode of arrival, people seeking asylum can be classified as sea arrivals or air arrivals. Although this report is mainly focused on people seeking asylum, we have, in some instances, used the terms people seeking asylum and refugees together because of the commonalities and overlapping nature of these groups and the available data about them.

Reports from the Australian Government Department of Home Affairs (2018), indicate that as at 31 December 2018, 'there were a total of 36,874 boat arrivals (so-called 'illegal maritime arrivals' ³ (IMAs) in Australia. Of these, 15,674 remained in the community and the remaining 21,200 IMAs have either been granted a substantive visa, departed Australia, returned to immigration detention or are deceased. Of those who remained in the community, 13,743 held a current Bridging E Visa (BVE) ⁴ and 1,931 awaiting grant of a further BVE (see Table 1). On the other hand, in 2017-2018, there was a total of 27,931 people who arrived by plane in Australia and later sought asylum in the country. Of those plane arrivals, only 1,425 were granted a protection visa. The remaining 26,507 people seeking asylum were on a bridging visa and waiting for their claim for refugee protection to be processed.

³ Illegal Maritime Arrivals (IMAs) is the term the Australian Government uses to refer to people seeking asylum who arrived in Australia by boat. Prior to 2013 'Irregular Maritime Arrivals' was used.

⁴ BVE lets people seeking asylum stay lawfully in Australia while they make arrangements to leave, finalise their immigration status, or wait for an immigration decision.

Table 1. People seeking asylum who arrived by boat and plane as at 31 December 2018 ⁵

	Total arrivals	Residing in communities	On bridging visas	Awaiting grant of bridging Visa	Departed Australia, in detention centres, granted a permanent visa, or deceased
Australia sea arrivals	36,874	15,674	13,743	1,931	21,200
Australia plane arrivals	27,931	NA	26,507	—	1,425 (granted permanent Visa)
Victoria		7,011 sea arrivals			

Source: Department of Home Affairs (2018)

About one-third of refugees and people seeking asylum in Australia make Victoria their home. It is estimated that about 4,000 refugees settle in Victoria each year, and another 10,000 or so people seeking asylum live in the Victorian community on bridging visas while they wait for the determination of their refugee status ⁶. Of those 15,674 people seeking asylum who arrived by boat and remained in the community as at 31 December 2018, about 7,011 (44.7%) lived in Victoria. Three-quarters (76%) of those living in Victoria were male. Within Victoria, about a quarter (1,522) lived in Greater Dandenong, followed by Brimbank (1,203) and Whittlesea (941). Over a third (35%) of the people seeking asylum in Victoria came from Iran (accounting for 2,466), while other major source countries for people seeking asylum include Sri Lanka (1,698), Afghanistan (642) and Pakistan (604) ⁷.

The successful settlement of people seeking asylum in Victoria is dependent on them gaining decent employment. Gaining decent employment is not only economically important to people seeking asylum, but also improves their health and wellbeing by providing a focus and purpose, and the opportunity to connect with others. Studies have consistently shown that decent employment can also ameliorate the detrimental health impacts of the protracted process of refugee status determination for people seeking asylum (Davidson & Carr 2010). However, people seeking asylum in Australia face a range of barriers to finding decent employment. These include individual factors (such as proficiency in the English language), social factors (including limited social networks), and systemic factors (such as institutionalised discrimination). Thus, there is a need for governments and organisations that support people seeking asylum to find new ways for people seeking asylum to secure and retain decent employment.

At present, there is a range of measures carried out by Federal and State governments and not-for-profit organisations to assist people seeking asylum to gain employment. These include the service provider network (of which the ASRC Employment Program is a member), which refers people seeking asylum to roles within the State's major infrastructure projects, delivered by consortia which have been set specific employment targets for members of disadvantaged groups. The Victorian Government's new social procurement framework and social enterprise strategy create new possibilities to support the employment of people seeking asylum. However, there are several critical gaps in the wider employment service ecosystem as it currently operates for people seeking asylum. This is particularly the case for those facing an immediate risk of destitution or heightened vulnerability to workplace exploitation, due to the imminent loss of their income safety net since June 2018.

The next section of the report presents the research methodology used in this project. This is followed by a literature review of the employment challenges faced by people seeking asylum and refugees, and the impact of unemployment on these groups. Finally, the findings section presents findings from the thematic analysis of the survey and interviews conducted for this project, as well as results of the economic analysis of targeted employment services, culminating in practical policy recommendations.

⁵ The group comprises both those on bridging visas and those awaiting grant of bridging visas.

⁶ <https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/about/populations/refugee-asylum-seeker-health>

⁷ <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/asylum-community/5/>

2 Methodology

2.1 Research aims and questions

The main aims of this project were to:

- quantify the cost-efficiency and economic return of the targeted employment support programs for people seeking asylum, and
- enable the development of a proposal to inform the State Government's agenda and practice around employment and social participation pathways for people seeking asylum in Victoria.

As such, the research question was 'What is the most efficient employment model to address the labour market needs and barriers faced by people seeking asylum in Victoria?'

2.2 Methods of data collection and analysis

To address this question, a mixed methods approach was used. First, a desktop study was conducted to review targeted employment services in light of their impacts and benefits. Concurrently, two survey instruments (one for people seeking asylum who are ASRC members, and another for current employers of people seeking asylum) were administered to their respective target samples. The surveys were designed to collect socio-economic data and other relevant information about the experiences people seeking asylum have had in seeking employment in Victoria. We also conducted interviews with three staff from the ASRC Innovation Hub (two managers and one volunteer) to gain insight into the structure and day-to-day operations of the ASRC Employment Program within the Innovation Hub, and the ways it responds to evolving Federal and State Government policies. Following the desktop study and collection of survey data, a socioeconomic analysis was conducted to determine the cost-effectiveness of targeted employment services available to people seeking asylum, and make comparison among these programs to enable program and policy recommendations to be made for the ASRC and the State Government's consideration.

2.3 Literature review and document analysis

A review of the literature on relevant policy instruments and identified programs supporting employment and social participation pathways for people seeking asylum with a focus on Victoria was conducted to inform both the economic impact assessment and policy analysis.

The targeted employment service programs reviewed include:

- The Jobs Victoria Employment Network (JVEN), funded by the State Government
- The ASRC Employment Program,
- The Brotherhood of St. Laurence (BSL) Given the Chance for Asylum Seekers (GtCAS) Program, and
- the New South Wales Government's Refugee Employment Settlement Program (RESP)

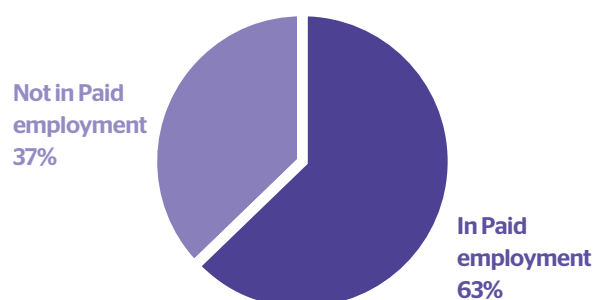
The first three programs were selected because of their direct relevance to people seeking asylum in Victoria and the fourth (RESP) was selected because of its instructional value as a State Government funded program focused on employment and social participation pathways for people seeking asylum and refugees.

2.4 Survey and interviews

Two surveys were designed and administered: one for people seeking asylum (ASRC members) and another one for employers offering work to people seeking asylum. The surveys were each comprised of forced-response and open-ended questions and hosted on Qualtrics. ASRC distributed links to the respective surveys to their member base and their network of known employers of people seeking asylum via email and SMS. The members' survey attracted 75 responses; 16 were incomplete and discarded, leaving a final sample of 59 for the analysis. The employers' survey attracted nine complete responses. Data from both surveys were initially analysed using Qualtrics, and relevant data was extracted for further policy and socio-economic analysis.

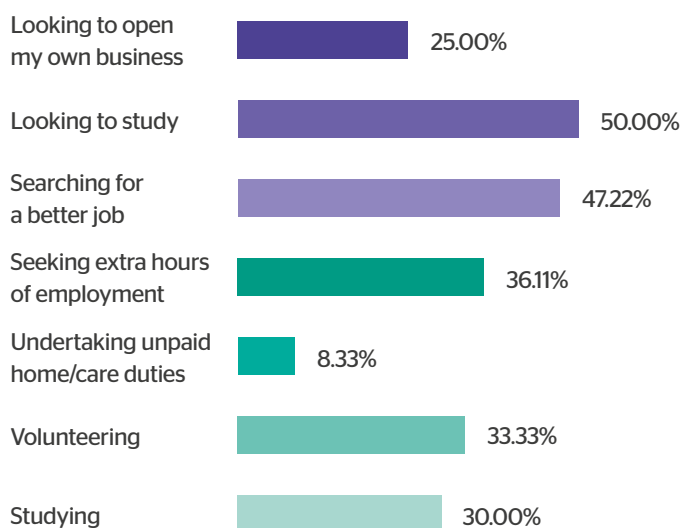
Of those members who completed the survey, 37 (63%) were in paid employment - 19 of these were employed full-time, 13 casual, and five part-time. Most were employed in business and administration (13), followed by factory and manual labour (9), the service industry (7), and community care and social services (5), with the remaining three in science and technology-related fields.

Figure 1. The proportion of member survey respondents currently in paid employment



Of those in paid employment, 18 reported ambitions to pursue further study while 9 were currently studying; 17 said that they were currently searching for a better job; 12 were volunteering; 9 said that they were looking to open their own business; and 3 were undertaking unpaid caring duties in addition to their employment.

Figure 2. Other occupations currently pursued by those in paid employment



Of the 9 employers' survey respondents, 4 organisations were in construction, 2 were social enterprises, 2 were in agriculture, forestry and fishing, 2 in transport, and one in each of wholesale trade, retail trade, finance and insurance, and cleaning. One was small, five medium, and three were large businesses.

To augment the survey data, interviews were conducted with ASRC employees and volunteers.

2.5 Data analysis

Data analysis was carried out in two phases. Phase one was concerned with establishing the most cost-effective program, and phase two was concerned with policy analysis and providing practical policy recommendations related to employment pathway(s) to support people seeking asylum based on the literature review, thematic analysis of the survey and interview data, and economic analysis.

Both survey and interview data, alongside the cost-benefit analysis of the targeted employment programs, were used to:

- understand the challenges of finding employment for people seeking asylum,
- determine the cost-efficiency of targeted employment programs, and
- provide relevant, practical policy recommendations to Government.

“Finding jobs could be easier if employers could not insist on having professional referees on your resume, because sometimes when you are new you can’t have these referees.”



3 People seeking asylum, the labour market and the social welfare system in Australia: a review of the literature

3.1 Introduction

Newly arrived people are settled in Australia under different migration policy frameworks, including migration programs (skilled and family), temporary entry visas (students, visitors, working holiday and others), and a humanitarian entry program. As noted in the introduction, employment plays a significant role in the successful settlement of migrants in Australia. Traditionally, employment services were provided directly by the Australian Government through the former Commonwealth Employment Service (CES). However, since the mid-1990s, employment services provision has been largely outsourced at the Federal level, through the creation of a quasi-competitive market for employment service providers (currently Jobactive).

The Australian Government's employment services system has five key objectives: helping job seekers to find and keep a job, assisting job seekers to move from welfare to work, supporting job seekers meet their mutual obligations, assisting employment services providers deliver quality services, and helping young people move into work or education (Australian Government 2018). However, people seeking asylum who are on bridging visas are not eligible for these employment services.

Data from the Department of Jobs and Small Business indicates that the Australian Government spent over \$1.7 billion on the Jobactive service in the 2017/18 annual budget (Australian Government 2018) to assist job seekers to secure employment. However, this has not been without challenges, particularly when considering refugees' and people seeking asylum's limited access to the services. In assessing the accessibility of government services for migrants, refugees and people seeking asylum, the Victorian Auditor General found that there was lack of consistency, coordination, or a whole-of-government approach to service planning and provision, despite \$1.32 million in funding to support employment service provision over three years (Auditor-General 2014).

Marketisation of employment services has created new challenges. Research has identified the tendency to 'park' and 'churn'⁸ job seekers by some service providers in order to maximise the financial benefits to providers (Considine, Lewis & O'Sullivan 2011). Further evidence shows that 'marketised' service delivery in employment services tends to focus primarily on job placement, rather than on education and training. Thus, employment service providers pay more attention to job-ready job seekers than those who face greater labour market disadvantage (Smith, Rhonda & Merrett, Alexandra 2018).

The outsourcing of employment services appears to have disadvantaged job seekers, especially the long term unemployed and other marginalised job seekers in rural and remote areas, who tend to be under-served (Smith, Rhonda & Merrett, Alexandra 2018). The "work first" model of employment support, which emphasises getting any work as soon as possible, rather than developing skills and gaining qualifications as an entry point to employment (Carney 2007; Davidson 2011) presumes a geographic mobility of workers that is not always desirable or possible. This can lead to excluding people with, for example, caring responsibilities from employment opportunities that are located a long way from where they live. For rural and remote communities, this can encourage out-migration of workers that undermines social cohesion locally, and exacerbates the over-concentration of population growth in our capital cities. As a result, governments continue to be involved in employment service provision, particularly where there are gaps in the market or disadvantaged job seekers with highly complex needs (Smith, Rhonda & Merrett, Alexandra 2018). However, there are additional challenges in providing employment opportunities for people seeking asylum in Australia, which is the focus of the subsequent sections of this report.

3.2 The employment challenges of people seeking asylum and refugees

Despite the significant contributions of all migrant groups to Australian society, there can be challenges related to the economic (employment, housing, education, and language); health (physical and mental) and socio-cultural (support networks, systemic racism, culture shock) issues that people face, particularly when they start life in their new country of residence. Refugees and people seeking asylum have needs particular to their situation (Fozdar & Hartley 2013). Many arrive having fled regional conflict or personal persecution. Some may have spent many years in refugee camps or in detention centres, and been denied the right to work or study. Many refugees subsequently suffer from the ongoing effects of trauma and stress (Davidson & Carr 2010). Others may have had disrupted education, work histories, and little or no access to healthcare, either in their country of origin, or in the country they fled to. As a result, they may have experienced economic exclusion and deteriorated physical and mental health (Sweet 2007).

Decent work – which may include paid or unpaid labour – has long been recognised in social psychology as having an important mediating effect on personal wellbeing by providing

⁸ 'Parking' occurs when employment providers provide little assistance to job seekers with low employment prospects, creating temporary artificial jobs that maximise placement payments, and rotating people through them. 'Churning' on the other hand indicates the tendency to prefer 'those job seekers most likely to achieve payable outcomes' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002: 80).

income, daily structure, self-esteem and new social relationships (Jahoda, 1982). In the Australian policy context, which is largely characterised by a 'work first' approach to social services, paid employment is essential not only for refugees and people seeking asylum to be able to support themselves and their families, but is also crucial in regaining a positive sense of identity and control over their lives (Australian Government 2011).

In this section, we focus primarily on the particular and additional barriers to employment faced by people seeking asylum. These barriers may result from several factors: institutions; government policies; systemic racism and discrimination; visa uncertainty; lack of English proficiency; labour market segmentation and a rigid system of skills recognition (Australian Government 2011; Casimiro, Hancock & Northcote 2007; Fozdar & Torezani 2008).

Physical and mental health needs can also limit the capacity of people seeking asylum to secure employment. These problems arise from torture and trauma, destitution, long periods living in refugee camps, social isolation and the multiple stresses of relocating to a new country (Refugee Council of Australia 2010).

Comparing refugees and people seeking asylum with other immigrant groups in Australia, Fozdar and Hartley (2013) found that refugees and people seeking asylum have higher unemployment rates, lower earnings, and lower occupational attainment. Furthermore, they are vulnerable to long-term unemployment and are less likely to secure 'good' jobs (Junankar & Mahuteau 2004). In relative terms, refugees are also more likely to be under-employed (that is, employed but seeking additional work hours) and to experience occupational downgrading where their pre-existing skills, qualifications and experience are not recognised by Australian employers (Hugo 2014). Lack of local work experience and referees, limited personal and professional networks, and structural and personal discrimination are other contributing factors (Correa-Velez, Barnett & Gifford 2015; Waxman 2001). Regardless of their trade or professional qualifications and extensive overseas experience, and even when their qualifications were achieved or updated in Australia, the majority of refugees and people seeking asylum find it difficult to gain employment. This was due mainly to a lack of Australian work experience, employers' perceptions of their general 'cultural difference' (what employers often described as 'organisational fit' and 'personality match'), and sometimes direct racism (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury 2006).

Securing stable, appropriate and fulfilling employment is vital for the successful settlement of refugees and people seeking asylum (Refugee Council of Australia 2009). Studies show that refugees and people seeking asylum have a strong motivation

to find work as quickly as possible, as they perceive work as an opportunity for personal development, an obligation to family and community, and as a way of showing gratitude to their new country (Refugee Council of Australia 2010; Flanagan 2007). Despite their eagerness to participate in the Australian workforce and the range of skills and qualifications they bring that match local skills shortages, people seeking asylum and refugees continue to face considerable barriers in accessing employment opportunities (Refugee Council of Australia 2010).

Employment gaps (that is, the time when people seeking asylum were not employed at a job) is another contributing factor for the chronic unemployment of people seeking asylum in Australia. Their inability to access employment for several months or years due to the denial or withdrawal of work rights, creates a gap in their employment history, which in turn undermines their subsequent employability. Federal Government policy has actively contributed to this problem by denying people seeking asylum the right to work in Australia - sometimes for many years - effectively limiting their capacity to gain local work experience (Fleay, Lumbus & Hartley 2016). The majority of people seeking asylum who arrived by boat were originally without work rights, and as a result, many were forcibly unemployed for several years (Jesuit Social Services 2015). Empirical evidence shows that a lack of local work experience reduces the chances of finding employment (Fozdar & Torezani 2008). Following the decision to cut SRSS payments in 2018, the Australian Government extended work rights to people seeking asylum who had previously been denied this. However, returning to work remains challenging for them because of the forced gap in their employment history.

In its 2018 Employment Research Project Brief, the ASRC stated that 'the capacity of people seeking asylum and refugees to find and retain suitable employment may be impacted by factors including welfare needs, health challenges, language and cultural barriers, discrimination, limited visa length, and limited access to social capital and local industry networks' (ASRC 2018, p.4). As a result, most people seeking asylum and refugees - including professional and qualified people - end up in 'survival' jobs which fail to utilise their skills, expertise, and aptitudes (Barraket 2007). While often a flow-on effect of the factors discussed above, this can also occur through patterns of 'ethnic path migration', where newly arrived people are offered low skilled work opportunities within their own ethno-religious communities (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury 2006). The results of a longitudinal study of employment among refugee migrants in Australia highlighted that 95% of highly qualified refugees who participated in the study worked in manual labour roles (Correa-Velez, Barnett and Gifford 2015)⁹. Worsening the

9 The study was conducted on 233 adult refugee men living in South-East Queensland

situation is the recent decision by the Australian Government to withdraw Status Resolution Support Service (SRSS) income support payments from people seeking asylum from June 2018, irrespective of their current employment status (ASRC 2018).

3.3 The Australian social services system and people seeking asylum

Welfare state regimes inform how social services are delivered, and they differ from country to country. According to Andersen (2012), there are three types of welfare models: residual, universal and corporatist. The Australian system can be broadly classified as residual (Green 2002). The basic principle of residual welfare states is that individuals and households should meet most of their welfare needs themselves, with the role of the state mainly confined to providing a safety net for those most in need. Corporatist and universal welfare states, on the other hand, encompass social insurance systems that take care of social risk and services for most of the population throughout the life course (Andersen 2012).

As previously noted, Australian government approaches to employment services since the mid-1990s have been characterised by a 'work first' logic (Davidson 2011). The Australian employment system is also relatively limited in how transitional it is; that is, it can be challenging to transition in and out of work at different life stages (for example, during periods of primary care for young children), although over the past decade there have been some improvements to government financial support for primary carers.

Comparative research indicates that there is a higher degree of stigma associated with unemployment in welfare state regimes compared with employment services environments within universal systems (Anttonen & Sipilä 2008). It is argued that when recipients of support are drawn mainly from the poor, people are more inclined to believe they are 'undeserving', as opposed to viewing taxpayers and recipients as essentially the same people, in interchangeable roles. In universal welfare regimes, the unemployed use the same child care facilities, schools, hospitals, nursing homes, and so on as other citizens, and this generates more similar living styles, and eventually makes it easier for those at the bottom to fulfil their 'identity criterion' (Larsen 2008).¹⁰

The residual nature of employment services provision in Australia can also create 'welfare trap' challenges for recipients of social security payments, which potentially confines the unemployed and those with low incomes to extended periods of poverty and welfare dependency (Dockery, Ong & Wood 2011).

The welfare trap occurs where it is financially more beneficial to individuals to remain on welfare than it is to move off it into paid employment. For example, people on disability support pensions can be highly affected by the welfare trap as there can be a significant drop in welfare payments when they take on a very small amount of paid employment. Similarly, for refugees and people seeking asylum, access to housing support payments can drop radically when they take on paid work, and this can be a disincentive to taking on paid work where their net income then becomes financially unsustainable (Bodsworth 2010). People seeking asylum, in particular, have limited to generally no access to services such as the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and Community Housing.

3.4 The current social security services for refugees and people seeking asylum in Australia

In the Australian policy context, as noted in the introduction, people seeking asylum and refugees are defined differently. Thus, the Australian Government social security services for these cohorts differ depending on their respective eligibility criteria, although there are certain services that both groups can access. Under its Humanitarian Settlement Program, the Commonwealth Government funds various non-governmental organisations to provide services to humanitarian entrants for up to five years after their arrival in Australia. This assistance is intended to build skills and knowledge for socio-economic wellbeing. Based on the needs of the refugees, this support may include help with housing, physical and mental health and well-being, community participation and networking, family functioning and social support, justice, language services, education and training, and employment (Migration Council Australia 2019).

The Commonwealth Government assists people seeking asylum living in the community through the Asylum Seekers Assistance Scheme and Community Assistance Support Program, which are provided through NGOs such as Adult Multicultural Education Services (AMES), Life Without Barriers and the Red Cross (now defunded). Eligible individuals and families could receive financial assistance not exceeding 89 per cent of the Department of Human Services (DHS) Special Benefit (which would currently amount to \$458.88 per fortnight for a single person) and 89 per cent of DHS Rent Assistance (which would currently amount to \$75.71 per fortnight) (Buckmaster & Guppy 2014).

Limited assistance in the form of services is provided to assist people seeking asylum living in the community to meet basic needs such as access to health and community services (Phillips 2013). However, not all people seeking asylum have access to

¹⁰ The identity criterion refers to the importance of feeling a shared identity with the groups who are to be supported (Larsen 2008: p150)

social services under current arrangements. Since late 2017, people seeking asylum have lost access to the support from these services. The Australian Government has also set 'tougher' criteria for other groups of people seeking asylum to access the services. The Government has indicated that people who have work rights and do not meet an extremely high threshold of 'vulnerability' will lose SRSS support, whether they have a job or not. There are four elements to the vulnerability assessment which include:

- a. ongoing and permanent physical health barriers;
- b. mental health barriers;
- c. single parents with pre-school aged children, pregnant women with complications, a primary carer for someone with a significant vulnerability, people aged 70 and over; and
- d. a major crisis for the client (family violence, house fire, flood, etc.) (Refugee Council of Australia 2018).

There are a few employment programs (including JVEN, the ASRC Employment Program, the BSL GtCAS program, and NSW RESP) in place to support people seeking asylum and refugees to access employment in Australia. The majority of these programs operate in Victoria and New South Wales as there are more people seeking asylum in these two states compared to other states and territories in Australia.

3.4.1 The Jobs Victoria Employment Network (JVEN)

The JVEN is an initiative of the Victorian Government to expand employment assistance to disadvantaged jobseekers, including people seeking asylum and refugees, and to work towards consolidation of Victorian employment services. The services are delivered by employment specialists who work closely with employers to identify job opportunities and prepare job seekers for those roles. These services include:

- actively engaging with employers to identify job opportunities
- offering flexible services designed to meet the needs of job seekers
- linking to community support services to meet the needs of job seekers
- providing services that address gaps in and complement existing services, including Federal employment services.

With \$53 million over four years allocated in the 2016-17 State Budget, JVEN aims to consolidate Victorian employment services into one system, making it easier for disadvantaged job seekers to access the help they need (Victorian Government 2017). Further, the Victorian Government provided \$550,000 to the Victorian Cooperative on Children's Services for Ethnic Groups (VICSEG) New Futures to assist disadvantaged job seekers in the state. VICSEG is a not for profit, community organisation for families, children & young people that provides

support and training to newly arrived and recently settled migrant communities. VICSEG New Futures has been contracted under the Jobs Victoria Program to assist disadvantaged jobseekers from migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds to find work, primarily focusing on the aged care, disability and health services sectors.

By June 2017, VICSEG had placed more than 170 participants into employment across health and aged care, the majority of whom had experienced unemployment, and faced cultural and language barriers to finding work. Based on this achievement, the Victorian State Government provided VICSEG additional funding of nearly \$1.3 million to help an additional 300 jobseekers (about \$4,333 per person) (Victorian Government, 2017).

3.4.2 Refugee Employment Support Program (RESP)

The RESP was rolled out by the NSW Government in 2017. The program is a 4-year \$22 million initiative managed by the NSW Department of Industry and delivered by Settlement Services International. RESP is designed to address the challenges experienced by refugees and people seeking asylum in finding long-term skilled employment opportunities within the state, by developing career plans and forging links with employers, and education and training providers as required. The program aims to assist up to 6,000 refugees and 1,000 people seeking asylum (about \$3,143 per person) across Western Sydney and Illawarra, the areas where the majority of the refugees settle in NSW. Program participants can only be registered if their Visa provides work and study rights, and their participation in the RESP must fully comply with their Visa conditions (NSW Government 2017).

3.4.3 ASRC Employment Program

The ASRC is an independent, not-for-profit organisation supporting and empowering people seeking asylum to maximise their physical, mental, social and economic well-being. For the past 15 years, the ASRC has operated an Employment Program for people seeking asylum with work rights. The Program assigns participants to personal employment advisors to help them prepare for work; address their employment barriers; apply Australian job-seeking strategies; understand their employment rights; navigate Australian workplace culture, and apply for suitable jobs. The Program also develops active referral partnerships with supportive employers to source suitable vacancies, and provides post-placement support, professional mentoring and networking opportunities for participants.

The ASRC offers its Employment Program from both its Footscray and Dandenong sites, as a result of the generous support of its philanthropic funders and volunteers. The

Program is distinct from other services in that it exclusively supports people seeking asylum on Bridging Visas and refugees holding a temporary protection visa (TPV) or Safe Haven Enterprise Visa (SHEV).

The total budget of the Program in 2018-2019 is \$614,749 (\$391,000 in cash and \$223,749 in-kind support from volunteers), which translates to \$1,602 per person (without in-kind support).

The total number of participants engaged in the ASRC Employment Program in 2017/18 was 826. The Program committed to a target of 220 job placements to be secured by participants over the course of that year. By 30 June 2018, the Program had exceeded its target, reaching 244 placements.

3.4.4 The Brotherhood of St Laurence's (BSL) Given the Chance for Asylum Seekers (GtCAS) program

BSL is a community organisation that works to prevent and alleviate poverty across Australia among a range of marginalised groups, including people seeking asylum and refugees. BSL runs the Given the Chance for People Seeking Asylum (GtCAS) Program - an employment service to assist people seeking asylum and refugees to find suitable job opportunities in Victoria. The program works with jobseekers and employers to identify opportunities, support recruitment processes, develop pre-employment training and provide post-placement support. By building relationships with employers, GtCAS also attempts to reduce demand-side barriers and create new jobs and training opportunities (Van Kooy & Randrianarisoa 2017). GtCAS received funding from a private philanthropist for the period from 2013 to 2018.

1,406 people seeking asylum were registered for the GtCAS program between July 2015 and April 2018 with funding of \$2,430,000 (\$2872 per person). Of these, 846 people participated in the program (Wickramasinghe 2018). However, GtCAS also has intakes from refugees, humanitarian entrants and asylum seekers with higher qualifications. At the end of the program in 2018, BSL engaged KPMG to undertake an independent assessment of the economic and social impacts of GtCAS through the application of a cost-benefit analysis (CBA) framework. The assessment indicated that the benefits of GtCAS significantly outweigh the investment made by BSL in delivering the service. The report revealed a net direct shared benefit (between government and GtCAS participants) of around \$5 million. However, there are significant benefits of GtCAS that are difficult to quantify. These include benefits relating to improved outcomes for people seeking asylum across other policy areas, such as health, justice and housing (Brotherhood of St Laurence 2018).

3.5 Impacts of unemployment on refugees and people seeking asylum

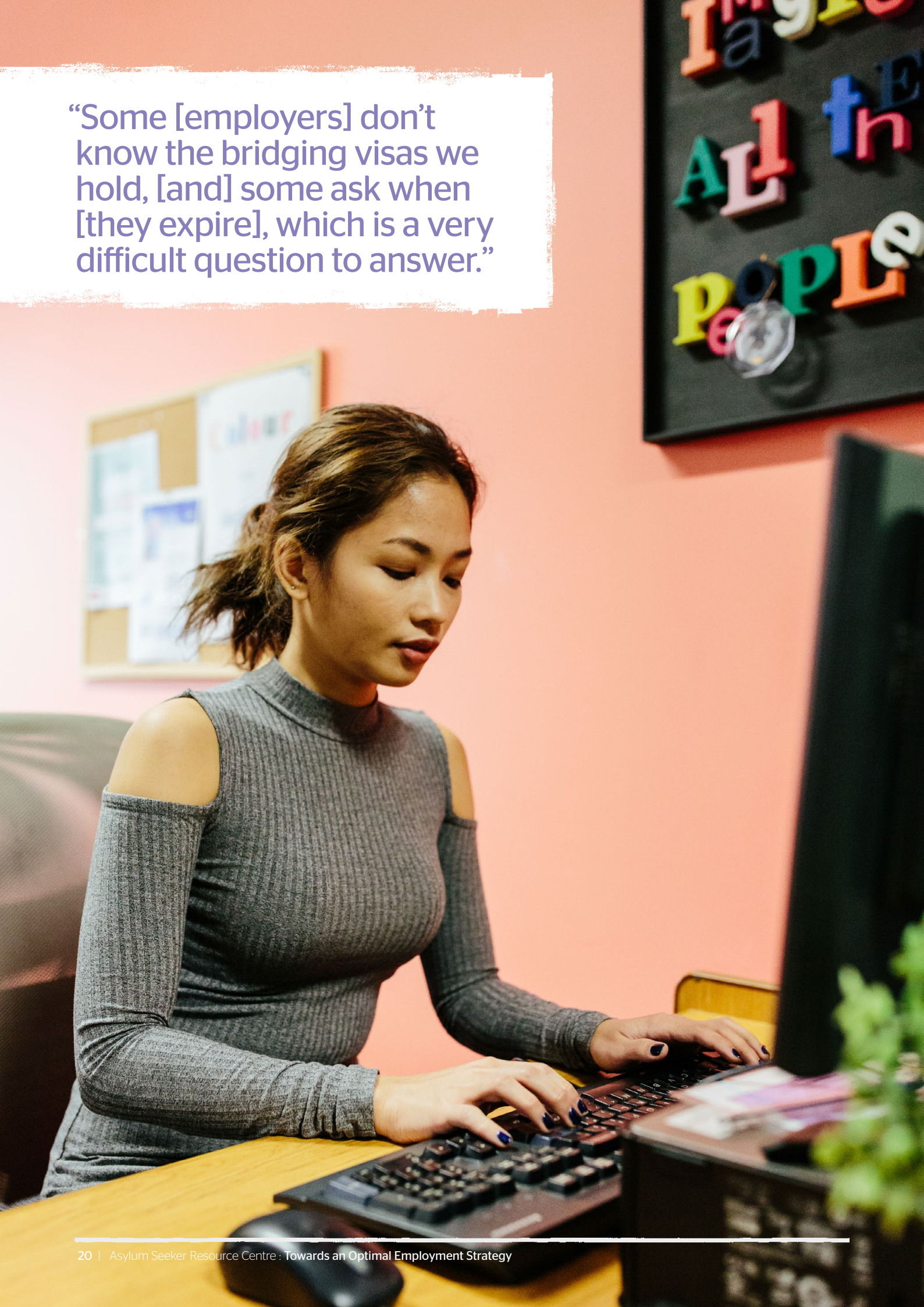
Migrants, refugees and people seeking asylum have made a substantial contribution to Australia's economic, social and cultural development. They not only expand consumer markets for local goods but also open new markets for consumers. Further, they bring skills to the Australian labour market, creating employment and filling empty employment places (Gridley 2011). Employment has a strong influence on the capacity of refugees and people seeking asylum to participate equally in the receiving society, without which they risk becoming trapped in a cycle of social and economic marginalisation affecting not only them but also possibly future generations (UNHCR 2002). Lack of timely and effective access to services, including employment, can lead to increased disadvantage and disengagement for people seeking asylum and refugees who are already highly vulnerable. This can create substantial social and economic costs for the individuals affected, as well as for society as a whole (Auditor-General 2014).

There is a well-established relationship between decent employment and health.¹¹ Studies show that employment increases health status, while at the same time healthy people are more likely to seek and maintain employment (Goodman 2015). Employment leads to better health through the provision of financial benefits - by increasing household income and decreasing economic hardship, both of which improve physical and psychological well-being (Goodman 2015). Existing evidence validates the causal relationship between employment and mental health in that when people move from employment to unemployment, there is a significant decrease in their mental health, and when unemployed persons find new jobs, their mental health significantly improves (McKee- Ryan, Song, Wanberg & Kinicki 2005).

Employment also conveys psychological benefits, contributing to improved self-esteem, self-worth, purpose and identity, which are vital components of mental health (Goodman 2015). Discrimination in employment can contribute to higher rates of poverty among culturally and linguistically diverse social groups, leading to limitations in housing options and increased stress, which could in turn lead to poor health (Sanders Thompson, Wells & Coats 2012). The health impacts of unemployment on people seeking asylum and refugees is more acute in comparison to Australian-born people. A study conducted on refugee health services in Melbourne found that refugees were 3.1 times more likely to experience mental illness, and twice as likely to have post-traumatic stress disorder, as Australian-born individuals (Shawyer et al. 2017).

¹¹ Evidence shows that poor quality/highly insecure work can affect mental and physical health. Job insecurity leads to impaired health since income is related to health. Results from psychological studies of job insecurity emphasize that job insecurity/poor quality work is a significant cause of stress (Green, F. 2015).

“Some [employers] don’t know the bridging visas we hold, [and] some ask when [they expire], which is a very difficult question to answer.”



4 Findings

In exploring the barriers to employment for people seeking asylum in Victoria, our findings comprise three elements: (i) a thematic analysis of the survey and interview data, which highlights a number of key barriers to employment for people seeking asylum, and the ways ASRC and other employment programs are structured to bypass them; (ii) an economic analysis of the costs and benefits of the ASRC Employment Program, in comparison to those of similar programs (BSL GtCAS, NSW RESP, and JVEN); and (iii) a policy analysis.

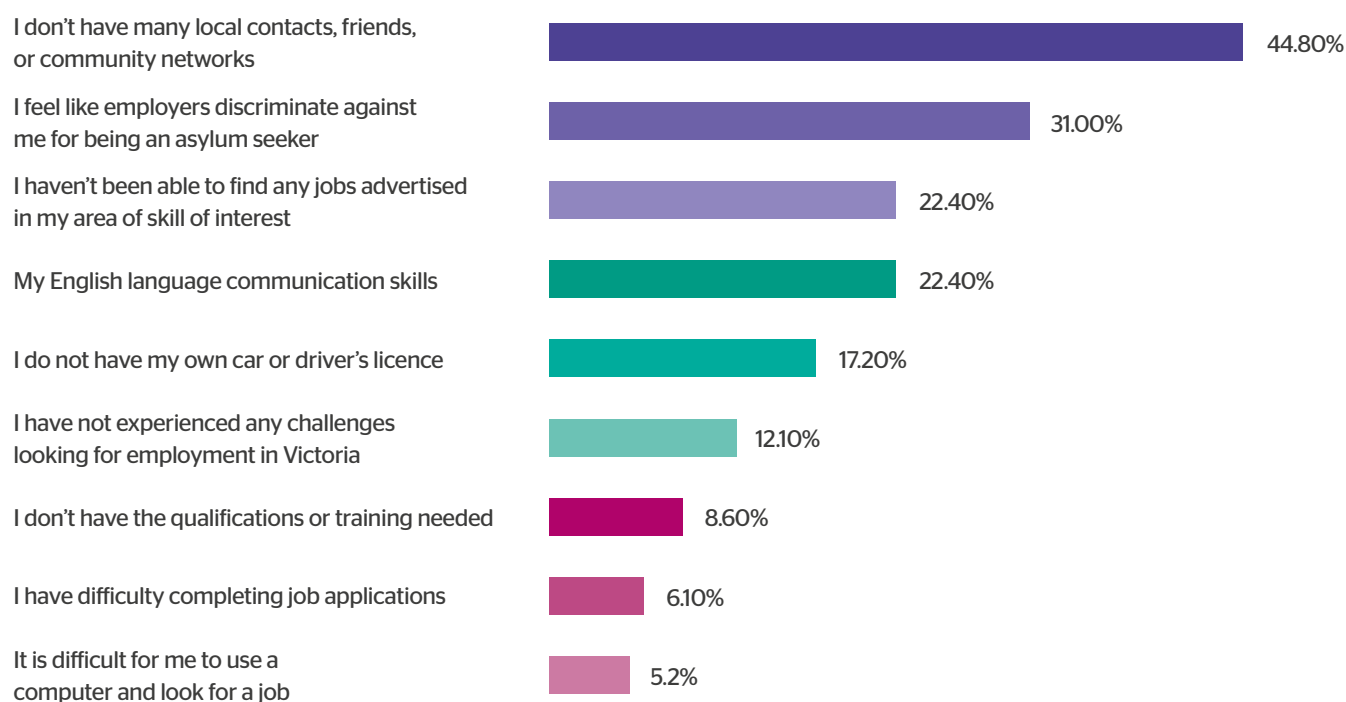
4.1 Thematic analysis

This section outlines the main themes identified from this investigation, drawing primarily on two data sources: firstly, two online surveys comprising both forced-choice and open-ended response questions – one for ASRC members, with 59 complete responses, the other for current employers of people seeking asylum, with 9 complete responses; and secondly, three semi-structured interviews with management and volunteer staff of the ASRC Innovation Hub. Findings highlight a multitude of overlapping, systemic barriers to employment faced by people seeking asylum in Victoria, largely echoing our findings in the literature. These stem mainly from systematic disadvantage, experienced through cultural adjustment challenges, limited access to employment networks and personal support, and employer discrimination and exploitation.

Ultimately, our findings suggest that two cohorts of people seeking asylum experience these barriers disproportionately. On one hand, those with higher levels of disadvantage (including low-skilled entrants, and those with low English fluency and literacy) tend to be rendered ineligible for accessing basic, government-funded services, and this exacerbates the many layers of disadvantage they must navigate to gain employment. Secondly, those with high skills and qualifications are often unable or ineligible to find work in their field, and are relegated to 'survival jobs'. Aside from the destructive psychological impacts this has on the individual, it both wastes their potential to contribute their skills to the Victorian economy, and bears significant costs for government services. Our data illustrates ways in which existing Victorian employment assistance programs, particularly those offered by ASRC, are required to fill a number of policy gaps in order to bypass these barriers and meet the needs of people seeking asylum.

4.1.1 Lack of personal networks and local experience: ASRC as a role broker

The first key theme to surface from our data was a lack of personal and/or professional networks for people seeking asylum upon first arriving in Australia as a significant barrier to finding employment. This creates obstacles for newly arrived migrants, both in finding and contacting prospective employers and in providing professional referees – particularly in light of employers' requirements for local experience. As an ASRC staff member explained, '[people seeking asylum] are usually from countries where they had a good network and found their jobs through networks. We have some professionals who can speak English, but they don't feel confident enough to go into the community and talk to people about searching for a job'. Indeed, when survey respondents were asked to nominate their greatest challenges to finding employment in Victoria, 'I don't have many local contacts, friends, or community networks' was the most frequently cited response (see Figure 3 below).

Figure 3. Challenges encountered by respondents while searching for employment

Many survey respondents also left comments that emphasised the value of having local work experience for securing a job. One member reflected, 'Finding jobs could be easier if employers could not insist on having professional referees on your resume, because sometimes when you are new you can't have these referees'. Another stated, 'Most professional jobs required local experience. It makes it really hard to apply and try opportunities.' Some members also described personal struggles over gaining this local experience – for example, one explained: 'I am a graduate engineer and have industry experience from my own country, however, I don't have a local qualification and experience to help me get a job'.

This common experience seems to arise largely due to language and cultural barriers. Of our seven employers who reported turning down other job applications from people seeking asylum, four cited English language skills as one of their reasons. Moreover, four of the six who reported their employees (people seeking asylum) required further training claimed that English language training would be necessary. As an ASRC staff member commented, 'English language barriers can be very challenging for people in terms of being able to fit in and also be able to navigate Australia as a very monolingual society... We rely so much on computers and information technology to communicate, and confusion around English instruction can be really challenging for employers to consider taking

on'. Another interviewee emphasised the importance of 'soft skills' – what she describes as 'attitude, behaviour... [...] what's right in one culture' is important. She explained that for many people seeking asylum, 'they are not sure if what they are doing is right or wrong', and that as a result, are either reluctant to approach prospective employers as they have little confidence or experience in navigating Australian workplace culture.

In response, organisations like ASRC appear to act as brokers for people seeking asylum, by both providing a bridge to prospective employers and industries through their professional mentoring and training programs, and by introducing them to the ASRC community – including staff, volunteers, and other people seeking asylum. As one of our interviewees explained, the value in the ASRC community goes beyond that of mentoring and training, in that it provides people seeking asylum with an essential network of personal and professional connections: 'If you are newly arrived in a community, nobody knows you; nobody can vouch for you. So even just having somebody who can be your referee on your CV will be hugely important in terms of your ability to find employment'.

Interviewees seemed to be conscious of their role as community intermediaries. One noted, 'The brokering role is probably the most important part because [it provides] lots of ways [people seeking asylum] can get networks in the community and people to help [them] up-skill, in terms of job-readiness.' Another

“Australian employers don’t recognise people’s skills and experiences from an international context. So people have to work their way up from the bottom.”



described having watched people come into the Hub from intake and participate in some of these programs: 'their confidence is built, and they've had opportunities to, say, volunteer in the Hub reception or do something that gives them some sort of local experience in an Australian context that they can put onto their CV, that has often led to positive outcomes'.

4.1.2 Restrictions accessing basic services based on visa conditions

All interviewees raised the complexity and ambiguity of the current visa framework, and the ways it restricts access to basic social and economic services for people who need them most. Our data illustrates that both the visa status determination process, and the eligibility restrictions for government-funded services (most notably the recent cuts to SRSS programs), has compounded the layers of disadvantage people seeking asylum experience and left many destitute – particularly those with lower skills and lower English language abilities. As one of the Hub managers summarised, 'Being an asylum seeker, you don't get access to public housing, you don't get access to a lot of things. It's all dependent on your visas.' Staff also noted the phenomenon of internal displacement within Australia, with many people seeking asylum living in temporary and insecure housing – a significant barrier to finding a stable and accessible job.

These restrictions mean that many people seeking asylum on bridging visas are ineligible for funded English language lessons, Centrelink payments, housing support, and counselling – all essential services for many people seeking asylum to become 'work ready'. One interviewee described the system of basing service eligibility on visa status as 'arbitrary', due to it resting on factors such as mode of arrival. This interviewee exemplified this in reference to the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP), a Government-funded English language program, which entitles new migrants on specific visas to 510 hours of free English language lessons. Whilst the AMEP was once available to people on bridging visas, its eligibility has been restricted in recent years to Permanent Protection Visa holders, and a limited number of Temporary Protection Visa holders, leaving many people seeking asylum to rely on non-profit or community-based organisations. Our interviewee explained, 'people aren't able to access [the AMEP] until they've got a permanent protection visa, or a temporary protection visa such as a SHEV or TPV.'

Despite the Federal policy vacuums, the interviewee also noted several policy levers pulled by the current Victorian Government to support people seeking asylum. These include allowing people seeking asylum to access concession rates on public transport and the public health system, and implementing

the Asylum Seekers' Vocational Education & Training (ASVET) Program, which allows people seeking asylum access to reduced cost and free TAFE courses. Nevertheless, these are still imbued with the same issues around accessibility and ambiguity and are inaccessible to certain visa holders. She explained: 'with the ASVET program and with access to free TAFE, [there is] ambiguity around people on bridging visa A who arrived by plane. People who arrived by boat can access concession rates for the TAFE courses that are on the skills-first list. So, they pay the same as a concession card holder would. There are some courses now that are completely free since the 1st of January this year [2019]. However, if you're on a bridging visa A, and you've arrived by plane, you can't access those concession courses.'

Moreover, visa status determination and eligibility criteria have been known to shift between government cycles, causing some visa holders to lose (and re-gain) work rights for periods of time. As one of the interviewees explained, '[The former Labour government] prevented people from being able to work as a punitive measure to try to stop people from migrating at the time. That then meant that there is a cohort of people that we're working with who were denied the right to work for a period of time - those who arrived by boat'. Excluding subsections of people seeking asylum from the workforce, and then re-introducing their work rights, creates ambiguity and confusion in the visa system on the part of both employers and job-seekers, adding another layer of disadvantage. The interviewee added: 'The longer that you are out of employment, the harder it is to get back in because it erodes people's sense of self-esteem and they just feel de-skilled'.

Due to the volatile nature of these visa conditions, interviewees explained that, whilst some people seeking asylum can access basic support services, many have been left to 'fall through the cracks.' These people are then forced to turn to organisations like the ASRC for their basic needs. One staff member explained this in light of the recent SRSS cuts and the removal of Red Cross as a service provider, which shifted a significant weight onto non-government organisations with limited capacity such as ASRC.

4.1.3 Industrial discrimination and exploitation

The data illustrates that the current system which determines the eligibility of specific visa holders to access services not only fuels a precarious labour market for people seeking asylum, but also for their prospective employers, whereby employing somebody on a temporary visa is perceived as 'risky'. One interviewee described this factor as a 'huge barrier' to work for people seeking asylum, and explained, '[for some people], the work visa is valid for three months. It means that the employer should check it every three months. [...] There is a risk [for the

employer to] train somebody and then you're going to lose that person, which is a great loss for a business.' Another interviewee added, 'employers are not meant to discriminate against an employee - or a prospective employee on the basis that they have a temporary visa, or a bridging visa. [...] But it doesn't mean it doesn't happen' she added, 'temporary visas are not really spoken about as much, but certainly our members report that they are often not considered for roles because of the fact that they're on a bridging visa and employers think that this might be a risk, that they are a migrant who might have to leave the country.' This was echoed in the experience of several member survey participants with comments such as, 'some [employers] don't know the bridging visas we hold, [and] some ask when [they expire], which is a very difficult question to answer'.

The combination of these restrictive and inconsistent working conditions, and the lack of government-funded support for those who cannot work, appears to have given rise to a culture of exploitation of people seeking asylum among some employers. Numerous comments were made by survey respondents about being underpaid or over-worked by their employers and feeling little legal or personal confidence to question this – for example, 'I faced lots of racist people who took advantage of me and recruited me under lower pay because I am an asylum seeker.' One of our interviewees described seeing many members experience this exploitation: '...Then, of course, you have the employers who understand exactly what they're dealing with and unfortunately exploit people seeking asylum. They understand that these people are vulnerable, take them on, mistreat them, sack them. So we have these sorts of things that seem to be unregulated and seem to be going on all the time without proper oversight'.


Another interviewee drew a connection between this issue and the punitive nature of the Australian policy environment: 'Australian Federal Government policies towards people seeking asylum are so punitive that it completely reduces people's ability to feel like they can stand up for their own rights. So we see a huge amount of exploitation that goes on for people, which is a breach of all the Work Safe policies that are designed to support and protect the rights of workers, regardless of who they are. But it's rife and it's happening and it's continuing'.

4.1.4 Barriers to employment exacerbated by a lack of mental health support

The challenge of being new to the Australian community and unfamiliar with how to navigate Australian culture is only intensified by the experiences of trauma many people seeking asylum have carried with them. Stories of trauma are threaded through the data, calling into question whether the expectation for people seeking asylum to transition straight into employment is feasible, or even fair, at all. One interviewee noted that, 'people need to have their physical and physiological needs met before they can even start contemplating going to work,' and that 'If you try to send people into work when they haven't got [these needs met], I can tell you the job is not going to last particularly long'. However, this is at odds with the framework ASRC and other employment agencies are required to work from, where they have to guide non-'work ready' people into the labour market. She explained, 'we are now having to work with more people whose lives haven't got stability, but who still need paid work. [...] You can't put somebody into [that] position if they've got profound mental health and other issues'.

This was apparent in several members' survey responses. Firstly, when asked their greatest challenge in finding work, one survey respondent specifically commented, 'Actually I am not feeling well [enough] to do anything, maybe it's mental health'. Additionally, the employers' survey data suggested this was a common sentiment. For example, when asked if any additional training or employment-readiness programs would be beneficial to their employees, one employer responded, 'Utilising and identifying support services available to help with PTSD and similar issues'. Staff also noted that trauma not only stems from experiences of violence, but also from emotional trauma, such as leaving family behind.

It appears that the expectation for people seeking asylum to transition immediately into the workplace, without support for immediate needs, such as trauma counselling and social support, is only reinforcing further obstacles to employment for people seeking asylum. As one of our interviewees pointed out, there is significant divergence in the experiences of people seeking asylum on their journeys to Australia, and the impact these journeys have had on their lives since: 'There are people who can go through profoundly traumatic experiences and [...] continue to move forward with purpose and meaning in their lives - but there's a lot of people...for whom employment isn't going to be the right outcome at this point in time.' She later asserted the importance of providing access to public housing and income support on par with Australian residents, for those who are unable to work: 'People seeking asylum can't get Centrelink, so if we're not going to provide it to people who are in need, they're going to be homeless and destitute, which then takes a huge toll on our system.'



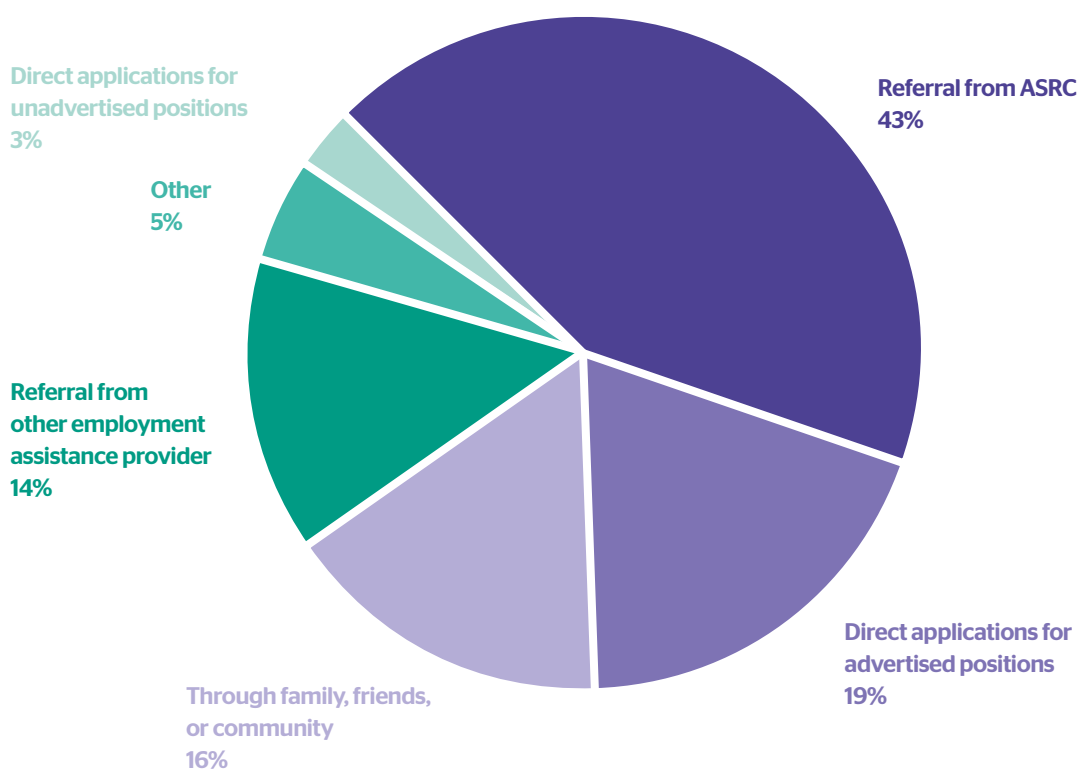
“Australian employers don’t recognise people’s skills and experiences from an international context. So people have to work their way up from the bottom”

4.1.5 The ASRC Hub model: Bridging gaps in accessibility for people seeking asylum

As shown, the lack of accessibility to government-funded services to help meet the basic needs of people seeking asylum has forced many to rely on organisations like the ASRC and BSL for services including skills training, employment assistance, and social support. While our participants were all ASRC members, several had also completed other programs, including: BSL (22), Victoria@Work (2), and PeoplePlus (3). Most respondents reported feelings of gratitude towards these organisations, and many commented that the employment programs were instrumental in helping them find work. Indeed, of our 37 member respondents who were employed at the time they completed the survey, 43% reported that they found their job

through a direct referral from ASRC, and another 14% from other employment programs (see Figure 4 below). Moreover, 75% said the program helped them ‘a lot’, with the other 25% saying ‘a little’, and all participants indicated that they could not have found their job without the assistance of the respective organisation. Whilst the scope of this project did not allow for a detailed exploration of the structure of other organisations’ programs (with the exception of our economic analysis of BSL’s GtCAS Program in the following section), our insight into the ASRC Employment Program – and the Innovation Hub model in particular as a ‘one-stop-shop’ – highlight features that seem to contribute to an optimal employment support model for people seeking asylum.

Figure 4. How respondents who are currently employed found their job



The operation of the ASRC Employment Program within the Innovation Hub appears to have been designed in response to external gaps in policy and welfare for people seeking asylum. Tracing back to the origins of the organisation, one of the Hub managers explained, 'ASRC emerged in a space where there was not any external support provided'. She elaborated that they were set up specifically as a resource for people who had received a negative visa decision from the former Refugee Review Tribunal (now 'Administrative Appeals Tribunal') and were consequently excluded from any kind of casework or income support. With these origins, both the ASRC - and its Innovation Hub - developed as integrated, 'holistic', multi-disciplinary service and support communities, which meet the multiple needs of people seeking asylum. One interviewee explained, 'the Hub in and of itself is a model which is designed to enable people to build the skills that they need to reach the personal and career goals that they are seeking, to some extent. So [it provides] members with access to information and resources around how to navigate the systems in Australia'.

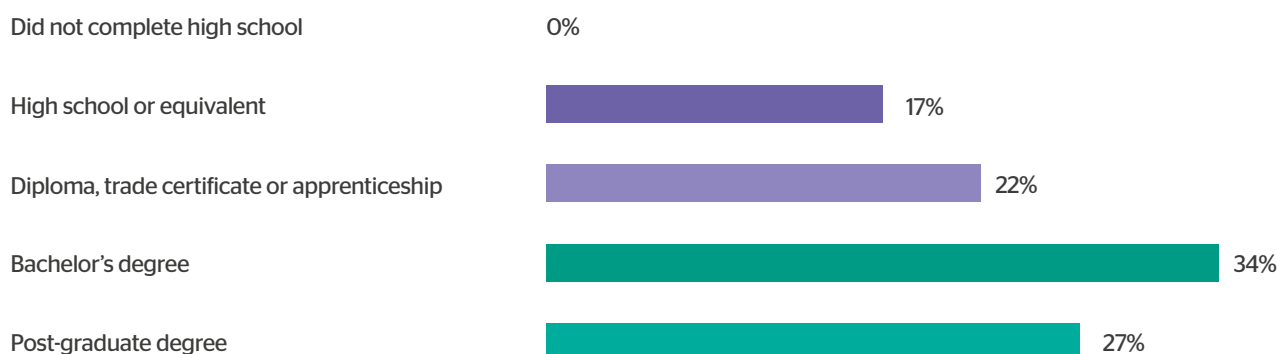
In doing so, the interviewee compared the Hub model to 'caseworker agency'-type models, which, she believes, have a 'massive power imbalance', where the caseworker is the 'gatekeeper of information': If you are working in an open-plan hub model, where you have got volunteers and members [...] and staff working together in a shared, cooperative working environment, they can get access. They can learn a lot more. They are watching, they're able to gather good modelling, for example. Peer-to-peer modelling, understanding expectations, trying to work in an Australian workplace setting. ...How do you answer the phone properly? How do you write an email professionally? That arrangement, I think, has its definite advantages'. Through integrating volunteers, staff, and members in a non-hierarchical model, the interviewee argued, 'all these elements working together are really what makes it work'. In this vein, she described the ASRC Innovation Hub as a 'wrap-around, holistic service model [...] which tends to be able to meet people wherever they are at on their employment journey.'

4.1.6 The ongoing barriers to finding 'decent work'

Despite the help the different employment programs offer to people seeking asylum, finding 'decent work' remains a challenge, with most people having to take up low-skill, entry-level 'survival jobs', regardless of their work experience. This is especially difficult for people with higher level skills and qualifications, who find they are unable to find work in their field in Australia. One ASRC staff member spoke about this in relation to the lack of a safety net, in the aftermath of the recent cuts to SRSS services, stating, 'I think what can be challenging is often people's expectations...when they come to us and they say, "I want a job; it doesn't matter what the job is, I'll do whatever it takes"'. She then explained that this leads to work which is 'not particularly satisfying or desirable' for members - particularly those with significant experience in other industries; '...given that a lot of members who are coming to see us are on the brink of being destitute, the desperation that they have to get urgent work means that we are forced to [refer] them into wherever there are vacancies.' Despite the ASRC's best efforts to match members with employment to suit their skills and experience, staff and members have both commented on the difficulty of doing this. A survey participant also commented, 'the help provided by ASRC was great at some point, but later on, I realised it is not for higher academic level/skills applicants. I think it is most beneficial for low skills applicants.'

This appears to affect high-skilled people who cannot apply their qualifications in Australia. An ASRC staff member explained, 'Australian employers don't recognise people's skills and experiences from an international context. So people have to work their way up from the bottom'. She later explained that this is a factor that operates throughout the employment space and which she finds most frustrating. 'So, it's a massive waste of human potential. I think - I find it hard when I speak to members on the phone about the fact that they're now working night shift in, say, a cleaning company, when they're just, "This is not what I really want to be doing. I have a degree - I am a particle physicist", or something'.

This was illustrated in our survey data, where many respondents reported holding a relatively high qualification (though it is important to consider our sampling bias here, which was skewed towards the more digitally-literate and English-speaking members). As shown below in Figure 5, all 59 respondents had completed high school or the equivalent. Additionally, 22% reported that their highest level of education was a diploma, trade certificate or apprenticeship (or equivalent); 34% had completed a Bachelor's degree; and 27% held a post-graduate qualification.

Figure 5. Respondents' highest levels of education or qualification (members' survey)

Nevertheless, 19 of these respondents reported that their highest qualification was not recognised in Australia – either because there is no option to translate it, or because they have not had it translated for a variety of reasons (including lack of documentation, inability to pay for the translation, and a lack of knowledge about how to go about having things translated). For example, one respondent commented that they hold a Master's degree, and wish to pursue a PhD someday: 'I [would] love to teach and become a lecturer to contribute [to] this country but I have been relegated to a warehouse job...'

4.2 Socio-economic analysis of current employment programs

To supplement our findings of the many systemic barriers people seeking asylum in Victoria face, and the ways ASRC and several other organisations are set up to bypass them, an economic analysis has been undertaken of the costs and benefits of the program run by the ASRC. These costs and benefits are then compared to the results of a similar study by KPMG (2018) on the support provided by BSL's GtCAS Program. The average costs of the ASRC Employment Program are also compared to those associated with the programs offered by the Victorian and New South Wales State Governments. As the estimations of the costs of the BSL GtCAS program include an estimation of the value of the in-kind costs of volunteers, this is also included for the ASRC Employment Program, as a point of comparison.¹² It is important to note that BLS is simply used here as a reference point and that the two programs are

fundamentally incomparable – primarily because the ASRC tends to set a less restrictive intake criteria and thereby receive a lower-skill cohort. The purpose of this 'comparison' is to show what value for money there is in the ASRC Employment Program. The analysis used the data generated from the survey undertaken by the Centre for Social Impact at Swinburne University of Technology, as well as publicly available data. It focused on the financial and economic costs and benefits of the programs, rather than any other cultural or educational benefits that might have arisen.

4.2.1 Costs

First, there are the costs of the various programs (see Table 1). It is clear from the figures in the Table that the programs, per participant, operated by the ASRC and BSL are far lower than that of the state governments. The lower cost of the programs run by both ARSC and BSL is partly due to the substantial number of volunteers employed in running them, but also in part because of the lower overhead costs, and staff salaries, of those employed in them.

In the case of the ASRC, the in-kind support of volunteers represented about 36 per cent of the overall programs costs. If they were included, the average cost per participant for the ASRC Employment Program would be \$2,519 (compared to a similar figure of \$2,875 for the BSL GtCAS program), both substantially lower than that of the state government services.

¹² The Brotherhood of St Laurence cost and benefit figures have also been converted to a Net Present Value as these have been generated over a number of years. This is not the case for the ASRC program as analysis was conducted in a single year.

Table 2. Average costs of programs

	Dates	Funds used \$	Number of participants No.	Average cost per participant \$
ASRC Employment Program (without in-kind support)	2017/18	391,000	244	1,602
ASRC Employment Program (with in-kind support)	2017/18	614,749	244	2,519
BSL GtCAS (with in-kind support)	2015/16-2017/18	2,430,000	846	2,872
NSW RESP	2017/18-	22,000,000	7,000	3,143
JVEN*	2016/17-2020/21	1,300,000	300	4,333

* Based on the amount of \$550,000 provided to the Victorian Cooperative on Children's Services for Ethnic Groups (VICSEG) New Futures

Source: ASRC. KPMG (2018). New South Wales (2017). Victoria (2017)

4.2.2 Benefits

In the report on the BSL GtCAS Program, KPMG found that the average level of employment for people seeking asylum was 23 per cent (KPMG 2018, 12). They also reported that this figure was 56 per cent after their program was completed, rising to 69 per cent six months later. A similar result for the ASRC Employment Program was found from the survey conducted as part of this report, which had employment at 69 per cent. This meant an initial post-program rise in participants' employment rate of 33 per cent (or $224 \times 0.33 = 94$ extra people in paid employment over what would otherwise have occurred).



“I am a graduate engineer and have industry experience from my own country, however, I don’t have a local qualification and experience to help me get a job.”

	ASRC (without in-kind) \$	ASRC (with in-kind) \$	BSL GtCAS \$
Delivery costs	391,000	614,749	2,430,000
Participant benefits (increased income)	1,350,000	1,350,000	3,710,000
Government benefits-taxation and avoided revenue	1,375,000	1,375,000	
	3,800,000		
Net Impact	2,344,000	2,110,251	5,070,000
Cost per participant	1,602	2,519	2,872
Full benefits per participant	11,168	11,168	8,877
Net Impact per participant	9,566	8,649	6,005

The KPMG report assumed that the additional revenue for those employed would be \$14,101 per person; that is, the net income minus payments equivalent to 89 per cent of the NewStart allowance. They also assumed that the increase in Government tax revenue, plus the saved payments on welfare, would be substantial, amounting to around \$14,431. Assuming that the average income of ASRC participants is similar to that of the participants in the BSL program, the gains are included in Table 2.

4.2.3 Insights from the socioeconomic analysis

A few things should be noted from this study. First of all, the survey results suggest that the ASRC Employment Program has a similar magnitude of economic benefit to the BSL GtCAS program. This is true if the in-kind costs are included with an estimated value of those costs. If these costs are not included, the benefits are even more substantial.

Secondly, the cost of the ASRC Employment Program is considerably lower per participant than the two government programs reviewed. This is true even when the in-kind contribution is included. The state government programs, therefore, would have to be substantially more successful if they are to achieve levels of economic benefit of similar magnitude¹³.

Finally, the results of the survey found that income levels of people seeking asylum who secured work through the ASRC Employment Program were higher than those in the BSL GtCAS program. It was decided to use the latter's figures in determining the benefits to participants to ensure comparability, although it should be noted that the economic benefits of the ASRC Employment Program might perhaps be greater than those cited in Table 2.

In addition to the direct benefits to people seeking asylum, it is possible that there will be spillover effects that flow on to the local communities in which people seeking asylum live. This is known as a "multiplier" effect and comes from the additional spending that would be carried out by people seeking asylum who successfully move into work because of their participation in employment programs.

Often there is disagreement about the size of multipliers because increased activity in one area comes at the expense of activity in another, therefore weakening the multiplier effect. For instance, if program spending increases activity in one area, it might do so by attracting resources (including people) away from another. In this case, there would be a positive multiplier effect, because of the very high level of unemployment experienced by people seeking asylum. This means there is a significant opportunity to leverage the spending of these programs into wider benefits.

It would be expected that the spending and employment multiplier for these programs would be about 2.0. This is a multiplier that is acceptable to the Australian Treasury for use in economic assessments and can be justified given the very high rate of unemployment this group of people generally experience. With the employment multiplier of 2.0, the total economic impact (gross output) of people seeking asylum participating in the ASRC Employment Program could be valued at \$4.2 million, or twice the calculated impact of the program.

While there is demonstrable socio-economic value in the ASRC program in terms of outcomes for individuals and local economic effects, it must be noted that there is something of a mismatch in the current geography of need relative to where the ASRC program is delivered and the Hub is located. We understand that Greater Dandenong, Brimbank and Whittlesea

¹³ The BSL Policy arm cost to the organisation is not factored in the results of the KPMG report, which could inflate the cost per participant.

host the highest number of people seeking asylum within Victoria, with a quarter of them living in Greater Dandenong, while the ASRC Employment Program bases its primary staffing resources in Footscray.

4.3 Policy analysis and recommendations

As detailed in our analysis of social security for people seeking asylum above, federal policies that apply to humanitarian entrants and people seeking asylum are highly residual and exacerbate the vulnerability and labour market exclusion of people seeking asylum in Australia. At the same time, the ‘work-first’ and competitive nature of Federal employment services creates transition barriers for people seeking asylum, and a lack of opportunity and choice in geographic areas with thin labour markets that are not well-served by Jobactive providers.

While recognising that the livelihoods of people seeking asylum are informed by the interplay between federal and state government policies, the focus of this report is on how Victorian programs and public investment might be improved.

Our analysis suggests there are two key cohorts of people seeking asylum who disproportionately experience barriers to employment and become trapped in a cycle of ‘survival jobs’, under-employment, or welfare-dependency, bearing significant economic and productivity costs for government. These two cohorts are: low-skilled entrants, who are excluded from accessing basic services, and high-skilled entrants, who are immediately de-skilled by virtue of arriving in Australia. We contend that there are a number of features of current state investments and programs that could be improved to both (a) increase the economic participation of people seeking asylum who do not meet the criteria for current programs; and (b) intervene in the active and passive ‘de-skilling’ of people seeking asylum, to reignite and leverage their skills for the social and economic benefit of Victoria, and Victorians.

Based on this, we have composed the following four, practical policy recommendations for consideration:

4.3.1 The Victorian Government should do more to support people seeking asylum who are excluded from federally-funded services

Federally imposed restrictions on accessing basic services, including housing and English language programs, based on visa conditions, are major impediments to employment for people seeking asylum — particularly those who are low-skilled upon entry to Australia, have an English fluency below Level 3, and who are facing destitution following their exclusion from SRSS. The current initiative of the Victorian Government to support people seeking asylum through the Asylum Seeker Vocational Education & Training (ASVET) Program is a welcome move —

however, it excludes the most disadvantaged and low-skilled cohort of people seeking asylum. There is scope to increase the benefits of this program through greater investment and geographic targeting, and by refining program offerings to provide targeted employment preparation and referral pathways for course graduates (see recommendations below). In addition to direct investment, there is further scope for the Victorian Government to challenge the stigma attached to people seeking asylum in a highly politicised immigration environment, by promoting the value to Victoria of these programs, and profiling the achievements of participants, particularly to employers. Within the constraints of our federated system, evidence-based policy advocacy to Federal counterparts to improve opportunities for people seeking asylum to access decent work would also be beneficial.

4.3.2 Creating pathways for decent employment for skilled people seeking asylum is useful both to the participants and the development of the State.

People seeking asylum have ongoing barriers to finding ‘decent work’, leading to them taking up ‘survival roles’, despite many holding tertiary and trades qualifications from their home countries. This is a waste of human potential, as there is significant unrealised scope for people seeking asylum with professional or skilled trades backgrounds to contribute to the Australian labour market. The Victorian Government’s Social Procurement Framework (SPF) incorporates targets for inclusive employment of key marginalised groups (including people seeking asylum and refugees), and offers a powerful signal to commercial contractors and suppliers to address diversity and inclusion in their hiring practices. The SPF applies to the procurement of all goods, services and construction by, or on behalf of, Victorian Government departments and agencies from September 2018. To reinforce this, the State Government could consider wage subsidies and other structured incentives for employers, and encourage prospective employers by profiling the achievements of people seeking asylum in the local labour market and their communities. The State Government could also systematically expand the number and range of paid internship opportunities for people seeking asylum with professional backgrounds based in government agencies and departments. This could be a valuable opportunity, not only for the individuals concerned in terms of personal career recovery, but also for State economic and social development through spillover effects into local communities.

4.3.3 An integrated and holistic program focused on people seeking asylum can fill policy and program gaps

Results from this study suggest that integrated services are better placed to address the labour market needs and employment barriers faced by people seeking asylum in Victoria. The ASRC Innovation Hub, which has achieved significant results, can be cited as an example. The Hub is designed to be an integrated, open and non-hierarchical space where people seeking asylum, volunteers and ASRC staff work together as part of a collaborative learning community. Further, the cost of offering employment services within this setting appears to be more cost-effective than the caseworker agency model favoured by governments. It is also worth noting that programs such as the emerging Pathways to Employment (PTE)/English for Work model in the Hub, designed as a targeted intervention for people seeking asylum with English below Level 3, may be instrumental in increasing the ability of people seeking asylum to access the formal labour market. Thus, it is advisable to revise current 'caseworker agency' models and explore alternative, integrated service models that achieve higher levels of economic benefit both to people seeking asylum and the State. An integrated and holistic program focused on people seeking asylum (particularly those with lower levels of English proficiency) can address challenges faced by this group and contribute significantly to the local economy.

4.3.4 Volunteering opportunities are valuable to people seeking asylum in their path to employment

Results from this study indicate that the majority of people seeking asylum lack personal or professional networks, and this negatively impacted on their employability. Opportunities to volunteer and meet other volunteers may help people seeking asylum acquire Australian work experience and local referees; absorb Australian workplace culture; develop and re-engage skills, and re-discover a sense of purpose and belonging within their local communities.

4.3.5 Collaborative and inclusive strategies that bring all stakeholders together are required to reform the macro-conditions that reinforce the exclusion of people seeking asylum

Our findings indicate that 'joined up' policy thinking and action are required to reform the macro-conditions – including systemic discrimination and labour market structures – that reinforce the exclusion of people seeking asylum, as well as others facing barriers to employment. It is advisable to bring stakeholders such as the State and Local Governments, employers, non-government organisations and others that work with, and for, people seeking asylum together, to create collaborative and inclusive solutions to promote the sustainable employment of people seeking asylum in the state. A broad ecosystem of support will be needed. State government policy reforms which include greater public investment in employment programs are also likely to have a positive effect on the economic participation of people seeking asylum. This will be beneficial both for people seeking asylum, and the economic and social vitality of Victoria.

“The longer that you are out of employment, the harder it is to get back in because it erodes people’s sense of self-esteem and they just feel de-skilled.”



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“The government policies towards people seeking asylum are so punitive that it completely reduces people’s ability to feel like they can stand up for their own rights. So we see a huge amount of exploitation that goes on for people, which is a breach of all the Work Safe policies that are designed to support and protect the rights of workers, regardless of who they are. But it’s rife and it’s happening and it’s continuing.”



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