

Submission to inquiry into student pathways to in-demand industries

Founded in 2001, the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC) is Australia's largest independent aid and advocacy organisation for people seeking asylum and refugees, supporting and empowering people at the most critical junctures of their journey. Our services include legal, casework, housing, medical, education, employment, and emergency relief. Based on what we witness through our service delivery, we advocate for change with refugees to ensure their human rights are upheld.

The ASRC welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry based on over 24 years working with people seeking asylum in the community in Victoria. We support over 7000 people seeking asylum, and through our employment, education, and social enterprise programs, we have a deep understanding of the workforce capacity and skills of the people we work with. However, of the total number of people who attend the ASRC, **63% have no right to work**.

The ASRC is aware that our partners at Foundation House have also made a submission to this inquiry. We note that many of the same barriers to education and employment that are outlined in their submission apply to all refugees and people seeking asylum, including our clients. However, due to their uncertain visa status, our clients also face significant additional challenges, and we focus our submission on outlining these.

Unlocking Potential: Work Rights for Refugees and People Seeking Asylum

Recommendation 1:

That the Victorian Government advocates to the Federal Government to provide all people seeking asylum with the right to work while they are waiting for the outcome of their protection, tribunal, or court application, or a request for Ministerial Intervention. This would allow them to contribute to Victoria's economic productivity while they are awaiting an outcome.

ASRC's experience in placing people seeking asylum in employment shows us that the skills and qualifications of the people we work with are closely matched to occupations in shortage in Australia's economy.

According to Jobs and Skills Australia, the industries experiencing the most acute shortages are¹:

- Construction
- Mining
- Healthcare and social assistance
- Education and training
- Electricity, gas, water, and waste
- Professional, scientific, and technical
- Manufacturing
- Administrative and support services
- Transport, postal, and warehousing
- Accommodation and food services

¹ Occupation Shortage Report - March 2025, <https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/publications/occupation-shortage-report-march-2025>

In 2024-25 over 77% of people with work rights who accessed assistance through ASRC's employment program gained employment in one of the most in-need industries.

People applying for protection are also overwhelmingly of prime working age, with 70% of people who lodged a protection visa application in May 2025 aged between 25 - 54 years.²

However, certain conditions applied to bridging visas prevent thousands of people seeking asylum from working, even as Australia faces major skills shortages. **Thousands of skilled, willing workers are locked out of the labour market** while awaiting the outcome of their protection visa application.

During this period, people remain on short-term bridging visas, and without access to social support and healthcare, they are often forced into destitution and reliance on charities. In a cost-of-living crisis, this is a waste of scarce charitable resources, especially when people with skills Australia needs are willing to work but are prevented by policy.

There is no clear data outlining the total number of people seeking asylum in the community without work rights (on all visa types), but it has been [estimated at up to 20%](#).

As of March 2025, **there are 8,982 people on a Bridging Visa E (BVE) living in the Australian community, and over 3,902 of those are living in Victoria.**

Senate Estimates recently revealed partial information about the number of people in the community on a Bridging Visa E without work rights. As of December 2024, **9,000 people were on a bridging visa E in the community without work rights**³ across the country, and a further **1,527 people who arrived by sea were on expired bridging visas**⁴, awaiting renewal and therefore unable to work.

This outlines the minimum number of people affected - however, given that people seeking asylum are on a range of visas, it is estimated that the total number is much larger.

The sudden or unpredictable loss of work rights deters employers who fear breaching the law. Providing ongoing work rights would give employers the certainty they need to hire people seeking asylum.

Case Study

Sadik arrived in Australia from Iran in 2013 and applied for refugee protection. A qualified plumber with years of experience, he was eager to work and contribute. Instead, he spent years on a bridging visa without work rights, unable to earn an income or continue his trade. When he finally gained work rights, Sadik enrolled in a plumbing apprenticeship, determined to have his skills recognised. But soon after, his work rights were revoked, and he was forced to withdraw.

Eventually, Sadik regained work rights, completed Recognition of Prior Learning, and secured his Australian plumbing registration. Today, he owns and operates a successful plumbing business - an example of the potential unlocked when barriers are removed.

² Monthly Update: Onshore Protection (Subclass 866) Visa Processing - May 2025, <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/research-and-stats/files/monthly-update-onshore-protection-866-visa-processing-may-2025.pdf>

³ Additional Estimates February 2025, QON AE25-377

⁴ Additional Estimates February 2025, QON AE25-380

The insecurity of bridging visas also makes people seeking asylum highly vulnerable to exploitation. ASRC lawyers regularly see temporary visa status used for control and abuse in work and family settings. Fear of job loss and lack of social support deter reporting, with conditions often linked to [modern slavery](#).

Investing in Skills: Study Rights for Refugees and People Seeking Asylum

Recommendation 2:

That the Victorian Government advocates to the Federal Government to provide all people seeking asylum with the right to study while they are waiting for the outcome of their protection, tribunal, or court application, or a request for Ministerial Intervention. This would allow them to contribute to Victoria's economic productivity while they are awaiting an outcome.

People seeking asylum are ready to rebuild their lives and learn in a supportive community; however, education is blocked by government policies that prohibit study or make it financially unfeasible. This is despite the clear benefits access to education has for both refugees and society as a whole.

Accessibility and affordability are the two major barriers to education and training for people seeking asylum and refugees on temporary visas. People on temporary visas are ineligible for a range of skills and training that would support their employment options, and most education opportunities they are eligible for are unaffordable.

For many people seeking asylum on bridging visas, they have no right to study at higher education institutions due to visa Conditions 8201 and 8207, which limit their study rights to 3 months and prohibit the right to study, respectively.

Of the people with study rights that ASRC supported to enrol in education courses in 2024-25, the top three industries were aging and disability, healthcare, and early childhood education - all of which are experiencing skills shortages.⁵

For those who do have the right to study, affordability can be a barrier. People seeking asylum and refugees with temporary visas, including temporary protection visas, are not eligible for any type of government loan for university, including HECS-HELP. To be admitted, people seeking asylum not only have to meet all the university's requirements for international students, but also pay the full-fee payment.⁶ This is not possible for the majority of refugees, with a basic degree at a major state university costing about **400 per cent more** due to international fees when compared to domestic prices. This policy creates an insurmountable barrier to refugees pursuing their studies at university.

This particularly has a heavy impact on young people graduating from High School, many of whom are high-performing students who would usually go on to study at university. ASRC regularly works with young people who have achieved a very high ATAR but are unable to pursue their preferred career path,

⁵ Occupation Shortage Report - March 2025, <https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/publications/occupation-shortage-report-march-2025>

⁶<https://asrc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/ASRC-Submission-The-extent-and-nature-of-poverty-in-Australia-2.pdf>

and instead go on to complete vocational education or work in industries where qualifications are not required. This causes them to contribute to the workforce below their true potential.

Case Study

Ashif is 21 years old and arrived in Australia with his family in 2013. At that time, he was 9 years old. He completed most of his schooling in Australia. When he graduated from Year 12, Ashif had dreams of becoming a civil engineer. All of his friends went on to university, but because of the up-front cost, he was unable to do so. Instead, he got a job at a local car yard. He now makes good money as a car salesman to support his family, but still hopes that when he receives permanent residency, he can study to pursue his preferred career path and one day contribute to solving Australia's housing crisis.

Realising the Full Skills Potential of People Seeking Asylum

Recommendation 3:

Streamline Australia's skills and qualifications recognition system to establish a national skills recognition oversight body, harmonise recognition processes, and set up a national online portal for all information on skills recognition.

Recent research shows that **44% of all migrants are underutilised**, as they are **working between one and four skill levels below their level of qualification**. Closing this gap in underutilisation would add \$70 billion to Australia's GDP over ten years in net present value terms. A roadmap to achieve this is outlined by a coalition of non-government organisations, employers, and unions in their Billion Dollar Benefit proposal, which ASRC supports.

According to their June 2024 report⁷, recent migrants are underutilised in every State and Territory across Australia, with Victoria being one of the states with the most to gain, given our significant proportion of recent migrants (29%).

One of the key reasons for this is that overseas skills and qualification recognition is time-consuming, confusing, and expensive, with criteria, processes, and costs set by individual assessing authorities, with some requiring upfront payments of \$10,000 or more.⁸

In March 2025, the ASRC held consultation processes with people with lived experience of seeking asylum to review our advocacy priorities. The need to streamline recognition of prior learning processes was one of the key issues discussed in consultations. **Several respondents mentioned that many refugees have prior qualifications not recognised in Australia, which can force them into low-paying jobs.** Many expressed concerns about the barriers refugees face to education and

⁷ Settlement Services International (SSI), *Billion Dollar Benefit: the economic impact of unlocking the skills potential of migrants in Australia* (2024) p.16,
https://www.ssi.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/DAE_SSI_Skills_Mismatch_Report_19062024_WEB.pdf

⁸ SSI, *Billion Dollar Benefit*, p. 33.

re-entering their previous professions due to complex accreditation processes, costs, and limited support networks.

Recommendation 4:

Provide secure, long-term funding to community organisations that work to unlock the potential of people seeking asylum and refugees by delivering employment and training pathways, and offering holistic support that enables individuals to overcome systemic barriers and thrive in our workforce.

In addition to the visa limitations outlined above, people seeking asylum face many other barriers to completing vocational training and gaining employment. Lack of access to a safety net means that many people don't have access to the healthcare they need to be well enough to work, basic funds for transport to job interviews, and secure housing to provide the stability necessary to thrive in the workplace.

Even where people do have work rights, visas are often short-term and regularly renewed every 3-6 months. This leads to hesitancy among employers, who are afraid of inadvertently breaking the law, or are concerned about the longevity and security of people's right to remain in Australia, and are therefore reluctant to invest in employing people seeking asylum. **Support and advocacy are often required to build employers' confidence in recruiting people in these circumstances.**

ASRC's Vocational & Empowerment Pathways Program (VEP) is made up of three programs: Employment Pathways, Education Pathways, and Women's Empowerment. These programs provide job readiness workshops, support people to access and complete TAFE and other vocational training, build trusted partnerships with employers, and refer to other ASRC supports that address health, housing, and basic needs to overcome barriers to gaining and maintaining employment.

Case Study

Tasnim came to the ASRC seeking work, legal, health, and basic needs support. After stabilising her access to essentials like food, shelter, healthcare, and transport, she joined our Women's Empowerment Program to create a resume and connected with our Employment Team. They linked her to a traineeship opportunity with an employer who is a partner of the ASRC. With support, she secured an interview and was provided with work readiness workshops and mock interviews to build her confidence in applying for the role. Tasnim secured the job - at a higher salary than advertised - and received computer skills training from an ASRC career coach to support her success in the workplace.

People seeking asylum sometimes need additional support to access employment, but when their potential is realised, they are a great asset to the economy. While the ASRC is grateful to receive Victorian State Government funding, including most recently from the Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions in the FY25-26 budget, more investment in this area of work is needed to provide English for Work classes, and to work with clients to support opportunities for University scholarship applications, vocational education pathways, career recovery, recognition of prior learning, to provide drop-in employment services and to scale up job readiness workshops.

Recommendation 5:

Invest in affordable, industry-aligned English language programs that support people seeking asylum and refugees to apply their skills and experience in the Australian workforce. Programs should include contextualised training for priority sectors and be delivered flexibly, in partnership with trusted community organisations, to maximise participation and employment outcomes.

Proficiency in English is a critical factor in securing and sustaining employment in Australia. For people seeking asylum, limited access to affordable, specialised English language classes is a significant barrier to entering the workforce, particularly in skilled roles or in industries facing acute labour shortages. Many arrive with strong professional experience and qualifications, but without the language support needed to navigate recruitment processes, workplace communication, and vocational training, their skills remain underutilised.

Current programs, such as the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP), exclude many people seeking asylum due to visa status, leaving them without pathways to improve their language skills. This exclusion not only limits their ability to find meaningful work but also constrains their capacity to fill skills gaps in key sectors such as aged care, construction, health, and hospitality.

While people seeking asylum are eligible for 'Learn Local' courses funded by the Victorian Government, there are still barriers to attendance such as housing insecurity, irregular working hours and lack of access to subsidised childcare.

Specialised English training - particularly contextualised for specific industries - also improves employment outcomes by equipping participants with both the language and the workplace-specific vocabulary they need to thrive. Delivered flexibly and in partnership with trusted community organisations, such programs also build confidence, reduce social isolation, and support smoother integration into the workforce and the wider community.

Investing in accessible, targeted English classes for people seeking asylum is an investment in workforce readiness and productivity. It unlocks the potential of skilled, motivated individuals who are already living in our communities, enabling them to contribute fully to Australia's economy and society.

Recommendation 6:

Provide fee-free or subsidised access to Early Learning Victoria's State-run childcare services.

A significant barrier that in particular prevents women who are seeking asylum from joining the workforce is a lack of access to the federal government's Child Care Subsidy, for which eligibility requires Australian citizenship, a permanent visa, a special category visa and certain temporary visas (that are not bridging visas).⁹ People seeking asylum are therefore not eligible.

⁹ <https://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/residence-rules-for-child-care-subsidy?context=41186>

Access to childcare therefore becomes extremely cost prohibitive, and as a result it is not possible for the primary carers of children to work. The Victorian Government has taken welcome steps to include people seeking asylum in public services like health care, dental care, transport concessions and education. Providing fee-free or subsidised access to State-run childcare would be a logical and impactful next step - removing a key barrier to employment and enabling more parents to contribute their skills to Victoria's economy.

Recommendation 7:

Invest in programs that provide for the basic needs of people seeking asylum, such as healthcare, housing, and food, to provide the stability needed for them to be active participants in the workforce.

Demand for access to the ASRC's food bank remains strong in the context of the rising cost of living. In the 2024-25 financial year, ASRC provided 4,050 people with food bank groceries, with over 13,000 total visits to our food banks in Footscray and Dandenong. Access to the food bank was the number one reason for people visiting the ASRC during this financial year.

In a recent submission to the National Economic Reform Roundtable, OzHarvest—one of Australia's leading food rescue organisations—highlighted that **food insecurity results in poorer health, lower workforce participation, and worse educational outcomes, driving long-term costs and constraining economic growth.**¹⁰

For people seeking asylum, the impact is even more severe. Excluded from mainstream social safety nets such as JobSeeker payments and Medicare, many experience extreme destitution that makes it impossible to secure work. When individuals come to the ASRC for employment support, we often first need to connect them with our free health clinic, food bank, and housing services to stabilise their situation. Without consistent access to food, transport, and secure accommodation, attending interviews or maintaining employment is simply not viable.

Targeted investment in programs that meet these basic needs is therefore an investment in employability, workforce participation, and overall productivity.

Recommendations

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¹⁰ Ozharvest, Unlocking National Productivity through Food System Reform, <https://www.ozharvest.org/app/uploads/2025/07/250725-Economic-Reform-Roundtable-OzH-submission.pdf?>

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