

# Refugees and the Right to Education: Reflections on International Frameworks and the Australian Context

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*The right to education is universally recognized as a fundamental human right, safeguarded by numerous international declarations and conventions, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Viewing refugee education through the lens of human rights is rooted in the principle that everyone, regardless of citizenship status, should have equal educational opportunities as an integral aspect of their broader human rights. However, such opportunities are variable. Using an interpretive approach to policy analysis, this paper reviews the Australian education policy space in the context of international initiatives, exploring national responses juxtaposed with key global arrangements. In shedding light on the alignment—or lack thereof—between national policies and international obligations, this paper contributes valuable insights to the broader debate on the importance of rights-based refugee education.*

*Keywords: human rights, refugee education, Refugee Convention, United Nations, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Australia.*

## **Introduction**

Refugee education, viewed through the lens of human rights, underscores the imperative to ensure that individuals forced to flee due to conflict or persecution have equal access to education and training. The right to education extends beyond mere access; it includes attentiveness to the diverse needs of refugee students (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2019). A human rights perspective demands cultural sensitivity, dignity, and respect for linguistic and cultural backgrounds in educational settings (Human Rights Watch, 2018). Protection from discrimination and exploitation, coupled with an emphasis on participation, empowerment, and the continuity of education despite displacement, are crucial to upholding human rights in refugee education.

Over 110 million individuals were forcibly displaced globally in 2023, with an estimated 40 percent being youth (Calaycay et al., 2023). While forcibly displaced people in general can face substantial obstacles in their educational journeys (Abu-Ghaida & Silva, 2020; Dryden-Peterson, 2018; Popescu et al., 2022; UNHCR, 2023), this paper examines the educational opportunities of refugees (forcibly displaced individuals resettled in third countries on humanitarian visas) in Australia. This narrowed approach will enable us to provide a nuanced exploration of their

distinct challenges and facilitate our context-specific assessment of Australia's adherence to international agreements on refugees and their access to education.

Countries of resettlement are expected to provide educational opportunities to support refugee integration (United Nations, 2016). Education can empower refugees to envision futures that transcend present-day challenges, leveraging valuable skills and knowledge. It can serve as a guiding light amidst uncertainty and precarity, representing a crucial pathway toward rebuilding lives (Cha, 2020; Dryden-Peterson & Reddick, 2017; Dryden-Peterson et al., 2017). In other words, "for people who have lost all their other assets, education represents a primary survival strategy" (Flukiger-Stockton, 1996, p. 3). For those who are displaced, education is more than just a fundamental entitlement—it serves as a lifeline, offering stability, hope, and a pathway to rebuilding their futures. However, around 48 percent of refugee children have no access to education (UNHCR, 2023a). Refugee learners are often overlooked in national data collection efforts, impeding governments' capacity to strategically plan and effectively deliver education services to this demographic (Calaycay et al., 2023; Borkowski, 2023). Addressing the pressing issue of limited access to education for refugees, along with their underrepresentation in national data in Australia, warrants analysis of national education policies' alignment (or misalignment) with international frameworks.

Education is enshrined in numerous international declarations and conventions as a human right. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) affirms education as a fundamental human right. The UN has enacted the UDHR through various binding conventions and other mechanisms, including the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees. These global commitments mean that governments that resettle refugees bear a responsibility to uphold their right to education (Goodwin-Gill & McAdam, 2021; Xi, 2017). As refugees integrate into new societies, host countries must ensure that educational opportunities for resettled refugees are accessible without discrimination.

Against the backdrop of the global refugee frameworks that outline states' responsibilities, including ensuring access to quality education for refugees, this paper analyses the framing of refugee education in Australia's education policy space. As a signatory to the 1948 UDHR, the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, and the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees, Australia collaborates with the UNHCR to evaluate asylum claims and ensure individuals in genuine need of international protection are identified and assisted. The partnership emphasizes a commitment to coordinated and humane responses to the growing displacement crisis, aligning with the principles outlined in these international frameworks (Refugee Council of Australia [RCOA], 2023, 2023a, 2023b). Australia voluntarily offers a program of refugee humanitarian settlement support within its commitment to assessing protection needs and offers. This includes equal access to education (pre-school; schooling; and adult English language provision).

Drawing on an interpretive policy analysis approach, this paper reviews international frameworks and national contexts, focusing on selected relevant UN declarations and conventions and the Australian education policy space. The central question guiding this inquiry is: *To what extent do Australia's refugee education provisions reflect its global commitments to humanitarian protection?*

Australia is a signatory to international agreements relevant to the rights of refugees including the 1948 UDHR, the 1951 Refugee Convention, and the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees. Our analysis illustrates how Australia, as a signatory to these international agreements, navigates the tension between its global commitments to protection and the practical realities of incorporating these commitments into domestic education policies. We aim to develop nuanced understandings of how the right to education for refugees is articulated, interpreted, and implemented within a global national policy context. In exploring the alignment—or lack thereof—between national policies and international obligations, the paper contributes valuable insights to broader debates on the importance of rights-based refugee education. We seek to contribute with potential solutions and provide a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics surrounding the implementation of international refugee frameworks within global and national contexts. The paper is organized into three main sections. The first section outlines the methodological approaches and data sources of the study. The second section analyzes purposefully selected UN documents and national education policies. The third section problematizes the alignment between the international frameworks and the national refugee education provisions.

### **Methodology and Data**

We used an interpretive approach to policy analysis (Yanow, 2000, 2014), which eschews the view that policies are objective phenomena; instead, perceptions, values, and beliefs of those involved shape policy design and implementation. The interpretive approach views policies as socially constructed artifacts that are influenced by a myriad of factors. The umbrella review includes political ideologies, cultural norms, historical legacies, and power dynamics (Yanow, 2000; Wagenaar, 2015). There is no universally agreed-upon set of issues that objectively demand policy attention. Policy problems are systematically formulated and negotiated within a particular political space (Bacchi, 2009), which entails (sometimes urgently) selecting some issues while neglecting others. Nor are social problems static. What was once a critical or global problem might not get policy attention today or in national contexts. Policies are usually understood and perceived differently by different actors. These varying mixed interpretations can shape the implementation of specific instruments and strategies on the evaluation of their intended and unintended consequences (Bacchi, 2009)

Policy knowledge is not discovered but generated through interpretation, mediated by social contexts, values, and experiences (Yanow, 2000; Wagenaar, 2015). Interpretive policy analysis is particularly suited to examining refugee educational

policies. It can facilitate an in-depth exploration of the meanings, assumptions, and values embedded in both international frameworks and the Australian administration responses. By focusing on the subjective and discursive aspects of policy, interpretive policy analysis enables an analysis that goes beyond the formal content, revealing how various stakeholders construct, understand, and implement refugee education (Yanow, 2000; Fischer, 2003). This approach is advantageous as it highlights the interplay between global expectations and national interpretations. Helping to elucidate how both international obligations and local contexts shape Australia's commitments to refugee education.

### **Authors' Positionality**

In making sense of policies, the interpretivist analyst invariably brings their interests, values, and worldviews to the table. Interpretive policy analysis involves grappling with competing narratives and acknowledging the ambiguity, uncertainty, and complexity inherent in policy processes. Methodological choices and theoretical approaches reflect the importance of analysts' assumptions, priorities, and scholarly socialization. Our lenses tacitly guide our gaze and focus our attention on how discourses circulate in particular ways through phrasings, positionings, juxtapositions, and silences. We are both elective and selected migrants to Australia. As an individual of African heritage who journeyed to Australia as an international student, Tebeje's distinctive positionality profoundly influences the research agenda he pursues and the theoretical and methodological approaches he adopts. Leveraging his cultural background and social location, he offers a nuanced understanding of African refugee youth's educational opportunities and adverse challenges. His advocacy efforts have been dedicated to continue improving and reforming refugee educational rights. Sally is an adult migrant who works as an English language teacher, inspired to advocate on refugee education attainability, and a scholar. Her work has examined how people with lived experience of forced migration are aided and constrained in accessing, participating, and succeeding in obtaining higher education. She is the founder and chair of Refugee Education Australia, a not-for-profit organization that works to create better educational opportunities and outcomes for refugees in Australian education systems.

We selected policy documents associated with global refugee frameworks and Australia's education system to respond to our research question. Qualitative data were drawn from three international frameworks—the UDHR (1948), the Refugee Convention (1951), and the Global Compact on Refugees (2018)—and two national (Australian) education policies: the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (Australian Government, 2019a) and the Australian Universities Accord Report (Australian Government, 2024). We focus on key documents that hold significant weight in shaping policies related to refugees' right to education. The national policy documents enabled us to contextualize the global frameworks.

**Table 1**  
*Policy Documents Reviewed for this Paper*

<b>Policy Document</b>	<b>Source</b>	<b>Scope and Purpose</b>
<i>Universal Declaration of Human Rights</i>	United Nations (1948)	Adopted by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in 1948, the UDHR is a foundational international document that outlines the basic rights and freedoms to which all human beings (including refugees) are entitled. It includes rights such as freedom from discrimination, the right to education, and the right to seek asylum from persecution. The UDHR serves as a guiding framework for the protection of human rights globally.
<i>Refugee Convention</i>	United Nations (1951)	The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees was initially created in response to the mass displacement in Europe following World War II. The Convention was pivotal in defining who qualifies as a refugee, laying the groundwork for international refugee protection. In 1967, the Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees was introduced to broaden the Convention's scope. This Protocol removed the geographical and temporal restrictions, allowing the Convention to apply to refugees worldwide, regardless of when or where displacement occurred.
<i>Global Compact on Refugees</i>	United Nations (2018)	Adopted in 2018, the GCR is a framework aimed at enhancing international cooperation in addressing large movements of refugees and improving the support for host countries and communities. It focuses on four key areas: easing pressure on host countries, enhancing refugee self-reliance, expanding access to third-country solutions, and supporting conditions for safe, voluntary return. The GCR is not legally binding but seeks to guide collective action for refugee protection and support.
<i>Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration</i>	Australian Government (2019)	The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration outlines Australia's national education goals, emphasizing inclusive and equitable education for all young Australians. It highlights the importance of providing targeted support to students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, including refugees.
<i>Australian Universities Accord</i>	Australian Government (2024)	The Australian Commonwealth Government commissioned the Australian Universities Accord review. The initiative aimed at re-envisioning Australia's higher education system to make it more accessible, equitable, and responsive to socio-economic and theological changes. One of its central goals is to improve pathways to university for underrepresented groups, which includes students from refugee and asylum-seeker backgrounds.

We closely reviewed each policy document, with special attention to refugee education framing within the international frameworks and the national policy statements. We identified and focused on terms central to our research question, including 'rights,' 'education,' and 'refugees.' Using these keywords, we conducted an initial sweep to isolate relevant excerpts within each document that directly referenced these terms concerning refugees' access to education. This process enabled us to gather a concentrated set of data points about how refugee education is framed and supported at international and national policy levels. After isolating these extracts, we undertook a comparative analysis to explore how key themes are framed across different policy scales (Molla, 2021). We then identified emerging patterns within the data corpus and developed storylines by collating relevant data extracts under relevant themes. The development of storylines is a pivotal aspect of our interpretive approach. Rather than merely presenting fragmented data points, we sought to weave a cohesive narrative by collating relevant data extracts under specific themes. This narrative construction facilitated a clearer communication of our findings and allowed for a more holistic understanding of the policy context. The interpretive lens allowed us to delve beyond surface content to understand the underlying values and assumptions that shaped the policy landscape. By unmasking and interpreting the representation of refugee education within international frameworks and national contexts, policy frame analysis enabled us to shed light on competing interests within the policy field and who remains invisible in the policies.

Interrogating national refugee education policy provisions concerning human rights and refugee resettlement international agreements is crucial for revealing gaps and inconsistencies that affect refugees' educational access and rights. We can make sense of policy silences and misalignments across different policy scales using interpretive policy analysis (Molla, 2021). We can uncover how global commitments are translated, limited, or redefined within national frameworks. This approach sheds light on how national policies may fall short of international standards, particularly when national equity provisions are vague, contradictory, or selectively applied. By examining these discrepancies, interpretive analysis highlights the spaces where refugee rights are weakened or neglected, often revealing underlying social, political, or economic forces that shape policy priorities.

The analysis focuses primarily on students with refugee backgrounds rather than individuals in the asylum process, internally displaced persons (IDPs), or those who are stateless. This focus is intentional. Our research aims to critically examine Australia's response to international frameworks and refugee education initiatives, specifically addressing those granted refugee status under international law. By honing in on this group, we seek to provide insights into how effectively Australia aligns with global expectations in its educational provisions for refugees, whose protection and resettlement involve distinct legal and policy commitments compared to other displaced groups. Our emphasis on students with refugee backgrounds also reflects the unique educational and social integration challenges this group faces within the Australian context. Focusing on students with refugee backgrounds allows us to explore how Australia's educational policies and practices support (or

hinder) this group's long-term integration and development, thereby offering critical insights for policy improvement and alignment with international standards.

## **Findings**

### ***Global Frameworks***

When governments sign and ratify UN conventions and agreements, they undertake a legal commitment to implement the stipulated provisions within these instruments (Betts & Collier, 2017; Loescher, 2021). This obligation is grounded in good faith, requiring a genuine intent to fulfill the terms outlined in the conventions. The implementation process involves incorporating UN principles into national legislation and policies, necessitating the creation or adjustment of laws to align with international expectations (Kneebone, 2017). Signatory governments are expected to submit periodic reports detailing their progress in implementing these agreements, with these reports subject to review by UN committees or monitoring bodies. Bearing this in mind, in this section, we review key international frameworks and Australia's education policies relevant to the issue of refugees and their right to education.

Following the end of the First World War, the United States and its European allies, mainly through the League of Nations, formulated the first collective response to the needs and conditions of forcibly displaced people in Europe. This intergovernmental response emerged during the interwar period, gaining significant momentum from the latter half of the 1930s onward when forced displacement and resettlement issues became a global concern (Betts & Collier, 2017; Loescher, 2021). The collective inter-war refugee organizations include the High Commissioner for Refugees in 1921, the High Commissioner for Refugees from Germany in 1933, and the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees in 1938 (Molla, 2024). Following the upheavals of the Second World War and the ensuing humanitarian crisis in Europe, global leaders established pivotal entities such as the United Nations Organization (1945) and the International Organization for Refugees (1946). Three international frameworks are pertinent to refugee education: the UDHR, the Refugee Convention, and the Global Compact on Refugees.

Adopted in 1948, the UDHR unequivocally affirms education as a fundamental human right (UN, 1948/2015). The UDHR aims to safeguard fundamental human rights globally, including civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, promoting the dignity and equality of all individuals. As a foundational document proclaiming the inalienable rights and freedoms to which all individuals are entitled, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, or religion, it sets out a common standard of human rights for all people. Subsequently, it has served as the basis for international treaties. Two articles in the UDHR (UN, 1948/2015) cover the right to seek refuge and the right to access education:

Article 14(1): Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution. (art. 14.1)

Article 26(1): Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit. (art. 26.1)

Article 14 reaffirms the fundamental principle that individuals facing persecution have the right to seek safety and protection beyond the borders of their home country. By protecting the right to seek asylum, the UDHR contributes to developing a global framework to foster a world where individuals are not only protected from persecution but are also granted the opportunity to rebuild their lives in an environment that respects and safeguards their human rights. Likewise, Article 26 is rooted in the principle that everyone, regardless of refugee status, should have equal educational opportunities as an integral aspect of their broader human rights.

The intersection of Articles 14 and 26 of the UDHR holds profound implications for the rights of refugees to education in countries of resettlement. Signatories to Article 14 are committed to offering refuge from immediate threats and providing the necessary conditions for individuals to rebuild their lives. Education emerges as a fundamental component of this process, playing a transformative role in the integration and empowerment of refugees. Educational attainment is seen as both a means and marker of refugee integration (Ager & Strang, 2008; OECD, 2019). In practical terms, the rights articulated in Article 26 mean that countries of resettlement should not only permit refugees to access education but also actively work towards eliminating barriers that may hinder their educational opportunities. This includes addressing language barriers, recognizing and validating prior academic achievements, and creating inclusive learning environments to accommodate diverse cultural backgrounds (Stevenson & Baker, 2024). Governments of resettlement countries and countries of first asylum should recognize that education catalyzes social cohesion, economic participation, and overall community development. It equips refugees with the skills and knowledge needed to navigate their new environment, contribute to the host society, and, eventually, become self-reliant individuals.

The UDHR was operationalized through several subsequent covenants and compacts. In direct response to the extensive displacement witnessed in post-war Europe, the UN took a significant step in 1951 by adopting the Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, commonly known as the Refugee Convention (1951). This landmark agreement explicitly urged member states to address the resettlement of displaced individuals on humanitarian grounds. Article 1 of the Refugee Convention provides a comprehensive definition of a refugee as an individual outside their home country, unable or unwilling to return due to a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. The Convention also underscores the commitment of member states to providing refugees with access to education on par with the host country's residents, promoting inclusivity and



equality in educational opportunities. Article 22 of the Refugee Convention outlines the rights of refugees to education:

The Contracting States shall accord to refugees the same treatment as is accorded to nationals with respect to elementary education. [...] The Contracting States shall accord to refugees treatment as favourable as possible, and, in any event, not less favourable than that accorded to aliens generally in the same circumstances, with respect to education other than elementary education and, in particular, as regards access to studies, the recognition of foreign school certifications, diplomas and degrees, the remission of fees and charges and the award of scholarships. (art. 22)

Member states that are signatories to the Convention are legally bound to provide refugees with the necessary resources and opportunities for successful resettlement and integration. Like other legal instruments that came before it (e.g., the Convention Relating to the International Status of Refugees of 1933 and the Convention of 1938 concerning the Status of Refugees coming from Germany), the 1951 Refugee Convention was Eurocentric in its scope (Ferris & Donato, 2020). Its 1967 Protocol removed temporal and geographical restrictions, expanding its applicability (Horsch & Russell, 2020). The Protocol expects member states to go a step further by recognizing new refugee situations and emerging needs in various parts of the world.

In the wake of the so-called 'refugee crisis' of 2015, the UN General Assembly Resolution 71/1 adopted the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants (2016). The Declaration was signed by all 193 Member States of the UN. Section 1 of the Declaration stresses movement as an inherent part of human history:

Since earliest times, humanity has been on the move. Some people move in search of new economic opportunities and horizons. Others move to escape armed conflict, poverty, food insecurity, persecution, terrorism, or human rights violations and abuses. Still others do so in response to the adverse effects of climate change, natural disasters (some of which may be linked to climate change), or other environmental factors. Many move, indeed, for a combination of these reasons. (sec. 1)

Signatory states have collectively agreed to provide quality education for all refugee children and young people and ensure they acquire essential knowledge and skills for successful integration and participation in society (Sections 81 and 82). Importantly, the New York Declaration paved the way for the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees (UNGA, 2018), which Australia, along with 175 other nations, supported. This non-binding international agreement provides a framework for more 'predictable and equitable burden- and responsibility-sharing' in responding to unprecedented numbers of refugees. The Compact encourages the international community to provide increased support to countries hosting large refugee populations and promotes innovative approaches to education financing. Under Article 2.1, the Global Compact on Refugees mandates that states and stakeholders

contribute resources and expertise to enhance the responsiveness of national education systems to the needs and conditions of refugees. The Compact emphasizes the importance of minimizing the duration refugees spend outside education and providing comprehensive support for addressing specific education needs, overcoming enrollment obstacles, and facilitating the recognition of equivalency in academic, professional, and vocational qualifications.

***National Education Policy Context: Australia***

As a signatory to the international frameworks discussed above, Australia resettles refugees and allocates resources to support integration. Measured on a per capita basis, Australia has one of the most generous refugee intake programs in the world (Mence et al., 2017; Parkinson et al., 2023). Since the end of the Second World War, Australia has resettled close to one million refugees, admitting around 13,000 refugees annually. The largest group of 170,000 displaced persons, predominantly from Europe, arrived between 1947 and 1954. Between 2013 and 2022, the country resettled 13.1 percent (132,180 individuals) of the total 1,008,934 refugees under the UN mandate (RCOA, 2023b). In 2023, the annual humanitarian migrant intake increased to 20,000 (RCOA, 2023b). Commensurately, over the past 75 years, there has been a notable rise in the percentage of Australians born outside the country, surging from 10 percent to approximately 30 percent (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2022). The refugee resettlement program is thought to have influenced this demographic shift substantially.

When considering multiculturalism and refugee resettlement in the Australian context, it is important to reflect on its history of colonial-settler violence against First Nations Australians. When Australia's contemporary multiculturalism is juxtaposed with its historic policing of migrants, the gaps that we address in this article are starkly exposed. Two aspects of Australia's history are relevant. Firstly, the disenfranchisement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, who have experienced systemic displacement, disempowerment, and abuse, tells us about how Australia is built on colonial violence, raising important questions about how refugees are selected and welcomed (Baak, 2019; Matthews, 2021). A second aspect is the racist White Australia policy that ran from 1901 until the 1970s (National Museum of Australia, 2023), which was enacted to restrict the immigration of 'undesirable' non-white migrants. That this policy was only fully dismantled five decades ago reminds us of the discriminatory underpinnings of colonial Australia's approach to migration.

At present, there are broad initiatives that support the educational opportunities of refugees. In the latest installment of the national Multicultural Statement (Australian Government, 2017), the Commonwealth Government aimed to extend services and programs that meet the needs of people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds while at the same time ensuring the shared values of mutual respect, equality, and freedom are upheld by all Australians. Subsequently, in the Multicultural Access and Equity Policy Guide, the Australian Government (2018) underscored the importance of ensuring 'equality of opportunity and equity of outcomes for all Australians' (p. 5). To this end, the policy calls explicitly for

government agencies and departments to be responsive to the unique conditions and needs of multicultural communities, including 'refugee and humanitarian entrants' and 'visibly different migrants'. The *Policy Guide* states:

We live in a multicultural society and that there is an obligation on Australian Government departments and agencies to ensure their programmes and services are *accessible* by all eligible Australians, *responsive* to their needs, and deliver *equitable outcomes* for them, regardless of their cultural and linguistic backgrounds. (p. 3, emphasis added)

Although the Government's 'investing in refugees' agenda falls short of fully acknowledging the educational disadvantage of humanitarian entrants (see Australian Government, 2019; Shergold et al., 2019), there is a consensus on the need for improving the educational attainment of this group. However, the notion of merit is overlooked in this agreement; if the principles of merit that exist for non-refugee/Australian-born students are applied, refugees are left to compete on a deeply uneven terrain that fails to account for educational disruptions and traumatic journeys.

### *Schooling in Australia*

Australia is a federation, comprising six states and two territories. Although school education is primarily the responsibility of states and territories, governments of all levels periodically meet to design and agree on national schooling policies. Social justice goals are prominent in such policies. For instance, through the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008), Commonwealth, state, and territory governments recognized that "students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, those from remote areas, refugees, homeless young people, and students with disabilities often experience educational disadvantage" and agreed to reduce the effect of such sources of disadvantage as "disability, homelessness, refugee status and remoteness" (p. 7). In the latest installment of the national educational framework—the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (Australian Government, 2019)—all governments agreed to provide targeted support for disadvantaged groups, including refugees. One of the key goals of the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration is to ensure that "the Australian education system promotes excellence and equity" (p. 5) through *inter alia*, "supporting all young Australians at risk of educational disadvantage" (p. 9). The Commonwealth, state, and territory governments agreed that:

Targeted support can help learners such as those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, those from regional, rural and remote areas, *migrants and refugees*, learners in out-of-home care, homeless young people, and children with disability to reach their potential. This means *tailoring to the needs of individuals* across a system that prioritises *equity of opportunity and that supports achievement*. (p. 17, emphasis added)

The commitment to providing equitable opportunities to refugees varies across the education system. In the school sector, the level of support refugees receive varies by

state and territory. This variation results in considerable differences in terms of access, support, and success for refugee students, not just between states and territories but also between schools. As Tippet et al. (2023) argue from their national study of refugee education, the policy invisibility for refugee students means that schools' capacity to support students and protect their rights to quality education are dictated by their access to funding and strongly influenced by "the multiple and complex forms of disadvantage represented within their student cohort" (p. 12). Since refugee students are most likely to attend public schools in lower socioeconomic areas, schools face "a difficult dilemma in deciding how to distribute funding; a dilemma which was informed by their moral and ethical obligations to support all children in their care" (Tippet et al., 2023, p. 13). Sometimes resources intended for refugee students were shared or used to support other students.

In the states that host the highest proportion of newly arrived refugees and diaspora communities, there are refugee-specific programs, such as the Refugee Education Support Program in Victoria (Foundation House, 2024). In New South Wales, the Department of Education provides Refugee Student Support (NSW Government, 2024). However, such programs and positions are not found in other states or territories; for example, in Queensland, refugee students are caught in the unhelpfully broad inclusion policy (Creagh et al., 2023), with responsibility for English language support devolved to individual schools with the consequence of limited accountability for the education and language rights of refugee students. This national variation creates inconsistencies in the ways that refugee students are supported, hindering consistent policy responses, such as guidelines, support programs, or teacher professional development. The latter is particularly necessary, given the absence of time and attention given to multicultural education in the crowded curricula of initial teacher education programs (Stewart et al., 2019).

### ***Higher Education in Australia***

The higher education sector is primarily a federal concern in Australia, meaning that it receives Commonwealth funding.<sup>1</sup> Within this sector, 'equity' is the dominant discourse that governs access for underrepresented groups in Australia, with the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) providing funding to universities to undertake activities and implement strategies that improve access to undergraduate courses for educationally disadvantaged people. In Australia, priority has been given to improving the retention and completion rates of 'equity groups', who are broadly categorized as people from low socioeconomic backgrounds, Indigenous Australians, and people from regional, rural, and remote areas. The original ambition of the HEPPP was to 'raise aspirations' for higher education, widen pathways to university education, and enhance the engagement and attainment of equity groups (Australian Government 2012). In the last 15 years (2010–2024), the Federal Government has allocated over AUD 1.9 billion under HEPPP (Australian Government, 2024). Other cohorts with intersectional educational disadvantages, such as refugees, are not a focus for the HEPPP, meaning neither

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<sup>1</sup> Although higher education is the purview of the federal government, the governance of higher education institutions is a state concern in Australia.

government nor universities are mandated to focus on this cohort. However, we note how under Section 1.50.10 of the HEPPP Guidelines, universities can use HEPPP funding to tailor their programs to 'address the specific disadvantage' within the demographics of the low SES student population (Australian Government, 2024). However, this, again, creates a level of variability and inconsistency across the national education landscape.

Refugees have remained invisible in the national higher education equity policies (Molla, 2021, 2024). For two decades (1990–2010), universities subsumed refugee background students under the category of 'non-English speaking background' (NESB) targets. The categorization overlooked the fact that considerable variations exist within the NESB category in terms of economic status, parental level of education, and cultural assets. In the last ten years, with the government's abandonment of NESB as an equity group,<sup>2</sup> refugees have been mainly identified by universities as belonging to the low socioeconomic status (SES) group, if at all. This framing has a homogenizing effect, overlooking complex non-economic factors of disadvantage that refugees face, and inhibiting institutions from running tailored resource-intensive programs to benefit the group.

The exclusion from policy considerations means refugees struggle to get access to and be successful in higher education. For example, African refugee youth, even with institutional equity measures, continue to experience low participation and completion rates in higher education. Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics reveal that, on average, more than 85 percent of young people from the primary countries of origin for African refugees settling in Australia lack a university degree and do not engage in higher education within five years of arrival (Molla, 2024). This pattern has remained largely unchanged since the mid-1990s. Despite access to alternative pathways and adjusted admission requirements, successful completion of a degree remains a formidable challenge for refugee students, therefore destabilizing the 'merit-based' requirement of Article 26 of the UDHR.

On a positive note, here are new promising developments. In 2022, the federal government commissioned the Australian Universities Accord Panel to review the sector and propose policy ideas. The panel delivered the final report in February 2024. The Panel acknowledged the invisibility of refugees in equity policies: "There is evidence to suggest other cohorts, such as care leavers, refugees, and some language groups from non-English speaking backgrounds, experience significantly lower higher education participation and attainment outcomes" (O'Kane et al., 2024, Section 3.2.2). A key issue that has stymied more support for refugees has long been that universities do not collect relevant data on the enrollment, progression, and completion rates of refugee students. In response to this gap, the Universities Accord Panel recommends that the proposed Australian Tertiary Education Commission measures and monitors the outcomes of educationally disadvantaged students by

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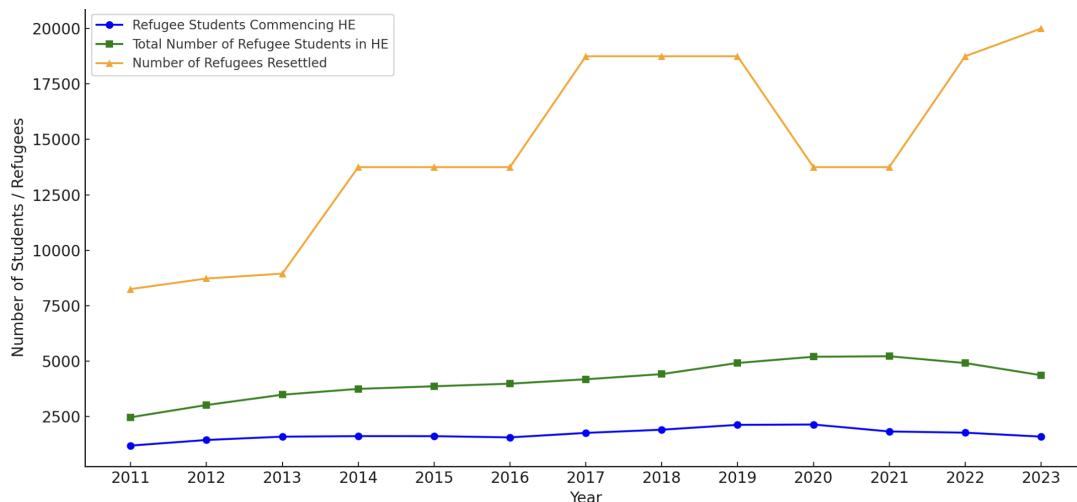
<sup>2</sup> While not an 'equity group' of concern in the HEPPP, the federal government still collects NESB student data, but this does not capture migration journey, visa category or duration in Australia, which are key markers of forced migration.

collecting “new types of data such as more granular equity indicators (e.g. students who are care leavers, carers or refugees) and course delivery costs to inform analysis” (O’Kane, 2024, p.241). This is a welcome measure. If implemented, this policy change can help track refugee students’ educational trajectories and outcomes in Australian higher education.

As illustrated in Figure 1, access to higher education for refugee students has steadily increased over the past decade. From 2011 to 2019, there was a consistent increase in both the number of refugees commencing HE and the total number of refugee students in the sector. This increase aligns with a steady rise in the number of refugees resettled, particularly in the years 2014 through 2019, which saw significant surges in resettlement figures (Department of Home Affairs [DOHA], 2023; Refugee Council of Australia [RCOA], 2024). However, the COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on global migration patterns, including the resettlement of refugees. In 2020, while there was still a high number of refugee students commencing higher education, the total number of refugees resettled dropped from 18,750 to 13,750. By 2023, there was a slight recovery in the number of refugees resettled, rising to 20,000. However, the total number of refugee students in higher education continued to reflect the declines in previous years, indicating that despite the increase in resettlement, the long-term impacts of the pandemic and the existing barriers faced by refugee students may still linger. As the number of refugees resettled fluctuates, education systems must adapt to provide adequate resources and support tailored to the unique challenges faced by refugee students.

**Figure 1**

*Refugee Resettlement and Access to Higher Education in Australia, 2011–2023; based on data from DOHA (2023), RCOA (2024), and Commonwealth Department of Education website*



Another key development can be found in the Department of Home Affairs, rather than the Department of Education. A key response for resettlement countries like Australia to the UNHCR’s 15/30 campaign (to get 15 percent of refugees into higher education by 2030) is the development of complementary education pathways.

Complementary pathways are “safe and regulated avenues for persons in need of international protection that provide for a lawful stay in a third country where the international protection needs of the beneficiaries are met” (UNHCR, 2023b).

Education complementary pathways offer a protection-focused pathway to a durable solution through an academic program of study. As of 2022, at least 33 coordinated education pathways are operating in 27 countries, a remarkable increase from the three pathways that were operating in 2019 (McAuliffe & Oucho, 2024; Evans et al., 2022). Australia is not one of these 27 countries, despite calls for them—as a generous resettlement host—to create one. However, given the new Labor government’s commitment to extending Australia’s humanitarian response through the creation of 10,000 additional complementary pathway places<sup>3</sup>, the country’s time has come. To this end, the Department of Home Affairs has co-designed a blueprint for a new *Refugee Student Settlement Pathway* (RSSP) with the new Australian Refugee Welcome University Sponsorship Consortium (ARWU SC).<sup>4</sup> The ambition of RSSP is to create a shared opportunity with the Australian tertiary education sector to increase resettlement options, with institutions contributing to the costs of settlement and utilizing the goodwill and energy of campus support groups to help students meet settlement outcomes for a year after arrival. That this has happened under the Minister for Immigration rather than the Minister for Education tells an interesting story about where responsibilities for refugee education (are seen to) lie. This illuminates the absence of a clear connection between the Departments of Home Affairs and the Department of Education, except for where there is a clear visa pathway. This hinders rights-based education for new arrivals because, once a person has arrived in Australia, responsibility for refugee education is lost in the gaps between these siloed divisions of government.

### ***Problematizing the National Commitment***

International frameworks recognize the importance of refugee education, urging signatory governments to ensure that refugees have substantive educational opportunities. Australia’s national multicultural policies and educational declarations reflect its commitment to multilateral efforts to support refugee resettlement and integration. The operationalization of national commitments is far from perfect. In this section, we illuminate the key limitations of refugee education in Australia.

Sectoral misalignments mean that refugees are explicitly recognized as equity targets in school education but not in the higher education sector. Refugees remain invisible in the Australian higher education policy space (Molla, 2021, 2024). Although some universities offer refugee-focused support, without sector-wide equity provision, institutional arrangements remain inconsistent and insufficient for refugees’ needs. Consequently, refugee students continue to face structural barriers to entry to and

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<sup>3</sup> The Australian government made this pledge at the Global Refugee Forum in December 2023. Details can be found [here](#).

<sup>4</sup> The ARWUSC is a consortium of 13 public universities with a strong commitment to social inclusion who have come together to co-design a blueprint for the Refugee Student Settlement Pathway with the Australian government.

progression within higher education institutions. To use Fraser's (2008) logic of participatory parity, policy invisibility reproduces injustice in three ways. First, in the absence of targeted policy provisions, refugees lack the necessary institutional support to succeed in their studies (*maldistribution*). Second, against the prevalence of negative stereotypes towards refugees in the public sphere, refugee students continue to experience racial bias at the institutional level and are construed in deficit terms (*misrecognition*). Third, the policy invisibility of refugees also implies their limited involvement in equity-related policy debates and decisions (*political misrepresentation*).

The invisibility of refugees in higher education equity policies appears to be a calculated omission. The Australian Government spends millions of dollars supporting refugee settlement. By focusing on developing 'foundational' English language, education (schooling), and employment, there is no targeted support for improving refugees' participation in tertiary education (Australian Government, 2019; Shergold et al., 2019). In many cases, refugee settlement policies are motivated by local needs for low-skilled workers—the humanitarian policy has an economic intent: refugees fill less-skilled, low-paying jobs at low wages (Legrain, 2016). Anthropologist Aihwa Ong (2003) refers to governments' tendency to educate refugees for positions that would not be taken by local workers as 'calculated kindness'. However, such stratified educational and occupational expectations signify political short-sightedness. By providing quality education to refugees, society has the opportunity to empower them to become self-sufficient, valuable citizens. For improved outcomes, the Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration program (Parkinson et al., 2023) and the Transition to Work services for young refugees who leave school early (Australian Government, 2019b) need to be complemented by widening access to and targeted support in higher education.

The invisibility in policy has long inhibited the imperative (of governments and educational institutions) to collect data on refugee participation in education, which is matched by a lack of international data on this matter. This invisibility is policy violence, interpreted by Calaycay et al. (2023) as an act of (deliberate) exclusion, which creates an additional layer of harm and arguably constitutes a violation of Article 26 of the UDHR. If the education system does not know who our refugee students are educationally (in terms of sector, performance, and potential), and where they want to go, it will be unable to respond. This requires careful and ongoing consultation with refugee communities, families, and individuals to ensure that needs and responses are co-established, specific, targeted, and flexible. This currently does not happen at any level, meaning that disconnections—between different governments (Commonwealth, states, and territories), departments (Education, Home Affairs), and sectors (school, vocational, higher education)—are deepened. It is thus heartening to see refugees recognized in the Universities Accord report. New challenges will emerge, such as how to identify refugees, particularly in the case where people have become Australian citizens, and whether people with refugee-like circumstances should be included. More debate is needed, which must extend across the silos within government, departments, and sectors.



The mandate within Article 26 of UDHR that “higher education [being] equally accessible to all based on merit” is critically endangered by a lack of connectivity and ecological thinking throughout the system. It is not feasible for new arrivals to compete on even ground ‘on merit’ lines without a clear understanding of the inequitable circumstances that many refugees experience, resulting from a plethora of factors (such as trauma, fragmented educational trajectories, learning new language/s, academic literacy acquisition, cultural unfamiliarity, financial precarity). As Creagh’s (2014) analysis clearly illustrates, refugee students are disadvantaged in national standardized testing instruments such as NAPLAN; it therefore follows that this is worse with high-stakes exams, such as the High School Certificate or English language tests needed for entry to professional programs such as nursing, especially when the impacts of trauma are factored in (Morrice et al., 2021).

We turn to the wicked problem of skills and qualifications recognition. According to the Committee for Economic Development of Australia (Barker & Tofts-Len, 2024), “On average, migrants who have been in Australia for two to six years earn more than 10 percent less than Australian-born workers” (p. ii) and this gap has in part to do with issues associated with recognition of skills and qualifications. Without efficient systems to identify and enhance refugees’ skills, many highly qualified individuals may resort to driving for services like Uber instead of pursuing their professions. Establishing streamlined mechanisms for skill recognition and upskilling is not only imperative for the successful integration of refugees but is also crucial for maximizing the societal benefits of their diverse talents and experiences.

## **Conclusion**

Our primary objective was to understand the alignment between global initiatives and national responses regarding refugee education, using the case of Australia. International human rights and refugee frameworks collectively underscore the right of refugees to quality education, highlighting the intrinsic dignity of displaced individuals. These frameworks urge host governments to demonstrate unwavering commitment to affording refugees access to educational opportunities. In particular, host governments have a responsibility to ensure refugees can access education and can rebuild their lives. Australia, as a signatory to these international frameworks, is bound by legal commitments to align its education policies with these global expectations. In their comparative analysis of the implementation of international legal frameworks, Horsch and Russell (2022) emphasized the need to enhance the enforceability of refugees’ right to education. Our analysis supports their point and suggests promising developments, such as the Australian Universities Accord Panel’s recognition of refugees as worthy of consideration for future equity policies and the co-creation of a blueprint for the Refugee Student Settlement Pathway (RSSP).

Our analysis reveals sectoral inconsistencies within the Australian education policy space. While explicitly acknowledged as equity targets in school education, refugees remain invisible in the higher education sector. This misalignment perpetuates structural barriers for refugees, hindering their entry into and progression within

higher education institutions. The absence of a sector-wide equity provision for refugees results in inconsistent institutional arrangements, leaving them without the necessary support for academic success and meaningful employment.

We argue that a more comprehensive approach to refugee education is imperative to recognize the multifaceted challenges and unique circumstances that displaced populations face. This should encompass a holistic framework that recognizes and addresses disadvantageous factors, such as language barriers, disrupted educational trajectories, financial hardship, trauma, and cultural adjustment. Further, an ongoing commitment to monitoring outcomes, collecting detailed data, and implementing targeted policies will be pivotal in ensuring that refugees receive the support they need to thrive in both school and higher education settings. Australia can genuinely fulfill its international commitments to refugee education through concerted, compassionate, and interconnected efforts.

Our analysis underscores the importance of critically examining how national policies translate international commitments into actionable provisions for refugee education. The disparities identified in the Australian context suggest the value of comparative studies with other nations, such as Canada, to uncover best practices and common challenges in aligning national policy with global standards. Future research should further investigate how different countries operationalize international frameworks and identify the factors that facilitate or impede effective implementation.

### **Acknowledgments**

This work was in part supported by the Australian Research Council (project number: FT220100062). We would like to extend our gratitude to the anonymous reviewers and the Special Issue editors for their invaluable feedback and constructive suggestions on this paper.

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