Refugees in Australia - employment outcomes remain problematic

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Captain Cook arrived in Botany Bay on 28 April 1770 and declared Australia as ‘terra nullius’, a Latin phrase meaning ‘a land of no one’. This ignored the rights of Indigenous Australians and set the scene for the theme of racism which mars the history of Australia through to the present day. This paper considers the difficulties refugees face in the Australian workplace, exploring interrelationships between their religion, ethnicity, employment and equity. These difficulties are due to a variety of factors including their visible difference in accent and appearance; their lack of Australian qualifications and experience; and the failure of federal English language programs to provide adequate employment skills or continuity in training for some immigrant groups. Even where refugees do find employment, this is typically in low status occupations or in workplace contexts where they often face structural barriers and discrimination. All these factors limit the employment opportunities of refugees in the supposedly egalitarian society of Australia which gives everyone a ‘fair go’.

Introduction

The aging of post-WWII communities and new migrants is taking place within the culturally and linguistically diverse population of Australia. European communities now display reduced migration in contrast to an increase in non-European communities including Asian, Middle Eastern and most recently black African.

Australia remains a strong Anglo-centric country despite its population shift since the end of World War II. The Australian government faces a challenge to accommodate the increasing range of
cultural and linguistic changes brought about by the increased diversity of migrants to Australia. Previously Australia could be considered as an ‘isolated island’ of mainly British culture in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. However, the increasing numbers and diversity of migrants to Australia has meant the Australian government has had to modify its immigration policies to meet the increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in the Australian community. Early policies favoured assimilation of migrants into the mainstream Australian community with potential loss of their language and culture. This has now changed to a policy of multiculturalism that seeks to meet the wish of migrant communities to maintain the cultures and languages of Australian immigrants as part of the rich tapestry of peoples that now make up the Australian community. The present government appears to be moving towards a policy of ‘integration’ (Jakubowicz 2009, p.29)

Migration has become the main driver of Australia’s current population growth. Migrants have arrived in Australia under a range of conditions – as migrant families with preferred work skills, some sponsored by business and employer groups, some migrating independently; others have arrived as refugees admitted to Australia on humanitarian grounds. Irrespective of their reason for entry, a larger proportion of these migrants have been of non-English speaking background. Within the publication ‘Population flows: Immigration aspects 2009-10’ (DIAC, 2011a), it is estimated that the 168,700 migrants arriving between 2010 and 2011 speak over 174 languages and dialects other than English.

Australia’s policy on migration and settlement

The Land of no one

According to the National Archives of Australia (2011), when Captain Cook arrived in Botany Bay on 28 April 1770, he declared Australia as *terra nullius*, a Latin phrase translated as ‘land of no one’. This was despite the fact that Cook knew there was an Australian Indigenous population from observations made on his voyage around the coast of Australia. Griffith (1998) notes that *terra nullius* refers to a doctrine established among colonising European powers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which recognized their right to take possession of lands regarded as being unoccupied – with no recognisable sovereign power and in which lived ‘uncivilised inhabitants in a primitive state of society’. Robertson, Demosthenous & Demosthenous (2005) comment strongly on the lack of validity of this doctrine of *terra nullius* based on the fact of Aboriginal systems of law and social heritage.

More than 500 linguistically, culturally, and spiritually diverse Aboriginal groups had lived on the continent for approximately 60,000 years, with political, legal, economic, and social infrastructure in place. But, then, the colonisers came, armed with the most oppressive of ways. Guided and motivated by imperialist (ir)rationality for the acquisition of land to expand *mother* England, the colonisers reported that the continent was unoccupied; an expanse of territory without settled inhabitants or settled law. And, in
colonising mode, they declared the country *no man's land* (original author emphasis; p. 38).

As Ardill (2009) notes, the notion of Australia as being unoccupied was the basis for the continued denial of justice to Indigenous Australians until the Mabo decision in 1992, when the concept of *terra nullius* was effectively overturned by the High Court of Australia and Indigenous land rights were recognised. The inequitable treatment of the Australian Indigenous peoples over the two centuries since British settlement has been extensively documented elsewhere and will not be further considered here. However, the facts concerning *terra nullius* are of interest to the present study in that they not only shaped much of Australian government policy towards Aboriginal peoples in the twentieth century, but also provide a context for the subsequent racist immigration policies of Australian governments in the early and mid-twentieth century leading up to the more enlightened policies of the present day.

**The land of someone (preferably white)**

In 1788, the first British penal colony was established at Botany Bay. The next century saw six independent colonies established (New South Wales, South Australia, Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia and Tasmania). Thompson (2007) notes that before 1900, there was in fact no country called ‘Australia’, only the six colonies. However, by the 1890s, there was a growing sense of Australian nationalism. This was driven by a range of factors, most noticeably the need for a national defence force and a common immigration policy. In the area of defence, Germany, France and Russia were expanding into the Pacific. Each of the six colonies maintained their own defence force, and it was realised that a single army and navy could better defend Australia.

Immigration was also a growing issue of concern. As Liebig (2007) notes, Australia has been the target of immigrants since the settlement of Botany Bay in 1788. In the early years of Australia, these immigrants were predominantly from Britain and Ireland. However, as Bryoni (2011) notes, the gold rush of the 1850s saw the influx of increasing numbers of Asian immigrants into Australia, particularly from China. There were also large numbers of South Pacific Islanders who worked on Australian cane plantations. Thompson (2007) maintains that the economic success of these immigrant groups led to jealousy and worry over jobs among the predominantly white population, and this led to a desire to restrict economic competition from Asian migrants.

The unification of the six colonies was not easily achieved because, as Thompson (2007) notes, there were many fights and walkouts among the delegates of the various colonies. However, in 1901, the Australian Federal Constitution was established, and the Commonwealth of Australia was proclaimed. It was against this backdrop that the *Immigration Restriction Act* of 1901 was passed. The rationale for the Act is captured by Thomson (2007).

In 1901, 98% of people in Australia were white. Australia wanted to remain a country of white people who lived by British customs. Trade unions were keen to prevent labour competition from Chinese and Pacific Islander migrants who they feared would undercut wages. One of the first pieces of legislation passed in the new Federal Parliament was the
Immigration Restriction Act. Now known as the infamous White Australia Policy it made it very difficult for Asians and Pacific Islanders to migrate to Australia (para. 5).

This Act, as Thompson (2007) notes, allowed immigration officers to administer a literacy test, actually a 50-word Dictation Test, in any European language of their choice to any potential migrant to Australia. If that person was unable to successfully write out that dictation (in a language with which they were not familiar), then they could be excluded from entry into Australia. In fact, this was one of three Acts passed in 1901 that were aimed at ensuring immigration of predominantly European migrants. The other two items of legislation were the Pacific Islander Labourers Act that allowed for the deportation of Pacific Island workers from Australia; and the 1901 Post and Telegraph Act (Section 15) which stated that ships carrying Australian mail should use only white labour. In addition, according to Curthoys and Lake (2005), over the next few decades further items of legislation were passed strengthening the White Australia policy – this ‘further legislation relating to suffrage, naturalisation, old age and invalid pensions and the maternity allowance all specified racial grounds for discrimination in the name of White Australia’ (p. 228).

The White Australia Policy was to persist until World War II, after which the policy was gradually liberalised. This was predominantly in response to Australia’s great post-war need for an increased population required for reconstruction and industrialisation. Initially, as Bryoni (2011) notes, the preference was still for white European migrants – as evidenced in the ‘populate or perish’ scare campaign of the late 1940s which argued that Australia was vulnerable to Asian invasion (remembering that Australia had been on the brink of invasion by Japan in 1942). However, as Tavan (2005) points out, Australia was also under increasing domestic and international pressures to change its discriminatory immigration policies. Despite this, it was not until 1973 that the White Australia policy was formally renounced by the federal government. It was around this time the integration policy of the Australian government also shifted from assimilation to one of multiculturalism.

Effects of assimilation

Krupinski (1984) presents a review of several articles on the health and wellbeing of refugees and migrants arriving in Australia over the period from 1947 to 1980. While most were British, other migrant and refugee groups of significance in this period were Eastern European refugees in the 1940s; Western Europeans (Dutch, German, Italian) in the 1950s: and then Greeks and Yugoslavs in the 1970s, as well as increasing numbers of Asians. These groups of NESB migrants and refugees are the main focus of Krupinski’s (1984) paper. General trends are discussed below with particular reference to European migrants as the main groups affected by the federal government’s policy of assimilation.

NESB migrants in this period were found to suffer from an increased incidence of mental health disorders (e.g. schizophrenia and depression). This was posited by Krupinski (1984) as due to pre-migration trauma where it had occurred, and culture shock related to arrival in a new country and culture. Interestingly, the peak incidence of such disorders was generally 7-15 years after arrival in
Australia. This was especially true in southern European females (e.g. from Greece and Italy), a fact that the author put down to a lesser degree of assimilation relative to their husband and children. His reasoning was that husbands were better assimilated into Australian society and language through work, and children through school; these women, on the other hand, remained at home, without a great deal of exposure to Australian language and culture. As the family aged, their role as mother and wife diminished leading to frustration and a greater likelihood of mental disorder.

Adolescent European migrants in this period did not suffer from any greater risk of mental health disorders than their Australian counterparts. However, as Krupinski (1984) notes, there were intergenerational conflicts relating to differences in morals and values, with younger people favouring the more liberal Australian norms, and rebelling against the conservative views of their migrant parents. This is thought to account for the greater incidence of behavioural problems seen in these young people caught between two cultures. Interestingly, and contrary to Krupinski’s (1984) expectations, the incidence of psychiatric disorders was lower in migrants who arrived in Australia at an older age. This is posited as perhaps due to the fact that such elderly migrants were not expected to work or to play a full role in family life; nor were they assimilated into Australian society, rather remaining within the protective cocoon of their extended family. Thus they were not exposed to the full stresses of migration and assimilation.

Finally, Krupinski (1984) concludes that there were a number of contributing factors that affected the health and wellbeing of migrants and refugees. These include pre-migration trauma, prior social and cultural background, and the relative degree of culture shock experienced. The individual effects of each of these factors are hard to quantify. However, it might be reasonably suggested that the policy of cultural assimilation demanded by the federal Australian government of the time would not have assisted NESB migrants in their settlement into Australia.

**Effects of multiculturalism**

In respect to workplace discrimination, Colic-Peisker (2011) presents research that concerns multiculturalism, noting that “multiculturalism as ideology and policy has been criticised for over-focusing on cultural identities and differences and [for] a lack of focus on the structural inequality of ethnocultural groups” (p. 637). In support of this, she provides the results of recent research. This research used a quantitative methodology to compare the employment outcomes of eight NESB immigrant groups among themselves and also with Anglophone reference groups (from the UK and Australia). The research hypothesis being tested was that: “employment outcomes of NESB immigrants with post-school qualifications (either vocational or tertiary) will be worse than those of the Australia-born. The major ESB group, the UK-born, is included as a control group, and their employment outcomes are expected to be comparable to the Australia-born.” (p. 641). Data collection was made from the most recent (2006) Australian census to identify “how the primary human capital factors – qualifications and language proficiency – translate, or otherwise, into appropriate jobs following migration to Australia” (p. 641).
NESB participants for Colic-Peisker’s (2011) study were selected from a cross-section of immigrants – older established, mainly economic immigrants (Germany, Croatia, Russia); the current largest source groups (UK, China, India, Philippines); and those who are typically humanitarian refugees (Chile, Somalia), often with the lowest employment outcomes and, for Somalis, with the additional aggravating factor of being visibly different in colour and religion (mostly Muslim). In order to control for English proficiency and length of residence (two other major factors impacting on employment success), participants were selected only where self-assessed English proficiency was ‘very good’ and where residence in Australia was at least ten years. The main findings of Colic-Peisker’s (2011) research confirm the research hypothesis – that, overall, NESB immigrants have worse employment outcomes than people from English speaking background (born in Australia or the UK). However, some NESB groups match the success of the Anglophone groups in vocational sector employment (Russia, Germany, China), and also in the tertiary-educated sector (Germany, Russia). Somalis are towards the bottom of both rankings (vocational and tertiary educated) for successful employment outcomes – that is, they have significantly worse employment outcomes relative to their skill and educational levels. Research by DIAC (2011) has found that humanitarian refugees have the highest levels of unemployment among migrant groups, even after five years. As Colic-Peisker (2011) notes – “refugee-ness tends to trigger mainstream prejudices against groups originating from underdeveloped and violence-ridden countries” (p. 648).

The findings above were also reported by Johnstone (2011) who reviewed the plight of professionally-qualified black African skilled migrants living in Melbourne. Many were Somalis and had been in Australia for many years. Despite this, they had found it very difficult to obtain professional jobs, and generally had to ‘downskill’ themselves (hide their true qualifications) and accept low status, unskilled work where available. According to Colic-Peisker’s (2011), this is due to the fact that they are both visibly different and also predominantly Muslim, thus they are regarded as more culturally distant than other migrant groups. The following quote from Johnstone (2011) captures the hopelessness felt by members of this group.

... bring them to Australia, and the courage and commitment of people like this slowly but surely die: eroded by year after year of rejection, discouragement and official silence. It’s little wonder the older professionals here – many once proud captains of their industries – wind up sliding into an uneasy retirement, “fitting in” as interpreters or drivers, and trying not to look back at what might have been, had they not given up their old lives for their children (final paragraph).

These findings on multiculturalism inform the present study in that they make explicit the fact that – despite the lip service paid to cultural respect; despite the legislation on equity and equal opportunity; despite the rhetoric of diversity management – discrimination against migrants, mainly the visibly different, remains both at an institutional/structural and interpersonal level in Australian society. Colic-Peisker (2011) makes clear in her paper that the effect of gender has not been studied in respect to Australian labour market outcomes and first culture qualifications.
Migrant employment in Australia

Employment outcomes for the skilled migration program

Migrants in the skilled stream of the Migration Program are selected according to skills and qualities that will both benefit the Australian workforce and assist them in finding employment in Australia – this includes a demand for high English proficiency as demonstrated by IELTS scores of 6.0 or higher. To put things in perspective – an overall IELTS band score of 6.5 is the minimum required for entry of international students to most university bachelor degrees, with IELTS 7.0 the minimum required for entry to postgraduate courses and some professional courses (e.g. nursing, medicine) (University of Queensland, 2012).

Research conducted by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) demonstrates that improved employment rates are the result of these demands for high English proficiency. For instance, the ‘Continuous Survey of Australia’s Migrants’ commenced in 2009 and will be updated every six months (DIAC, 2010a, 2010b). The most recent results for migrants arriving in 2009-2010 shows that after six months residence, skilled migrants have a workforce participation rate of 95 per cent with only 5 per cent unemployment; furthermore, 75 per cent of those employed were in a skilled job, and over 83 per cent were employed full time. An interesting contrast here is the fact that only about 65 per cent of Australians of working age (over 15) participate in the workforce, with around 49 per cent in a skilled job, and 70 per cent employed full time.

Another longer-term research project was the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Australia (LSIA) (DIAC 2007a, 2007b, 2009). This looked at longer-term outcomes for Australia’s migrants in employment and other areas by surveying three cohorts of arrivals in the periods 1993-1995 (LSIA 1), 1999-2000 (LSIA 2) and 2004-2005 (LSIA 3). These cohorts were interviewed at six months and 18 months after arrival; and in the case of LSIA 1 also at 42 months after arrival. The general trends of relatively high employment levels for settlers within the Migration Program are again evident in the LSIAs (see figure within next section).

Employment outcomes for the humanitarian program

Data for refugees on the Humanitarian Program was included in LSIA 1 and LSIA 2, but not LSIA 3 as there is now a separate study available on Humanitarian refugee outcomes (DIAC, 2007b). There is also a longitudinal survey of refugees due to commence in 2012 and run to 2017 (DIAC, 2011). Data from the LSIA 2 for the Migration and Humanitarian Programs is presented in Figure 1. As can be seen, settlers from the Humanitarian and Refugee Program generally have wages around two-thirds less than skilled migrants; lower rates of employment relative to skilled migrants at around 2 per cent at six months and 15% at 18 months after arrival (wave 1 and 2 questionnaires); and finally minimal numbers working in skilled occupations on arrival, with only a 2-3 per cent increase by 18 months later (DIAC, 2007a).
Hugo (2011) provided a report to DIAC on the economic, social and civic contributions of first and second generation humanitarian entrants to Australia. This author maintains that there is a prevailing stereotype among many in the Australian mainstream population that humanitarian refugees often do not enter the workforce, and are thus heavily dependent on social welfare payments. Initial viewing of the LSIA 2 data above might seem to support this, as would other trends identified within the LSIA. The labour force participation of humanitarian refugees as surveyed within the LSIA was low eighteen months after arrival (above 50 per cent), and even after three years in Australia there was still an unemployment rate of around 33 per cent. However, the LSIA is limited in that humanitarian refugee migrants were only followed for eighteen months after their arrival in Australia.

To counter this, Hugo (2011) reported data from the 2006 Census which allows a longer-term picture to emerge for refugee migrants. Some major trends identified include the following. First generation refugee migrants continued to have lower levels of workforce participation than Australian-born population, especially among recently-arrived groups from Africa (Sudan, Congo, Liberia, Burundi and Somalia), Afghanistan and Iraq (40-40%). However, it was noticeable that as their length of residency in Australia increased and into the second generation, the average unemployment rate of NESB refugee migrants gradually fell towards single figure percentage, though generally still above the Australian average (5%). There is further comment on this so-called ‘refugee gap’ phenomenon in the next section on research.

For Humanitarian refugees in general, Hugo (2011) found that there were noticeable differences in their profile relative to other migrants in respect to English language proficiency, education and qualification levels, all of which impact on final employment opportunities. Based on their self-assessed English language proficiency from the 2006 Census, Hugo (2011) provides the following summary for Humanitarian refugees:

> It is a striking finding that more than a third of humanitarian migrants reported that they either could not speak English at all or not speak it well. This creates a very significant barrier to their entry to the labour market … in 2006 almost three quarters (74 per cent) of humanitarian migrants who did not speak English well or not at all were ‘not in the
labour force’ and only 16 per cent were employed. Of those who spoke English very well, 40 per cent were employed (p. 128).

Pre-migration education and qualification levels of Humanitarian migrants are another factor important in employment success in their host country. Combining data from the 2006 Census and DIAC/ABS database, the Australian Bureau of Statistics noted (ABS, 2010, cited in Hugo, 2011):

... the proportion of Humanitarian Program migrants who had completed year 12 or equivalent (47 per cent) was lower than the proportion in the general migrant population (75 per cent) ... There was a higher proportion of Humanitarian Program migrants (13 per cent) with an educational level of year 8 or below when compared to the general population of all migrants (3 per cent). The rate of persons who never attended school was higher for Humanitarian Program migrants (7 per cent) than it was for the total migrant group (2 per cent). (p. 136).

In addition, the qualifications for Humanitarian refugees are also lower than other groups. This can be seen by reference to table 1 below collating statistical data from DIAC and the ABS. It can be seen that Humanitarian refugees have much higher percentages of people with no post-school qualifications (70.7 per cent) as compared to other visa categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Visa Type of Settler Arrivals, 2001-06 by Post-School Qualification in 2006: Proportion (Percent) of All Migrants Aged Over 15 Years</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Source: ABS/DIAC Data Linkage Project</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family</td>
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<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor degree</td>
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<tr>
<td>Advanced diploma/diploma/grad dip</td>
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<tr>
<td>Certificate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Qualification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 – Post school qualifications of Australian migrants
(Source: Hugo, 2011)

The picture emerging for Humanitarian refugees in Australia is thus one of relatively less achievement for English language, education and qualification levels relative to other migrant groups. As will be appreciated from research presented in the next sector, these factors impact considerably on their employment outcomes.

Employment outcomes for the skilled migration program

According to Jones and McAllister (1991) in their work on migrant unemployment, research has consistently shown that there are four determinants of employment outcomes for Australian migrants and refugees – English proficiency; length of residence in Australia; educational qualifications; and visa type. More recent research funded by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (2009) presents analysis of survey data predominantly obtained from the Longitudinal
Survey of Immigrants to Australia (LSIA), the most recent being the LSIA3 in 2005. This confirms the earlier findings of Jones and McAllister (1991) in identifying four factors that affect the employment outcomes of migrants – skill and education level; English language proficiency; age on arrival in Australia; and length of residence in Australia. Generally, higher work skill levels, better English language proficiency, younger age (adults) and greater time in Australia results in better work outcomes for these new Australians (DIAC, 2009).

Similar findings from other countries confirm the importance of these four factors in labour market performance of recent migrants. Liebig and Lemaitre (2007a, 2007b, 2007c) present an extensive analysis of labour market integration of immigrants within Australia, and also the more economically-developed countries of Europe (Denmark, Germany, Sweden, Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Portugal, Austria, Norway and Switzerland). That review also echoes the importance of the general themes already noted (human capital, L2 language proficiency, length of residence and discrimination) in the labour success or otherwise of immigrants. Clark & Drinkwater (2008) studied migrants in the United Kingdom and identified human capital (skill and educational levels), English proficiency, length of stay, and discrimination as important factors in work outcomes for migrants. Moran & Petsod (2003) identified similar themes in relation to immigrants in the United States; as did Hiebert (2006), and Hum and Simpson (2004) in relation to the Canadian workplace. Chiswick and Miller (1995, 2010) also identify similar factors in relation to employment outcomes in Australia, Canada, Israel and the United States.

While all the factors noted above influence employment outcomes for migrants and refugees, proficiency in the language of their new country remains a particularly important determinant of their successful employment. Thus Hugo (2011) found in Australian refugees that:

... there is a consistent relationship between ability to speak English and level of labour force participation. Those who are able to speak English very well have a 70.2 per cent labour force participation rate compared with only 12.1 per cent for those who cannot speak English at all and 36.3 per cent for those who cannot speak the language well ... Similar striking patterns are apparent for the unemployment rate, with 7.7 per cent of those who speak English well being unemployed compared with almost a third (31.5 per cent) among those who cannot speak English at all (p. 132-133).

As Liebig (2007) notes in his extensive study of Australian and European immigrant employment outcomes – “language proficiency is arguably the most important element of human capital with respect to [labour market] integration ... [but] low language proficiency does not seem to be an obstacle to the filling of lower skilled jobs” (p. 44). These are also the findings of Chiswick and Miller (2010) in respect to migrants to the United States, namely that a good command of English results in higher earnings, but immigrants with lower level English skills still find employment in lower status, lower paid jobs where English proficiency is not as important. Chiswick and Miller (1995) also present research that indicates proficiency in the language of the country of settlement has a
significant effect on earnings potential, and this was identified in relation to Australia, Canada, Israel and the United States.

If length of residence and human capital (English proficiency, qualifications, work skills) were the only factors influencing labour market success, then it would be expected that, over time, all NESB migrant groups would tend towards similar labour market success as English-speaking Australians. However, as found in most of the research papers mentioned in this section, this is not the case, especially for visibly different migrants. There are other intangible factors that negatively affect the labour market outcomes of some groups of new settlers to Australia and other Western nations.

Colic-Peisker (2011) comments on these intangibles in relation to the Australian workplace. In respect to human capital, she notes that overseas qualifications do not have the same worth as Australian qualifications. Longer time of residence allows for accumulation of work experience and qualifications, and the learning of ‘soft skills’ such as the culturally-specific rules of social interaction in the workplace. Establishing social capital is also important – this reflects not just one’s personal social network, but also the acceptance of one’s ethnic group by the host society (here Australian ESB people). Lack of any one these intangibles can impact on employment success or failure, as well as integration into the host society. Discrimination against some NESB groups appears to be a definite factor influencing employment outcomes. This is suggested as likely for the findings in relation to the Somali group in Colic-Peisker (2011). Discrimination (structural and interpersonal) is also a theme identified in several of the research papers as mentioned above across most countries in the Western world.

Refugees are a particularly problematic group in relation to migration. Connor (2010) reports similar findings in the United States to those in Australia (as in previous section) using refugee data from the first wave of the US New Immigrant Survey in 2003. He notes several factors that impact on the earnings and occupational differences of refugees – “Refugees, on average, have less English language ability, less educational experience, different forms of family support, poorer mental and physical health, and generally reside in more disadvantaged neighbourhoods than other immigrants” (p. 377). However, even controlling for all these factors, there remains a constant and persistent disparity in earnings and occupational attainment within refugee groups relative to other immigrants and the mainstream population.

For Australian Humanitarian refugees, Hugo (2011) provides the information below (Table 2) illustrating data from the 2006 Census comparing their workforce participation and unemployment rates with the Australian-born. It can be seen that higher level qualifications improve workforce participation in all groups. First generation refugees have higher unemployment and lower workforce participation than the Australia-born regardless of their qualification level. In the second generation, workforce participation levels actually rise above the Australian-born for all educational levels. However, unemployment rates of the second generation remain slightly but persistently higher than the Australian-born for all educational levels. This is ascribed to the refugee gap phenomenon.
Another aspect to this refugee gap phenomenon, as Hugo (2011) notes, is that many refugees have to accept lower income occupations regardless of their past qualifications or work experience. They make a great contribution to the Australian economy through such employment. However, they often remain trapped in this situation, never rising above lower paid, lower status jobs despite the passage of time and improvement in English proficiency and qualifications. Note has already been made of this in Colic-Peisker (2011) and Johnstone (2011) discussed previously.

According to Hugo (2011), these findings of a refugee gap in occupation, employment and earnings have been identified in all Western nations receiving refugees. It has been clearly shown in Australian research that humanitarian refugees face greater difficulties to integration – economically, socially and culturally. This may be in part accounted for by reasons identified by Richmond (1988), namely that refugees did not migrate voluntarily, but rather were displaced by war, famine, politics, religion or other reason. They have also often experienced physical and mental trauma. Nevertheless, as Hugo (2011) notes, when all the reasons for refugee disadvantage are controlled for, there still remains this refugee gap, and it is important to understand the reasons for it.

An understanding of this is a major gap in our knowledge of migrant adjustment, not only in Australia but elsewhere as well. This is of importance not only to maximise the economic benefits which humanitarian settlers deliver to the country but also to give those settlers the same opportunities that other Australians enjoy (p. 172).
Conclusion

This paper identifies that there is a complex interplay between human capital factors and intangible human factors influencing employment outcomes for NESB migrants in Australia. English proficiency is pivotal to employment success but reasonable proficiency is sometimes offset by workplace discrimination and other influences. The reasons for the refugee gap phenomenon need further elucidation.

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