

# Submission: Australia's Humanitarian Program 2024–25

Settlement Council of Australia

June 2024

The Settlement Council of Australia acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land on which we operate, the Ngunnawal people. We also acknowledge the traditional custodians of the various lands on which migrants and refugees settle across Australia, and on which our sector operates.

We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging and celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their ongoing cultures and connections to our lands and waters.

### About the Settlement Council of Australia

The Settlement Council of Australia is the peak body representing Australia's migrant and refugee services and allied organisations. We provide leadership to the settlement sector and broader society to enable people of migrant and refugee backgrounds to experience positive settlement outcomes. We represent over 120 member organisations nationally, all working towards a shared vision for an Australia where all people of migrant and refugee backgrounds belong, thrive and experience fulfilling lives.

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### Introduction

The Settlement Council of Australia (SCOA) is grateful for the opportunity to make a submission regarding Australia's Humanitarian Program 2024–25. Australia's commitment to resettling refugees is fulfilled through the Humanitarian Program, which is complemented by settlement services that are vital in assisting humanitarian entrants as they start their new life in Australia. We acknowledge and appreciate the Australian government's commitment to the Humanitarian Program.

SCOA welcomes the recent expansion of humanitarian places to 20,000 places in the 2023-24 Humanitarian Program. We also welcome the government's commitment to maintain a program of 20,000 places in 2024-2025. This demonstrates progress towards the Labor Party's 2021 commitment to expand the Humanitarian program to accommodate 27,000 people. The benefits of a larger intake include upholding Australia's moral obligations to assist those in need, long-term economic contributions, and cultural diversity.

SCOA also welcomes the investment of \$120.0 million in settlement services announced in the 2024-2025 Federal Budget. SCOA has long advocated for improved investment in settlement services. Cost of living pressures, domestic and family violence, housing shortages and other issues are on the rise for all, and refugees are not immune from these impacts. The injection of funds into the Humanitarian Support Program, which supports refugees from the moment they first arrive in Australia, is especially welcome as every cent invested helps set our newest arrivals up for success.

SCOA would be remiss if we did not also take this opportunity to raise concerns about the increasing demonisation of refugee and humanitarian cohorts in the context of the wider discussion around Australia's migration system.

Migration is a complex area for discussion composed of permanent migration streams, temporary visa grants and the humanitarian program. The value and contribution of humanitarian entrants to Australian society and the social and economic benefits they bring has been well documented.<sup>1</sup>

It is a source of pride for our settlement sector that we have one of the best settlement systems in the world and that Australia is committed to a generous and flexible humanitarian and settlement program that meets Australia's international protection obligations. It is of deep concern to our members that humanitarian entrants have become part of the political football of blame, be it in the housing debate, transport or social disharmony.

In responding to Australia's Humanitarian Program 2024-25 Discussion paper, we call again on politicians, political parties, political and social commentators to stop demonising refugee and humanitarian cohorts in the context of the wider discussion around Australia's migration system.

Below we have outlined several recommendations to enhance the program. Our responses are arranged as per questions raised in the Discussion Paper.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Deloitte Access Economics (report commissioned by Oxfam, August 2019), *The economic and social impact of increasing Australia's humanitarian intake*, <a href="https://www.deloitte.com/au/en/services/economics/perspectives/economic-social-impact-increasing-australias-humanitarian-intake.html">https://www.deloitte.com/au/en/services/economics/perspectives/economic-social-impact-increasing-australias-humanitarian-intake.html</a>; Hugo, G. (2014), "The economic contribution of humanitarian settlers in Australia", *International Migration*, 52(2), 31-52, <a href="https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/imig.12092?casa\_token=qm-XcE2-XkUAAAAA:xjoXxFWINvSnQSPZDc1BeRu40NyFyuoThbECsbmrXJvxzbo1WH7jnfevXTYBoaQZZEJiRGF1aUg\_h\_o">https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/imig.12092?casa\_token=qm-XcE2-XkUAAAAA:xjoXxFWINvSnQSPZDc1BeRu40NyFyuoThbECsbmrXJvxzbo1WH7jnfevXTYBoaQZZEJiRGF1aUg\_h\_o</a>

## Responses to questions in Discussion Paper

### Ideal composition and split between the Refugee and Special Humanitarian Program

SCOA advocates for a balanced composition in the Humanitarian Program, with the majority of places allocated to the Refugee category, reflecting the urgent need for protection and resettlement among the most vulnerable populations.

While increasing the humanitarian intake, we recommend an increase in the proportion of the program drawn from UNHCR referrals, given that they are based on set criteria established to identify refugees in need of resettlement. The humanitarian program must maintain a focus on providing resettlement for those most vulnerable and most in need of protection, and therefore, the focus on UNHCR referrals is positive.

However, UNHCR processes can be limited due to the nature of certain conflicts and challenges in accessing UNHCR protection processes for some cohorts. This can be particularly problematic for LGBTQI+ refugees in countries where they continue to face persecution on the basis of their LGBTQI+ status. Therefore, Australia must also maintain a level of agility. In this regard, the recent ability to respond to crises (such as those in Afghanistan, Ukraine and Gaza) has been positive. However, crisis responses need more consistency – particularly in the entitlements to government services and settlement services. We expand on this further in the next section.

### **Enhancing transparency and managing expectations**

Enhancing transparency and managing expectations are pivotal elements for Australia's Humanitarian Program, shaping its effectiveness, credibility, and impact.

Transparency forms the cornerstone of trust between the government, stakeholders, and the public. By openly sharing information about the program's objectives, criteria for selection, and outcomes achieved, the government can demonstrate its commitment to accountability and integrity. Transparency not only reassures the public that resources are being allocated judiciously but also invites feedback, leading to continuous improvement.

Moreover, managing expectations is essential for ensuring that the program's objectives align with reality. Humanitarian crises are often complex, with limited resources and competing needs. By setting realistic expectations about the program's scope, capacity, and limitations, the government can avoid disappointment and disillusionment among beneficiaries and stakeholders. Clear communication about eligibility criteria, timelines, and available services helps to mitigate misunderstandings and prevent false hopes.

Importantly, when beneficiaries have a realistic understanding of the assistance they can expect, they are better equipped to make informed decisions and plan for their future. This transparency also facilitates collaboration and partnership between the government and civil society organisations, enabling more effective coordination and response to humanitarian challenges.

To address the high demand for humanitarian places and to mitigate false hope among applicants, SCOA recommends the following measures:

### Recommendation 1: Enhancing transparency and managing expectations

- Clear communication on processing times and application outcomes.
- Regular updates on the status of applications via an accessible online portal.
- Enhanced outreach and information dissemination in refugee camps and host countries, managed in collaboration with UNHCR and NGOs, to set realistic expectations.

### Responding to future resettlement crises

The Humanitarian Program must retain flexibility to respond swiftly to emerging crises. Specific advanced preparation could be undertaken to stay prepared for future resettlement crises to ensure our responses are effective and non-discriminatory.

### Maintain consistency in crisis responses

The Humanitarian Program should remain non-discriminatory and should prioritise those in greatest need.

For instance, the government offered special temporary humanitarian visas (subclass 786 visa) to displaced Ukrainian nationals. The visas entitled the holders to full rights to work and study, access to Medicare, school enrollment, and a subsidy towards childcare expenses.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, 4,000 Afghan refugees were evacuated to Australia in August 2021 and were provided settlement support through the Humanitarian Settlement Program.<sup>3</sup> However, in comparison, Palestinian refugees have only been offered visitor visas or other short-term visas. As such, most people do not have work rights, access to Medicare, access to income support or study rights. This has placed people fleeing the conflict in very precarious circumstances.<sup>4</sup>

While conflicts can be different, people fleeing conflicts have certain needs that are consistent, irrespective of the visa entry pathway. As the scale of global crises continues to grow, Australia should establish a baseline package that can be activated in response to crises. This standard response, which can be activated in crisis, should include, at minimum, work and study rights, access to Medicare, access to basic levels of settlement support, torture and trauma services, and accommodation, all delivered on a needs-basis. This consistent package and response ensures that the known basic needs of displaced people are responded to. Critically, it is an important social cohesion measure, as the differing treatment of displaced people from different cultural backgrounds has undermined social cohesion and undoes many other social cohesion interventions the Australian government invests in.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Department of Home Affairs, *Information for Ukrainian nationals who accepted the offer of temporary humanitarian stay before 31 July 2022*, <a href="https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/help-and-support/ukraine-visa-support/australian-government-offer-for-temporary-humanitarian-stay-in-australia">https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/help-and-support/ukraine-visa-support/australian-government-offer-for-temporary-humanitarian-stay-in-australia</a>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> See SCOA's submission to Senate Inquiry into Australia's engagement in Afghanistan (2022), <a href="https://scoa.org.au/submission-senate-inquiry-into-australias-engagement-in-afghanistan/">https://scoa.org.au/submission-senate-inquiry-into-australias-engagement-in-afghanistan/</a>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Refugee Council of Australia (2024), Support for People Fleeing the Conflict in Israel-Gaza, <a href="https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/support-israel-gaza-conflict/">https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/support-israel-gaza-conflict/</a>

### Recommendation 2: Improved consistency in crisis responses

Develop a basic package that can be activated in situations of crisis, which includes at minimum, work and study rights, access to Medicare, access to basic levels of settlement support, torture and trauma services, and accommodation, all delivered on a needs-basis.

### Incentivising contributions for complementary pathways

To expand complementary pathways for humanitarian entrants, the Australian Government can incentivise contributions from the private and community sectors by making complementary pathways additional to core humanitarian intake, having a basic level of settlement support, making the current pilots permanent feature of Humanitarian Program, and reducing visa fees where relevant.

### Complementary pathways must be 'additional' and permanent

Australia has several complementary programs or pilots which allow for various avenues for refugees to find safety beyond the established Humanitarian Program. These programs include the Community Support Program (CSP), Community Refugee Integration and Settlement Pilot (CRISP) and the Skilled Refugee Labour Agreement Pilot. While the current government has committed to making community-sponsored programs additional, at present, visas allocated are from within the existing humanitarian intake with the exception of the Skilled Refugee Labour Agreement Pilot, where places are drawn from the skilled stream.

All of these programs should be in addition to the Humanitarian Program so as to not substitute UNHCR-referred refugee places. Australians motivated to sponsor refugees would like to see their voluntary financial and in-kind contribution result in additional refugees finding a safe place in Australia. In the existing model where places are drawn from core intake, this would give the impression that their contribution is not making a difference; they are simply taking over the government's responsibility. Making the complementary places additional would motivate more individuals to sponsor refugees as they would see a clearer impact of their efforts.

### Recommendation 3: Additionality of complementary pathways

All complementary pathways – specifically the Community Sponsorship Program (CSP) and the Community Refugee and Integration Pilot (CRISP) should be made additional to the humanitarian intake as soon as practicably possible.

The Community Refugee Integration and Settlement Pilot (CRISP) program, launched in 2022, should also become a permanent feature of our migration program. Certainty in sponsorship programs is another critical element of incentivising participation. In moving to a permanent program, it is suggested that a review be conducted to ensure better alignment between the CSP and CRISP, enabling easier sponsorship of family, friends, or other individuals through named sponsorship, as CRISP presently only permits unlinked applications, and the obligations placed on CSP applicants and sponsors are overly onerous. This includes reviewing the emphasis on being 'job ready', English language proficiency requirements, age limits, and fees.

## Refugees and others in humanitarian need have skills, educational and employment aspirations, and families in Australia that make complementary pathways relevant.<sup>5</sup>

### Recommendation 4: Permanency of CRISP and alignment with CSP

The Community Refugee Integration and Settlement Pilot (CRISP) program should be a permanent feature of our migration program. In moving to a permanent program, a review should be conducted to ensure better alignment between the CSP and CRISP, enabling more equitable pathways for named sponsorship.

Similarly, the **Skilled Refugee Labour Agreement Pilot**, which is set to conclude in June 2025, should be continued and expanded as a permanent complementary pathway for skilled refugees to come to Australia. This program, which allows skilled refugees a pathway to live and work in Australia recognises the potential and valuable contributions that skilled refugees can make to the Australian workforce and society as a whole. Skilled refugees bring a range of skills and experiences from their home countries, which can enrich workplaces and foster innovation. The program allows Australia to showcase its commitment to humanitarian principles, while also benefiting from the contributions of skilled refugees to its society and economy. The program is additional to the current intake, has proved its success, and is not only cost-neutral, but in fact creates revenue for the government through visa fees and tax receipts, without the provision of access to social welfare or government-funded settlement support.

It should be noted that the visa fees associated with the skilled refugee pilot are substantial, particularly compared to standard skilled-visa fees in comparable countries. This is a significant disincentive to participation in the pilot. We strongly urge a reduction in these fees — refugees arriving through this program already make a net-positive economic contribution to the Australian government from the day they arrive. Therefore, the high visa fees are unwarranted in this circumstance, particularly given the social, human rights, and international credibility this program provides the government. Insofar as visa fees remain a feature of the program, a portion or all of these fees should be redirected into supporting the program, including in providing the resourcing required to maintain effective engagement with employers, and fund the settlement support necessary for the success of the program which is currently an additional cost to employers. These changes would reduce the up-front costs to employers, which is a significant deterrent at present to many more employers participating in the program.

There is also a missed opportunity in the current settings which limit applications to offshore applicants. There are many temporary humanitarian migrants and asylum seekers in Australia who would be eligible to join the skilled refugee pilot. We urge the government to allow these cohorts of onshore migrants to apply for the skilled refugee pathway when they meet the eligibility. This pathway would be an optimal solution from both a humanitarian entrant and government perspective to resolve temporary status.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Community Refugee Sponsorship Australia (2023). *Australian Complementary Pathways for Refugees: Policy Principles*, <a href="https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/2023">https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/2023</a> Complementary-Pathways-Principles.pdf

Permanency of the skilled labour pathway is an obvious next step, and provides the kind of long-term certainty that is necessary for effective engagement with employers. Adjustments to the upfront costs would also incentivise an even greater number of employers to participate.

### Recommendation 5: Permanency and reforms of the Skilled Refugee Pilot

The Skilled Refugee Labour Agreement Pilot, which is set to conclude in June 2025, should be continued and expanded as a permanent complementary pathway for skilled refugees to come to Australia. As part of making the program permanent, the visa fees should be substantially reduced, or redirected into supporting the program. It should also include a pathway for onshore applications.

### Settlement support for complementary pathways arrivals

It is important that all migrants and refugees who arrive in Australia are able to access settlement support. Refugees arriving through complementary migration pathways are likely to have similar experiences and needs to other refugees when it comes to navigating life in Australia. While the pathways of arrival may differ, these individuals have fled their home countries due to persecution, conflict, or other dire circumstances and have sought safety and protection in Australia. Like any other refugee, those arriving through complementary migration pathways face various challenges and adjustments when settling into a new country. These challenges may include language barriers, cultural differences, limited social networks, and unfamiliarity with the local systems and services. Therefore, it is crucial to ensure that adequate settlement support is available to assist these individuals in their integration process.

A common feature of complementary pathways is alternative forms of settlement support, such as community sponsorship groups. In other pathways, settlement support becomes an additional costs to the sponsor, such as the CSP and the Skilled Refugee Labour Agreement Pilot – in these cases paying for settlement support can be a disincentive. Further, it is our position that all refugees arriving through complementary pathways should have access to government funded settlement services as a safety net. Currently, Australian settlement services have complex eligibility criteria – instead, we would like to see a needs-based approach where all refugees are eligible for at least a very basic level of support from funded services if they require it.

Settlement support services play a vital role in helping refugees adapt to their new environment and build a successful life in Australia. These services encompass a range of initiatives, including language classes, employment assistance, housing support, healthcare access, educational opportunities, and cultural orientation programs. While complementary pathways may mean these services are not needed at all by many refugees, or may be less intensive, universal eligibility of these services are critical to the sustainability of complementary pathways, ensuring sponsors feel well-supported, and delivering the kind of equitable outcomes necessary to sustain the long-term social license for the program.

### Recommendation 6: Consistency of settlement support across arrival pathways

Settlement support should be available to all migrants and refugees who arrive in Australia regardless of their mode of arrival.

### Supporting economic aspirations of humanitarian entrants

Humanitarian entrants have made significant economic contributions to Australia, demonstrating resilience and entrepreneurial spirit that enriches the nation. Upon settling, many refugees start small businesses, contributing to local economies and creating job opportunities. Their entrepreneurial ventures range from restaurants and retail shops to professional services, adding diversity to the Australian market and fostering innovation. These businesses not only provide employment but also introduce unique products and services that reflect the cultural diversity of the refugee community. This entrepreneurial activity stimulates economic growth, enhances the vibrancy of communities, and creates new consumer markets.

In addition to entrepreneurship, refugees contribute to the Australian economy as diligent workers in various sectors. They fill essential roles in industries such as healthcare, agriculture, manufacturing, and services, often taking on jobs that face labour shortages. Their participation helps sustain these industries, ensuring that critical services and products are available to all Australians. Moreover, refugees pay taxes, contribute to social security, and participate in the consumption of goods and services, thereby fuelling economic activity. Over time, as refugees integrate and gain access to education and training, their economic contributions expand, enhancing their potential for higher-skilled employment and further contributing to Australia's economic dynamism.

Refugees are often entrepreneurial as they face the need to set up and establish themselves in a new environment. One illustration of this was evident in the 2000 Business Review Weekly's annual "Rich 200" list which showed that five of Australia's eight billionaires were people whose families had originally come to the country as refugees. The positive impact of refugees has also been especially felt in regional and rural Australia. In recent times, rural areas have experienced large-scale population departures, resulting in skills losses, lack of local entrepreneurship, business closures and the loss of social capital and services. Successful regional and rural refugee resettlement programs have helped plug some population gaps, supply much-needed labour and stimulate economic growth and service delivery. More generally, the young age profile of humanitarian entrants makes a very positive contribution to a labour market in which new retirees now exceed new labour force entrants.<sup>6</sup>

Research suggests that targeted employment support programs have better outcomes for refugees and can be more cost-effective than mainstream employment support services. However, presently, Workforce Australia services take a predominantly mainstream approach to the delivery of services to refugees, despite the existence of a mechanism for specialised support for refugees. The ineffectiveness of government-funded employment services in delivering o

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Refugee Council of Australia, prepared for the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (2010) *Economic, civic and social contributions of refugees and humanitarian entrants: A literature review*, <a href="https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/economic-literature-review/">https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/economic-literature-review/</a>

employment outcomes for refugees has been canvassed comprehensively in a number of SCOA submissions.<sup>7</sup>

Employment is a critical settlement outcome, and enabler of other settlement outcomes. While the primary administrative mechanism for delivering outcomes sits outside the direct responsibility of the Department of Home Affairs, it is critical that employment services are reformed to better activate specialised tailored services. Getting this right will ensure refugees have not only safety – but a fulfilling and rich life after resettlement. It will also reduce a number of barriers to increasing the humanitarian intake, such as the cost to the government.

Beyond Workforce Australia services, vocational education and training programs linked with English language learning, and initiatives that provide opportunities for refugees to gain work experience, have both proven to facilitate successful pathways into employment. Other factors that contribute to labour market success include: professional mentoring programs; overseas skills and qualifications recognition; and programs that facilitate access to drivers' licences.<sup>8</sup>

### Recommendation 7: Supporting economic aspirations of humanitarian entrants

- Reform Workforce Australia to better leverage specialised services for refugees.
- Invest in additional and complimentary programs that deliver interventions such as vocational education and training that integrates English language learning, work experience programs, industry partnership programs, mentorship programs, and interventions to assist with skills and qualifications recognition.

### **Conclusion**

In this submission, we have provided several recommendations for improving Australia's Humanitarian Program from 2024 onwards.

These proposals emphasise maintaining consistency in crisis responses, improving settlement support services, and making complementary pathways additional and permanent. Reducing visa fees associated with community and private sector sponsorship, and providing robust settlement support for all humanitarian entrants are pivotal measures that will fortify the program's capacity to respond to global humanitarian needs effectively.

The recommendations also highlight the necessity of transparent communication and realistic expectation management to build trust and credibility among stakeholders and the public.

Our recommendations reflect a commitment to humanitarian values and the belief that Australia can significantly contribute to global resettlement efforts while benefiting from the diverse talents and resilience of refugees. Adopting these recommendations will not only enhance the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> SCOA (2023), Submission: Inquiry into Workforce Australia Employment Services, <a href="https://scoa.org.au/submission-inquiry-into-workforce-australia-employment-services/">https://scoa.org.au/submission-inquiry-into-workforce-australia-employment-services/</a>; SCOA (2022), Submission: Employment White Paper, <a href="https://scoa.org.au/submission-employment-white-paper/">https://scoa.org.au/submission-inquiry-into-workforce-australia-employment-services/</a>; SCOA (2022), Submission: Employment White Paper, <a href="https://scoa.org.au/submission-employment-white-paper/">https://scoa.org.au/submission-inquiry-into-workforce-australia-employment-services/</a>; SCOA (2022), Submission: Employment White Paper, <a href="https://scoa.org.au/submission-employment-white-paper/">https://scoa.org.au/submission-employment-white-paper/</a></a>

humanitarian program's effectiveness but also strengthen Australia's role as a global leader in refugee resettlement and integration.

### **List of recommendations**

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- Clear communication on processing times and application outcomes.
- Regular updates on the status of applications via an accessible online portal.
- Enhanced outreach and information dissemination in refugee camps and host countries, managed in collaboration with UNHCR and NGOs, to set realistic. expectations.

#### Recommendation 2: Improved consistency in crisis responses

Develop a basic package that can be activated in situations of crisis, which includes at minimum, work and study rights, access to Medicare, access to basic levels of settlement support, torture and trauma services, and accommodation, all delivered on a needs-basis.

#### Recommendation 3: Additionality of complementary pathways

All complementary pathways – specifically the Community Sponsorship Program (CSP) and the Community Refugee and Integration Pilot (CRISP) should be made additional to the humanitarian intake as soon as practicably possible.

### Recommendation 4: Permanency of CRISP and alignment with CSP

The Community Refugee Integration and Settlement Pilot (CRISP) program should be additional to the current Humanitarian Program, and a permanent feature of our migration program. In moving to a permanent program, a review should be conducted to ensure better alignment between the CSP and CRISP, enabling more equitable pathways for named sponsorship.

#### Recommendation 5: Permanency and reforms of the Skilled Refugee Pilot

The Skilled Refugee Labour Agreement Pilot, which is set to conclude in June 2025, should be continued and expanded as a permanent complementary pathway for skilled refugees to come to Australia. As part of making the program permanent, the visa fees should be substantially reduced, or redirected into supporting the program. It should also include a pathway for onshore applications.

Recommendation 6: Consistency of settlement support across arrival pathways
Settlement support should be available to all migrants and refugees who arrive in
Australia regardless of their mode of arrival.

#### Recommendation 7: Supporting economic aspirations of humanitarian entrants

- Reform Workforce Australia to better leverage specialised services for refugees.
- Invest in additional and complimentary programs that deliver interventions such as vocational education and training that integrates English language learning, work experience programs, industry partnership programs, mentorship programs, and interventions to assist with skills and qualifications recognition.

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