



University of  
South Australia

Centre for  
Research in Educational  
and Social Inclusion



# Intergenerational refugee aspirations and academic success:

from uncertain pasts to promising futures

*Full Report*



# Research Team overview



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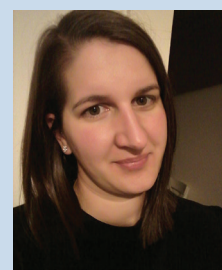
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# Acknowledgements

This report is dedicated to the memory of Daniel, who was the initial inspiration for undertaking this research. His parents arrived in Australia as 'boat people'. They are so very proud of the young man he became and what he accomplished in his too short life.

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Our heartfelt thanks to the 50 participants who were interviewed for this research project. We thank the participants for their generosity and openness in sharing their thoughts, opinions and experiences during the interviews. It has been an honour and a privilege to hear a small part of your story and to include your voices throughout this report.

To the parents of the children: we thank you for the care and intent with which you have raised your children, for your courage and persistence in providing them with a new home, while maintaining roots and connections to your first home, and for sharing your aspirations with your children.

To the educators of the children: we thank you for your expertise, dedication and generosity to all your students and their families, and for providing inclusion within school communities focused on care and learning.

To the young adults: we are in awe of your resilience and strength in pursuing your aspirations, and of your confidence and your capacity to contribute meaningfully to the world.

And to the children: we are proud of your achievements as you continue to build your own aspirations that are strengthened by your parents' hopes for you.

We wish you all ongoing safety, prosperity and happiness within the Australian community.

Thank you, شكرا جزيل لك, tashakor, murakoze cyane, मुरी मुरी धन्यवाद, katta rahmat, cảm ơn rất nhiều.

With thanks to videographer, Juan Van Staden, for producing the video series 'Refugee-background young people talk about aspirations and educational success.'

To the Channel 7 Children's Research Foundation, thank you for providing the funding to allow the team to undertake this research project. Although the project was initially affected by COVID-19, we truly appreciate your continued understanding and support. Without your funding and support, we would not have been able to examine the significance of 'aspirations' in the lives of the refugee parents, young people and children we interviewed. We hope more refugee families with young children in schools will benefit from this research project.

We express our thanks to UniSA's Centre for Research in Educational and Social Inclusion for support in disseminating the findings of the research project for greater educational and social impacts.

*We recognise the traditional lands of the Kaurua people, the land on which this research was undertaken. We acknowledge and pay respect to Elders past, present and emerging and to the continuation of cultural, spiritual and educational practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples throughout Australia.*



# Foreword: Associate Professor Loshini Naidoo

The remarkable Mary Angelou once said “the children to whom we read simple stories may or may not show gratitude, but each boon we give strengthens the pillars of the world”. Growing up in apartheid South Africa, I came to understand the intricacies of privilege and power through stories of longing and belonging in a country delineated by race. This proved to be fertile ground later, when as an educator, I chose to enact, nurture and sustain a social justice pedagogy in my teaching and research. The main thrust of my work lies in supporting schools and universities to build and foster educational achievement for students of refugee background.

The challenges that refugee students experience with regard to accessing, transitioning into, and successfully participating in education have been subject to increased scholarly attention. However, little is known about the impact of the parents’ aspirations on the educational achievement of refugee background students in Australia. This is an extraordinary omission given the increasing focus on parent engagement in Australian education. By including the voices of parents and students of refugee background, the report: *Intergenerational Refugee Aspirations and Academic Success: From Uncertain Pasts to Promising Futures*, gives us a powerful insight into the unique and diverse life experiences of refugee families. Giving voice, being heard and offering validation, apart from being central aspects of social justice, are also revelatory.

I applaud the research team for affirming and sharing the aspirations of the parents of refugee young people because it highlights the important role that refugee parents and communities play in the processes of education. It is the connection between students, parents, and places of education that help refugee background students transition and this association presents both opportunities and challenges. The research report highlights the value of intercultural understanding in cross-cultural relations and the impact of such sensitivity on refugee students’ ongoing engagement in education. By foregrounding parents, students and communities as knowledge producers and agents in their own learning, the findings of the report are nuanced by complex understandings of cultural, social and linguistic diversity. *Intergenerational Refugee Aspirations and Academic Success: From Uncertain Pasts to Promising Futures* offers a convincing alternative narrative about refugees that counter the prevailing discourse that forced migrants are a threat to economic stability and social cohesion.

## **Associate Professor Loshini Naidoo**

School of Education, Western Sydney University, July 2021



# Commendation: His Excellency the Honourable Hieu Van Le AC and Mrs Lan Le

As children, we were both brought up in families which highly valued education. School was a sanctuary for us during the chaos of the war, even though tragically we lost many classmates and friends over the years.

In 1977, we arrived in Australia as boat people, with little more than the clothes on our backs. We knew that education would enable us to open up to many opportunities to build satisfying careers and fulfilling lives, so we both pursued further study.

A decade later, we had our two sons, Kim and Don. By this point we not only understood the importance of education for a successful life, but we had navigated the Australian education system ourselves. This knowledge and experience helped us immensely as we set about choosing pre-schools and schools for the boys, and supporting them on their own education journey.

Many parents of refugee backgrounds in Australia may not have had the same experiences as us. This creates a challenging situation for parents who want passionately to provide their children with the best education opportunities possible, but are not sure how to do this.

While research into educational outcomes for refugee youth exists, to date it has focused on teaching methods, English language proficiency and curricula. We are very pleased that this report breaks new ground into the role refugee parents play in supporting the academic success of their children.

We would like to acknowledge the University of South Australia for conducting this important research, and the Channel 7 Children's Research Foundation for its valuable support. We have no doubt its contents will provide excellent guidance for community leaders, policy makers, principals and teachers as they pursue educational excellence with students of refugee backgrounds.

**His Excellency the Honourable Hieu Van Le AC and Mrs Lan Le**

July 2021



This research offers significant insights into the intergenerational aspirations of refugee-background families. It highlights the important role of parents in fostering the educational success of their children and their subsequent development as accomplished, confident and respectful young adults.

Facing uncertainty and with much courage, refugee parents in this research have sought peace and safety through resettlement in Australia. Hopes for a better life for their family are often translated into valuing education for their children as the foundation for future possibilities. The importance they place on their children's education is very much in alignment with the intent expressed in the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration:

*Education has the power to transform lives. It supports young people to realise their potential by providing skills they need to participate in the economy and in society, and contributing to every aspect of their wellbeing ... [It] encourages and supports every student to be the very best they can be, no matter where they live or what kind of learning challenges they may face. (COAG Education Council 2019, p. 2)*

Like many parents, refugee-background parents hope for a better life for their children and they see the child's education as crucial in this process. However, the educational outcomes of their children vary. We hear anecdotal stories of parents wanting children to attain prestigious and financially rewarding careers, such as becoming a doctor, and of teachers who are impressed with the children's resilience and ability to work hard. However, educators interviewed in this research pointed out that, despite their best intentions and the implementation of identified school practices, not all refugee-background children experience educational success.

This research is a small qualitative study which investigates the impact of parental aspirations on their children who are doing well academically. As such, we acknowledge the limitation that it reflects the views and experiences of the research participants, rather than all refugee-background migrant families.

The Intensive English Language Centre Coordinators shared that, despite valuing education, for a range of reasons, not all refugee parents are as effective in supporting their children to value education and undertake their schooling in ways that lead to doing well academically. Therefore, the capacity of children to follow their parents' aspirations, or their own, varies. However, the academically successful young people in this research reported that their parents highly valued and supported their education. They have strong understandings of and connections with their parents' refugee journey and appreciate that their parents have made significant sacrifices to provide them with opportunities they would not have otherwise had. This has had a positive impact on their identity, motivation and educational achievement.

This report presents the research findings through a series of interdependent themes, which are further described in the 'Research background' section. The findings provide valuable insights into the importance of the role of refugee parents in shaping the confident and accomplished young adults their children become. The research has the potential to build a greater understanding between parents, children and education institutions about the contribution that parents make to the academic success of their children. Moreover, the findings can inform best-practice approaches to improve educational outcomes for refugee-background young people.

The research was funded by the Channel 7 Children's Research Foundation and was conducted during 2019–2021. Our aim was to investigate the impact of refugee parents' aspirations on their children's academic success. Ethics approval was granted by the University of South Australia, with additional approval from the South Australian Department for Education.

Existing research into the educational success of refugee youth identifies curricula, pedagogical practices and English language proficiency as enabling resources for positive academic and employment outcomes. However, little attention has been given to the aspirations of refugee parents and how these might enable and support children to achieve successful educational outcomes. Focusing specifically on refugee-background families of children and young adults who are achieving well academically, this research gives voice to 50 participants: educators, refugee parents, and their children ranging in age from primary school-aged children to young adults. The participants' countries of origin include Afghanistan, Bhutan, Burundi, Nepal, Rwanda, Sudan, Syria, Uzbekistan and Vietnam, with Nepali, Hazara and Algerian ethnicities. The languages they use include Arabic, Bhutanese, Dari, Dinka, Farsi, Hazaragi, Kirundi, Nepali, Uzbek and Vietnamese.

The participants were interviewed by members of the research team. Most interviews were conducted in person, though due to COVID-19 restrictions several interviews were undertaken via Zoom. Interpreters were used for those participants who were not fluent in English. Semi-structured interviews of 45–60 minutes' duration were audio recorded and professionally transcribed. Open-ended questions explored participants' family background and settlement experience in Australia, parental aspirations, the role parents played in the children's education, and the children's experiences at school and university. The interviews allowed the participants to reflect on factors that have shaped their aspirations, and their success in settlement outcomes.

**Parent participants:** 23 parents were interviewed: 11 female parents and 13 male parents. The parents' education varied from no formal schooling to a PhD. The majority undertook the interview in their first language with either a professional interpreter, a bilingual school services officer (BSSO), or an adult child or relative interpreting.

**Tertiary-educated participants:** 14 young people were interviewed: 11 females and 3 males. Their time in Australia varied from being born here to the most recent arrival in 2016. All speak their home languages and English fluently. We recruited refugee-background young adult participants who have been or are in tertiary education. The university degrees they were undertaking or had completed included: construction management, commerce, creative studies, education, health science, human resource management, international studies, law, optometry and software engineering. While obtaining a tertiary education is not the sole measure of academic achievement, it is recognised as an important indicator of academic success. We acknowledge that there are many pathways to future socio-economic success.

**Secondary-aged participants:** 3 females undertaking Year 12 were interviewed. All were born overseas and had arrived within the last five years as secondary-aged students. They had varied schooling experiences in their country of birth and transit countries.

**Primary-aged participants:** 6 children from Intensive English Language Centres (IELC) were interviewed, 3 females and 3 males, aged 6–12. The children had a BSSO or older sibling present to interpret if required. As the interpreter was familiar to the child, their main role was supporting the child by putting them at ease during the interview process. The children were born in their parents' country of origin or transit countries and had spent extended time in other countries on their refugee journey.



**Educators:** Interviews were undertaken with 4 educators. Two interviews were with IELC coordinators at Department for Education public schools. The Community Engagement Manager of a suite of private colleges was interviewed as well as a bilingual school services officer (BSSO), who is also a parent of young children and currently studying teaching.

The interviews took place in two phases:

- Phase 1: tertiary students
- Phase 2: parents, primary-aged children and educators

Following an analysis of the interviews, a number of relevant themes emerged. A focus group, comprised of a tertiary student, parent, educator and members of the research team, met to discuss these initial themes and to share possible ways to disseminate the findings. Two main forms of dissemination have been actioned:

1. This report
2. A series of video clips of five young adult participants sharing their advice to children and young people of refugee background about navigating aspirations, educational success and the future.

The research findings in this report are structured as six interrelated themes:

- Child–parent relationships: caring and respectful communication
- Towards a better life: from uncertainty to safety
- New beginnings: foundations for the family's future
- Cultural identity: from family to the wider community
- Valuing education: aspirations for future opportunities
- Parent–school relationships: building partnerships

Each theme begins with brief contextual information, followed by the research findings. Central to the findings is the use of parent and child voices in the form of quotations, as this provides authentic insights into the identified themes. Pseudonyms have been used to ensure the confidentiality of participants.

Each theme concludes with key messages. While the research findings cannot be generalised to all refugee-background families, the key messages highlight what parents can do to increase the likelihood of specific positive outcomes for their children. As such, these are worded as:

- When parents ...
- Children are more likely to become adults who ...

The research findings are based on children who have achieved or are achieving well academically. Key messages from this research provide information which can be shared more widely with parents of refugee background. There is potential to increase parents' knowledge, capacity and understanding about the important role they can play in supporting their children's education, and advancing their children's academic outcomes.

The report concludes with some recommendations for further research that are based on issues which were revealed during this study.

# Child–parent relationships: caring and respectful communication

Relationships are complex: they are not static, but are dynamic and change over time. The child–parent relationship is critical in providing emotional security and a loving base for the child to learn about themselves and their place in the wider world. As children grow older they develop from being completely dependent on their parents to becoming increasingly independent as competent adults.

For families of refugee background, relationships are critical in strengthening family connections and communications during and after resettlement. Refugee families have additional stressors because of their refugee experience and the challenges of settling in a new country where the language and culture often are initially foreign. For some refugee families, extended time apart adds complexity and places additional stress upon relationships. Another challenge can be found in the varying abilities of parents and children to acquire fluency in the language and culture of their new home. Children usually acquire English more quickly than their parents. This builds their independence within the wider Australian community. Parents may rely on their children for communication outside their ethno-specific community. However, differences in English language abilities between the child and parent can become a source of tension. While some parents embrace their child's ability to relate within the wider Australian community, others worry that this may impact negatively on the child's cultural identity and connection with them. Parents' reliance on their child for communication can also impact relationships within the family. In addition, navigating differences of perspectives in ways that respect family and wider culture requires sensitivity. Such sensitivity is shown in the two-way conversations maintained by the research participants. These proved central to building a loving family life where children have the capacity to have respectful conversations that work to overcome any difficulties.

It was clear in our research that the child–parent relationship played a fundamental role in the child's educational success. These relationships were strong and caring and were defined by open, respectful communication that enabled the conversations discussed in the sections that follow. These conversations addressed parents' refugee experiences, parents' limited opportunities and hard work in Australia, language and culture, and negotiating their aspirations for their children.



## Our research findings

Our research sought to understand how the dynamics of the child–parent relationship contributed to young people doing well academically. We found that the strength of the relationship was crucial to understanding intergenerational education aspirations and success. Insights included:

- Parents were actively present in their children's lives with respectful, caring, reciprocal relationships. At the core of the relationships were communication and navigating difficult conversations.
- A close and connected family unit, enabling collective rather than individual support, was central to educational success.

The close bonds between parents and children were a consistent theme throughout this research, and they were described as caring, loving and friendly. The child–parent relationship was balanced with respect, shared connection and emotional security, with family conversations forming the basis of listening to each other and regular checking in. The depth of the relationship was evident in conversations during interviews with young adult children about what their parents were proud of, which at times brought the young adults to tears:

*I'm very, very, very close with both of my parents. We are very close ... we have this bond that, I don't know, it's especially with my dad, I'm very close with my dad. (Shilpa, aged in her 20s, Nepalese-born to Bhutanese parents of Nepalese ethnicity, Bachelor of Teaching student)*

*My mum is [the] inspiration [for] my studies ... me and my mum are really close ... My mum would have more of a connection with me 'cos she would come into my room at night and we'd talk [about] our day, our futures and things like that. (Amy, aged in her 20s, Australian-born to Vietnamese parents, Bachelor of Optometry student)*

Parents shared that their own parenting was somewhat different from how they had been raised. They believed they were more connected and friendly through open conversations with their children than they experienced with their own parents:

*When I was a little child, it was good ... but not similar to now. We couldn't tell parents everything ... Sometimes we scared of, maybe he or she not happy. Sometimes we shy, can tell to parents. But now it's friendly, they can tell me everything, everything, now it's very different. Now I'm very friendly on that time ... Just be friendly; just be friendly, not by force. The main thing ... is through communication, to have a conversation and then ... talk about that more and ... I give them the reasons. (Ahmad, aged in his 40s, Afghanistan-born parent of Hazara ethnicity)*

The strength of the family unity was a common theme raised in participant interviews. Participants believed that parents heading strong, connected families enabled collective family support, rather than a focus on the independent, individual child:

*We have very strong bond, very strong relationships – we are a strong family. (Abbas and Ameena, Syrian-born parents)*

*So, with us ... making every decision as an entity, like family, it's pretty good. First family and then the individual. So that's why I think we're very close. But just because we want to do this, doesn't mean for someone to say no ... we discuss it and then make the right decision, because they [parents] will probably know more than me. Maybe I know something they don't know, so it's just out there and someone can comment on it and give advice. It's not like I'll do something and you guys [parents] decide do or not. You can put your opinion in. (Setara, aged in her 20s, Afghanistan-born of Hazara ethnicity, Bachelor of Law and International Studies student)*

For many families of refugee background, the notion of respecting parents, as a cultural norm, underpins the relationship and the child's sense of cultural identity. It was clear from the participants that parents, through conversations with their children, were central to developing the children's understanding of the past, cultural connections, home language maintenance and valuing of education. This theme will be explored in further detail later in this report. This is evident in the children's clear respect and trust of their parents, even at times when they may not have completely agreed with their parents, and where conversations were difficult:

*My parents are very ... vocal and we communicate a lot with them. So, we have ... a good relationship with them. I would say we're close but ... [there is] a level ... with African families, there's like boundaries and respect. So, there are some things that I wouldn't speak to my parents about ... Other than that, I do feel comfortable speaking with them ... bringing my issues to them. (Ester, aged 18, Tanzanian-born to Burundian parents, Bachelor of Teaching student)*

*I am extremely close to my parents ... I could never retaliate because ... in our culture, ... you have to respect your elders and I always respected my dad ... I trust him completely and when he makes a decision ... I trust in it even though in the time I might be telling myself, oh, this is so unfair ... I'm like, but it must be for my good ... and I've always found that when he'd tell me not to do something or he would stop me from doing something, later on when I look back on it, I was like, oh, I see why he did that. (Farzana, aged in her 20s, Afghanistan-born of Hazara ethnicity)*

As the children grew into young adulthood, they began to make their own decisions, though they still maintained strong and open communication with their parents:

*So, my parents ... I guess they grew while we were growing as well in their mindset and now the way I see their aspirations is truly that it's just to be the best possible that we can be and that's made the relationship between my dad so much better as well ... compared to when we were very, very young. (Farzana)*

## Key messages

**When parents** foster close, connected, caring family relationships, and enable their children to have a voice in discussions, with all parties contributing and listening, **children are then more likely to become young adults** who have strong, close connections with family, participating in two-way caring, empathetic and considerate conversations.





# Towards a better life: from uncertainty to safety

All refugees have made the difficult decision to leave their home and extended families, enduring unimaginable hardship and danger in their endeavours to find a safer place to live. This is different to other forms of migration in which people enact agency and expend capital in making their decisions for their futures:

Refugees are people who have fled war, violence, conflict or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country. (UNHCR 2021)



Each refugee has an individual story of experiences of fleeing their home and facing uncertainty about where they will live and resettle. Undertaking incredibly difficult and courageous journeys from uncertainty to safety was most certainly the experience of the parents in this research, regardless of their country of origin and reasons for leaving. During the interviews, parents shared basic information about how they reached safety in Australia, providing insight into the depth of hardship endured, for example:

*My father died in Bhutan and I came to Nepal with my mum and ... my younger brother and sister. No one is to look after us. Mother also uneducated, and in the refugee camp, there's no income source. So, we have ... struggled ... We have little, beautiful house, small hut ... a bamboo house. We decorate the paper. At the time, it was a little bit good house. But other time, no good. The rains came from the roof ... In the refugee camp, we had no hopes. (Hamesh, aged in his 40s, Bhutanese-born parent, 24 years in a Nepalese refugee camp)*

Their gratitude in being successful in bringing their family to safety was at the forefront of the conversation:

*Happy to be here in Australia, because of the peace, because of the peaceful environment. (Hamidah, aged in her 40s, Afghanistan-born parent of Hazara ethnicity)*

## Our research findings

The research revealed children's clear understanding of the purpose for their refugee parents' journey to Australia, with strong connections between:

- the parents' careful and considered sharing of their refugee journey story with their children and
- the children's understanding of why their parents sought safety in a new country and what their parents had endured in order to provide them with a safe and better life, as an important prerequisite to accessing education.

The refugee parents we interviewed were adamant about the importance of living in a peaceful country. Safety for their family was integral to building their family's capacity to move forward and to enable their children to consistently participate in education:

*It's the opposite of our country. We can find justice here, but you couldn't find it in our country ... it's very safe here. There is no safety back in our country, and [now] we have the opportunity to send our children to learn. (Abbas and Aameena, Syrian-born parents)*

Parents shared the experience of their refugee journey with their children, with some children having first-hand memories of the experience. However, parents did this in a carefully considered way, not sharing the more traumatic details of their experience. In doing so, they spared their children overwhelming fear and sadness. The refugee story was important in helping their children understand why the family had moved to Australia, and that living in a safe country was a prerequisite for their future 'better life'. The young people interviewed did have an understanding of their parents' refugee journey and this has been woven into the fabric of their relationship with their parents, their cultural identity and their sense of purpose in relation to their family's future.

The depth of understanding of why their parents undertook their refugee journey is reflected in the following quotations from young people we interviewed. The individual stories are unique; however, they have in common an awareness of the hardship and sacrifice endured by their parents as they moved from uncertainty to safety:

*[My parents] were in Burundi but there was a war. They were very young so they had to ... flee into Tanzania ... and that's where they met each other ... I think my mum was ... probably ... eight ... and my dad is a bit older ... probably around 12 maybe when they fled ... My mum, she fled with her whole family but her and her mum were separated and her dad ... died during that process. When she arrived in the camp that's when she was ... reunited with her mum. My dad, he fled with ... his younger siblings because his parents didn't, they chose not to flee from war, they chose to stay ... My parents got married when they were 20 ... and they had me and my brother, [they were] probably 15 years in the camp ... we came to Australia in 2005. I was four and I was turning 5 the next month ... I feel like my memory starts, like, when I got to Australia. (Ester, aged 18, Tanzanian-born to Burundian parents)*

*Coming here from Afghanistan, I didn't even need to be told what my parents sacrificed ... it was always known ... growing up I knew the story ... they have given up so much for us, they've fled war, they've left their family loved ones, just for us. Just so we can have a better life. So, we have to do well. That's like our life purpose. (Farzana, aged in her 20s, Afghanistan-born of Hazara ethnicity)*

## Key messages

**When parents** share in a considered way the reasons why they undertook their refugee journey, **children are more likely to become young adults** who draw from these stories purpose and motivation for their education and future, and retain strong connections with, and respect for, their parents.



The Vietnamese Boat People's Monument, Adelaide, depicts a narrative of the refugee journey, with a small boy releasing lotus flowers (symbolising rising from adversity and optimism for the future) towards a beacon on the horizon (symbolising a guiding light and new beginnings). Common to all refugees, regardless of how they have undertaken their journey, is the 'notion of family – both its strength and its survival across generations. It is an opportunity for a safe and better future ... [while honouring] the sacrifices paid by one generation so that another may flourish' (<https://www.vbpm.com.au/about-vbpm/>).



# New beginnings: foundations for the family's future

As refugee migration relies heavily on the government's humanitarian policies and quota of places, the uncertainty about where and when resettlement will occur is a significant difference to forms of planned migration. The refugee journey, however, does not end with the arrival in a place of safety. There are ongoing challenges for refugees in transitioning to their new place of settlement.

Bringing the family together is a focus during resettlement, as it is not uncommon to have been physically separated for an extended period of time during their refugee journey. Among the parents we interviewed, the ways in which the family unit was re-established during resettlement were quite varied. For some, the father arrived first and then began the lengthy process of sponsoring his wife and children from a refugee camp or country of origin. This included years of separation. For others, the family unit was established during many years living in refugee camps. We spoke with families who had lived in transit countries for extended periods of time, unsure when and where permanent resettlement would begin. The time it takes to bring the family unit together extends resettlement.



Refugee parents prioritise providing economically for their families. For refugees, this involves beginning with limited financial and material assets and starting life over again, often with support from non-government organisations. Some of the parents we interviewed had secondary and tertiary education and professional employment in their country of origin. However, on resettlement most had taken whatever employment opportunities were available, which often did not match their prior employment. Most parents interviewed had minimal or no prior education. Extended time in refugee camps or transit countries resulted in limited previous employment opportunities. On resettlement, parents made the most of the employment opportunities available with a focus on providing for their family. Several parents were unable to undertake paid work as they were carers for partners who were unwell or were unwell themselves.

*We arrived to Australia; we didn't have a cent in our pockets, so we started from the beginning. (Amira, aged in her 40s, Algerian-born parent, former university lecturer with a PhD)*



## Our research findings

Our research found that, despite variation in the length of time and experiences of resettlement, the families were consistent in concurrently focusing their efforts on:

- ensuring their family was strongly committed to their collective, rather than individual, new beginning
- providing economically to enable their children to focus on their education, hopefully leading to better job opportunities in the future.

The parents we interviewed prioritised establishing the family unit. Permanently leaving extended family in their place of origin was a cause of ongoing worry and sadness for many. Regardless, all refugee-background parents were persistent in establishing a strong immediate family unit in Australia. The following quotations provide some insight into the hardship endured, including indefinite and permanent family separation, and lack of access to extended family members:

*If he tells you in detail about his history, it will take about a week for you, for him to explain. So ... just the main points. Like, he was born in Afghanistan then he migrated to Pakistan when he was 22. Then ... 2011, he left Pakistan, then he went to Indonesia ... 2014 he left Indonesia for Australia ... in Adelaide one and a half months, then he worked in Naracoorte at a butcher's. He sponsored his wife and 5 children from Pakistan; they arrived three years after him in 2017. They moved to Adelaide for their education. A married daughter remaining permanently in Pakistan. (Interpreter for Benham, aged in his 40s, Afghanistan-born parent of Hazara ethnicity)*

*They didn't have a grandpa or they didn't have a grandma, they didn't have cousins, uncles, so we were the only family that was there for them, my husband and myself, we were the only people that they could call family. (Amira, aged in her 40s, Algerian-born parent)*

The educators we interviewed, including the Intensive English Language Coordinators, shared that the hardship of the refugee journey for some parents can be compounded by extended family separations, grief and lack of control over their circumstances. This hardship can negatively impact the ability of some parents to undertake resettlement with a 'futures-thinking' positive mindset. The educators indicated that some parents' physical and/or mental health has been so impacted by their life experiences that they are unable to be present in their children's lives in ways that support them academically. However, this was not the case for the parents interviewed in this study. They were able to position their refugee journey as a past experience, which then formed the foundation for their purpose in resettling in Australia. As the heads of the family unit, parents acknowledged the refugee journey as a time of great hardship and uncertainty, while speaking positively about the present. Being very much present and active in their children's lives provided their children with emotional security and an optimistic future-focused mindset. As such, the parents were pivotal in supporting their children's participation in education:

*And my mum, she's always ... sitting down with us every chance that we get, telling us ... about her past and ... how hard it was for her ... she just really encourages us to do ... good and just chase the opportunity that we have. So, she's really good ... in the camp it was really hard to find jobs or do something with your life and they say how they managed to do that through ... working hard and stuff. And they talk about the things they want to see us achieve as well. (Ester, aged 18, Tanzanian-born to Burundian parents)*

The need to provide economically for the family was a consistent focus of the parent interviews. However, many were concerned about their own lack of job opportunities, or the physically hard employment they undertook. There was a strong sense of parents undertaking physically hard work so their children could focus on education, which would lead to better future employment opportunities. Parents were clear that they wanted their children to have less physically demanding jobs than they had themselves. The interpreter for Abdul, one of the parent participants, commented on the priority he placed on being the economic provider for his family:

*He has been working very hard to provide them economic support ... So, his main purpose is to support them economically and whatever they need, he can, he could provide them for their education. So that they should benefit from this opportunity [he tells his children] I give them the reasons that if you don't have, if you will not get education, you will be like me working 12 to 14 hours a day. (Interpreter for Ahmad, aged in his 40s, Afghanistan-born parent of Hazara ethnicity)*





*Being a refugee makes you tough, makes you do the things which you can't imagine, but then you become as skilful as well, there's another positive thing. (Ahmed, parent talking about his current employment in a team of gyprock flushers)*

Both the children and the young people we interviewed were very aware of the ongoing hardship and effort that their parents have undertaken to establish their family and provide for them. They felt deeply their parents' limited education or the lack of recognition of their parents' skills and past experience and, hence, their subsequent limited employment opportunities. Even primary-aged children had a good understanding that their parents undertook often physically demanding jobs to provide for the family economically. Children and young people made strong connections between their parents' persistence in establishing and providing for the family, and their parents' aspirations for better future employment opportunities for the children:

*My dad says ... I'll earn money but you guys have to study so you guys can ... be something in your life other than being like us, going to the farm and working. Because my dad now has ... some issues with his hands, they don't work properly. (Salima, age 12, Pakistan-born to Afghanistan-born parents of Hazara ethnicity)*

*Now my parents think it's not an age that they can learn new things. They have to do what they can do and they have to earn the money that they need for survival everyday life, so they're happy they just have a job ... But as a child, it's really sad to see that your parents are working somewhere else when, instead of that, they could have done something different where they enjoy what they can do ... it's really sad. And my mum ... hasn't gone to school, not at all, my dad, at least he did up to Year 3. My mum, they were married when they were 12 ... she was a housewife, she used to do all this housework ... and she came here, she went to the farm as well and then now she can't work, the doctor says she can't work, she is a bit sick ... but my mum is very smart ... if my mum had opportunity, she could have done anything. (Shilpa, aged in her 20s, Nepalese-born to Bhutanese parents of Nepalese ethnicity)*

## Key messages

**When parents** work towards providing a secure foundation for their family and the children's education, **children are more likely to become young adults** who develop respect and gratitude for their parents' support, and in turn are motivated to work hard in their studies for a better future.



# Cultural identity: from family to the wider community

Regardless of one's cultural background, one's identity provides a sense of belonging within the family unit and community. Common among parents of refugee background is having left their extended family and community, with the real possibility of never being able to return. The cultural differences between the country of origin and country of resettlement are often considerable. The need for a sense of familiarity and belonging when there is so much change and unfamiliarity heightens the importance of maintaining a strong cultural identity at home and through community cultural connections. Maintaining connections to one's heritage can be challenging without the support of extended family and community. As a result, the family unit becomes central to developing cultural identity.



Knowing one's home language appears to be strongly connected to cultural identity and a sense of belonging. Maintaining home languages with children enables a depth of communication in home and cultural community contexts. At the same time, for parents, learning English as an adult is often a considerable challenge, even with the support of government-funded TAFE classes. Fluency in home languages was a strong feature among the children and young people interviewed in this study.

Identity is dynamic and fluid, influencing a person's ability to connect inclusively with others. This impacts the extent to which a person feels a sense of belonging in varied communities. When the home culture differs from that of the wider community, there is a continuum of ways identity is expressed. Some live predominantly within their home culture, while some abandon their home culture and assimilate into the dominant culture. Others develop bicultural identities, having the ability to take on different cultural nuances depending on the context. A cosmopolitan identity embraces a more global sense of self and is subtly different from being bicultural. We are mindful that cosmopolitanism can be taken as a form of elitism, which is not what we are saying here. The



cosmopolitan identity relates to how these individuals understand, navigate and embrace diverse cultural and social norms within the host society. A cosmopolitan identity is rich, complex and interwoven, encompassing an understanding of cultural differences, the ability to relate inclusively with a wide range of people, and understanding of different perspectives. This becomes the lens through which the world is perceived, rather than a set of behaviours enacted in different settings. The young people we interviewed communicated with a confident and inclusive cosmopolitan sense of identity.



## Our research findings

Our research findings revealed the fluid nature of cultural identity for our young participants as their global sense of self and belonging strengthened over time.

- Parents were influential in facilitating strong connections with the home culture, and maintenance of home languages was significant for children's and young adults' cultural identity and belonging.
- Children expanded their early home cultural identity to embrace a more cosmopolitan sense of identity and belonging within the wider community as young adults.

Interviews with both parents and children highlighted the concurrent importance of home culture and making connections within the wider Australian community. Parent participants shared their experience of navigating resettlement and the adaptability and resilience required of them. Evident was the importance of cultural identity within their family in maintaining a sense of familiarity and

belonging. Unexpectedly, a parent articulated how freedom through resettlement in Australia has empowered pride in their cultural identity, a source of repression in their country of birth:

*I am very proud of them [my young children] because they came from another country and different language and be like this here with the ... short time, I am very proud of them. (Hiba, aged in her 40s, Syrian-born parent)*

*Because Hazaras they're in minority in Afghanistan ... they had a very hard life before, never had opportunities. But now a little bit circumstances has changed, they have a little bit more opportunity, that's why the Hazaras they're more keen to have a better life, they're working hard to have better life ... and they are very successful now ... [In Australia] we are proud of being Hazara. (Ahmad, Afghanistan-born parent of Hazara ethnicity)*

While parents and children had experience of cultural difference and even racism, the participants communicated a generally positive acceptance within the wider community:

*I remember our neighbours ... I was feeling like they're not looking forward to seeing us here, because in that block we were the only refugee. And now that couple is our best friend. (Masheed, aged in her 30s, Afghanistan-born, Bachelor of Law student)*

Our research found that the parents' ability to facilitate the maintenance of home languages was critical for children to be able to communicate with their parents at a deep level. Fluency in home languages provided authentic connection with home cultures and played a crucial role in a child's ability to communicate with relatives, particularly elderly relatives within cultural communities and in the country of origin. The tertiary-educated young participants were proud and thankful for having maintained fluency in their first languages. They saw being bilingual/multilingual as having benefits beyond communication within the family. They believed it gave them a beneficial point of difference for future employment, and a broader lens in understanding the wider community:

*I'm very happy that I can speak and read and write the language because a lot of my peers from the same background don't. So, I feel like I have, like an extra ... I guess how to understand the world, a different perspective, because obviously there's cultural differences. (Thuy, aged in her 20s, Australian-born to Vietnamese parents, graduated with Bachelor of Creative Arts, working in the field)*

Parent participants were proud of their children's acquisition of English; however, they perceived acutely that their own lack of English was a barrier to full participation in Australian society.

*It's a bit, I guess, hard for them [parents] and the major issue is language. The ability to communicate with people around them has made it difficult to engage with the community and get connected with people. I guess it's not been as easy for them as for me it was. (Habib, aged in his 20s, Afghanistan-born of Hazara ethnicity, Bachelor of Software Engineering, speaking about his parents)*

Interviews with the young adults suggested that their current global identity and inclusive sense of belonging was very much a personal journey which had developed over time. The young adults indicated that they were aware of their cultural identity growing up, and of differences between their home culture and wider Australian society. While children embraced their home cultural identity respectfully, there were clearly points of difference that caused some level of tension and reflection:

*I guess the cultural sense where ... there are different cultural norms ... and how you speak to adults, how you treat your fellow friends and family, respect elders ... very strict, very family oriented, very communal ... (Samuel, aged in his 20s, Rwandan-born, Bachelor of Construction Management)*

*I think it's having similar experiences [and] similar upbringing ... where you can relate to people, it's just about having shared experiences, and I guess it also comes down to the fact that when I was younger I wasn't allowed to do heaps of things, ... I wasn't allowed to go to all the 16<sup>th</sup> birthday parties and all of that. So how can I develop those experiences when I'm not even allowed in that situation? (Farzana, aged in her 20s, Afghanistan-born of Hazara ethnicity)*

Many of the children and young people indicated that making friends and building a sense of belonging in their primary years was relatively easy. They described their school environments as culturally inclusive places:

*The thing is, in this school, because everyone is from other countries, no-one really cares [where] are you from, they just be kind and nice to you. (Alayna, aged 12, Iranian-born to Afghanistan-born parents of Hazara ethnicity)*

Yet, many of the young adult participants shared that they found it more challenging during early adolescence at high school to make friends due to the 'cliquey' nature of peer groups. Young participants spoke reflexively of the challenges to their cultural and broader Australian community identity and the difficulties of not always quite fitting in. Some felt that their peers defined them by their home culture and, hence, at times they felt isolated:

*In primary school ... I had all sorts of friends, all backgrounds, and it was fine, everyone loved each other, everyone was all good, but then from Year 8 on, I started seeing the cliques ... I started seeing the Asians with the Asians, the Italians and the Greeks with each other ... I loved my school but at the same time ... it's like when you look at it from the outside, everything was great, but then throughout my schooling I never really felt this connection. I never felt this true sense of belonging. It's like even though everyone's nice to you and kind and they're not forwardly mean or racist or anything, you still just don't feel like you belong. (Farzana, aged in her 20s)*

During the senior high school years and at university, the young people developed friendships with peers from a variety of cultural backgrounds, which expanded their own sense of identity. As young adults, participants had developed both a strong cultural identity and an inclusive sense of belonging in the wider community. They presented themselves as confident and gracious people who were proud of their cultural heritage. Rather than operating in bicultural ways with one set of values and behaviours at home, and another in the wider community, these young people seemed to embrace a more cosmopolitan identity in which they were able to relate inclusively with people from different cultural backgrounds regardless of the situation. They were aware and respectful of nuanced cultural ways of being:

*[As a young adult] I'm really proud of my heritage ... but I don't really see myself as a Vietnamese person ... it's a little blurry. [My current friendship group is] very diverse, I have a lot of European friends actually, my best friend's Cambodian, my housemate's Greek, her partner is Chilean. (Thuy, aged in her 20s, Australian-born to Vietnamese parents)*

## Key messages

**When parents** facilitate a strong home culture, including maintenance of their home language, and encourage their children to relate within the wider community, **children are more likely to become young adults** who respect the home culture and language, relate well with people from diverse cultural backgrounds, and are confident, culturally proud and accomplished young people.





# Valuing education: aspirations for future opportunities

There is a wide variation in the educational experiences of refugee parents, ranging from no formal education to completion of tertiary education. This was the case with the parents interviewed in this research. Most of the parents had had limited or no educational opportunities, while a few had some form of tertiary or professional education. Regardless of their own educational backgrounds, refugee parents see education as an important prerequisite to future career opportunities and value it highly:

*As a parent, I think all the parents in the world, in the universe, maybe every parent has their dream about their kids' future, especially what their parents want them to be. I ... [want them] to be a successful person, have a successful career, successful in any ways. But of course they can choose [what] fits for them, for the career or in life. I don't want them to be work like a blue job like me. I want them to be a white job ... I want them to be in the office environment, clean, use their brain, not ... and hands like me, not physical, tough job. (Interpreter for Aziz, aged in his 40s, Uzbekistan-born parent)*

*It's quite true too, every parent wants their children to do well, with books and their studies ... because when you study you do this for yourself. You are basically doing this for your future. (Setara, aged in her 20s, Afghanistan-born of Hazara ethnicity)*

The anecdotal stereotype of refugee parents' aspirations is for their children to have careers with high community status and good financial benefit (e.g. doctor, engineer, lawyer) and that their children's dispositions include being hard working, highly motivated and studious. This stereotype was prevalent among participants in this research. The parents often aspired for their children to have high-status careers, and the children were clearly committed, motivated and persistent students. However, over time, the parents' aspirations were subject to negotiation with their children, and usually, the children's aspirations determined their future degree and career choices.



## Our research findings

In looking specifically at the connection between the valuing of education, parental aspirations and children's academic achievement, our research findings revealed:

- The parents discussed as a family the value of education and dispositions for learning as pathways to future employment opportunities.
- Parents and children navigated and negotiated aspirations in a nuanced way, which evolved over time from parent-led aspirations to children following their own aspirations.

Education was articulated and prioritised by parents as the pathway to better future employment opportunities. Parents provided ongoing encouragement for children's academic studies, actively modelling and facilitating the development of dispositions for learning, such as working hard and with effort, persistence, being focused, as well as being proactive in seeking supportive mentors, and striving to do one's best for academic success:

*A strong message from my family that I have to study (because) without education, there's nothing. That's the message ... but they also have this trust [that] I can do it. It's really positive and very exciting to be ... at the university as a refugee with uneducated parents. My parents always wanted me to be happy and healthy and be successful. I just wanted to be an educated girl. I am the first one to graduate in my family and take my parents to graduation. (Shilpa, aged in her 20s, Nepalese-born to Bhutanese parents of Nepalese ethnicity)*





Parents also ensured their children were well positioned to focus on education with practical support even when they were not personally able to help their children with their academic studies. Examples included: ensuring children were well fed, driving children to and from places, providing them with access to technology, and alleviating their household chores at times of intense study:

*My mum has been more than supportive because every weekend ... I used to go and study and she would do everything for me. I don't have to worry about a thing, about food, anything, when I have my exams, studies, everything. (Jaanya, aged in her 30s, Bhutanese-born of Nepalese ethnicity, Bachelor of Human Resource Management, working in this field)*

*Whenever ... I have an assignment or exam ... they gave me that time ... And they also ... help me with ... make small place in my room to ... to make a space ... just for study ... they help me ... I get a table. (Sadiya, aged 18, Syrian-born secondary student)*

As the young people in this research entered adolescence, they studied hard, often putting themselves under increasing pressure to achieve, knowing how important their success was to their parents. They also understood how much their parents had endured to provide a better life for them:

*They'll always be ... asking us ... have you done your homework? They just don't want [us] to be very ... distracted by other stuff. They just wanted us to ... focus on school ... they're really ... keen on us ... doing well at school ... they just wanted us to do ... better than they did ... because we've got ... an opportunity to come to Australia. They didn't want us to ... waste it. They want us to ... make something of ourselves. (Ester, aged 18, Tanzanian-born to Burundian parents)*

*So, I always wanted to do my best and ... help provide for them and live up to their expectations ... there was definitely pressure. I always felt like, since I am the oldest, I have to provide ... a good role model for my little sister in terms of doing well and being successful and helping out my family. (Amy, aged in her 20s, Australian-born to Vietnamese parents)*

Many of the parents had initially articulated aspirations for their children to pursue careers that have high community status and financial rewards, such as becoming a doctor or lawyer. The significance of their children being the first in the family to attain tertiary education was clearly a source of parental pride:

*The main inspiration for [the parent] is that no one in his family had an opportunity to have a higher education. So his children will be the first one in his family that ... will be educated enough ... with a higher qualification. No one in his family was a doctor or an engineer, there's the aspiration that he wants from his children to be educated so that he could feel proud. (Interpreter for Ahmad, aged in his 40s, Afghanistan-born parent of Hazara ethnicity)*

However, the 12-year-old primary school participants were beginning to develop their own aspirations, even though they clearly respected their parents' aspirations and understood the importance of making the most of educational opportunities:

*My mum really wants me to be a doctor because doctor is a good job, and is really just not wasting in just coming to school, it's not you're wasting your time, it's actually going to be really useful for you if you be a doctor ... If I don't do their ideas and do a horrible job like not coming to school anymore, of course that will be bad, but if I don't choose to be a dentist or a doctor or still be a teacher and a useful person for the world, they will be totally proud of me. (Alayna, aged 12, Iranian-born to Afghanistan-born parents of Hazara ethnicity)*

*I had 5 dreams, like being in army and air force and police, lawyer, and other one I forgot but I just wanted to be them ... I want to do my own dream. I think dad because he gives me ideas of being ... other things. Like, for example, he wants [me] to be a doctor ... he just wants me ... to be comfortable in my work ... not being like ... them because ... they worked really hard, but now they can't like just do something because their back hurts or their ... I don't really want to be a doctor because in Pakistan I heard before being a doctor you have to operate [on] a frog so I don't want to be a doctor. (Salima, age 12, Pakistan-born to Afghanistan-born parents of Hazara ethnicity)*



Over time, as young people became highly self-motivated learners with increasing independence and agency, there was a shift from parent-led aspirations to children prioritising their own aspirations. These aspirations were shaped by personal interests and emerging abilities. The children, like the adolescents and young adults, were able to discuss their own alternate aspirations with their parents. Their caring relationships enabled different perspectives to be voiced and difficult conversations to be had. These discussions were often within the family setting, with siblings supporting their parents to see alternate perspectives. As children grew into young adults who were confidently pursuing their own aspirations, they did this with a strong connection between pursuing a career they were interested in and wanting to make their parents proud. Strong parental support remained throughout with parents ultimately wanting their children to be successful and happy. They supported their child's aspirations with pride:

*Like most other Asian parents, they want to provide ... the best future they can for their children. And I think I understand where they coming from because they came from not a really good background and they didn't have all the things that ... me and my sister [have] ... They tried to push me to become a doctor, which I thought was a little bit too much but I talked to them about it and said ... at the end it's my career and my future. I want to do something that I really like. And I talked to them about it and they were okay with me pursuing anything that made me happy then after I had that talk. (Amy, aged in her 20s, Australian-born to Vietnamese parents)*



*I try and take their aspirations, I value their aspirations a lot ... I know that we live in a society where it's like you have to live for yourself, you can't live for other people ... I'm not going to live for my parents but I really, really value what they want out of life and I want to somehow take that and take what I want and work around it ... [my dad] wants me to do something that's best for me ... and he also believes that I'm at an age where I can make those decisions ... when we were young, he was always ... [become] a doctor and then in Year 12 ... I told him ... I don't want to be a doctor ... and he was like, okay, that's not what you want to do ... he could see that I was going to pursue something because I truly was dedicated to it ... he can just respect that I have a life of my own, I have aspirations of my own ... where I take their aspirations into consideration, I just know that they don't want me to take things for granted, so I won't. (Farzana, aged in her 20s, Afghanistan-born of Hazara ethnicity)*

## Key messages

**When parents** promote positive dispositions for learning, share their aspirations and also listen to their children's aspirations, **children are more likely to become young adults** who confidently pursue their own aspirations for their future while valuing their parents' earlier aspirations, and are intrinsically self-motivated with a strong belief in their own abilities and efforts.



# Parent–school relationships: building partnerships

There are many things that parents need to understand in order to make informed decisions about their children's education. This includes understanding that Australian education systems are segregated into public and private sectors, with private schooling further separated into Catholic and independent schools. They also need to understand the disparity between public and private school fee structures, scholarship opportunities, starting school ages in public and private schools, the curriculum offered, school zones, and the Year 12 Australian Tertiary Admissions Ranking (ATAR) and associated bonus points.

Refugee parents are provided with information about Australian education and enrolment support during the initial stages of resettlement. This is a time when they have a considerable amount of new information to take in. Initially, most primary-aged children in metropolitan areas of South Australia are enrolled in Intensive English Language Centres (IELC) within the public sector. When they meet English language acquisition milestones, they transition to mainstream schooling, with parents central to the schooling decision. Secondary-aged students enrol in the new arrivals program (NAP) at Adelaide Secondary School of English, and students over 17 can enrol in NAP at Thebarton Senior College. When children transition from an IELC to a mainstream primary school, and from primary to secondary school, parents are expected to make informed decisions about their child's enrolment.

Regardless of schooling sector, a positive relationship between parents and school is important in providing cohesive support for the children's education. Refugee parents come from countries where education systems and cultural approaches to learning can differ significantly from the Australian context. In addition, their own educational experience can be minimal. Some parents in this research had no formal education due to poverty and/or being female. Others had minimal and disrupted education due to crisis situations and extended time in places of transit. Many refugee parents therefore have limited understanding of Australian school contexts on arrival, despite information during early resettlement.

Schools seek 'partnerships' with parents in educating the children. However, the term partnership can be misinterpreted by refugee parents as needing to physically support children at school, or provide direct supervision of homework tasks, both requiring competency in English and knowledge of the curriculum content. Refugee parents can be confused and unsure about their role in the partnership with schools and undervalue the ways they can support their children's education. Schools also can undervalue the contribution of refugee parents in supporting their children's valuing of education, sense of purpose and development of positive dispositions for learning.

## Our research findings

This aspect of the research considers education across the primary and secondary sectors. The research findings highlight positive aspects as well as areas that would benefit from more comprehensive research.

- Parents and children had close relationships with primary schools. This included a high level of trust of key staff members and recognition of the importance of bilingual staff for effective communication.
- Children had close relationships with key staff in secondary schooling; however, for parents communication was more limited with a reliance on children as the conduit.
- Parents undervalued the positive impact of their home support for their children's education and did not recognise the value and importance of their role in partnership with the school.

Parents provided very effective support for their children's education through articulating their aspirations, encouraging their children's positive learning dispositions, providing for the family economically, practical support, and establishing connected family units with a strong cultural identity and sense of belonging. However, while parents could see the importance of their input in advising and encouraging their children, they acknowledged their limitations in academic support for their children's education. They attributed this to their lack of English language, lack of understanding of the content that children were learning at school and the ways teachers in Australia teach. Lack of English language impacted parents' ability to support their children's education directly (e.g. listening to children practise their reading, clarifying homework tasks). They did not generally see their contributions as valuable or as 'partnership' with the schools:

*They can't help them with their learning, but the only thing that they provide is to care about them. They advise them about their education, how you can be successful through education. (Interpreter for Benham, aged in his 40s, Afghanistan-born parent of Hazara ethnicity)*



*We will support them [children] in every aspect, actually for fulfil their dreams and it's up to them what they want to do ... in future, but we hope they can achieve the higher degrees and live good lives. We cannot do much actually in this regard because our English is not that good, so they have to depend on themselves most of the time. (Abbas and Aameena, aged in their 40s, Syrian-born parents)*

Poor English language skills and cultural differences can form a barrier for refugee parents in building understandings about school contexts. Physically, functionally and in relation to understandings about how children learn can create barriers to communication with schools. Our research revealed overwhelmingly that parents from schools with bilingual staff who were fluent in their community language were confident and comfortable in their communications with the school. These schools were personable and innovative in their dedication to proactively supporting communication with parents. These actions built parents' understandings of the school system, their children's progress, and their capacity to work with their children. This increased the parents'



capacity to participate in partnership in informed ways. For example, one primary school creates short YouTube clips in community languages for the school's communication internet platform, to share information with parents about school happenings:

*Students who have recently arrived to Australia ... have different perspectives and understanding about education because they were in the refugee camp ... We [BSSO] know the family ... we know the community, we know the language, the culture, the child, the family and [from] preschool we slowly build up that relationship and family start to understand the education process, educating kids from support in the community, family and school. (Maher, Bhutanese-born Bilingual School Services Officer)*

*Having someone from our community working in the school has helped a lot. In general, we have questions. We want to ask something about our children. And if we have someone from the community [who] works in the school, we feel comfortable to ask questions. (Hamesh, aged in his 40s, Bhutanese-born parent speaking about bilingual support at school)*

There was little doubt that parents placed much trust in school staff and the Australian education system. They encouraged children to connect with staff as mentors to support gaps in their learning. Schools endeavour to provide a positive school environment, with children, staff and families forming a community approach towards learning, belonging and well-being. Younger children whom we interviewed expressed enthusiasm towards their teachers.

*His children will be the first one in his family that ... will be educated enough ... with a higher qualification ... there's the aspiration that he wants from his children to be educated so that he could feel proud. His great aspiration was to educate the family and the children, and he's very grateful from Australian, from Australia's government, from the teachers, from the whole community who are very supportive for the education of his children. (Interpreter for Ahmad, aged in his 40s, Afghanistan-born parent of Hazara ethnicity)*

*I realise that kids are enjoying learning here ... what I find is kids are always curious to go to school and learn even after holiday. What I believe is when kids are very close to teachers, then they open and share and learn. We advise, like positive advice. (Hamesh, aged in his 40s, Bhutanese-born parent)*





This was reinforced by young adult participants as they fondly recalled significant teachers who had provided additional support as well as showing care and kindness:

*I guess so because I've always had positive experiences at school with the teachers ... Especially in high school ... they ... really wanted us to ... focus on what career path and they wanted us to be sure. So, they really encouraged us. And when I told them that I wanted to be a teacher ... I had a lot of support because teachers ... are really happy when you want to be a teacher! ... And they really ... guided me with the different pathways that I could take, in case I didn't get [the] ATAR. (Ester, aged 18, Tanzanian-born to Burundian parents)*

Interviews with educators and parents revealed concerns that decision-making by parents was not informed by comprehensive understandings of education systems and options. Instead, decisions for post-IELC primary and secondary schooling were predominantly based on three sources: following cultural community enrolments or advice, children taking the lead in decision-making based on friendships, and key primary school personnel.

Primary school leaders expressed concerns about limited enrolment information and communications in home languages within the secondary sector, leading to a reliance by parents on key primary school personnel. Whilst considering the advice and opinions from their community, children and key school personnel is relevant, we believe parents need to have more comprehensive information on which to base decisions. This requires access to objective information after the initial resettlement. We believe further research, beyond the scope of this study, would be beneficial.

## Key messages

**When parents** understand their role in partnership with schools, provide a supportive home environment that complements the school learning environment, and engage personally with their children's school, **children are then more likely to become adults** who stay engaged in education, value their parents' contribution and connect with educators and mentors along the way.



A video series, *'Refugee-background young people talk about aspirations and educational success'* has been developed as a resource to facilitate reflection and discussion with educators, pre-service teachers, students and parents. The series includes:

- the main resource, a 9 minute compilation of five refugee-background young adults,
- a 3 minute video of one tertiary student of Hazara-Australian ethnicity,
- 5 extended videos; one of each of the participants.

The videos can be accessed via the following YouTube link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5bZR7UDWVvk8&list=PLuKEOROYHJPncPSghu4irQR3xQr-JorEJ&index=1>

The five participants are academically successful and are representative of the wider group of participants interviewed for the research. Their family cultural backgrounds are Afghani, Nepalese, Rwandan, Syrian and Vietnamese. Their time in Australia varies from being born here, coming here as a young child, or arriving more recently as an adolescent. Despite their varied cultural backgrounds and length of time in Australia, they have in common strong family connections and an understanding of why their family settled in Australia.

The participants are highly motivated and confident young adults who are building on their academic success and making the most of their opportunities for a better future. They share their experiences of navigating education, cultural identity and parental aspirations. In reflecting on their past, they reflect on what they would tell their 12-year-old self and 16/17-year-old self in hindsight. Their ability to reflect on their own experiences growing up as a child of refugee parents will inspire other children and young people of refugee background and provide valuable insight for educators and refugee-background parents.

The aim is for the resource to be used:

- by educators to facilitate reflection and conversation with primary and secondary age children of refugee backgrounds as inspiration for their future
- by educators and pre-service teachers to facilitate a deeper understanding of the experiences of refugee-background children, further building strengths-based rather than a deficit perspective in relating with refugee families
- by educators to facilitate reflection and conversation with refugee parents to develop an understanding of the educational complexities that their own children may navigate over time, through sharing the experiences of refugee-background young adults who have achieved well academically.

In addition, suggested questions to facilitate reflection and discussion with children, young people, preservice teachers, educators and parents are available in the form of Word document resources on the project's UniSA research web page. These can be adapted to suit your context: [bit.ly/UniSARefugeeAspirationsandAcademicSuccess](http://bit.ly/UniSARefugeeAspirationsandAcademicSuccess)

This research has focused on the impacts of refugee parental aspirations on their children's academic outcomes and has brought attention to a group of successful refugee young people and children which is largely absent in educational research. It also highlights a need to develop a more nuanced understanding of the intergenerational aspirations of refugee parents and youth. This understanding must account for the significance of education as a key component of the intergenerational aspirations of refugee parents for their children. It further recognises that, in the process of building a new beginning and a better life from uncertainty to safety, aspirations for future opportunities are continuously evolving for refugee-background parents and their children.

# Conclusion

This research drew inspiration from Daniel, whom this report is dedicated to. The experiences and memory of Daniel and his parents provoked us to explore how other successful refugee young people and their parents construct their lives as a collective and as individuals. Throughout this report we have identified how refugee young people come to show respect and care for their parents, are influential in building close relationships with school and family, develop strong cosmopolitan capacities to bridge between and across cultures, and excel in education, leading to significant participation and inclusion within their family, cultural and wider communities.

In caring about creating conditions for substantive inclusion in our schools and universities, and by extension in multicultural democratic societies, it is imperative that researchers and educators pay careful attention to the intergenerational aspirations of refugee parents and children.

*This is about community perception: people probably [don't] look down on us, but they didn't know that we have potential. We have as much potential as someone who's born here. (Ester, aged 18, Burundian parents)*

Similar to young people from minority communities, Ester is an example of a child of refugee-background parents who has drawn on collective experiences with being 'othered' to articulate attempts to belong. In many ways, refugee youth today represent the face of a modern form of citizenship in which ways of belonging, and the spaces for recognition, are not limited by one's cultural identity or refugee history. Rather, as this research has demonstrated, the aspirations of refugee-background parents and their children have been shown to be key in unlocking their unlimited potential.





Based on the research undertaken in the project, we have identified five areas for further research.

## **1. Improving refugees' understanding of our education systems to support informed decision-making**

The complex nature of our education systems is challenging for refugee parents to understand, particularly with all they are contending with during resettlement. This has an impact on what informs decision-making and how decisions are made in relation to children's education. Within our research three aspects were noted in parents' decision-making about which secondary school their child would attend:

- parents relying on recommendations from extended family, and friends within their cultural communities
- parents passing decision-making to their child, due to lack of English, and the child basing decisions predominantly on friendships
- parents taking no action, relying on primary schools to manage secondary school enrolments.

We suggest further research in relation to supporting parental understanding of our education systems, to enhance their ability to make more broadly informed decisions in relation to their children's educational options. Of note, the children's parents often also had little understanding or concept of our tertiary education system beyond the ATAR score required for program entry. More work needs to be done to inform parents about various career pathways and educational trajectories even beyond high school education.

## **2. Improving parental understanding of their 'partnership' role with schools and its impact on their child's education**

Refugee parents valued education as the pathway to future opportunities. However, parents of children who were achieving well academically did not comprehensively value their own role in supporting their children's education. They understood the value of their encouragement; however, they did not readily recognise the value of how they supported their child. They tended to focus on negatives or what they were not able to contribute due to lack of English and lack of familiarity with the education systems and content. Parents had limited understanding of their role in partnership with schools and the value they bring to this.

Our research indicated that parents contributed significantly to their child's education by:

- prioritising family and child–parent relationships and staying connected with their children throughout their life stages
- reinforcing their cultural identity by maintaining their home language and cultural heritage
- articulating the value of education and supporting the development of dispositions for engaging in education
- offering practical support in various ways.

We suggest further research to support more refugee parents to realise that they too have the capacity to support their child's education. In addition, further research would be useful in relation to increasing parental and school understanding of the value of what parents bring to the partnership to support their children's education.

### 3. Supporting the transition to university

The tertiary-educated young people in this research were all academically successful. Nevertheless, despite their capabilities and confidence, many of them expressed that they felt isolated when they started university and struggled with:

- finding a peer group and building their sense of belonging
- knowing how to navigate university in general and more specific course requirements
- making the transition from relational-based Year 12 education to more independent tertiary education.

While universities have many resources available to support students, university studies are increasingly online and the relationships with support systems are often transactional. We hence suggest further research into strategies and resources that support refugee-background students in their transition to tertiary education.

### 4. Mental health discussions

The young adult participants communicated that they are confident, capable and well-grounded. However, several shared their:

- personal experiences of considerable stress during their adolescence, which impacted their levels of anxiety
- close association with people who experienced anxiety and/or depression
- family members who suffered from mental health issues impacted by their refugee journey and life experiences.

They spoke about the difficulty of discussing mental health issues with their parents. This was highlighted by one tertiary student:

*Mental health issues were not spoken about with her parents' generation and that this needed to change for her own generation.*

We suggest that further research is needed into effective ways to increase parental understanding of mental health issues and cross-generational discussions on mental health between refugee parents and their children.

### 5. The impact of parental refugee stories on their children

The young people valued and respected their parents' refugee journey and the positive impact this had on providing purpose and motivation to do well in their studies and for their future employment. While this has been an important finding in this report, there is clearly a need to investigate this in a more in-depth way and with a larger group of participants focusing on:

- the intergenerational complexities of how the transmission of parental refugee experiences occurs or does not occur
- the various ways this has impacted their children and their life trajectories from education to employment.

This will be of benefit to refugee-background families and communities as well as for educational institutions that seek to support these families.

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