

Australia's Humanitarian Program 2022-23

Response to the Department of Home Affairs Discussion Paper: Australia's Humanitarian Program 2022-23 | August 2022

About AMES Australia

AMES Australia (AMES) welcomes the opportunity to provide input into Australia's Humanitarian Program 2022-23. Our submission is based on AMES long history of working with new arrivals to Australia through both permanent and temporary migration pathways.

Under AMES vision of *'full participation for all in a cohesive and diverse society'*, AMES overarching purpose is to support migrants and refugees as they move from early settlement to independence, and greater social and economic participation in Australia.

AMES provides integrated settlement services, English language, foundational, employability and vocational education, and employment support. AMES is the Humanitarian Settlement Program (HSP) provider for the contract regions of Melbourne, regional Victoria, South Australia, and Tasmania, and the Status Resolution Support Service (SRSS) provider in Victoria and the Adult Migrant Education Program (AMEP) provider in four Victorian regions. AMES is also an Approved Proposing Organisation (APO) under the Community Support Program (CSP) operating nationally.

Response overview

AMES supports a long-term vision for the Humanitarian Program, underpinned by a strong network of settlement services working with refugee communities that understand humanitarian entrants' settlement needs and can foster real and practical opportunities to develop independence.

At the highest level, a national strategy for settling in Australia that brings together different government departments, state and local governments, and involving refugee communities and broader civil society has the potential to build the required capacity, infrastructure and service provision to ensure a connected, responsive settlement sector.

AMES commends the department's commitment to a flexible and responsive Humanitarian Program and its aspiration to progressively increase Australia's humanitarian intake for those requiring Australia's protection.

AMES welcomes the department's further commitment to prioritising the backlog of permanent visa holders currently offshore to Australia as efficiently as possible.

The following provides more detail in relation to the composition of the 2022-23 Humanitarian Program; and comments on the features of a strong settlement sector to support humanitarian entrants.

Management and composition of the 2022-23 Program

AMES suggests that the Program set a target, rather than a ceiling, of the number of places in the Program with the total number informed by the following considerations.

Increased global unrest and increased displacement and UNHCR referral processes

The African continent continues to see ongoing armed conflicts with the Tigray region of Ethiopia leading to significant displacement of people in the Horn of Africa region. The coup in Myanmar has seen the repressive Military Junta return to power. These conflicts are likely to increase the number of refugees from cohorts which are already priorities in the Humanitarian Program (e.g. Ethiopians, Eritreans, Myanmarese – Karen and Chin). Escalating tensions in Sri Lanka and Gaza, the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan and the war in Ukraine will further contribute to unrest and displacement in the coming years.

AMES considers that maintaining the size of the Program as a ceiling, is a restrictive goal, and may result in a Program that fails to respond to emerging and escalating global conflicts. This is at a time when refugee displacement around the world is at a record high (estimated to be 27.1 million globally).¹

¹ UNHCR Figures at a glance, accessed 4 August 2022: <https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>

The allocation of places under Australia's Humanitarian Program to UNHCR referrals should be proportional to the high numbers and level of need for unlinked refugees from global conflict regions. In support of flexibility in the Program, crisis response numbers, as with the Afghan crisis response, should be additional to the Humanitarian Program.

Offshore applicants

COVID-19 has impacted the resettlement and arrival of humanitarian entrants under the Humanitarian Program, and AMES supports government's position to prioritise the 9,000 refugees who have been granted permanent residency but remain offshore. Additionally, AMES recognises Australia's responsibility to expedite the processing of applications already received. AMES considers the prolonged wait time may exacerbate applicants' need for support resulting from unaddressed complex health and other needs.

Women at risk

AMES acknowledges the importance of the Women at Risk visa (204), and the increased risks faced by many women fleeing conflict zones and repressive regimes. Recent events in countries such as Afghanistan highlight the plight of not only women, but also young adult females and girls who are in grave danger under the Taliban. This conflict is of a specifically gendered nature resulting in unique negative impacts for these cohorts. Escalating tensions in other parts of the globe, for example the war in Ukraine, are also contributing to the displacement of vulnerable females.

AMES considers that a more nuanced and targeted response that would reinforce the mechanisms to offer safety to women and their children should be to support the increase of the intake under the Women at Risk visa category by broadening the Women at Risk eligibility criteria to:

- a. include young women/girls as a priority group in crisis situations
- b. temporarily waive the strict requirements for identity and other evidentiary documentation for female refugees. (Women and girls living under oppressive regimes frequently have no passports or other identifying documents).

Community Support Program (CSP)

AMES commends and supports the government's aspiration to progressively increase the CSP places to 5,000 per year; and affirms the expectation that CSP places are additional to and complements the total humanitarian intake. In September 2020, AMES responded to the Review into the CSP, undertaken by the Commonwealth Coordinator-General of Migrant Services within the Department of Home Affairs. AMES looks forward to the change outcomes from the Review, including a fee reduction to support greater accessibility to the Program, and extended criteria for applicant inclusion into the Program.

Building a strong settlement sector and mainstream capacity

Australia's commitment to a flexible and responsive Humanitarian Program that provides appropriate support for those requiring Australia's protection must be underpinned by an equal commitment to a strong settlement sector. Continuing to invest in a cohesive specialised settlement sector is critical to the success of the Program and the settlement, in both social and economic terms, of entrants. Fragmentation of services in the sector is not useful and can weaken the larger effort and impact of core programs and services.

In addition to a specialised settlement sector, Australia requires continued commitment to building the capacity of mainstream services – including seeking input from refugee community groups - to support the full participation of entrants in the social and economic life of Australian society. For this to be achieved, a national strategy for settling in Australia that brings together the relevant stakeholders in governments, communities and settlement service providers could frame and inform the Australian settlement model.

Areas of particular relevance underpinning the successful implementation of the Humanitarian Program are:

- **Housing:** People cannot settle if they do not have access to stable housing. Affordable, appropriate and secure housing is critical. This underpins the economy's ability to attract and retain a workforce, and impacts community health, education, productivity and overall wellbeing.

- **Employment:** Satisfying work is fundamental to full integration for entrants under the Humanitarian Program. Mainstream employment services providers need the skills and cultural understanding to assist humanitarian entrants to secure work in Australia. AMES notes that in the current Workforce Australia Services there are only three Refugee Specialist Licences, all of which are in Victoria. New South Wales and Queensland, the other major settlement locations, have no Refugee Specialist Licences.
- **Health:** Many humanitarian entrants arrive with complex health issues, mental and physical, and there is a continued need to support refugee health outcomes long after the initial settlement period. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted how essential language and cultural support is to ensuring refugees (and other diverse cohorts) have access to trusted, accurate and timely health information and services.
- **Education:** AMEP provides English language tuition as part of the broader settlement sector. Access to mainstream education and training for humanitarian entrants can be supported through the consistent provision of career advice, supported pathways, bridging programs, and assistance with recognition of prior learning/qualifications.

AMES acknowledges the government's recent review of the settlement and integration of refugees and refers to AMES response submitted in May 2022 for further details about settlement service provision (refer attachment).

Community sponsorship

The role of a specialist settlement sector to facilitate connections between refugees and the broader community is highly valued and cannot be readily replaced. The sector possesses a wealth of professional, complex, and valuable cultural and linguistic skills, networks into community, and often a shared lived experience of being a migrant or refugee to Australia. As a sector it also upholds standards in training and delivery which are crucial when working with vulnerable populations.

AMES has direct experience of the value of support provided by the broader Australian community in the managed response to the Afghan evacuees and Ukrainian arrivals. Models involving community support (e.g. Community Refugee Integration and Settlement Pilot (CRISP), provide an opportunity for community to add to the specialist settlement organisations work in supporting the integration of refugees. With adequate oversight and training from the professional settlement sector, such models would be valuable adjuncts to supporting the settlement of new arrivals.

Regional settlement

Regional settlement is a recognised priority for the Australian Government with migration seen as vital for regional economic development. There is an opportunity for the department to reposition settlement services providers to: scope alternative settlement locations, build capacity of communities in regions, extend relationships with key stakeholders, and develop material on these regional locations to be shared with clients offshore. This approach has the potential to both develop a stronger connection to regional settlement and build support for regional regeneration.

Strategies to increase successful regional settlement include:

- communication about Australia's Humanitarian Program to off-shore applicants needs to be clear and accurate, including defining/redefining 'regional' Australia which is often confused with 'rural' Australia
- reviewing and potentially expanding the current regional settlement locations in consultation with settlement services providers
- update AUSCO pre-arrival materials to accurately reflect the different settlement locations and manage expectations
- regional areas may require improved resourcing, particularly in regards to adequate affordable housing stock, to participate fully in the settlement and retention of humanitarian entrants.

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