



*'I just want to study, if don't get it free, I'll  
borrow the money from government,  
just let me study!'*



**An equitable education:  
Achieving equity status and  
measures to ensure equality  
for refugee-background  
tertiary students in  
Aotearoa New Zealand**

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Cover quote: 29 year old female from Bhutan (10 April 2011).

Unless otherwise stated, quotations from refugee-background students and TEI staff members are drawn from the following research carried out by VUW academics:

Kindon, S., Joe, A., and Postgraduate Students in GEOG 404 2011 (forthcoming). A Long Way from Educational Equity: Refugee Background Students' Study Experiences in Aotearoa New Zealand Tertiary Institutions. School of Geography, Environment and Earth Sciences Research Report. Wellington: Victoria University of Wellington.

Joe, A., Wilson, N., Kindon, S., and Postgraduate Students in GEOG 404 2011 (forthcoming). Assessing the Impact of the Withdrawal of Refugee Study Grants on Refugee Background Students at Tertiary Institutions in Aotearoa New Zealand. Report for Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages Aotearoa New Zealand (TESOLANZ). Wellington: Victoria University of Wellington.

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# Glossary

## **In the context of this paper, the following definitions apply:**

**Equity:** Principles and practices that ensure fairness to tertiary students irrespective of gender, race, religion, and disability, by providing opportunities to participate in and successfully complete tertiary studies. This includes taking measures to remove barriers to participation and achievement among those who are disadvantaged and/or under-represented.

**Equity group:** Equity groups are identified in order to encourage access and participation among people who are under-represented through the elimination of barriers and the implementation of targeted strategies.

**Refugee-background:** People from refugee backgrounds include those who have come to New Zealand through the UNHCR refugee quota system, through family reunification, as an asylum seeker, and sometimes as a migrant who has come from a refugee-like situation (for example, Zimbabweans, some Iraqis and Assyrians). We have chosen to use the term refugee-background for the purposes of this paper because it is our intention that equity recognition would benefit more than just those who entered New Zealand as UNHCR quota refugees.

**‘Special measures’, ‘Affirmative action’, ‘Measures to ensure equality’:** Deliberate, positive action that is undertaken to enable particular groups who have been disadvantaged because of their gender, race, disability, religion, or sexuality, in order to benefit an under-represented group – usually as a means to counter the effects of a history of discrimination – and achieve equal outcomes with other groups in society.

# Acronyms

<b>EFTS</b>	Equivalent fulltime students
<b>ESOL</b>	English for speakers of other languages
<b>TEC</b>	Tertiary Education Commission
<b>TEI</b>	Tertiary Education Institution(s)
<b>TES</b>	Tertiary Education Strategy
<b>TESOLANZ</b>	Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages Aotearoa New Zealand
<b>UNHCR</b>	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>VUW</b>	Victoria University of Wellington

# Executive summary

*'[Former refugees] are also important for the future of this country... [we] can help build the country.'*

21 year old male from Burma (11 April 2011)

The purpose of this paper is to advocate for recognition of refugee-background students as an equity group both in government policy and at New Zealand tertiary institutions, and for their inclusion in equity funding and other special and targeted support.

\* \* \* \*

In a 2006 study<sup>1</sup> of the goals of Victoria University of Wellington (VUW) refugee-background tertiary students, refugee-background research participants identified six key goals of their university study:

- to get an education
- to finish study
- to get high marks
- to socialise
- to get a good job
- to help 'our people'.

These goals may be common to refugee-background students, but they are also likely to be shared by tertiary students who are women, Māori, Pasifika students, students with disabilities, as well as 'everyone else'. In order for this diverse range of students to achieve these shared goals, it is not enough to merely provide the same education for all. New Zealand has international obligations and has made national commitments to ensure that the right to education is realised by all New Zealand citizens.

Equity of access and opportunity is an important part of the vision for New Zealand's tertiary education system. The 2010-15 Tertiary Education Strategy (TES) reflects the New Zealand Government's legal requirement to enable all New Zealanders to enjoy their right to

education, stating that the tertiary sector ‘should respond to the diverse needs of all the groups it serves’.<sup>2</sup>

The TES points out that for those groups who do not have equitable access to enjoy that right, ‘this will mean **providing targeted services to create an inclusive environment for a diverse student body**’.<sup>3</sup> This statement echoes the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990 and the Human Rights Act 1993, which both recognise that **special measures are required to assist these groups to ‘achieve an equal place with other members of the community’**.

Great strides have been made for Pasifika students through their recognition within government policy as equity groups and through the provision of equity funding to support specific service delivery within tertiary education institutions (TEIs).<sup>i</sup> Within the same sector, however, refugee-background students are not recognised as an equity group, despite a need for similar support mechanisms. Support for refugee-background students is often delivered in an ad hoc manner and relies heavily on the goodwill of staff. This is unacceptable. Equity status recognition would improve access to TEIs for refugee-background students to achieve an ‘equal place with other members of the community.’

While refugees come from a wide range of backgrounds and have diverse needs and challenges, they are clear candidates for equity recognition if seen as a cohort that is linked not by their ethnicity, religion, or gender, but by their common barriers – and shared solutions – to academic achievement.

There are many well-documented barriers to tertiary education achievement commonly shared by refugee-background students<sup>4</sup> (many of which have also been documented in studies of Pasifika tertiary education issues). These include:

- difficulty in adapting to western and independent learning styles
- lack of culturally familiar courses
- lack of culturally responsive orientation and support

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<sup>i</sup> We acknowledge the unique position of Māori as tangata whenua of New Zealand, and are therefore solely drawing parallels with Pasifika students, as aspects of the Pasifika tertiary experience are more comparable to those of refugee-background students.

- family and community demands / lack of community support
- lack of role models and mentors
- difficulties in making friends and 'fitting in'
- English literacy difficulties
- history of very broken education
- financial hardship
- concern about family members still at risk in refugee camps or country of origin
- health issues
- feeling alienated by the academic environment
- lack of information about tertiary programmes and difficulty in making appropriate study choices
- lack of knowledge from university staff about the specific needs of refugee-background students
- lack of awareness of 'mainstream' student support services.

These barriers have been compounded by a number of recent changes that have closed pathways to tertiary education for refugee-background students. These changes include:

- the termination of Refugee Study Grants
- reduced funding for assessment and placement advice
- TES preference for specialisation of tertiary providers, including moving bridging/foundation programmes out of universities
- a cap on domestic equivalent fulltime students (EFTS) places – moving from no extra funding for enrolments beyond the cap to harsher disincentives to TEIs who accept students beyond the number funded by the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC).
- raised enrolment criteria
- reduced places for bridging/foundation programmes as TEIs attempt to shift their enrolments to the current TES priorities
- more stringent restrictions in Study Link policy on dropping and changing courses
- unevenness of the responses of TEIs to the new funding environment, which introduces geographic inequalities.<sup>5</sup>



Over the last 10 years, equity funding has been provided to TEIs to help meet the extra costs of supporting Pasifika (as well as Māori and students with disabilities). A Ministry of Education review of this funding scheme found it was ‘...seen as one of the singularly most influential initiatives to improve the provision of support services to assist Pasifika tertiary success and achievement.’<sup>6</sup>

The investment per person of realising significant increases in participation and achievement among Pasifika tertiary students is minimal. Equity funding ranges from \$133-\$444 per full-time student, per year, which over the last two years has constituted around quarter of a percent of the total government expenditure on tertiary education. It’s our expectation that, given a similar amount of expenditure, significant improvements will be seen in enrolment, retention, and completion rates of refugee-background students in tertiary study.

It is broadly agreed that there is a lack of quantitative data with regard to refugee-background tertiary students.<sup>7</sup> A formal process of identifying refugee-background students at the time of enrolment would make it possible to calculate how many are enrolling, how many are completing their study, and what kind of support they need.

*‘If they [refugee-background students] were an equity group for example, like Māori, then I’d have statistics as far as the eye can see.’*

Teaching Staff Member  
South Island TEI (30 April 2011)

While some students may have a (understandable) fear of the potential stigma associated with identifying as refugees, findings spanning over a decade of research with refugee-background participants have found that risks of being labelled are worth taking if the outcome addresses institutional disadvantage.<sup>8</sup>

There is a growing body of research that suggests students from refugee-backgrounds are not accessing or completing tertiary study, undermining the potential to achieve such benefits.<sup>9</sup> These findings reflect New Zealand’s failure to uphold our national and international obligations to ensure all groups have equal access to tertiary education.

New Zealand has ratified international conventions that include the right to education. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights requires that States provide access to higher education on non-discriminatory terms and measures to ensure full participation in education. Further, the Refugee Convention specifies that we must accord treatment to refugees 'as favourable as possible ... as regards access to studies ... the remission of fees and charges and the award of scholarships'.

Having signed these international human rights treaties, New Zealand has a legal obligation to uphold them. Currently New Zealand is not meeting its international obligations in this area.

Recognition of people from refugee-backgrounds as an equity group – and the subsequent special measures that comes with that recognition – will result in greater numbers of refugee-background students enrolling and achieving in their studies, in the same way it has for Pasifika students. Greater enrolment and achievement at TEIs has positive benefits not just for the individual and their community but also wider societal benefits.

The myriad barriers to tertiary study, including the removal of support mechanisms such as the Refugee Study Grants, and refugee-background students not being recognised as an equity group have made the situation for refugee-background tertiary students untenable and requiring urgent attention.

# 1. Position statement and principle

## recommendations

*'just let me study!'*

29 year old female from Bhutan  
(10 April 2011)

### 1.1 Position statement

**We recommend that the New Zealand Government addresses the barriers impeding access to full participation in tertiary education for refugee-background students and works towards systemic improvement and reform through changes in current policy and practice.**

### 1.2 Principle Recommendations: Policy

- Establish refugee-background tertiary students as an equity group.
- Set up an education policy working group to identify key issues impacting on refugee-background students' ability to access and sustain their participation in tertiary study, including funding changes in the tertiary sector and appropriate domestic enrolment policies.
- Identify refugee-background students at enrolment.

### 1.3 Principle Recommendations: Operational

- Government recognition of equity status, to enable refugee-background students to access transition courses, scholarships and grants, pastoral and academic support and preferential access in under-represented fields.
- Access for refugee-background students to transition programmes such as English for Academic Purposes and Foundation courses, where these programmes are currently only available to full-fee paying international students.
- The identification of refugee-background students on enrolment forms, enabling support to be more effectively and appropriately provided. There must be a clear

statement that this information will not be used to disadvantage the individual in any way but rather be used to provide targeted and tailored support.

- Studies commissioned to identify the cost-benefit of providing targeted support.
- The implementation by Tertiary Education Institutions of 'good practice' that supports refugee-background students to progress to and achieve at higher levels of study. This would include:
  - Establishing a network of academic and service staff that would assist in establishing 'good practice' within each Tertiary Education Institution.
  - Training academic and support service staff about issues relating to refugee-background students.
  - Ensuring that teaching staff are culturally responsive and can adjust their teaching to meet the needs of refugee-background students.
  - Providing scholarships and grants to cover the fees of transition programmes that ensure that refugee-background students are well-prepared for tertiary study.
  - Designating academic support staff within each faculty for refugee-background students.
  - Providing orientation programmes and information specifically for refugee-background students.
  - Assigning student mentor/buddies to help navigate the systems and support services.
  - Setting up a study space and study groups for refugee-background students.

## 2. Overview of the paper

This paper is a collaborative initiative of ChangeMakers Refugee Forum, the New Zealand National Refugee Network, ESOL Assessment and Access Service and academics from Victoria University of Wellington.

The paper includes:

- A review of New Zealand's national and international obligations supporting the right to tertiary education.
- Examples of how refugee-background tertiary students are supported in other countries.
- An overview of the current environment for refugee-background tertiary students in NZ universities and polytechnics, and the impact of recent funding cuts and policy changes.
- Research from current refugee-background students on the barriers and challenges they face.
- An overview of tertiary education equity funding, policies, and initiatives.
- Information regarding the achievement of Pasifika students as an equity group.
- Recommendations to the NZ Government, policy makers, and leaders within NZ universities and polytechnics.

## 3. Background

New Zealand is one of eleven countries that has been annually resettling refugees as part of the UNHCR refugee resettlement programme since the 1980s. Consequently, New Zealand's refugee-background population continues to increase, and statistics show that the majority of recent refugee intakes are youth with ages of between 16 and 36, many of whom may aspire to achieve in higher education.

### ***3.1 The right of people with refugee backgrounds to tertiary education***

Education is both a human right in itself and an indispensable means to realising other human rights. Education provides the opportunity for people with refugee backgrounds in New Zealand to attain the knowledge, skills and confidence to obtain durable and ongoing employment, access health services, engage in voluntary and community work, and take part in the social and cultural life of their host country.

Rights apply to everyone, including people with refugee backgrounds. When New Zealand signs an international human rights treaty, it is not only required to comply with it, but also to regularly report to the United Nations on how it is meeting these human rights obligations.

In order to meet its obligation to make public services equally accessible to vulnerable groups (such as refugees), **a State may be required to take special measures to address any particular disadvantages or barriers they face**. In the context of education, for example, it is not sufficient for New Zealand to provide the same education for all. Special measures include providing different and additional support to 'level the playing field' and accommodate the diverse needs of learners.

The New Zealand Human Rights Commission describes special measures as 'one way of ensuring equality of outcomes for the diverse groups that make up New Zealand society'.<sup>10</sup>

The Commission also notes:

Treating groups who have been discriminated against in the past the same as those who have not been can perpetuate existing inequalities. As a result, to ensure genuine equality, at times it will be necessary to treat individuals or groups differently.<sup>11</sup>

While the right to education is not specifically provided for in New Zealand law, the following national and international instruments ratified by New Zealand provide for special measures to ensure that people from refugee backgrounds are not disadvantaged in their tertiary study:

- The *Refugee Convention* requires that refugees are provided with social and economic rights on a non-discriminatory basis. Article 22 of the Refugee Convention specifies that States shall accord treatment to refugees ‘as favorable as possible ... with respect to education other than elementary education and, in particular, as regards access to studies, the recognition of foreign school certificates, diplomas and degrees, the remission of fees and charges and the award of scholarships’.
- The right to education is set out in a number of international treaties, the most significant of which are the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (Articles 13 & 14), the *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination*, and the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (Article 28 & 29). The core element within these treaties that is particularly relevant to adult refugees in New Zealand requires measures to ensure full participation in education.

In meeting international human rights obligations towards refugees, New Zealand is obliged to take into account any additional support that may be needed to allow people from refugee backgrounds to enjoy equitable access to, and benefits from, higher education.

The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has reinforced that human rights obligations apply even in times of severe resource constraints. Where policy changes such

as those described later in this paper have unintended and disproportionately negative impacts on the rights of a particular group, such as refugees, States are obliged to take all possible action to redress those unintended effects. If a State fails to take steps or adopts regressive measures, the burden of proof rests on its shoulders to show that careful consideration has been given to all relevant rights and that full use is being made of available resources.<sup>12</sup>

The New Zealand Government's recent policy changes and funding cuts – made as part of a broader effort by the Government to cut costs at a time of significant economic pressure – are already resulting in unintended consequences for people from refugee backgrounds, effectively limiting their right to education in New Zealand. It is the responsibility of the New Zealand Government to show how it intends to redress these consequences.

### ***3.2 International precedents***

The following international examples of support to refugee-background tertiary students demonstrate some of the initiatives that are necessary in New Zealand in order for the right to tertiary study to be realised.

Although students from refugee backgrounds remain a small percentage of students at TEIs worldwide, OECD countries such as Australia provide targeted support to refugee-background students in the form of scholarships, mentoring, the provision of study resources, and orientation support.

Macquarie University in New South Wales provides a refugee mentoring programme and also offers two scholarships each year to students from refugee backgrounds.<sup>13</sup>

Deakin University in Victoria has an equity and access programme that caters for individuals and groups who might otherwise not participate in higher education. Deakin's three categories of scholarship programmes all apply to refugee-background students: scholarships for students from 'refugee backgrounds'; 'disadvantaged financial backgrounds'; and 'non-English speaking backgrounds'<sup>14</sup>.



The Equality and Diversity Centre at La Trobe University in Victoria offers support programmes for refugee-background students. La Trobe has a special entry and access scheme, which includes financial assistance in the form of textbooks, gift vouchers, and transport tickets specifically for refugee-background students, as well as a refugee contact person on each campus and assistance with the enrolment and orientation processes. The ‘La Trobe study support scholarships for commencing students, residential scholarships and government and community-based scholarships’ are all scholarships that are relevant and applicable to refugee-background students.<sup>15</sup>

Other examples of good practice can be found in Canada, where the Maytree scholarship programme provides mentoring and skills development support for refugee-background students, along with funding that covers tuition, books, transportation, rent and a living allowance.<sup>16</sup>

In the United States, students from low income families, including those from refugee backgrounds, qualify for federal and state student aid.<sup>17</sup> There are a few targeted scholarships, for example, the Clementine refugee scholarship fund which provides financial support to first generation war refugees living in the United States to attend a tertiary institution of their choice.<sup>18</sup>

### **3.3 Barriers to achievement in tertiary study**

Unique barriers to refugee-background tertiary students include:

**Language and education** – Few refugee-background students have entered university straight from secondary school. Interviews with Victoria University refugee-background students reveal that most have applied for Special Admission as Mature Students (over 20), or on the basis of qualifications earned after New Zealand secondary school or before arrival in New Zealand.<sup>19</sup>

*‘There were lots of kiwi students... and they were so confident about their English and they are not like me.’*

29 year old female from Bhutan (10 April 2011)

*'...in quite a lot of cases, students who come to this country, sometimes with no previous experience in education, sometimes who are not literate in their own language let alone in English, and who are starting to learn a new language having never learned another language before.*

*So for some of those students it might be two years of full-time study before you could even say that they've reached the elementary level... and it's assuming they are in the right mental space to study, and that they're not still heavily traumatised by their experiences.*

*So it's a minefield really. There's a whole range of other stuff going on.'*

Teaching Staff Member, South Island TEI (29 April 2011)

Many refugee-background students are unlikely to succeed at undergraduate level if they don't complete university preparation and English language courses first. Often they have good spoken English but limited academic and written English skills and need support to overcome these barriers.

Weaknesses in vocabulary and reading of academic English require a large time investment for even simple tasks. Students feel strongly that they have a degree of aptitude and mastery of their subjects that is not fully expressed in test situations because of the time it takes for them to read the questions and then write the answers.<sup>20</sup>

**Course costs** – Because many refugee-background students come from low socio-economic families they are often reluctant to borrow more under the student loan scheme than they have to. As a result, if the preparation and language courses are not free, they will go straight into undergraduate study, but will be ill-prepared and likely to fail.

*'[S]ometimes I'm late for my class because I can't pay ... I have to divide my money, separate my money for each day ... sometimes there is a problem, you know, a conflict.*

*Also sometimes I have to ask to get money from my parents as well and I don't want to get money from others.'*

21 year old male from Burma (11 April 2011)

In a survey of 81 students who received a Refugee Study Grant for tertiary ESOL or foundation courses, only 20% expected to complete their tertiary study. Those who did take out a student loan did so with apprehension because of worries about how they would repay them. A few took out a loan just to cover tuition fees, but were forced to abandon their studies because they couldn't survive without a student allowance. They refused to get themselves into further debt.<sup>21</sup> New prerequisites for student loans and allowances mean if students fail more than half their courses, they lose their eligibility for the following year.

*'I asked – Why can't I study? So they said they only accept international students at the moment. No more space for domestic students.'*

29 year old female from Bhutan (10 April 2011)

**Limited numbers of places available** – If refugee-background students do apply for the university preparation and English language courses, they are now competing for a

smaller number of places that are available for domestic students, as the government has capped the funding allocated to each university or technical institute. In contrast, international students who do not receive government funding may be able to enroll in programmes when they are closed to domestic students. In addition, from 2011, there are more stringent enrolment requirements for school leavers and mature students (over 20), which are likely to further reduce the number of people from a refugee background who enroll in foundation and other programmes.

**Appropriate advice** – Ironically, good oral fluency can work against refugee-background students, as course advisors can overestimate a student's ability, which leads to their enrolment in courses of study that are too difficult or not appropriate. Refugee-background students' lack of cultural knowledge about how TEIs function is compounded by their reluctance to challenge the advice or knowledge of the advisors.<sup>22</sup> TEI staff members, particularly course advisors, are not trained to work with refugee-background students and are not aware of the unique issues that may influence the study paths that students take.<sup>23</sup>

**Culturally sensitive orientation and support** – A VUW study looking specifically at support for refugee-background students found that 'Cultural sensitivity in the university environment was identified by refugee-background students as the number one stepping stone to their achievement, and to maintaining wellbeing during their studies.'<sup>24</sup>

*'I sometimes feel no one really understands me. Like I will wake up and find it is all a dream.'*

*Sometimes in class I spend the whole day worrying about my mum who is working two jobs, one in a supermarket and as a cleaner at night.'*

*I have no computer at home so I never get to finish my assignments in time, I worry about my English, and I don't know who I can talk to without getting judged.'*

*I am keeping to myself a lot these days. Other students think I am being rude. But they don't know what I am going through.'*

Johnstone & Kimani, 2010 (see reference list)

Many refugee-background youth are the first in their family to attend a TEI. This means they do not have siblings and friends who have already been through the tertiary system to give them useful advice. Without peer support, they might not access or be aware of even the most fundamental services or support systems.

*'They sent me a list of times and rooms and I went, but I didn't know what to do.'* When asked if he had gone to orientation: *'Not until my second year. I didn't understand what it was for.'*

Somali youth (O'Rourke, forthcoming)

Preliminary research at VUW suggests that many refugee-background students are not actually accessing support services, at least not until their second or final year, which impacts on both completion rates and quality of experience.<sup>25</sup>

*'We are quiet, so people don't want to speak to us.'*

22 year old male from Ethiopia (6 April 2011)

**Trust and safety issues** – the trauma that refugees may experience can cause many refugee-background people to fear people in authority and fear discrimination.<sup>26</sup> This can result in distrust of teachers, difficulties in seeking help or participating in classes, and the lower likelihood of using support services.<sup>27</sup>

## 4. The impact of policy changes and funding cuts

In 2009, the Government announced significant funding cuts that will adversely impact on refugees' ability to access educational services:

- **Funding for adult community education classes**, which provide a building block for refugees into further education, has been dramatically reduced.
- In August 2010 the Government reduced **entitlements to Training Opportunities**, which had until then allowed refugees to access one to three years of ESOL to bring them to the minimum level at which they could enter the workforce or access further training.
- The 2010 budget included **'transition' programmes of study** in the 200 week life-long maximum allocation per person for the student allowance. Refugee students funded by a student allowance who study English before enrolling in tertiary education may now find their allocated quota for the student allowance runs out half-way through their study at tertiary institutions.
- **Capped funding** leading to reduction in places for domestic students means that refugee-background students:
  - have access to a reduced number of places in foundation and ESOL courses in universities, polytechnics and institutes of technology
  - are competing against native English speakers for a limited number of places in mainstream courses.

*'I want to study ESOL and I want to take a university preparation course but they don't let me.'*

29 year old female from Bhutan living in Lower North Island (10 April 2011)

The government's decision last year to cap equity funding at 2009 enrolment levels means the same amount of money is now being spread more thinly, given the increasing student numbers each year.<sup>28</sup> While this may appear to be a short-term

saving for the government, there will be opportunity costs over the longer term, with compelling evidence that investment in tertiary education produces considerable social and economic returns not only for individuals and communities but for the country's economy.<sup>29</sup>

- **The Refugee Study Grant**, which has had significant success as a bridge into tertiary education, was abolished in December 2010. Under the Study Grants, refugee-background school leavers entering VUW, for example, were often placed in the English Proficiency Programme, followed by the Foundation Studies programme, which develops academic content as well as language. Both programmes were designed for international, fee-paying students but made available to people from refugee backgrounds through the Refugee Study Grants.

#### **Case Study 2: Cuts to Refugee Study Grants - one student's story**

As a 52 year old Muslim woman from Iraq, this ex-student already holds a Science degree from her country of birth. She used to teach Biology in secondary school in her native country and was advised that she only needed 120 cross-credits to convert this to a New Zealand science degree.

However, because of her age and the withdrawal of the Refugee Study Grants, she now believes she has lost her last opportunity to learn English. She will not be returning to study.

*'Yeah, OK. I am really very sad ... I think it is the last opportunity for me.'*

She now works full-time as a child-carer for Barnardos. Her focus is on working full-time to get the money to pay for her children's education, rather than her own.

52 year old female living in Lower North Island (5 April 2011)

#### **Case Study 3: Cuts to Refugee Study Grants – a TEI perspective**

A TEI Teaching Staff Member at one institution in the Lower North Island commented that the Refugee Study Grants were crucial for the students in her region.

Without the grants, the majority of her students from last year were unable to return to the English language course as planned. Before grants were cut, the course had 23 students enrolled. After the grants were cut, only two students were able to re-enrol.

She also noted that the Refugee Study Grants were allowing students to return to study vocational courses after finishing a six month or year-long English course. Being able to study in the English course helped them to not only build up the English skills needed, but gain the confidence and support needed to go on to further study and get jobs which would allow them to contribute and support themselves.

Many have gone back to lower level community English courses and some are not studying at all.

Interview with a Teaching Staff Member, Lower North Island TEI (6 May 2011)

*'....I think we've had an 86% reduction [in refugee-background students since cuts to Refugee Study Grants].'*

Teaching Staff Member,  
Central North Island TFI (6 May 2011)

The removal of the grants means that young people who need further ESOL and foundation tuition to **achieve the proficiency** to succeed in mainstream courses are not able to access these without taking on additional student loans. They will now start their working lives with a higher level of debt than other domestic students.

#### **Case Study 4: Cuts to Refugee Study Grants – an example of opportunity provided by the now-defunct Refugee Study Grant**

A 19-year-old woman from Afghanistan had an appointment with the ESOL Assessment and Access Specialist Service in May 2009. She was studying in a Wellington high school for the last 3.5 years and acquired fluent spoken English and enough literacy to achieve NCEA level 2 in less linguistically demanding subjects.

She was working while at school in a local supermarket to supplement the family income and was frequently called out of school to act as an interpreter for her parents when they needed to have transactions with medical or social services.

She had aspirations to study business administration but an assessment of her vocabulary range and writing showed a gap in the level of complexity in which she could express herself as well as gaps in her foundation knowledge of western systems and concepts. She needed at least another year at school to be on anything like a level playing field with her Kiwi peers who have had 13 years of schooling in English. She felt too old at school and was losing motivation.

The ESOL Assessment and Access Specialist Service negotiated with her school to allow her to leave at the mid-year break. She got a **Refugee Study Grant** to study an English preparation course for further study and then a Foundation programme designed for people from other language backgrounds that helped build knowledge of New Zealand political systems, history and culture as well as develop base knowledge of computing systems and accounting. It also enabled her to work out what subjects she actually enjoyed and has aptitude for. She took on a student loan and started a degree programme in History, Political Science and Development Studies in July 2010.

This young woman will have responsibility for the well-being of her family for the rest of her life. The refugee study grant gave her the opportunity to develop her English and subject knowledge without incurring a debt before she actually started her study.

Client notes, Judi McCallum, ESOL Assessment and Access Specialist Services, 2010

## 5. Equity funding and measures to ensure equality in New Zealand

As well as having international obligations to ensure that people from a refugee background can access tertiary education, New Zealand has made national commitments. For example, the 2010-2015 Tertiary Education Strategy emphasises our commitment to provide an inclusive and representative environment for students. One of the key ways that equal education opportunities can be achieved is through special measures, which include equity funding.

### ***5.1 Overview of equity funding***

Equity funding is the New Zealand Government's contribution to help improve equity of access and achievement for clearly disadvantaged student cohorts. Its purpose is to provide the special measures needed to improve participation, retention, completion and progression of learning for these students. There is congruent evidence that equity funding has been of benefit for groups such as Māori, Pasifika and students with disabilities within the tertiary education sector.

The Tertiary Education Strategy 2010-2015 outlines the Government's strategic direction for tertiary education and explicitly includes equity support. In 2010, equity spending was \$14.1 million, around 0.25% of the total government expenditure on tertiary education.<sup>30</sup> The 2011 Budget indicates that just over \$2 billion has been allocated for TEC expenditure (including equity funding). The percentage of equity spending for 2011-2012 has not yet been finalised.

Equity funding provides for a range of support, including tutoring and mentoring programmes, and the provision of cultural coordinators and support people. It can also be used for up-skilling staff to enable them – and their institutions – to be more responsive to the specific needs of equity groups.



Equity funding is distributed to TEIs nationally by the New Zealand Government to enhance services directed at improving achievement and retention for Pasifika, Māori, and students with disabilities. TEIs receive funding based on the number of equity students enrolled in their institution and their course workload.

A 2005 report to the Ministry of Education assessing an extensive body of research on student support measures showed that equity funding can have substantial benefits for students from *a diverse range of cultures*, in terms of retention and achievement.<sup>31</sup> The report noted,

Although [Equity Funding] is a limited amount in comparison to the rest of the money provided to fund tertiary education, it has made a huge and important difference for ‘disadvantaged’ groups within tertiary education institutions.<sup>32</sup>

## **5.2 Current institutional equity policies and initiatives**

As part of a wider national-level participatory research project, an audit was conducted of fifteen Aotearoa New Zealand TEI websites to determine their equity policy initiatives and the current visibility of refugee-background students.<sup>ii</sup> This research also included interviews with ten TEI staff and more than eighty refugee-background tertiary students from fourteen different ethnicities.<sup>iii 33</sup>

*‘We feel sad we are not meeting the needs of the community that we know exist.’*

*Teaching Staff Member  
Upper North Island TEI (2 May 2011)*

The audit found that there were good systems in place for Māori and Pasifika students and students with disabilities, but a lack of support mechanisms for refugee-background students:

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<sup>ii</sup> Policies in this audit were considered documents that represent the official strategic intent of the TEI’s while ‘initiatives’ refers to the operational implementation of these policies.

<sup>iii</sup> Quotes and stories from TEI staff have been categorised into four regions to allow confidentiality to be kept. Upper North Island includes Auckland and Manukau TEIs; Central-Lower North Island includes TEIs from Whanganui, Waikato, Hawkes Bay, Manawatu and Wellington regions; and South Island includes TEIs from Nelson/ Marlborough, Otago and Canterbury regions.

- **Equity Policies:** Refugee-background students were not referred to as a specific group in any existing equity policies within the fifteen websites surveyed. The majority of TEIs referred to equity policies for Māori, Pasifika students and students with disabilities. Three TEIs referred generically in their policies to ‘disadvantaged’ or ‘under-represented groups’.
  
- **Management of Equity Policies:** Thirteen of the fifteen TEI websites did not provide comprehensive data of the equity policy review process, and only half provided some indication of the dates their policies were up for review. Every TEI had different management structures to assist their recognised equity groups, with a variety of people across TEIs and in the wider community who supported students from these groups. For example, several North Island TEI websites referred to partnerships with local iwi and community advisory groups to provide scholarships and support for identified equity groups.
  
- **Equity Initiatives:** Refugee-background students were rarely mentioned in relation to equity initiatives, indicating they were not given the same amount of support as identified equity groups. Only one university had an initiative specifically for Muslim students to have access to a prayer room and one university referred to a study group for refugee-background students. Māori and Pasifika students and students with disabilities were well represented and had access to a large amount of resources and support.
  
- **Current Visibility of Refugee-Background Students:** Although nine of the fifteen TEIs mention refugee-background students, only four institutions represented them as a group with distinct support needs. The remaining five institutions referred to refugee-background students as part of a research project or as able to receive Refugee Study Grants (no longer available). Only one of the fifteen TEIs provided data about the numbers of refugee-background students enrolled in their institution.

Despite the lack of visibility of refugee-background students in terms of equity policies on the surveyed websites and the apparent low degree of official targeted initiatives for them,

tertiary education staff indicated that there were various forms of financial support, academic support and social/cultural support available to these students within their institutions. However, most of this support was provided on an ad hoc basis by motivated staff, above and beyond their contractual obligations.

*'[the] approach that we've had... with different institutions doing their own thing and having variable outcomes for students may not have necessarily served us particularly well. So I suppose it's time... perhaps we're being forced into thinking more collectively than working at an institutional level.'*

TEI Teaching Staff Member, Central-Lower North Island TEI (6 May 2011)

Three institutions offered scholarships and fee waiver programmes for refugee-background students studying in English language programmes and, in one case, across the entire TEI. At one institution this support was specifically targeted to refugee-background students. At two other TEIs they included refugee-background students under broader criteria such as the provision of ESOL scholarships. **This financial support was funded by each TEI to make up for the lack of financial support resulting from the loss of the Refugee Study Grants in 2010.** As one staff member interviewed noted, the sustainability of such an arrangement is questionable.

The role of individual teachers in orienting refugee-background students and supporting them to access financial as well as broader support services available to all students was mentioned as highly valuable and important to refugee-background student success by six out of ten TEI staff.

TEI staff targeting and encouragement of refugee-background students within their institutions and by outreach to students' communities and networks reflects **a high degree of individual and unofficial pastoral support offered by those working with refugee-background students, most often in TEI English language units.** One staff member outlined how their English language unit operated as an unofficial hub for refugee-background students and associated issues within their university.

**Alongside unofficial pastoral support networks, other initiatives went unmentioned in the TEI websites.** These included one instance of a mentoring programme for refugee-background students, one university-wide staff network offering academic and strategic

support to refugee-background students, and in the same institution, a staff-organised academic drop-in centre and an unofficial student-run refugee support group.

#### **Case study 1: Equity at Victoria University of Wellington**

The VUW Equity and Diversity Policy has identified five equity groups for targeted actions for the period 2010–14: Māori students and staff; Pacific students and staff; students and staff members with disabilities; women or men in disciplines in which they are under-represented; and students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

A 2010 audit of VUW equity support showed that although staff members were sympathetic to the position of refugee-background students, equity-funded support such as mentoring could not be extended to refugee-background students due to their lack of equity status and their subsequent ineligibility to receive funding (Roberts, 2010 - see reference list).

In 2012, VUW will close Foundation Studies to all domestic students, the Certificate of University Preparation will not be offered, and there is uncertainty about the number of places available for English preparation courses.

**There is no coordinated cross-institutional approach to refugee-background students in any of the TEIs audited.** While it is positive that TEI staff are responding to the needs of refugee-background students, this research indicates that support is delivered on an ad hoc basis and relies heavily on the goodwill of TEI staff. This is unacceptable. Recognition of refugee-background students as an equity group would address this situation and ensure that these students are able to participate fully and therefore realise their right to education, alongside other members of New Zealand society.

### ***5.3 Pasifika tertiary education: a road of progress***

The example of Pasifika becoming an equity group provides a model for refugee-background students, as the barriers to participation at TEIs are similar among Pasifika students and refugee-background students.

In 2001, just 15.4% of the New Zealand Pasifika population aged 18-24 years were enrolled in tertiary education, compared with 28.7% of the non-Pasifika population.<sup>iv</sup> Pasifika students were more likely to withdraw from their tertiary study than other students and, of

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<sup>iv</sup> For level 4 qualifications and above.

the Pasifika population aged 25-64 years, just 5.6% had a qualification at degree level or above.<sup>34</sup>

During the early-1990s, data on Pasifika participation, engagement and achievement in education had been largely unavailable and there was no coordinated government response to Pasifika education, as is the case for refugee-background students today. Indeed there appeared to be general acceptance of a 'one size fits all' approach to education policy.<sup>35</sup> Pasifika students faced a range of cultural barriers (many of which are shared today by refugee-background students), including family demands, cultural alienation in the academic environment, peer pressure, lack of role models and mentors, and lack of information and guidance about tertiary programmes, as well as financial barriers.

As more Pasifika data began to emerge in the mid-1990s, the extent of the inequities for Pasifika became increasingly evident. Driven by the Treaty of Waitangi, a government plan to address Māori education under-achievement had been agreed. Given that the key barriers to participation in tertiary education were common to both Māori and Pasifika, there was a strong case for a similar plan for Pasifika education.<sup>36</sup> A change of government in 1999 spurred a new momentum to address Pasifika education issues with the core focus of increasing participation, retention and achievement and encouraging progression to higher levels of study.<sup>37</sup>

An important part of the Pasifika policy since 2001 has been equity funding (initially a Special Supplementary Grant (SSG)). To receive equity funding with regard to Pasifika, TEIs must demonstrate a commitment to:

- encouraging students to take qualifications at higher levels and in subject areas where they are under-represented
- ongoing engagement with Pasifika staff, students and communities
- gathering relevant data and information relating to participation, retention and achievement.<sup>38</sup>

While staying within the above parameters, TEIs are using equity funding for a wide range of initiatives, including pastoral and academic support, tutoring, mentoring and the provision of cultural liaison people. Other initiatives include conducting research to inform best practice or professional development for staff with Pasifika students, including feedback from students on what staff could do better.

*'By up-skilling staff in this way, it not only informs their teaching practises, but allows them to better understand and support Pasifika students.'*

Ministry of Education, 2003  
(see reference list)

Partly as a result of equity funding, the number of Pasifika students aged 18-24 years enrolled in tertiary education has increased by 101% between 2001 and 2009, compared to 31% for the non-Pasifika population. By 2012 an estimated 27% of Pasifika students aged 18-24 years will be participating in tertiary education, compared with 15.4% in 2001.<sup>39</sup>

While the actual number of Pasifika students has doubled – and the number of Pasifika students gaining a tertiary qualification has more than doubled – the proportions of those increasing numbers who are staying on and achieving are also increasing.

The first-year retention rate of Pasifika tertiary students increased from 68% in 2001 to 74% in 2009 and is expected to be 75% next year.<sup>v</sup> And the proportion of the Pasifika population aged 25-64 years who had a tertiary qualification at degree level or above increased from 5.6% in 2001 to 8.3% in 2009.<sup>40</sup>

It is clear that Equity Funding has been a key contributor to Pasifika successes. A Ministry of Education review of the scheme found the SSG (now equity funding) to be 'one of the singularly most influential initiatives to improve the provision of support services to assist Pasifika tertiary success and achievement.'<sup>41</sup> The review found that even from its relatively early stages it was having a positive impact 'often disproportionate to the amount of money' being spent.<sup>42</sup> The research literature indicates it could do the same for refugee-background students.

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<sup>v</sup> Based on the number of students enrolled in their second year after their first year of tertiary education.

## 6. Our concerns

*'[We are] in a position this year where we're not able to cater for refugee students... at any of our campuses.'*

Teaching Staff Member, Central-Lower North Island TEI (6 May 2011)

The lack of targeted equity support for refugee-background students has been exacerbated by the New Zealand Government's recent policy changes and funding cuts. The cuts have been made as part of a broader effort by the government to cut costs at a time of significant economic pressure and are already resulting in the right to education becoming even more difficult to realise for people from refugee backgrounds.

Reduced access to tertiary education is likely to result in increased economic and social costs. Students who do not succeed in the education system may require assistance in the form of welfare payments and housing allowances, and are less likely to achieve social and economic independence.

Without good data processes in place that identify refugee-background students as a cohort it is difficult to quantify the exact cost of providing this welfare infrastructure. However, it is very likely to cost much more than the \$133 - \$444 that the New Zealand Government is currently spending per student per year for those recognised as an equity group.

Each TEI is responding in its own way to the new policies of the Ministry of Education and the TEC, but there is resounding consensus among many academics and teaching staff that these changes will detrimentally affect minority groups including refugee-background students.<sup>43</sup>

Equity groups (Māori and Pacific students and students with disabilities) have established supports within the tertiary environment that promote – and monitor – participation, retention, completion, progression and achievement rates.<sup>44</sup> Despite the many barriers to achievement outlined in this paper, refugee-background students do not receive support of this kind.

Access to appropriate pre-degree courses is tightening, and future prospects look bleak. If refugee-background students are to succeed in their tertiary study and go on to participate fully in New Zealand society, then New Zealand must, fulfil its responsibility to ensure that special measures are taken to support refugee-background access to, retention and achievement in tertiary study.

*'...if the government continues not to fund studies of refugee students, then I can see them disappearing.'*

Teaching Staff Member, South  
Island TEI  
(29 April 2011)

Well-supported refugee-background tertiary students are an asset and will 'give back' to New Zealand far more than they cost. Supporting people with refugee backgrounds into tertiary study – and subsequently into the New Zealand workforce – will help New Zealand to fulfil its obligation to ensure that people from refugee backgrounds reach their potential to participate fully in New Zealand life.

*'...it is primarily a humanitarian issue that you can't bring a refugee to a wealthy country like New Zealand and tell them you've got to be at the bottom of the heap and you've all got to be cleaners.*

*And not only that, a cold hard economic argument as well, they could be on the benefit for 15 years because nobody will teach them English. Then who is that benefiting? The taxpayer is supporting them for their whole life instead of saying, "Let's enable them to get a proper job".'*

Teaching Staff Member, Lower North Island TEI (3 May 2011)



## 7. Contributing organisations

**ChangeMakers Refugee Forum** is a rights-based, community development and advocacy organisation representing refugee-background communities in Wellington New Zealand. ChangeMakers works with refugee-background communities and those who work with them to ensure that people from refugee backgrounds reach their potential and are supported to contribute to their own and the wider community.

**The New Zealand National Refugee Network** is the collective voice of refugee-background communities in New Zealand. It brings together the five regional refugee-background networks and forums to advocate nationally around key issues including employment, immigration, housing, education and mental health. The NZNRN works collaboratively with many different agencies and individuals with a goal to achieving full participation of refugee-background communities in New Zealand.

**ESOL Assessment and Access Service** works in the Wellington region to assist migrants and refugees to identify their learning needs and the educational options that will help them achieve their ultimate career goals. It is a service of Multicultural Learning and Support Services (MCLaSS).

**Geography of Development Studies: Young People and Participatory Development** is a postgraduate course in Geography and Development Studies in the School of Geography, Environment and Earth Sciences at Victoria University of Wellington. Through a mix of class and community-based learning it engages students in participatory action research projects with collaborating partner organisations such as Changemakers with a view to contributing to effective social change.

**The English Language Institute** is part of the School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies at Victoria University of Wellington. Drawing on research on English language learning and teaching, it is committed to designing and delivering English language courses in response to learners' needs and purposes.

**The Empowering Study for Refugee Background Students Project** works, through research and study support action, to assist refugee-background students in accessing, completing and excelling in tertiary study. It depends on the volunteer activity of students from VUW's Anthropology Programme and the university leadership programmes, VicPlus and VILP.

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