



**Research** Social Change  
& Social Equity  
CENTRE FOR SOCIAL & COMMUNITY RESEARCH

# Refugees and Employment

**The effects of visible difference  
on discrimination**

**Interim Report**

**Val Colic-Peisker and Farida Tilbury**



**MURDOCH  
UNIVERSITY**  
PERTH, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

We thank Professor Trish Harris,  
Director of the Centre for Social and Community Research,  
for peer review of this report.

We acknowledge the financial support of the Australian Research Council.

We thank our interviewees for participating in this project.

**Centre for Social and Community Research  
Murdoch University  
August 2005**

# Contents

	Page
Summary	3
1. Introduction: Refugees, visibility and employment	4
2. Data collection and participants	5
• Refugee sample	5
• Employer sample	8
3. Refugee settlers: experiences of marginalisation in an era of prosperity	9
• Experience of discrimination	11
• Refugee occupational niches	14
4. Employers' perceptions and experience in employing the 'visibly different'	16
5. Policy relevance, recommendations and conclusion	18
6. Bibliography and further reading	20

## List of Figures and Tables

Figure 1: Age of refugee participants	6
Figure 2: Gender of refugee participants by regional origins	6
Table 1: Higher educational qualifications in refugee communities	7
Figure 3: Highest education level	7
Figure 4: Current English language proficiency	8
Table 2: Participating organisations by industrial sector	8
Table 3: Unemployment rates in refugee communities	9
Figure 5: Current employment status	10
Table 4: Work by qualification	10
Table 5: Employment status in home country	11
Table 6: Employment status in Australia	11
Table 7: Experience of discrimination in the labour market	13
Figure 6: Bases of discrimination as nominated by refugee participants	14

## Summary

This is an interim report on the sociological research project *Refugees and employment: the effect of visible difference on discrimination*. The project is based at Murdoch University and runs for three years (2004, 2005, 2006), funded by the Australian Research Council's Discovery Project scheme. Although this scheme predominantly funds 'basic', theoretically-oriented research, our project has considerable policy implications which we communicate in this report.

There are three chief investigators on this project: Dr Val Colic-Peisker and Dr Farida Tilbury from Murdoch University and Dr Nonja Peters from Curtin University. A number of other people assisted with the data collection phase which was completed in early 2005. Six bilingual interviewers conducted 150 structured, questionnaire-based face-to-face interviews with refugees from three broadly conceived groups: ex-Yugoslavs, people from Middle Eastern backgrounds and black Africans. The chief investigators and a research assistant conducted 40 semi-structured interviews with employers. We also conducted three focus groups with key informants.

The most striking finding from our initial data analysis is a massive loss of occupational status among our refugee respondents. Our data also indicate the existence of a segmented labour market, where racially and culturally visible migrants, and refugees in particular, are allocated unattractive jobs regardless of their 'human capital'. Formal skills and English ability were high among respondents in the current study, as the sample was deliberately selected for 'employability'. Their 'human capital', however, has been significantly underused in the Australian labour market. This not only disadvantages them economically and socially, but also represents a waste of skills, some of which are currently in short supply in Australia – for example there are doctors and engineers driving taxis, and teachers and lawyers cleaning offices.

Discrimination on the basis of race, religion and ethnic origin plays a role in creating unsatisfactory employment outcomes such as unemployment, underemployment and loss of occupational status. As a result, 'new and emerging' African and Middle Eastern migrant communities (predominantly created through refugee intakes) may develop into marginalised minorities where social problems may crystallise over time, unless more decisive action is taken.

Our research has policy implications in the area of refugee resettlement, qualification and skills recognition, employment assistance for non-English speaking migrants and especially refugees, and equal opportunity and anti-discrimination. This is why we are keen to communicate our findings to policymakers and service providers, rather than solely addressing academic audiences. This is the main purpose of this interim report. Our final report will be released in late 2006. We would appreciate feedback on this report and are enthusiastic to establish research and other links with government and non-governmental agencies in the area of migrant settlement and employment, equal opportunity and anti-discrimination.

Authors' contact details:

Dr Val Colic-Peisker [v.colic-peisker@murdoch.edu.au](mailto:v.colic-peisker@murdoch.edu.au)

Dr Farida Tilbury [f.tilbury@murdoch.edu.au](mailto:f.tilbury@murdoch.edu.au)

## 1. Introduction: Refugees, visibility and employment

This project explores the impact of 'visible difference' on employment outcomes of recently arrived refugees in Australia. We started from the well-established fact that satisfactory employment is the crux of successful resettlement for migrants generally, and refugees specifically, given that the latter represent a potentially more disadvantaged part of the immigrant intake.

Our refugee sample consisted of 'off-shore' refugees who arrived in Australia on permanent residence visas during the 1990s. The project focuses on three broadly conceived 'refugee communities' — ex-Yugoslavs, people from Middle Eastern backgrounds and black Africans — who are 'visible' among the predominantly white, English-speaking and Western-clad Australian majority to different degrees and in different ways: by their 'foreign' accent, skin colour and physical features, and attire, often connotative of religious denomination. It was hypothesised that these three groups may encounter different degrees of disadvantage because of their visibility. This assumption, to be checked through data collected in this project, arose from previous research and from refugee unemployment statistics, which show that their labour market integration is considerably slower and less successful than for other migrant categories. According to available data, unsatisfactory employment outcomes are widespread among refugee communities in Australia. For example, 18 months after arrival the unemployment rate for humanitarian entrants is 43 per cent, compared to no unemployment among business entrants and seven per cent among 'independent' (skill-based) arrivals (DIMIA 2005a; Hugo 2001).

Successful labour market integration is defined as securing a job appropriate to one's qualifications, skills and experience. Employment outcomes of migrants can be unsatisfactory in at least three ways. A person can be: unemployed, that is, welfare-dependent but wanting to work; underemployed, that is, working fewer hours than desired and possibly being partly welfare dependent; or 'occupationally downgraded', that is, having a job of considerably lower status than before migration, or having a job not commensurate with one's skills and educational qualifications.

Researching discrimination in employment has special salience in the current moment of Australian and global history when intolerance of Islam has risen significantly. Similarly, black Africans are currently the largest component of the Australian humanitarian intake and, because of their high visibility, racist views about their 'unassimilability' have recently re-appeared in public (the problem may be compounded for black African Muslims). Despite the fact that the Australian population is increasingly ethnically diverse and the trend is likely to continue in the future, the Anglo-Celtic foundations of modern Australia still define it as a 'white' and 'Anglo' nation, with the implication that a 'fair go' for 'Others' should be qualified. The debate about the levels of racism that affect the immigrant 'Other' in Australia is ongoing and it is important to contribute research-based evidence to such debates in the changing social context.

It is often emphasised that Australia has so far successfully avoided the excesses of ethnic conflict, but the 'lucky country' is not a zone of racial harmony either. Australia has stringent anti-discrimination legislation, but its benefit to groups who may face prejudice and discrimination is questionable. This especially pertains to recent arrivals from non-English speaking backgrounds. The focus of Australian racism has recently shifted from Asians, who nowadays tend to arrive in Australia under the skilled or business migration categories, to immigrants from the Middle East and Africa, who tend to be refugees. Our research analyses the challenges they face, and provides

material relevant for the appraisal of Australia's comprehensive refugee resettlement program and employment services for NESB migrants and refugees. It also provides evidence of on-going discrimination such groups face.

## **2. Data collection and participants**

Primary data collection consisted of:

- A review of Australian and overseas academic literature and government reports, documents and statistics
- 150 structured questionnaire-based face-to-face interviews with refugees
- 40 semi-structured interviews with employers, and three focus groups with other key informants

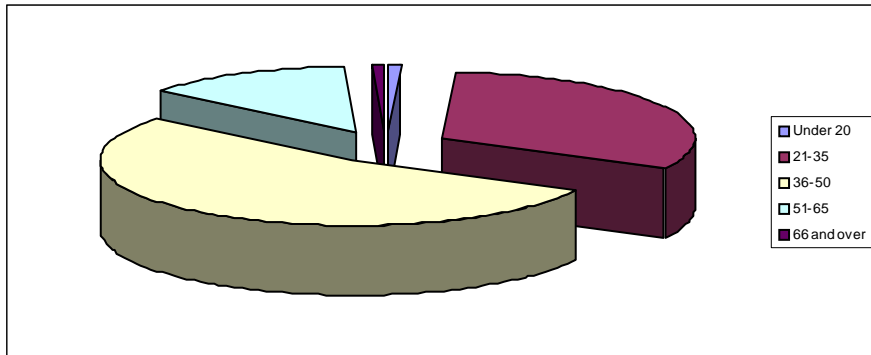
The bulk of data was collected from July 2004 to March 2005. In order to further clarify the existing data, additional interviews and focus groups may be conducted with key informants.

### ***Refugee sample***

The refugee sample consisted of individuals from the three targeted regions of ex-Yugoslavia, Africa, and the Middle East, who had entered Australia on a permanent refugee or humanitarian visa acquired 'off-shore' through Australia's planned humanitarian intake. Bilingual assistants used snowball sampling to identify 50 respondents from each group who were of working age and either employed or looking for work, and with a completed high school education, trade or professional education. This well educated sample was selected to eliminate the lack of human capital (poor English and/or lack of skills) as an explanation for poor employment outcomes. We acknowledge our sample may not be representative of their communities. However, these 'new and emerging' refugee communities do have relatively high education profiles (see below).

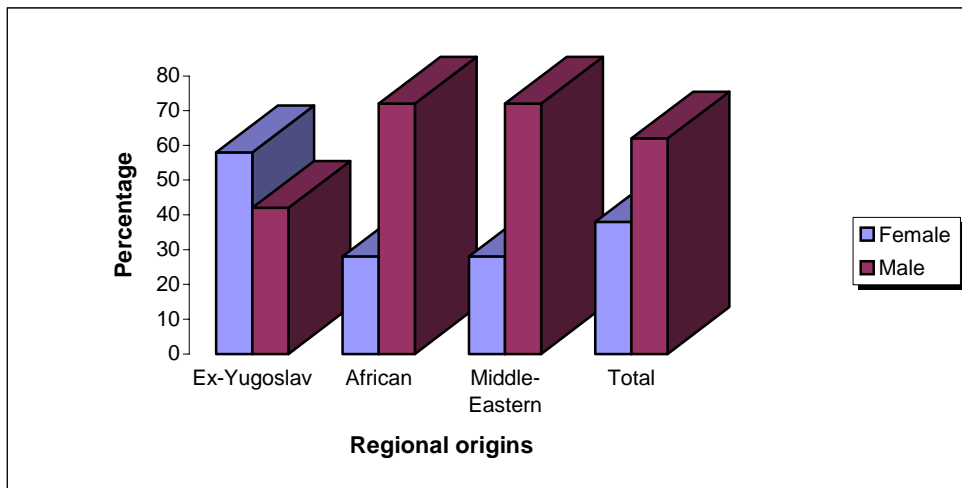
The refugee questionnaire traced participants' demographics, education and employment histories, job-seeking practices, and their expectations and experiences within the Australian job market. The last section addressed respondents' overall satisfaction with their Australian resettlement. Our respondents communicated their experiences through quantitative (multiple choice) and qualitative (open-ended) questions.

Respondents came from a range of national and ethnic backgrounds. Among the ex-Yugoslavs the majority came from Bosnia, but were from all three ethnic backgrounds: Muslim, Serb and Croat. For the Middle Eastern sample, the majority came from Iraq and some from Iran. The majority of the African sample were from Somalia (about half), followed by Ethiopia and Eritrea. The average length of residence in Australia was about seven years in all three sub-samples. Figure 1 shows the age range of our respondents.



**Figure 1:** Age of refugee participants

More than three-quarters of our respondents were of prime working age (21-50). In terms of gender composition, the ex-Yugoslav sub-sample was predominantly female, while the African and middle-Eastern sub-samples were predominantly male (see Figure 2). The latter may reflect the fact that the breadwinner's role is seen as primarily befitting men in these communities.



**Figure 2:** Gender of refugee participants by regional origins

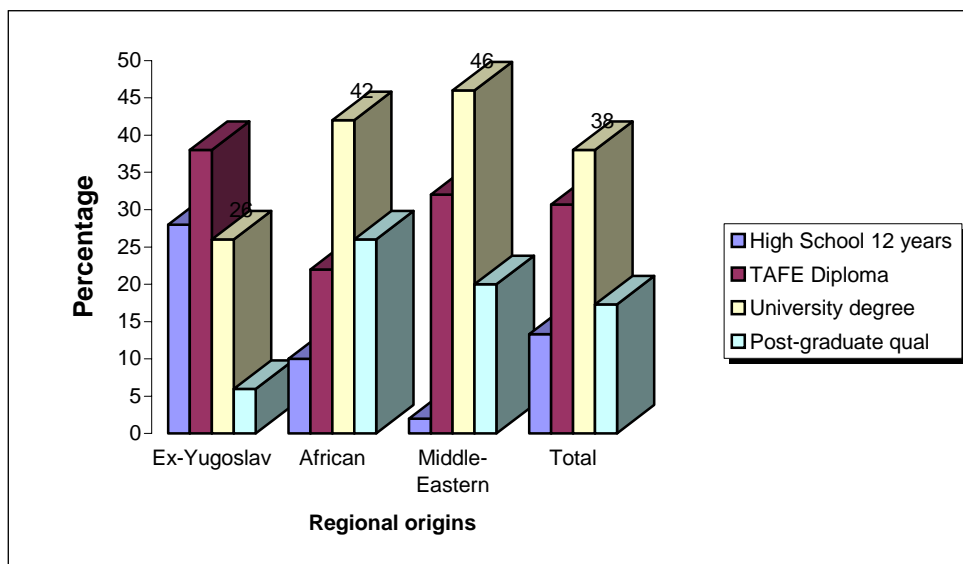
Contrary to the common perception that refugees arriving from economically and culturally 'distant' countries are poorly educated, recent refugees arriving in Australia are in most cases well educated. Table 1 shows rates of higher educational qualifications ('post-school') in the 'new and emerging', predominantly refugee communities. In comparison, the rate of higher educational qualifications among the Australian-born is 18 per cent (ABS 2002).

**Table 1:** Higher educational qualifications in refugee communities

Country of origin	Higher qualifications (%)
Bosnia	17.0
Sudan	26.2
Ethiopia	22.4
Eritrea	21.7
Somalia	13.6
Iraq	19.8

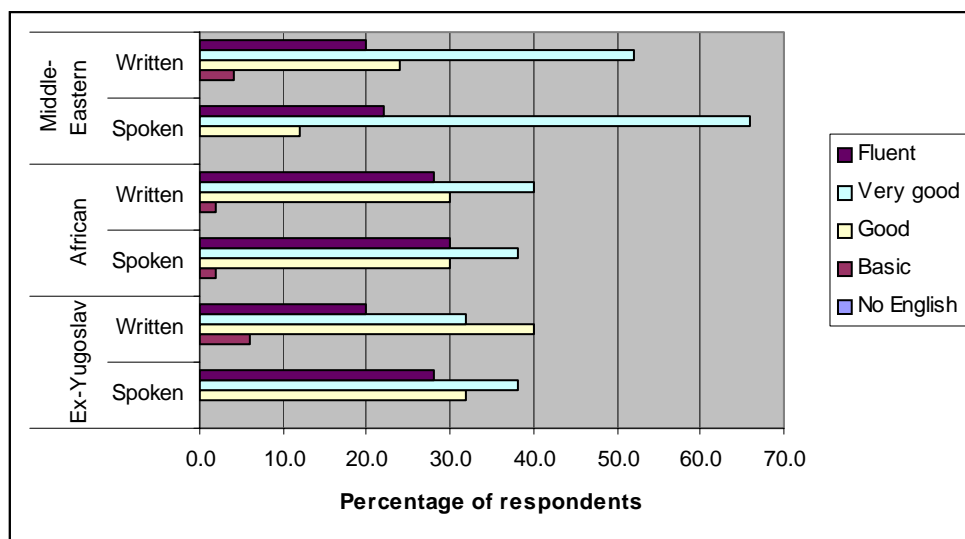
Source: DIMIA 2005b: *Community Information Summary*

An impressive number of respondents held university degrees and even postgraduate qualifications, especially those from Africa and the Middle East (see Figure 3). Given that the difference between these two groups and ex-Yugoslavs does not reflect the educational profiles of their countries of origin, it may indicate Australia's more selective process of granting humanitarian visas to people from these two regions i.e. the better educated Africans and Middle Easterners are getting priority. However, the sample selection process focussed on such individuals, so no definite conclusions about the general population can be made.



**Figure 3:** Highest education level

Figure 4 shows that the African and Middle-Eastern participants had, on average, better self-assessed English language skills than the ex-Yugoslavs. This difference in current language proficiency is not as large as it was with 'on arrival' language proficiency, reflecting the fact that many Africans spoke English as their second or even first language before migration, while English was not widely taught as a second language in Bosnia. Refugees from the Middle East assessed their current English proficiency to be very high.



**Figure 4:** Current English language proficiency (self assessed)

## Employer sample

The sample of employers comprised a broad cross-section of industries, organisations, and managerial profiles, all of which had an office or operation in Perth, Western Australia. Of the 40 participating organisations, 21 were private businesses and comprised a mix of family-owned and operated companies and partnerships. Of the remaining 19 organisations, eleven were public companies, most with operations across Australia, four were government departments or government affiliates, and four were not-for-profit organisations mostly working in the home- and aged-care industries. Table 2 shows the industry profile of the employer sample.

**Table 2:** Participating organisations by industrial sector

Mining/construction/engineering	8
Recruitment	7
Catering/food processing	4
Government	4
Home and aged care services	3
Retail	3
Cleaning (Industrial)	2
Diversified industrial	2
Media	2
Education	2
Other	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>40</b>

The size of the participating organisations was classified according to employee numbers, including national or international operations. Other factors, such as market capital or fiscal turnover, were not taken into account. The three classifications used were small (less than 49 employees), medium (50 to 199 employees), and large

(more than 200 employees). Based on this criterion, the participant profile comprised eight small, eight medium and 24 large companies. The employer sample is therefore weighted in favour of large organisations of 200 or more employees. The original research design targeted a greater cross-section of organization size. However, of the over 100 companies we approached to participate in this project, many of the smaller organisations declined, citing lack of time, their company size and lack of experience with migrant employees as reasons for non-participation.

People who represented employers in interviews were 25 women and 15 men, with an average age of 41. Of these, 22 were human resource managers who facilitated the recruitment and hiring process, many (but not all) in an advisory capacity and without the final hiring authority. They nevertheless were crucial to the outcomes of the recruitment process by virtue of their initial assessment of applicants and the extent to which they ensured compliance with organisational and legislative equal employment opportunity policies. Only three interviewees were from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB), though more were migrants. Twenty interviewees had tertiary qualifications but only seven among them had formal training in human resource management.

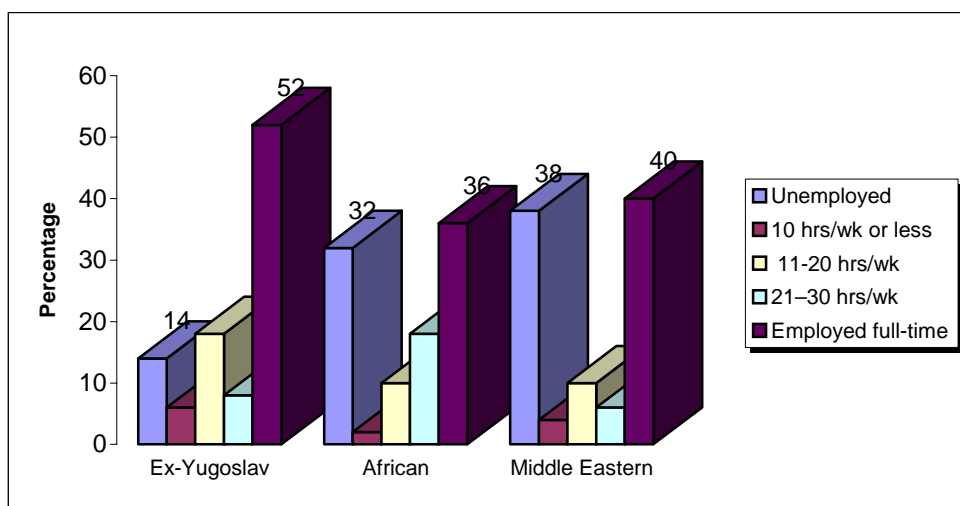
### **3. Refugee settlers: experiences of marginalisation in an era of prosperity**

Australia is currently experiencing an extended period of economic prosperity with exceptionally low unemployment and shortages of skilled and unskilled labour. Nevertheless, Australian residents who entered the country on refugee or humanitarian visas continue to experience high unemployment and massive loss of occupational status. Table 3 shows the unemployment rates in refugee communities as recorded in the 2001 Census.

**Table 3:** Unemployment rates in refugee communities (2001 Census)

Country of origin	Unemployment rate (%)
Bosnia	16.8
Sudan	27.6
Ethiopia	18.9
Eritrea	28.5
Somalia	46.8
Iraq	34.2

In spite of their high education levels, each of the three refugee groups in our sample experienced unemployment levels significantly above the current national average of approximately 5 per cent (Figure 5). Nevertheless, there is high variability in employment outcomes between the three regional groupings.



**Figure 5:** Current employment status

Figure 5 shows that, with an unemployment rate of 14 per cent, respondents from ex-Yugoslav backgrounds fared better than Africans and Middle Easterners, who had unemployment rates of 32 per cent and 38 per cent respectively. This is despite the fact that the African and Middle-Eastern groups had, on average, the highest standard of educational achievement (Figure 3), and highly developed self-assessed English language skills (Figure 4). The lower unemployment among ex-Yugoslavs may be due to two factors: the presence of well-established ethnic communities which may assist with securing a job, and possibly less discrimination in the labour market experienced by ‘white’ European refugees, due to their being perceived as more ‘similar’ by employers, compared to the more visibly different people from the Middle East and black Africans.

However, ex-Yugoslavs reported the highest rate of loss of occupational status (See Tables 4, 5 and 6).

**Table 4.** Work by qualification\*

	Ex-Yugoslav (%)	African (%)	Middle-Eastern (%)	Total
Appropriate	18.0	20.0	34.0	24.0
Above skill level	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Below skill level	80.0	44.0	24.0	49.3

\*Totals do not sum to 100 due to different understandings of the question by respondents and bilingual assistants. All but 2% of ex-Yugoslavs responded to the question, yet 14% had reported being unemployed. It is assumed that many of these unemployed chose the ‘working below qualification level’ answer. On the other hand, 36% of Africans and 42% of Middle Easterners did not answer the question, reflecting more closely the numbers reporting being unemployed.

**Table 5.** Employment status in home country

	Unskilled (%)	Semi-skill / trade (%)	Para-profess. (%)	Professional (%)	No response (%)
Ex-Yugoslav	10	20	22	42	6
African	2	22	16	24	36
Middle-East	0	18	10	60	12

**Table 6.** Employment status in Australia

**Entry level employment in Australia**

	Unskilled (%)	Semi-skill / trade (%)	Para-profess. (%)	Professional (%)	No response (%)
Ex-Yugoslav	88	6	6	0	0
African	44	6	24	10	16
Middle-East	22	10	10	16	42

**Highest level employment in Australia**

	Unskilled (%)	Semi-skill / trade (%)	Para-profess. (%)	Professional (%)	No response (%)
Ex-Yugoslav	34	46	10	10	0
African	34	10	26	14	16
Middle-East	20	8	12	18	42

Table 6 shows that entry level occupations are heavily clustered in the unskilled category, which consists mainly of cleaning and factory work, especially among ex-Yugoslavs (88 per cent). Unskilled level entry into the Australian job market is also common among Africans (44 per cent) and the Middle-Eastern respondents (22 per cent), yet in their countries of origin, no Africans and only 1 per cent of Middle Easterners in our sample worked in such jobs. For many, this became a long term outcome with 34 per cent each of Africans and ex-Yugoslavs and a fifth of Middle Eastern respondents reporting such jobs as their highest level of employment attained in Australia. Many highly qualified respondents spoke of difficulties in gaining access to employment commensurate with their education and work experience.

### ***Experience of discrimination***

The presence of discrimination is notoriously difficult to assess. However, many of the refugee participants described experiences of being exposed to prejudices or explicit discrimination during the job search process, job interview or in the workplace. Many spoke of difficulty gaining an interview and that they were only successful after they disguised their ethnicity in their written applications. Others found that potential employers, on speaking with or sighting the applicant, immediately rejected their applications, thereby suggesting discrimination based on accent or visible difference.

The Middle Eastern and African Muslim respondents experienced the added challenge of negative representations in the media following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. One man, a former supervisor electrician, currently unemployed, described his experience thus:

*One employer admitted to me during interview that if he employed me he will lose clients due to the feeling [about] people from Middle Eastern appearance after September 11 events.*

Another Middle Eastern man, a former mechanic, was denied an opportunity to apply for a vacancy while an Australian colleague was simultaneously granted an interview. He said of his job search:

*Unfortunately discrimination was the 99 per cent reason for not getting job because wherever I called to apply for that job, the answer always 'the job has been taken', but when I asked one of my Australian work mates about the same job and at the same time they answered him to attend a job interview.*

A Somali man, a former GP and medical researcher, described a similar experience:

*I went to an agency that was looking for someone with qualifications and experience like the ones I have. The receptionist had a hard time in accepting the fact that I was applying for that high position and, after asking me to wait while she talks to her superiors, she came back to tell me the position was already filled even though the deadline was not until two weeks later.*

A Bosnian woman, a former accountant, described her experience in the workplace:

*During my work experience in real estate industry I was verbally abused by my colleagues in front of the other staff. Even my juniors took liberty to make remarks about my accent. I was told I do not suit enough and was given wrong instructions intentionally to look like I under performed. I had to work twice harder than others and still was not equally treated as English-speaking staff. When I complained to my manager, he told me, 'I am giving you first warning'. It took me a long time to prove myself as a capable worker and earn their respect.*

A Sudanese man, with a university engineering degree from Kenya, who had to retrain in Australia, described his experience of harassment:

*I was made uncomfortable in very subtle ways. I was shunned by colleagues, reported for small things and for tasks that I am not in any way responsible. I was even called names by colleagues.*

An ex-Yugoslav man, a former pilot, described his experience while working as a taxi-driver:

*As a taxi driver I have been exposed to all kinds of racism. On one occasion a customer asked about my name and the spelling and I wrote it down on a piece of paper. I asked her why she [wanted to know] that. She said because she was looking for a name for her new dog [...]. I found it shocking and offensive.*

Stories such as these were widespread amongst the respondents in our sample. For many, simply obtaining a job interview proved a challenging task with their ethnicity and lack of local experience frequently posing insurmountable barriers. One ex-Yugoslav man, for example, spoke of his feelings of frustration and disappointment after a three-year struggle to find employment, while a Sudanese man felt that his experience of hundreds of unsuccessful job applications could only be indicative of discrimination.

Table 7 shows a significant proportion of each regional group reported that they had experienced discrimination in the Australian labour market. The experience of discrimination does not only have an adverse economic and social impact, but also leaves psychological scars. People who feel that they have been discriminated against, particularly if this takes place over an extended period of time, may

experience a loss of self-esteem, incentive and decline in morale, and turn into 'discouraged job seekers' (Tan-Quigley 2004).

**Table 7:** Experience of discrimination in the labour market (%)\*

	Ex-Yugoslav	African	Middle Eastern	Total
No	50.0	52.0	42.0	48.0
Yes	48.0	40.0	52.0	46.7

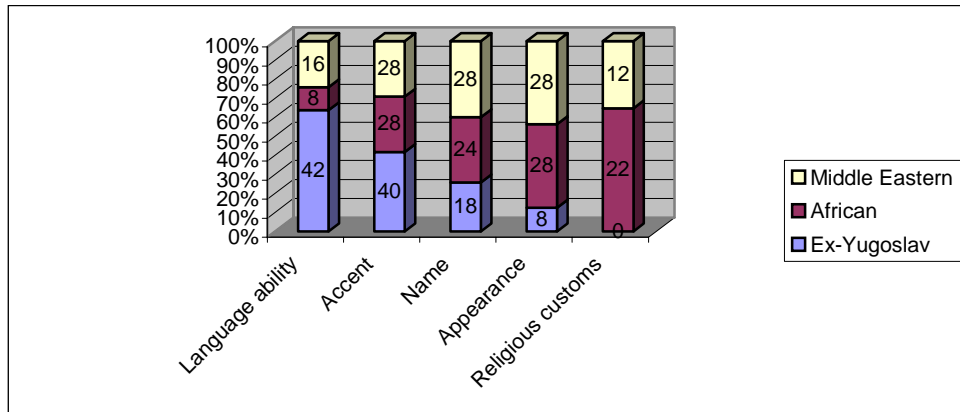
\* Totals do not sum to 100 due to missing data.

The basis of perceived discrimination indicates a wide variability between the three groups (see Figure 6). Language ability was less important for Africans and Middle Easterners, which is not surprising given these groups reported a high level of English language proficiency. Accent seemed to be seen as more important for ex-Yugoslavs, although for Africans, accent (what some refer to as 'African English'), together with appearance, were the most likely perceived causes of discrimination. For Middle Easterners, their accent, name and appearance fared equally.

*My name is Mohamed and it is obviously a Muslim name. Every time I put it in the cover letter with my CV to employers there is no response or feedback, but when I indicate to my name (just M), employers respond and in good manner (Middle-Eastern man, former teacher, currently unemployed).*

*Once I applied for a job in one of the factories in Northern suburbs and was turned down, because I was told my long Islamic dress (Hijab) was not appropriate for factory work.... When I was working in one factory I was continuously harassed and discriminated against by other workers because of my African appearance. When I complained to the supervisors they didn't do anything about it (African woman, currently unemployed).*

Figure 6 enables the reader to compare the bases of discrimination nominated by our respondents.



**Figure 6:** Bases of discrimination as nominated by refugee participants

The 22 per cent of Africans who felt they had been discriminated against in the job market due to religious customs reflects the large proportion of Somali Muslims in our sample. The only basis of job market disadvantage that pertains to a job-relevant characteristic, language ability, was often quoted as a basis for discrimination by ex-Yugoslavs. This is consistent with their considerably lower self-assessed language proficiency compared with the other two groups.

The difficulties experienced by the refugee participants suggest that discrimination based on visible difference, in the form of name, language ability, accent, appearance and religious customs, is a widespread problem in the Australian labour market and poses a major barrier to satisfactory employment outcomes for refugees.

### ***Refugee occupational niches***

Being driven in a taxi by a highly-skilled non-English-speaking-background immigrant is nowadays part of the Australian urban folklore. In the Perth metropolitan area, where recent refugee arrivals to Western Australia tend to settle, they are concentrated in low-skilled service ‘niches’ such as cleaning services, transport (especially taxi-driving), security and building industries, and increasingly, aged care. Industrial and domestic cleaning is the most significant labour market niche for ex-Yugoslavs who arrived in the 1990s. Information from employers also confirmed a heavy presence of ex-Yugoslav and Middle Eastern refugees in industrial cleaning in Western Australia. Needless to say, these are poorly paid and insecure jobs.

Africans are concentrated in food processing, the security industry and aged care. Aged care is a booming industry, but not one that offers attractive jobs. This ‘naturally’ creates a labour market segment staffed by immigrants, especially those assigned a subordinate position in society on the basis of race, ethnicity and ‘culture’. The security industry, where a number of Africans had also found jobs, was described as ‘dangerous’: ‘We [black Africans] can have these jobs because Australians do not want them’, commented an African man. A focus group we ran with employment officers from metropolitan Migrant Resource Centres also identified cleaning, aged care, security and taxi driving as current [non-English-speaking background] migrant niches in the labour market.

Our findings contradict Australian research which argues that there are ‘no separate labour market segments for NESB immigrants’ (Adhikari 1999:203) and confirm ‘high

and sustained levels of occupational segregation, particularly amongst migrants from NES countries' (Wood 1990:2; Ho and Alcorso 2004; Collins 1991). Our data indicate that there is a segmented labour market, where racially and culturally visible migrants, and especially those from refugee backgrounds, are allocated bottom jobs regardless of their human capital (formal qualifications, skills and experience). Similar findings on labour market segmentation have been reported from overseas research into immigrant employment by Lamba (2003) and Bauder (2003) in Canada and Rydgren (2004) in Sweden.

There is another mechanism that directs refugees towards low-skilled employment: the recent government initiative to attract refugees, especially those from 'new and emerging' African and Middle Eastern communities, to settle in country areas where labour shortages have been identified (DIMIA 2005c). This policy has had some success so far, as reported in the media and by DIMIA. Jobs on offer in country areas are overwhelmingly low-skilled jobs, as the cases of regional towns such as Young, Albany, Warrnambool and Toowoomba, reported in Australian media, show.

After several years in a low-skilled job, skills are likely to degenerate and the likelihood of reaching one's previous occupation level decreases. In addition, being trapped in a low-skilled job means that networking with peers, crucial for keeping one's professional skills up to date, as well as for learning about better job opportunities, is almost impossible.

Current developments in refugee employment are reminiscent of the late 1940-1950s policies around the reception of 'Displaced Persons' from Eastern Europe, where highly qualified professionals were registered as 'labourers' (men) and 'domestics' (women). These 'culturally inferior' aliens were 'naturally' expected to fill low-skilled jobs. The demand for low skilled labour is not as high as it was back then, but the preparedness of the Australian-born to take the bottom jobs is lower still. Whether the impressive pool of skills among recent refugees will be wasted in the long term cannot be established now, but once five or more years in the new country have passed, the likelihood of regaining pre-migration occupational and social status for the first immigrant generation becomes remote (Wood 1990:6).

#### 4. Employers' perceptions and the experience in employing the 'visibly different'

Employers we interviewed appeared to be unaware of the disadvantage experienced by the visibly and culturally different.

Most employers emphasised that the market 'naturally' works against discrimination. In other words, employers follow their business interests and employ the person best skilled for the position, regardless of the person's 'non-essential' characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, age etc. The assumption is that the market is generally 'blind to ethnicity' and people who come from different ethnic and racial backgrounds are treated like everyone else.

An older man, manager of a cleaning firm, explained:

*Ethnic variety to us is not a great issue simply because we're in an industry where we have so many different varieties [sic] every day come through the door that we're almost blind to the fact because they're [just] another cleaner to us, you know.  
[...] Regardless of their background, if they are able to work for us and they've met our criteria, I don't care where they're from. It's the best person for the position. At the end of the day, that is always what it's about – the best person for that position.*

Employer participants in this research project almost universally denied the existence of discrimination in the Australian workplace. A general presumption was that outright racial discrimination is a thing of the past, and something that no longer occurs within the context of a modern multicultural nation. An illustrative example comes from a young recruitment agent, who premised her discussion on the fact that people were 'becoming more accepting' as a result of increased contact with people from different backgrounds.

*In my experience I haven't come across [racial discrimination] for a very long time, you know [when employers say], 'I don't want specifically X, Y, Z', say, black people. I haven't had that sort of racial, those sort of comments come through at all.*

Employers did recognize that new migrants and refugees might face difficulty finding work due to a lack of communication skills, local experience, cultural understandings of interview processes and interaction generally, and because their overseas qualifications and experience are not recognised, as well as due to the individual prejudice of (other) employers. However, most employers tended to deny personal or company discrimination, and certainly did not take responsibility for migrants' negative employment outcomes.

There is a significant discrepancy between the labour market experience of refugees, as described earlier, and the non-discriminatory environment described by the employers. Statistical records on ethnic diversity were rarely available from the employers. While publicly owned organizations generally kept equity statistics, private firms of all sizes were generally unable to tell us what proportion of their workforce were overseas born or from non-English-speaking backgrounds. This

enabled employers and their representatives to assert equity without having to prove it.

It is important to acknowledge the sensitivity of any inquiry into the field of racial discrimination and this must be taken into account when assessing employer responses. Nevertheless, a close analysis of the employer interview transcripts indicates several strategies by which the question of potential discrimination was deflected. They argued that if discrimination occurred it was for the sake of their clients or customers to whom they were ultimately responsible. For example, if customers did not like to see a receptionist in *hijab*, the firm could not employ such a person. Some suggested that the visibly and culturally different simply did not have job-relevant characteristics including communication abilities, or 'cultural knowledge', or that they would not 'fit in' with other staff (what Constable et al. 2004 call 'tea-room mentality'). This was often stated in general terms, as a 'soft skill' related to 'Australian-ness'. This factor, the extent to which potential employees are judged on their assumed ability to fit in with the existing team of workers or work environment, was identified both by employers and by the refugees we interviewed as a significant, yet invisible, barrier to appropriate employment.

Some employers transferred the discrimination to the market or to the 'wider community' by arguing that they recruited staff according to what the market or community demanded. Private firms often stated they did not have the 'luxury' of using affirmative action or adhering to equity principles the way public companies did. Finally, some suggested that it was the NESB migrants' fault that they could not get jobs, due to 'personality differences', 'bad attitudes' such as 'lack of gratitude' or being 'too proud' of their country of origin, being 'too enthusiastic' or not enthusiastic enough, exaggerating their abilities or 'not selling themselves enough', or simply because they lacked understanding of Australian work culture (including racist jokes).

One employer, an older male recruiter for rural trade jobs, described the racial discrimination experienced by a black African employee and placed the burden of responsibility for the workplace problems firmly on the African man:

*I had one African young bloke ...black fella...yeah he left a bad taste too.... Big strong young bloke and I got him a job and he got on the grog or the drugs or something and beat a couple of people up. I spoke to him about people calling him 'blackfella' or 'hey blackie come over here'. I said that's what they do and you've gotta be ready for it get used to it and if you can't handle that then don't even think about going. They don't do it to be nasty...I said if they've had a few whiskeys, they will be looking for a fight...but you have to try and avoid that...*

While such formulations tend to reinforce stereotypes of migrants, and the trouble caused by employing them, most employers did seem sympathetic to the notion that refugees, like other disadvantaged groups such as Indigenous peoples or people with disabilities, should be given special training and employment opportunities. However none of the private firms felt in the position to provide this, and public companies were constrained to work within existing programs. Employers generally embedded their arguments within the theme of pragmatics – what can and can't be done within a competitive market system. Most seemed to feel their actions were reasonable and did not breach their obligations under the current anti-discrimination legislation.

## **5. Policy relevance, recommendations and conclusion**

This report has identified a number of issues in relation to 'visibly different' refugees and employment. Refugees overwhelmingly experience a loss of potential to use their human capital, finding themselves in jobs (where they have jobs) beneath their skills levels. They tend to be concentrated in certain unskilled or semi-skilled job market niches and find it difficult to be upwardly mobile from these. Refugees also perceive discrimination, both formal and informal, in the employment market. Employers, on the other hand, are unaware of some of these issues, and neither perceive discrimination nor accept responsibility for it. In terms of policy, our findings have relevance in at least three areas: qualifications recognition, employment assistance and anti-racism.

At the very start of their quest for an appropriate job, refugees face a systemic barrier: qualifications recognition. Many of their formal skills are not recognised or only partly recognised. This structural constraint keeps refugees and other migrants from economically and culturally distant countries in underprivileged segments of the labour market, and in the longer term may relegate them to the status of a disadvantaged minority.

There is a national system of qualifications recognition, comprising the Curriculum Council, Overseas Qualifications Unit and Trade Recognition Australia. A less regulated part of the system is run by professional organisations (for example Australian Medical Association) and various professional registration boards. Methods of accreditation used by professional organisations do not seem to secure a 'fair go' for overseas trained professionals (Constable et al. 2004). The same applies to government departments, such as the Education Department which assesses, tests and accredits overseas trained teachers. This not only affects overseas trained professionals but also wastes available skills which are simultaneously in short supply in Australia (for example, teachers and doctors in country areas). Policy improvements in this area could include regular updating of the operations of professional associations and boards, and better coordination between them and employment agencies in organising professional training and work experience placements. While it is clear that a fair, up-to-date and transparent system of overseas qualifications recognition cannot guarantee equitable employment outcomes for NESB migrants and refugees, it is necessary that good policy foundations are provided for a successful start of their labour market integration in Australia.

Employment services have in recent years been increasingly mainstreamed and privatised, which appears to have made them less sensitive to cross-cultural issues and generally less successful in helping NESB migrants and refugees. Our current as well as previous research projects show that most migrants did not find the Job Network services useful (Colic-Peisker and Waxman 2005) and the APC (2003) report on the privatised Job Network is also critical. More specific and better focused employment assistance for skilled and professional migrants from NES backgrounds and refugees is clearly needed. Such assistance only existed in NSW in the form of 'Skilled Migrant Placement Officer' but should be instituted across Australia.

Our research also points to unresolved issues in the area of anti-discrimination. For many, recruitment procedures are not transparent, leaving applicants unclear as to why they have not been given the job (and therefore assuming 'racism'), and enabling employers to apply their personal prejudices and informal discriminatory practices. Education of employers about what constitutes 'discrimination', and a broader application of the Australian motto of 'a fair go', would go a long way to improving outcomes for 'visibly different' migrants and refugees.

As reported by our respondents, people affected by the current upsurge of xenophobia and open racial abuse and discrimination are reluctant to seek redress through anti-discrimination agencies or regular legal avenues. They feel that attempting to set the slow wheels of anti-racist and anti-discrimination bureaucracies in motion is not likely to improve their work or life situation. Despite Australia's stringent anti-discrimination legislation, if people who suffer from discrimination do not lodge complaints and those who discriminate can do it through non-transparent processes, the legislation remains impotent. One way to improve the situation would be to create a more direct link between regular migrant settlement services providers (for example Migrant Resource Centres) and HREOC (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission).

In conclusion, the current research project indicates a number of concerns for refugees in the Western Australian labour market. Many of those who come to Australia through humanitarian immigration are highly skilled, proficient in English and educated. However they are unable to find appropriate work, with many unemployed or working below their capacity. This serious loss of occupational status disadvantages the refugees, but also the market itself, with wasted human capital impacting both on individuals and the wider society. Refugees attribute some of this disadvantage to systemic barriers, and some to discrimination based on language ability, name, accent, appearance, religion and 'cultural compatibility'. Some employers appear to hold stereotypical and prejudiced views about 'visibly different' migrants and refugees, and to engage in discriminatory practices. Employers generally appear to be unaware of the challenges faced by refugees, assuming that the market, as ultimate arbiter of human capital distribution, will ensure equitable outcomes. While some are sympathetic to the notion that refugees, like other disadvantaged groups, should be given special training and employment opportunities, most felt unable to ensure such practices themselves, due to economic imperatives. There is a clear place for policy in trying to improve employment outcomes for refugees, including service provision and ensuring employers are educated about the various barriers the visibly different face in the Australian labour market.

## 6. Bibliography and further reading

- ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) (2002) *Measuring Australia's Progress, The headline indicators, Education and training*, Cat. No. 1370.0 at <http://www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/abs@.nsf/0/e82c41fdcdf621feca256bdc001223fb?OpenDocument>
- Adhikari, P. (1999) 'Are there migrant enclaves in Australia? – A search for the evidence', *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 14(3):191-210.
- APC (Australian Productivity Commission) (2002) *Independent Review of the Job Network*, Report No. 21. Canberra: AusInfo.
- Asekeh, G and Tilbury, F. (2004) 'A Different Life: African migrants in Western Australia' in *A Changing people: diverse contributions to Western Australia*, R. Wilding and F. Tilbury (Eds), Perth, Office of Multicultural Interests, Dept Premier and Cabinet.
- Bauder, H. (2003) 'Immigrants in urban labour markets: place of birth and immigrant concentrations in British Columbia', *Canadian Journal of Urban Research*, 12(2):179-205.
- Hawthorne, L. and Birrell, B. (2002) 'Doctor shortages and their impact on the quality of medical care in Australia', *People and Place*, 10(3):61-63.
- Castles, S. and Miller, M. J. (2003) *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World* (3<sup>rd</sup> revised and updated edition), Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Colic-Peisker, V. (2003) 'Bosnian refugees in Australia: Identity, Community and Labour Market Integration', *New Issues in Refugee Research*. At <http://www.unhcr.org>.
- Colic-Peisker, V. (2005) "At least you're the right colour": Identity and social inclusion of Bosnian refugees in Australia', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 31(4):615-638.
- Colic-Peisker, V. and Waxman, P. (2005) 'Human and social capital in the process of economic adjustment of Bosnian refugees in Australia', in P. Waxman and V. Colic-Peisker (eds.), *Homeland wanted: Interdisciplinary perspectives on Refugee Resettlement in the West*, New York: Nova Science Publishers, pp. 43-68.
- Colic-Peisker, V. and Tilbury, F (2003) 'Active' and 'Passive' Resettlement: The Influence of Host Culture, Support Services, and Refugees' Own Resources on the Choice of Resettlement Style', *International Migration*, 41(5): 61-91.
- Constable, J., Wagner, R., Childs, M. and Natoli, A. (2004) *Doctors Become Taxidrivars: Recognising Skills – not easy as it sounds*, Office of Employment Equity and Diversity, Premier's Department, New South Wales, Sydney, [www.eeo.nsw.gov.au](http://www.eeo.nsw.gov.au)
- DIMIA (Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs) (2005a) *Migrant Labour Market Outcomes*, Fact Sheet 14, accessed at <http://www.immi.gov.au/facts/14labour.htm>
- DIMIA (2005b) *Community Information Summary*, accessed at [www.immi.gov](http://www.immi.gov)

- DIMIA (2005c) *Humanitarian Settlement in Regional Australia*, Fact Sheet 97, at [http://www.immi.gov.au/facts/97humanitarian\\_settlement.htm](http://www.immi.gov.au/facts/97humanitarian_settlement.htm)
- Essed, P. (1991) *Understanding Everyday Racism: an interdisciplinary theory*. Newbury Park, Sage.
- Evans M. D. R. and Kelly, K. (1991) 'Prejudice, Discrimination, and the Labor Market: Attainments of Immigrants in Australia,' *American Journal of Sociology*, 97 (3):721-59.
- Flatau, P. and Lewis, P. (1991) 'Segmented Labour Markets in Australia', *Economics Programme Working Paper No. 56*, Murdoch, Western Australia: Murdoch University.
- Fugazza, M. (2003) 'Racial discrimination: theories, facts and policy,' *International Labour Review* 142(4):507-542.
- HREOC (Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission) (2004) *Isma - Listen: National consultation on eliminating prejudice against Arab and Muslim Australians*. Croydon Park, NSW: HREOC.
- Hugo, G. (2001) 'Australia'. In *Migration and the labour market in Asia: Recent trends and policies*. Paris: OECD, pp 65-125.
- Ho, C. and Alcorso, C (2004) 'Migrants and Employment: Challenging the Success Story', *Journal of Sociology*, 40(3):237-259.
- Lamba, N. K. (2003) 'The Employment experience of Canadian Refugees: Measuring the Impact of Human and Social Capital on Quality of Employment' *The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 40(1):45-64.
- Martin, J. (1965) *Refugee Settlers: A study of Displaced Persons in Australia*, Canberra: Australian National University.
- McAllister, I., Hwang, S., Saenz, R., Aguirre et al.(12 authors) (1995) 'Occupational mobility among immigrants: the impact of migration on economic success in Australia', *International Migration Review*, 29(2):441-469.
- Rydgren, J. (2004) 'Mechanisms of exclusion: ethnic discrimination in the Swedish Labour Market', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 30(4):697-717.
- Shih, J. (2002) ' "...Yeah, I could hire this one, but I know it's gonna be a problem": how race, nativity and gender affect employers' perceptions of the manageability of job seekers', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 25(1):99-119.
- Tan-Quigley, S. (2004) *All Dressed up and Nowhere to Go: Implementing strategies to address issues affecting unemployment in young people from new and emerging communities*, North Perth: Ethnic Community Council of WA.
- Tomei, M. (2003) 'Discrimination and equality at work: a review of the concepts', *International Labour Review* 142(4):401-419.
- Wood, G. A. (1990) 'Occupational segregation by migrant status in Australia', *Economics Programme Working Paper No. 48*, Murdoch, Western Australia: Murdoch University.