

Somali students in VET- some factors influencing pathways

Maree Keating and Bonnie Simons, Equity Research Centre

Abstract

Somalis living in Australia have a very high participation rate in vocational education and training (VET). Findings from Equity Research Centre research conducted in 2007 indicated that for many Somalis, aspirations to attain a university education and a professional career are high. However, achieving these goals often involves a pathway through the VET system, and for some this pathway is more complex than for others .

One of the unintended findings from this research project, conducted with Somali Victorian TAFE students, potential students and their families, is that, in practice, post compulsory educational choices for Victorian based Somalis appear to be heavily dependent on three key factors. These factors are the age and educational attainment of the person at the time the educational system broke down in Somalia (between 1987 and 1991), the educational experiences of the person in the years between leaving Somalia and arriving in Australia, and the age at which the person arrived in Australia.

This paper will explore the critical relationship between these factors which, in a high number of cases, could be calculated in advance to determine the post compulsory educational pathway to employment available to Somali individuals.

Whilst it was also found that other factors such as gender, social grouping, rural or urban place of origin, financial role and position in the family also have a strong influence in Somali post compulsory educational choices, our unintended research findings suggest that individuals who do undertake VET study in Australia are heavily influenced in their choice of pathway by the limitations imposed on them by the three factors outlined above.

These factors are considerations for this generation of Australian based Somali in the choices they are likely to face in their educational and career planning. They are also potentially considerations that post compulsory educational providers should be aware of in providing advice and guidance for Somali students.

Introduction

“An emancipatory focus for settlement programs would seek to minimise impediments to the labour market and higher education and pre-empt the effects/development of a minority status” (CMYI 2003: 12).

It is well documented that age of arrival has a significant impact on the experience of success in the school system and also on the additional educational supports required for school aged refugee students fitting into the educational system. Young refugee students arriving with little or no English must allow six to twelve months for language classes before they can cope with the school environment. Refugee students

with disrupted education who arrive when they are older than the age of twelve or thirteen often face more significant setbacks in their educational attainment. A student arriving with little or no English at the age of 13 will enter the school system at the age of 14. At this age the student could slot into Year 8 or 9 and, even with disrupted education, often make rapid gains in the two years leading up to VCE.

It is also well documented that student experiences of basic education preceding refugee engagement with the Australian school system will play a vital role in their ability to pick up the curriculum and be competitive with their peers. Basic educational attainment will be influenced by the presence of an education system in the country of origin, the quality and uninterrupted nature of the education received, and the quality of exposure to other sources of education during the course of their refugee journey before arriving in Australia.

For refugee students with major gaps in their basic education, but who have arrived at too late an age to fit into the school system (sixteen or over), programs such as Young Adult Migrant Education Course (YAMEC) play a critical role in providing a ESL style basic education program which can provide a bridge for students into VET courses. For these students, however, it has been found in previous research that, despite significant inputs from TAFE advisors (NMIT 2003:3), post compulsory educational options are not sufficiently developed to stop many from disengaging from education (Foundation House, 2007:4).

Background

Educational opportunities in Somalia

Somalis have arrived as refugees in large numbers in Australia in several waves since 1991. Over that time they have arrived with varying experiences, perceptions and expectations of education, depending on their age, gender, social grouping and under which period of history they were of school age in their country of birth. Many have spent time in other countries in their journey as refugees, sometimes accessing education along the way, often not.

In the 1950s and 60s there were several major shifts in the educational opportunities available in Somalia. However, under Italian/ British colonial rule, then British administration and early Independence, access to educational opportunities continued to be very limited, and education was conducted in Italian, English and Arabic languages.

During the 1970s, however, the revolutionary regime under Siad Barre adopted educational policies which prioritized the eradication of illiteracy, an expanded and accessible technical education system and the development of higher education options in Somali. Post secondary courses offered at the Higher Education level in the capital, Mogadishu, included law, teaching, agriculture, economics, engineering and medicine. Somali language was developed in written form in 1975. By the early 1980s considerable progress had been made towards Barre's educational goals. All schools were nationalized and there were four levels of education. However, in the 1970s girls and children from nomadic groups still often only completed three or four years of the eight year primary curriculum and enrolments beyond primary school continued to be low in the late 1980's. Despite enormous efforts on the part of the

government to restructure the school system in order to encourage further study, and to establish an effective adult literacy program in rural areas, there were high levels of secondary /technical school drop out rates and the UN estimated there to be roughly 24% literacy by 1990 (Helen Chapin Metz (ed), 1992).

In the years between 1987 and 1991, social unrest disrupted the fledgling education system and by 1991 schools ceased to exist. Since then, Somalis have had little access to secular education at any level (AMEP, 2003: 21).

It is critical to this paper however, that whilst primary school enrolment levels in Somalia were reported by UNICEF in 2006 to have stayed very low since 1990, the Somalis who were better educated, including many teachers, were the ones who were able to leave refugee camps for Australia, the US and Europe since then (Brophy and Page, 2007: 136).

A great number of Somalis living in Victoria today hold passionate beliefs about the right to universal education and the value of a University qualification.

Demographics of the Victorian based Somali community

In 1992, an estimated 800 000 Somali refugees fled to neighbouring countries to escape political unrest. Continued factional fighting and drought led to the further displacement of 20 000 people in 2000 and 2001. The Transitional National Government, formed in 2000, is still not accepted by a number of Southern clans (AMEP 2003). Political divisions continue to affect relationships within the Somali diaspora.

The greatest number of Somalis arrived in Melbourne between 1996 and 2001, with only a tiny number of Somalis arriving in Australia prior to 1991, and 35% arriving between 1991 and 1995. Of the Australia wide Somali population, 60% is resident in Victoria. In 2001 nearly all Victorian based Somali born residents lived in Melbourne (99.1%). According to 2006 Census of population and housing in Melbourne, a total of 2 594 Somali born people are resident in Victoria. According to 2001 census information, the majority of the Somali population is situated in the Northern suburbs within Banyule and Darebin. According to the Banyule Community Health Service Somali Research Project (2005) , the majority of Somalis in Banyule have come from large town or cities in Somalia, which would indicate that adult Somalis arriving in Victoria during the first wave of refugee intake were urban Somalis most likely to have benefited from Barre's educational policies and programs.

Nearly 50% of the Somali population living in Victoria in 2001 was still under 25 years old. This means that half the 2001 Somali population living in Victoria falls into the generation of Somalis who were under the age of 14 in 1990, when the school system ceased to exist. The other half fell either into the category of Somalis who had the opportunity under the Barre regime to have up to a University level education, or who were over 35 and who may have been fortunate enough to get an education under the British education system.

74% of Somali born Victorians in 2001 assessed themselves as speaking English “well” or “very well” in the census, which can be attributed to the youth of the arrivals and their determination to learn English for study or work.

The issues to do with school based support are now most relevant for other cultural groups, whilst the issue of post school educational support is critical for the Somali community. In 2005/6, 52% of the humanitarian entrants assisted under the Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy (IHSS) were aged 18 or under. 399 newly arrived refugee children from Sudan were enrolled in Victorian schools in 2005/6, and only 16 from Somalia.

Attitudes towards Australian education

Most of the young Somali men and women who arrived in Australia at school age between 1991 and 1995 are now in their twenties. Somali school students interviewed in 1996 were found to have a very high regard for learning (White R, et al, 1999) and high ambitions to succeed educationally. Whilst alternative secondary school programs such as VCAL in schools have been heralded as positive development for students with disrupted learning (NMIT, 2007: 5), Equity Research Centre research in 2007 found that current Somali school students are particularly unlikely to choose a VCAL stream, because of family expectations that they will go into a university based rather than VET course after school. Inter generational communication on the issue of VET is often fraught within the Somali community, with young Somali people undertaking VET study often unable to communicate to family members that their choices are realistic.

The Changing Cultures Project report found that, whilst teachers in support programs such as YAMEC at NMIT are in an excellent position to identify concerns of refugee young people and to connect them to social services, there is an additional need for a strategy directed at newly arrived communities and community workers providing settlement advice “to promote understanding of the TAFE sector and the pathway options it offers” (NMIT, 2003:3).

New arrivals coming to Australia too late to enter the high school system often recognise the practical limitations in their educational options. The Changing Cultures project found that many students “accept that due to their limited exposure to any formal education and their literacy levels they may begin their career in non professional positions”. Work experience programs have been found to help students to broaden their career aspirations and exposure to Australian culture, although it has also been found that amongst the Somali community, apprenticeships are generally not highly regarded. The project found that, for Somali families, “there is more status attached to computer/office work” (NMIT, 2007: 47), and certainly a large number of Somali interviewees of all ages within the ERC research in 2007 indicated a preference for white collar professional work in areas such as teaching, engineering, health or community development.

Given the high educational aspirations of Somalis living in Victoria, and their ambitions to participate in professional employment, it is important that the factors which influence their educational options be understood. The three critical factors for Victorian Somalis to consider in assessing their likely options are often the age and educational attainment of the person at the time the educational system broke down in

Somalia, the educational experiences of the person in the years between leaving Somalia and arriving in Australia, and the age at which the person arrived in Australia.

Research method

A literature review was conducted into the Somali community in Victoria in relation to post compulsory education. AVETMISS enrolment data and ABS data was analysed to determine both the age of arrival of Somali refugees in Victoria since 1991 and VET choices that were being made by Somali students in 2006. Seventy three people then participated in interviews and focus groups including 53 people from within the Somali community.

Responses were analysed and from this analysis, some unintended findings emerged relating to the choices that Somali men and women were making. One of these unintended findings is the subject of this paper and relates to the critical factors influencing choice of post compulsory education pathway. Material from the research and case study material is used to demonstrate key points.

An interesting pattern emerged from the interview and case study material, that the experience of education in Somalia prior to 1991 combined with post Somalia exposure to education and age of arrival in Australia could be calculated to determine the vocational pathway the subjects would be most likely to choose towards employment.

Discussion of research findings

Age and year of arrival in Victoria in relation to educational background

Table 1 shows that around 25% of all Somalis have arrived in Victoria when they were between the ages of fifteen and twenty four. However, those in that same age group arriving in different periods have a different range of possible educational backgrounds.

For example, the age group 15-24 made up 24.2% of those who arrived between 1991 and 1995. Allowing for a 3 year interim stay in a refugee camp, the educational participation of this group could have ranged from a tertiary education for a 24 year old arriving in 1991 to 3 years of secondary education for a 24 year old arriving in 1995. For a 15 year old possible education levels could range from up to 5 years primary in 1991 to no education at all in 1995.

This same age group made up 27.5% of those arriving between 1996 and 2001. Their education experience, again allowing for 3 years in a refugee camp en route to Australia, would have ranged from 3 or 4 years secondary education for a 24 year old arriving in 1996 to 3 years of primary school for a 24 year old arriving in 2001.

A 15 year old arriving at any time between 1996 -2001 would have had no secular education at all in Somalia and very limited education in refugee camps. The implications are that hundreds of 15-25 year old Somalis arriving in Victoria after 1996 and now of working age, will have experienced a combination of heavy family pressure to succeed academically and major problems preparing for post compulsory education which would require many years to address.

Table 1- Somali Migration to Victoria 1981 – 2001 by Age

Age group (years)	1981-1990		1991-1995		1996-2001		Not stated		Total Somalia-born	
	Persons	% of total	Persons	% of total	Persons	% of total	Persons	% of total	Persons	% of total
0 – 14	3	2	160	19.4	323	26.9	54	39.1	540	23.3
15 - 24	26	17.3	199	24.2	330	27.5	28	20.3	583	25.2
25 - 34	29	19.3	221	26.9	283	23.5	24	17.4	557	24.1
35 - 44	59	39.4	139	16.9	135	11.2	17	12.3	350	15.1
45 - 54	20	13.3	52	6.3	70	5.8	6	4.3	148	6.4
55 - 64	7	4.7	32	3.9	38	3.2	3	2.2	80	3.5
65 - 74	3	2	15	1.8	13	1.1	3	2.2	34	1.5
75 >	3	2	5	0.6	10	0.8	3	2.2	21	0.9
Total	150	100.0	823	100.0	1,202	100.0	138	100.0	2,313	100.0

Source: ABS, 2001 Census of Population and Housing, Special Tables, Usual Residence

VET participation in Victoria

In 2006, Somalis proportionally attended more VET training than any other Horn of Africa community. 44% of Victorian Somalis were engaged in some form of VET training (25% in TAFE and 19% in other VET) compared to 28% of the larger, equally established Ethiopian population. Of these, Somali women were highly represented with 54% of the female Victorian Somali population participating in VET in 2006 (2006 Australian Census of Population and Housing).

According to AVETMISS 2006 data, 1128 Somali born students were undertaking VET courses. This included 354 Somalis under the age of 25, (a higher proportion of young VET participants than is found in the Ethiopian community.) For this group of highly motivated students, it is likely that their experience of education in Somalia was non-existent or minimal. As can be seen in the Table 2 below, their main exposure to basic education would have taken place in the years following their flight from Somalia.

Table 2-Somali Education Experience by current age group

Age in 2007	Educational life stage in Australia	Education System in Somalia
5 - 12	Primary Prep – 6	No secular education in Somalia and limited or none in refugee camp
13 – 18	Secondary Years 7 – 12	
19 – 25	Post compulsory	Limited secular education in Somalia and refugee camp
26 – 45	Post compulsory	Functioning system with access lessening approaching 1987 and governed by family income, gender, geography and social position

Three comparisons

The three factors: age in 1991, exposure to education between leaving Somalia and arriving in Australia, and age of arrival in Australia, need to be looked at together in order to predict likely educational pathways. These three factors often converge in such a way that certain educational choices and pathways for Somali students and potential students becomes prescribed. In order to illustrate the human impact of the convergence of these three factors, some comparisons can be taken from the research data. These comparisons reveal the kinds of educational and vocational impacts arising from the convergence of the three factors in different ways.

The first comparison can be made between two Somali women both currently aged between 15 and 25. Both arrived in Australia after 1996, with no education in Somalia. In many ways their situations were very similar on arrival. On the one hand, however, Fartun arrived in Australia at the age of fourteen and Nasra arrived at the age of twelve. As a result, Fartun entered school at the level of year 10 and Nasra at year 7.

By the time Fartun was able to start school in 1998 it was determined that she should enter at Year 10. Unable to successfully integrate into secondary school, she dropped out early in Year 11. In the intervening eight years she enrolled in a Fashion Design course at a TAFE college (which she did not complete), attempted to enrol in a nursing course (but failed the preliminary test twice), and subsequently enrolled in a maths and science bridging course in order to address the gaps in her basic education. She said “My older brothers and sisters had education before the war, but there was no opportunity for us younger ones. It was very hard to come to Australia at 14 and go into Year 10 with no education and no English. I couldn’t catch up.”

Nasra entered school at year 7 in 2002 and integrated quickly. She completed her Year 12 and immediately went on to complete a Certificate 3 with a view to doing further study in Community Development.

The difference for these two women is a stark indication of the difference the age of arrival can make to educational pathways, even with other key factors being similar.

Table 3- Pathway for two women under 25 with different point of school entry and age at arrival

	Fartun	Nasra
Current Age	25	18
Year Arrived	1997	2002
Age at Arrival	14	12
Education	No education	No education and limited education in refugee camp
School Entry	Year 10	Year 7
Pathway	Year 10 – TAFE (3 attempts)	Year 7 – Year 12 - TAFE

The second comparison can be made between two Somali men of almost identical age, who both arrived in Australia after 1996. Neither had any basic education in Somalia and limited exposure to education in a refugee camp. One arrived at the age of twelve and the other at the age of nineteen. Both had families that were very supportive of them achieving a university

education. Like Fartun and Nasra, the critical difference between the two men was that one arrived at an age when he could complete a full secondary education in Australia and the other arrived at an older age and was unable to cope with the demands of the VCAL course through TAFE.

Mohammed is twenty three years old and arrived in Australia at the age of twelve. He was able to integrate into school quickly after some English language classes and completed Year 12. He then went straight into TAFE from school and completed an Advanced Diploma in International Trade, followed by a university degree in International Trade. At twenty three years of age he is now ready to realise his dream of working in business.

Ahmed on the other hand, is twenty four years old but arrived in Australia when he was nineteen. He quickly realised he would not realise his mother's dream for him to have a university education. After some English language classes he entered the YAMEC program for 6 months. He attempted VCAL through TAFE but English language and educational gaps made it impossible for him to complete without intensive support. So he returned to YAMEC and continued to study for two years.

Ahmed completed a TAFE pre-apprenticeship in fitting and turning but again his age worked against him and he was unable to get a job because of his age. He was eventually offered a boilermaker apprenticeship when he was looking for work as a fitter and turner. He was completing his apprenticeship in 2007.

Table 4- Two men under 25 but different point of school entry and age at arrival

	Mohammed	Ahmed
Current Age	23	24
Year Arrived	1996	2002
Age at Arrival	12	19
Education	No secular education and limited education in refugee camp	No secular education and limited education in refugee camp
School Entry in Australia	Year 7	YAMEC
Pathway	Year 7 – 12 – TAFE - University	YAMEC -- VCAL at TAFE – YAMEC -- TAFE

The third and final comparison illustrates the ways in which age at the time of breakdown in the Somali educational system influences two people, even when they have arrived in Australia at the same age.

Aden and Sahra both arrived in Australia when they were too old to access the school system. Aden was seventeen and Sahra was eighteen. Aden, however, arrived in 2003 and was only five years old when the school system completely broke down in Somalia. He therefore had no basic education. Four years after his arrival he is now entering a carpentry apprenticeship. Sahra arrived just after the beginning of civil unrest, in 1988 and had completed twelve years of study in Somalia. She immediately enrolled in further study.

After studying in the YAMEC program for two years, Aden has taken full advantage of the TAFE educational pathways available in order to achieve his goal of secure employment. First he enrolled in an IT course and then completed a Business Management course at TAFE.

Currently completing a Carpentry Pre-Apprenticeship at TAFE, Aden then hopes to go into an apprenticeship in the building industry and eventually into self employment.

Sahra completed several months of English classes in 1988 and was then able to immediately enrol in and complete a Diploma course at TAFE. She is currently undertaking a second Diploma level qualification.

Table 5- Two people with similar age at arrival but different ages in 1991

	Aden	Sahra
Current Age	22	38
Year Arrived	2003	1988
Age at Arrival	17	18
Education	No secular education and limited education in refugee camp	Completed 12 years in Somalia
School Entry in Australia	YAMEC	TAFE
Pathway	YAMEC for 2 years TAFE – 3 courses	TAFE – 2 Diplomas

Conclusions

Somalis living in Victoria are avid consumers of VET courses. Many between the ages of thirty five and fifty five potentially had access to a wide range of educational opportunities in Somalia and have arrived with the capacity to slot quickly into post compulsory education. Unfortunately for many of them, economic imperatives inhibit their participation in VET and professional careers.

A large number of younger Somalis, however, arriving in Australia after the age of fourteen have the double disadvantage of no basic education and an inability to benefit from the Australian secondary school system. For those students the vocational pathways are more complex, time consuming and incremental.

The case study material about Somali experiences of post compulsory education in Victoria, developed by the ERC, is full of perseverance, determination and ambition to succeed over many years of study. One older, university educated case study participant said to us that *“TAFE course in Somali culture is something very low. I mean, it’s not like uni, maybe a little bit higher than high school”*.

For those like her who lived through the Barre regime, it was a major achievement to complete University level study. Technical courses were offered to students who had barely completed primary school. For younger Somalis, who are too old to enter the Australian school system on arrival but too young to have had any education in Somalia, there is a great need for the Victorian VET system to provide sustained educational support to allow them to reach their full potential in post compulsory education and beyond.

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