



VICTORIA UNIVERSITY OF  
**WELLINGTON**  
TE HERENGA WAKA

# **Enhancing Refugee-background Learner Journeys in Tertiary Education in Aotearoa New Zealand**

**by Sara Kindon, Sarah Willette and  
Members of the New Zealand National Tertiary  
Network to support Refugee-Background learners**

**2024**

This report has been produced through a collaboration of the following individuals who are connected through the Aotearoa New Zealand National Tertiary Network to Support Refugee Background Learners (NTN), established in 2019. Affiliations listed below reflect those at the time of individuals' contributions to the report.

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**Ma whero ma pango ka oti ai te mahi**

*With red and black the work will be complete*

# 1.0 Introduction

## 1.1 Report Aim and Intended Audiences

This report aims to honour and enhance Refugee-Background Learners' journeys within tertiary education in Aotearoa New Zealand. It informs, and is designed to be read with, the *Best Practice Guidelines to Support Refugee-Background Tertiary Learners in Aotearoa New Zealand* (BPG) published by the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC).<sup>1</sup>

By raising awareness of what Refugee-Background (RB) Learner journeys *could* be like (through BPG implementation), the report also aims to resource Tertiary Education Organisations (TEOs) to deliver on the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) *Ōritetanga Learner Success Framework*. This Framework encourages TEOs to adopt learner-centric success approaches that deliver equity of educational outcomes for all learners. The report and BPG are therefore intended for use by senior leaders, professional, academic/teaching and learning support staff within TEOs.

All New Zealand TEOs: universities, institutes of technology (Te Pūkenga), private training establishments (PTEs) and wananga are required under law to provide a fair, safe, diverse, and inclusive environment that promotes equal opportunities for all learners. RB Learners in Aotearoa New Zealand are a growing and diverse group in Levels 1-3 or Intensive Literacy and Numeracy (ILN) programmes, vocational programmes, as Foundation and second chance learners, and as learners in degree programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. However, they are not always recognised in equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) initiatives or in programme design and delivery, which limits their learner experiences and educational outcomes.<sup>2</sup>

## 1.2 Report Evolution and Context

Despite the New Zealand government officially providing asylum and resettlement to refugees since World War II, it was not until 2006 that the first New Zealand-based research into RB Learners' experiences of tertiary education was carried out. This participatory research was requested by ChangeMakers' Refugee Forum in Wellington and took place through a partnership with Professor Sara Kindon at Victoria University of Wellington (VUW). Professor Kindon, with postgraduate students in a human geography and development studies course, engaged VUW RB Learners to analyse and produce a research report.<sup>3</sup> One of this report's recommendations led to the establishment of the Victoria University of Wellington Network to Support Refugee-Background Students (the VUW Network) which began advocating for changes within and beyond VUW from 2007.

Through this postgraduate course over the following twelve years, Kindon and her postgraduate students carried out numerous other projects involving former refugee youth and students in Wellington high schools and at VUW.<sup>4</sup> Then, in 2011, they joined with other VUW researchers and non-governmental refugee-led organisations to undertake the first-

ever national research involving RB Learners and staff from 13 TEOs. This research identified the ad-hoc responses to this learner group across the country. Through a paper presented to the Minister of Education, they advocated for changes to national education policy and TEO practices to recognise and respond to RB Learners as a targeted equity group.<sup>5</sup>

This paper, its associated report and VUW's continued advocacy, influenced a number of universities around the country and at the University of Auckland, Jonathan Sampson, Jay Marlowe and colleagues' went on to explore how current policy overlooked complex nuances of resettlement needs and how educational institutions engaged with young people.<sup>6</sup> They suggested educational policy development emphasising reciprocity and mutual adjustment between refugee-background people and host societies to enhance holistic resettlement success.<sup>7</sup>

Over subsequent years, some universities around the country took up recommendations of the CRF-VUW advocacy paper and by 2017, there were some positive incremental changes to tertiary institutional policies and practices with regard to RB Learners. Further research again at VUW, however, revealed there were still on-going challenges associated with lack of visibility and resourcing of RB Learners and those seeking to advance their educational outcomes.<sup>8</sup>

At the University of Otago, as an outcome of a study that included biographical interviews with international and forcibly displaced students in southern Aotearoa,<sup>9</sup> Vivienne Anderson, with RB Learner representatives, and colleagues from the local vocational education provider, NZ Red Cross, schools' sector, and Ministry of Education office, established the Pathways to Tertiary Education Network (PTEN) in 2018. PTEN aims to remove structural barriers that limit RB Learners' access to tertiary education in southern Aotearoa NZ. Specifically, their research with RB high school students in Dunedin and Invercargill has shown the importance of relationship and bridge building within efforts to strengthen pre-access pathways into tertiary education.<sup>10</sup>

Then in an effort to address ongoing gaps and mobilise action across the country, in 2019, Te Herenga Waka VUW, with support of Vic without Barriers: Refugee-Background Student Club and the TEC, held a one day forum to connect TEOs, RB Learners, resettlement agency practitioners and others committed to supporting RB and asylum-seeking Learners. PTEN members were part of this forum. The *Learning Together in Aotearoa* Forum took stock of TEOs' efforts to respond to RB Learners (see also Table 2.1). It also generated future visions and actions to enhance coordination, advocacy and equity outcomes nationally across the sector.<sup>11</sup>

At the Forum, The National Tertiary Network to Support Refugee Background Students (NTN) – comprised of tertiary staff members, RB Learners, non-governmental organisations and government practitioners – was launched.

More recently, NTN members have contributed further research and understandings to the picture: Sarah Willette's Master's research with RB Learners at four universities was published in 2020 confirming the benefits of existing targeted provisioning (such as the Sir

Robert Jones Refugee Daughters Scholarship and dedicated staff support roles) while calling attention to gaps in resourcing for RB Learners across the tertiary sector.<sup>12</sup> Quickly gathering more than 100 members, the NTN got off to a bumpy start in 2020-21 with CoVid-19 impacts, but momentum gathered through the TEC's commissioning of Kindon and Willette, with the wider NTN, to produce the Best Practice Guidelines for RB Learners (BPG) published in 2023. Between 2021 and 2024, existing research and the collective wisdom of NTN members was gathered into this research report and associated guidelines. The publication of these collectively-authored documents marks a major milestone in New Zealand's recognition of, and actions with, former refugee learners.

Also worthy of note was University of Auckland's top 10 Times Higher Education global ranking in Sustainable Development Goals in 2022 after enrolling 800 RB Learners, through its Undergraduate Targeted Admission Schemes (UTAS), Tertiary Foundation Certificate and New Start programme, alongside providing them with a range of scholarships.

Other studies are emerging in Aotearoa such a recent PhD thesis by Nuzha Saleem focusing on school-based experiences of youth from refugee backgrounds,<sup>13</sup> and there are also burgeoning studies from Australia which have been helpful in the evolution of this report and appear in the bibliography.

At the time of this report's publication, the Best Practice Guidelines have been circulated and promoted to many TEOs which are beginning to work with them to enhance RB Learner journeys and support the implementation of their own Ōritetanga Learner Success plans, but much more research and work needs to be done. In particular ongoing efforts would benefit from more knowledge about how to enhance RB Learners' secondary to tertiary education pathways, how to build stronger relationships between RB Learners and those with Māori and Pasifika whakapapa (genealogy, heritage), and how to effectively build and sustain TEO institutional capacity and responsiveness to this learner group.

### **1.3 Report Orientation, Structure and Limitations**

This report, sitting alongside the BPG published by the TEC in late 2023,<sup>14</sup> represents the first collective publication of the NTN, led by researchers from Te Herenga Waka VUW and University of Canterbury in collaboration with a number of colleagues, as well as former and present RB Learners from across the country. It draws on published academic research from Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia and other settlement contexts where pertinent. It is informed by a form of collective ethnographic approach, which draws from our lived experiences and observations as educators, advisors and Learners. This approach is evident in the creation of fictional Learners' journeys through TEOs in Section 5.0, which aim to centre Learner narratives (both imagined and actual), and to expand the educational possibilities for RB Learners and their families.

Together, these documents seek to honour the experiences and attributes of RB Learners, as well as the lessons learned from colleagues who work with them. They harness the knowledge and aspirations of NTN members and support the TEC's efforts to have all TEOs adopt a Ōritetanga Learner Success approach.<sup>15</sup>



In what follows in the Research Report, we:

- define 'RB Learner' and provide relevant contextual information about forced migration, New Zealand's responses and the role education plays in resettlement;
- outline diverse RB Learners' pathways into TEOs;
- present important RB Learners' characteristics that can inform their learning journeys;
- describe some ideal RB Learners' journeys through their TEOs from pre-enrolment to employment. These narrative accounts are fictional but are informed by evidence from research, staff observations and RB Learners' voices; and
- share some less-than-ideal common realities and salient 'Warning Tales' based on real-life RB Learners' experiences recounted to us by RB Learners or NTN members working with them; and
- conclude with the reiteration of key messages and an extensive bibliography.

Having outlined what we cover in this report, it is also important to share some caveats and limitations. The report is informed by the weaving together of experiential knowledge and academic research because there is a dearth of systematic and comparable quantifiable data for this Learner group nationally. Individual TEOs may collect some data, but this is not easily accessible. This situation means that we do not yet know the approximate number of RB Learners studying in Aotearoa New Zealand, let alone the RB population from which they originate. University of Auckland estimates that two per cent of its student body are from refugee backgrounds, and Te Herenga Waka estimates a few hundred Learners based on enrolment data. As the report highlights, however, finding appropriate ways for RB Learners to self-identify is also challenging. Stigma associated with any mention of 'refugee' for some suggests that whatever figures a TEO may have, there are likely to be more RB Learners who remain invisible and unaccounted for. Further, we do not have quantifiable data about retention or graduation rates from different kinds of programmes or institutions.

As a result of this context, we have endeavoured to work carefully with the data that we do have and the collective authorship from different TEO contexts has enabled us to identify and speak to common issues. That said, as the majority of existing published or available research has been carried out within or by universities, the Learner journeys represented within this report tend to reflect the specificities of those TEOs. There is a clear and urgent need for more research with RB Learners in Te Pūkenga, private training establishments and wananga.

These constraints noted, we are confident that the report and BPG if used systematically, can build sector capacity, and enhance RB Learner journeys and educational success.

## **1.4 How to use this Report and the accompanying Best Practice Guidelines To Support Refugee-Background Tertiary Learners**

It is our intention that each section of this report can be used by Senior Leaders, Heads of Programmes, academic, professional, support staff and advisors within TEOs as part of TEO capacity building conversations or workshops. Challenging misperceptions and stigma associated with former refugees is often something that needs to be repeated regularly, but is something that once shifted can provoke the greatest impact to TEO culture and RB Learners' experiences.

We also ask readers to note that the Learner definition, contextual data, resettlement pathways and Learner characteristics represent a complex and shifting landscape within which TEOs must respond. Keeping this complexity in mind, while considering how to best implement the BPG within the specific context of each TEO, will be vitally important to avoid 'one-size-fits-all' approaches.

The BPG that accompany this report flow out of the ideal Learner journeys shared in this report. If put into action, the BPG will help to make such ideals a reality. Actioning even some of the BPG will help to combat some of the all-too-common realities and real life warning tales we also share in this report. They will enhance Learner journeys and support Ōritetanga Learner Success.

We also encourage any TEO colleagues and RB Learners, graduates and professionals reading this report, and/or engaging with the BPG, to join the NTN and benefit from the diverse expertise and knowledge it harnesses. The NTN provides a pan-sector forum for sharing strategies, problem-solving, crafting solidarity actions, and celebrating positive outcomes. The NTN meets via zoom a few times a year and has a private Facebook group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/614967222376968> where you can request membership.

## 2.0 Context

### 2.1 Defining ‘Refugee Background Learner’

A refugee, defined by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), is a person who is forced to migrate and stay outside of the country of their nationality due to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons such as race, religion, nationality, social group affiliation, or political opinion.<sup>16</sup> Such forced migrants once re-settled in Aotearoa New Zealand, officially cease to be refugees because they are granted permanent residence here and may apply for citizenship within five years of residence.

Despite this definition and permanent residence upon resettlement, confusion persists around nomenclature within New Zealand society and media. This confusion pervades as tertiary education where former refugees (as domestic students) are often mis-represented through labels like: migrants, refugees, cross-border students, and even ‘international students’. Such mis-recognition can flow on into invisibility within institutional processes and resource allocations. It can also undermine former refugees’ ability to feel settled in their TEO, develop trust or a sense of belonging.

More accurate terms include: “student *from* a refugee background”, “student *with* a refugee background”, or “refugee-background student”. All of these terms acknowledge what a student (or their family members) may have lived through while avoiding a legal or immigration categories (i.e., refugee, asylum seeker) that may no longer apply (because they received asylum or residence, or were born in New Zealand). More recently, as distinctions have been made between those studying in compulsory primary and secondary education, and those within optional tertiary education, the term Refugee-background Learner (RB Learner) rather than ‘student’ has been adopted within the tertiary sector and in this report and BPG.

However, to complicate matters further, many people with refugee backgrounds choose not to identify with any (or only some of these terms) because the terms may:

- confuse their former temporary political status (and the frequent societal stigma accompanying it) with their current and foreseeable status (e.g., refugee vs NZ permanent resident);
- evoke stigma from others by reference to a person’s prior refugee status (e.g., refugee, former refugee, person with a refugee background, person from a refugee background) when they wish to leave that part of their life experience behind them;
- generate concern or mistrust by reference to a person’s prior refugee status (e.g., refugee, former refugee, person with a refugee background, person from a refugee background) because they don’t know why identifying in this way is important or how this information may be used by the people or institution requesting it;

- misrepresent a person's migration pathway into the country, overlook their lack of choice in this and/or the implications of this for their resettlement experience (e.g., migrant vs former refugee);
- fail to recognise a person's entry into New Zealand through a pathway other than the United Nations Quota Refugee programme hiding particular experiences or needs (e.g., entry through a claim of asylum once already in NZ; refugee-like experience prior to arrival vs entry via another pathway) (see Section 3.0);
- be seen as irrelevant depending on a person's migration pathway or family response to this (e.g., self-identification as a migrant vs coming from a refugee-background or having refugee-like experiences).

Acknowledging the complexity and sensitivity around nomenclature and labels is important, and calls for creative responses if tertiary education is to reliably identify these Learners and take steps to better meet their needs.

For the purposes of this Research Report and the BPG, we use the term **Refugee-Background Learner** to recognise that a person's background, informed by refugee or refugee-like experiences, brings assets and challenges into the educational context.

We use 'Learner' rather than 'student', as this better reflects people enrolled in tertiary education organisations (TEOs) in Aotearoa New Zealand and accords with nomenclature used by the TEC.

Therefore, in the remaining pages, the term Refugee-background Learner (RB Learner) refers to any Learner who has:

- experienced a humanitarian or asylum-seeking pathway into Aotearoa New Zealand;
- parents or relatives who have experienced a humanitarian or asylum-seeking pathway into Aotearoa New Zealand; or
- experienced a migration pathway that is similar in nature to a humanitarian or asylum-seeking pathway into Aotearoa New Zealand.

We recommend that TEOs remain open-minded in their consideration of which learners fall under the label "refugee background" instead of aligning solely with Immigration New Zealand definitions. Adopting a broad definition of the category that encompasses the diverse pathways through which refugee background people arrive into Aotearoa New Zealand and our TEOs (Section 3.0) increases the likelihood that no individuals who self-identify as coming from a refugee-background (or refugee-like background) are excluded from accessing tertiary education or targeted institutional provisioning and support.

## 2.2 Geopolitical Context and New Zealand's Response

By May 2024, there were 120 million forcibly-displaced people worldwide as a result of conflict, violence and human rights violations. This figure (the largest ever recorded) included 43.4 million refugees.<sup>17</sup> In response to this enduring geopolitical context, Aotearoa New Zealand is one of 37 countries internationally which take part in the United Nations Commissioner for Refugees regular refugee programme. Together, these countries contribute to the resettlement of about one per cent of all refugees.

Since NZ first officially-recognised refugees in 1944, over 35,000 refugees from over 26 countries have been resettled here through the 1987 NZ Humanitarian Immigration Quota,<sup>18</sup> with thousands more accepted via alternate resettlement pathways including asylum, family reunification, and community organisation sponsorship (Section 3.0).

In 2013, New Zealand established its first national Refugee Resettlement Strategy (NZRRS) which upheld resettled refugees' rights to housing, health, education, employment and participation. It aimed to have former refugees participating fully and integrated socially and economically within society as soon as possible.<sup>19</sup> Full participation and integration were understood as former refugees living independently, undertaking responsibilities (such as employment), and establishing a strong sense of belonging within their own community and New Zealand.<sup>20</sup>

While often applauded internationally, the NZRRS (and policy underpinning it) received criticism for being overly focused on rapid self-reliance,<sup>21</sup> not offering genuine hospitality,<sup>22</sup> and for being discriminatory.<sup>23</sup> It largely precluded any forced migrants who entered the country via alternative pathways to the UN Quota (Section 3.0), and placed heavy emphasis on employment and independence rather than health and wellbeing.<sup>24</sup>

During 2022-23, the Refugee and Migrant Services branch within Immigration NZ (INZ) inside the Ministry of Business, Immigration and Employment (MBIE) carried out an extensive process of community engagement leading to a refresh of the NZRRS from 2024. The revised vision of this strategy now is that former refugees and their families settle successfully, achieve their goals, and thrive in Aotearoa New Zealand. This includes feeling safe and well, having a sense of belonging and being able to participate in and contribute to all aspects of life (social, economic, cultural, and civic).

The vision is underpinned by five settlement outcomes:

1. **Participation and Inclusion:** Former refugees and their families are welcomed and have a strong sense of belonging and acceptance in their communities and in Aotearoa New Zealand. They feel confident and safe to participate in different aspects of their lives.
2. **Health and Wellbeing:** Former refugees and their families achieve their health and wellbeing goals and thrive in their lives.
3. **Housing:** Former refugees and their families live in homes and in communities that meet their long-term needs and goals.
4. **Education, Training and English Language:** Former refugees and their families achieve their education, training and English language goals.

5. **Employment and Self-Sufficiency:** Former refugees and their families achieve their employment and self-sufficiency goals, building on their skills and experiences.

The refresh also led to the extension of the NZRRS to include Convention Refugees and those people entering New Zealand through the asylum-seeking pathway. Such changes are welcome and go some way to reducing the unevenness of the resettlement landscape. The NZRRS is also the larger guiding context within which any efforts to enhance RB Learner journeys sits because education is vitally important to successful resettlement outcomes as we outline in the next section.

## 2.3 Why Does Tertiary Education Matter in Refugee Resettlement?

The transformative potential of education is identified by many international organisations. UNESCO regards it as a critical tool to help people rebuild lives after disaster and displacement.<sup>25</sup> The UN more broadly made quality education access a pillar of its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) seeking to ensure that all individuals - especially those living in circumstances such as forced migration - have access to inclusive and quality educational opportunities.<sup>26</sup>

Although the potential benefits of accessing and completing tertiary education are immense, research shows that RB people access and participate at this education level at significantly lower rates than their non-refugee background peers.<sup>27</sup> In 2019, only three per cent of all refugee adolescents accessed tertiary education globally.<sup>28</sup> Acknowledging this as an education accessibility crisis, the UNHCR established the *15by30 Initiative*, setting a target goal of enrolling fifteen per cent of young refugee individuals in tertiary education programmes by 2030.<sup>29</sup>

At a national level, as noted in Section 1.0, we don't yet have data about RB Learner enrolment rates in tertiary education, or about enrolment rates in different kinds of TEOs. Neither do we know much about what TEOs might be doing to support or retain them, or how many graduate in which fields or with which qualifications.

What we do know is that a variety of TEOs play a vital role. For example, NZQCF Level 1-3 programmes support the development of former refugees' English language and literacy, and basic skills in numeracy and digital literacy. This is empowering for RB Learners who come from severely disrupted (or non-existent) educational backgrounds and therefore have no literacy or, in some cases, very basic literacy (e.g. can read and write but not make sense of a connected text). Such literacy is frequently developed alongside the use of English language to support engagement with day-to-day life in New Zealand, empowering the individuals to act for themselves, rather than be dependent on a mediator permanently. Further, in Te Pūkenga, PTEs and wananga, RB Learners gain positive skills via NZQCF Level 4 programmes and above including apprenticeships, which enable them to gain skilled employment and support the effective resettlement of their families. In other cases, such learning prepares RB Learners for degree level tertiary study, or they enter at this level because of prior education and training.

In all cases, tertiary education matters because it:

- enhances RB Learners' abilities in creative, critical thinking and knowledge about how best to tackle personal and wider development issues at different scales;<sup>30</sup>
- helps them to establish rich social connections with peers to foster social integration;<sup>31</sup>
- helps RB Learners attain financial independence via access to higher-waged employment opportunities;
- can rebuild RB Learners' former professional or work-based identities and re-establish their lives in a new setting;<sup>32</sup>
- stands as an affirmation of belonging - a tangible achievement and indicator of RB Learners' preparedness to participate within the workforce and society; and
- generates a ripple effect of positive development within an individual learner's life, and beyond into their family, community, and society.

In addition, receiving a tertiary qualification can be a critical indicator of a successful resettlement outcome,<sup>33</sup> but does not yet feature within the NZRRS. Some of the reasons for this situation include (but are not limited to):

- Resettlement strategies that prioritize low-skilled employment rather than education pathways;
- Lack of easily accessible information about education options;
- Language, financial or health barriers;
- Family/community responsibilities (both within New Zealand and overseas);
- Limited institutional bridging programmes or welcome prior to enrolment; and
- Invisibility as a learner group and lack of support within TEOs.

## **2.4 What does Aotearoa New Zealand currently provide to Tertiary Refugee-Background Learners?**

Within countries of resettlement such as Aotearoa New Zealand, access to, participation within, and completion of, tertiary education still remain unequal for RB people despite their willingness to "give back" to the country that has given them an opportunity of a new life. Currently, a number of provisions are available but ease of access can vary geographically and by organisational provider:

Some, like Pathways to Employment, are provided by a non-governmental organisation: Red Cross and specifically target RB people. Others are made via national government funding mechanisms (Student Allowance, Student Loan) and can be accessed by any domestic learner (NZ citizen or resident), but are not targeted towards or specifically reflective of RB Learner needs or characteristics. Then there are provisions for English language teaching (administered through the TEC) which are able to be accessed by TEOs to support RB Learners (but not exclusively so). Many TEOs also provide bridging or foundation programmes, which may support RB Learners, or offer targeted admissions pathways into particular programmes. Increasingly, TEOs, philanthropists and charities offer a range of

scholarships for RB Learners. We briefly review these provisions here and encourage readers to follow the endnotes to links where there will be more up-to-date information available.

### **New Zealand Red Cross: Pathways to Employment<sup>34</sup>**

Pathways to Employment (P2E) is a free and individualised service available in most regions that offers help with study and career planning to people from refugee or refugee-like backgrounds. P2E can provide an overview of the tertiary system, assistance in understanding the implications of choosing a particular course of study, help with connections to relevant people in TEOs, and with accessing all the necessary information regarding allowances, rights and obligations.

### **Student Allowance<sup>35</sup>**

Like other learners – RB Learners aged 18-65 and planning to study full-time at an approved TEO doing an approved course (undergraduate level 7 or below on the National Qualifications Framework, or up to a Bachelors degree with Honours) can apply for Student Allowance to support their tertiary studies. They must also be:

- a New Zealand citizen; or
- ordinarily resident in New Zealand and have lived in NZ for at least three years and are entitled to reside indefinitely in NZ for at least three years; or
- a refugee or protected person who is entitled to reside indefinitely in New Zealand;<sup>36</sup> or
- on a Christchurch Response 2019 Permanent Resident Visa or be eligible for it, even if they are already on another residence visa; or
- entitled to reside indefinitely in New Zealand and were sponsored into New Zealand by someone in their family who, at the time they were sponsored, was a refugee or protected person who was entitled to reside indefinitely in New Zealand; or
- on an Afghan Emergency Resettlement Visa, for study starting on or after 1 January 2022.

This weekly payment can help with living expenses and does not need to be paid back, but the amount a Learner receives is dependent upon how much other income they have and may also depend on their age, and parents' or partner's income. In our experiences as authors of this report, for RB Learners with complex family and living arrangements, there may be challenges associated with navigating application forms and providing appropriate evidence to secure the appropriate allowance amount to truly meet their needs.

RB Learners are also subject to the same lifetime allocation of Student Allowance as all other Learners despite their prior different circumstances (see Sections 3.0 and 4.0). Currently this is 200 weeks of tertiary study (around 5 years) for Learners under 40 years of age, and 120 weeks of tertiary study (around 3 years) for Learners over 40 years of age (including any weeks of student allowance a learner over 40 may have had before). There is no possibility to get more weeks of Student Allowance unless a Learner has had a serious illness, such as glandular fever, that affects their ability to study for a period of time, major accident and hospitalization, or has experienced other special circumstances (for example, a Civil Defense emergency like a flood which has displaced them from their accommodation).



Of particular concern to us is that the migration pathways and characteristics of RB Learners (detailed in Sections 3.0 and 4.0) may impact what courses a Learner needs to take, how they experience them, and how long they may need to achieve similar outcomes to non-RB Learners. While the conditions associated with Student Allowance rest with central government and are not something an individual TEO can control for, it is vital that student advisors working at all stages of an RB Learner journey consider the implications of their migration pathways and Learner characteristics when providing advice and support.

### **Student Loan<sup>37</sup>**

Alongside Student Allowance, RB Learners, like all Learners, can apply for a Student Loan. To access this, the same criteria as for Student Allowance (listed above) apply. Application for a Student Loan can be used to cover compulsory course fees, course-related costs and living costs. Student Loan is available for up to 2 EFTS of study per year (around 240 points or credits). It is not available to pay for hall of residence or hostel costs or special charges or fees associated with enrolment, payment by instalments or student association membership: some of the provisions – from our experiences - that would most help RB Learners access and stay engaged in tertiary study. Further, if a RB Learner is on a benefit as many may be, they can only get a loan to cover compulsory course fees and course related costs.

### **English Language Teaching<sup>38</sup>**

The TEC administers two funds to support English Language Teaching by TEOs:

#### **a) Intensive Literacy and Numeracy - English Language Teaching (ELT)**

This mechanism has three aims:

- i) to increase opportunities for adults to engage in literacy and numeracy learning, particularly migrants and former refugees;
- ii) to raise adults' literacy and numeracy skills to help learners progress onto further study and employment; and
- iii) to fund the intensive provision of ELT learning opportunities within an appropriately structured environment.

#### **b) Intensive Literacy and Numeracy Refugee English**

This mechanism also has three aims, some of which overlap with a) above, but which more explicitly target learners with refugee backgrounds:

- i) to increase opportunities for adults to engage in literacy and numeracy learning, particularly migrants and refugees;
- ii) to raise adults' literacy and numeracy skills to help learners progress onto further study and employment; and
- iii) to support those with a refugee background, or other special circumstances related to their transition to residence in New Zealand, to reach a level of English that will allow them to enter employment, or undertake their choice of vocational or degree-level education, by providing fees-free access to English Language Teaching (ELT) (formerly known as Specialised English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)) programmes at Level 3 or above on the New Zealand Qualifications and Credentials Framework (NZQCF).

Funding via this mechanism can only be used by TEOs for programmes which are a qualification or course at Level 3 and above on the NZQCF that supports ELT learners with English, and can include skills in preparation for further study.

RB Learners across the country can therefore access fees-free English language literacy and numeracy programmes, and the TEC also funds courses which build competency in te reo Māori, digital literacy and soft skills, as well as pre-trades learning. As many RB Learners come from severely disrupted (or non-existent) educational backgrounds and therefore have no literacy or, in some cases, very basic literacy (e.g. can read and write but not make sense of a connected text), such programmes can empower individuals to act for themselves and support their own and their families' resettlement outcomes.

At the time of writing, RB Learners (defined as noted above) are eligible for up to three years (or 36 months) of funded English Language Teaching provision. As part of this ILN Refugee English Funding from TEC, TEOs can support pastoral care to support RB Learners' successful completion of their study programmes. This funding can be applied to ILN learners, as well as other RB Learners within the TEO, to provide additional tutoring support or to remove barriers that may prevent learning (such as provision of textbooks and laptops, transport and childcare subsidies, as well as academic coordination and career advice).

From our experiences, navigating these funding mechanisms can be complex, particularly their relationship to the 200 weeks/five years fulltime equivalent maximum Student Allowance noted above. RB Learners needing English Language Teaching provision may be mis-recognised and receive inappropriate advice, or who may have several false starts before identifying the correct educational pathway for their abilities and aspirations, which can add time to their educational journeys. Sometimes, because of the additional literacy or language needs, RB Learners may use up all of their 200 weeks Student Allowance before completion of their ideal or main programme of study.

Further as noted elsewhere, with challenges about how best to recognise RB Learners generally within TEOs, the use of pastoral care funding within the ILN Refugee English provisions may be hard to allocate beyond ILN Refugee English initiatives if no enrolment data is collected or monitored.

To better support and advise RB Learners, readers are encouraged to read the detailed information about the ELT and REF \ at the link provided via the endnote above, as well as through the TEC,<sup>39</sup> and to attend to the Warning Tales in Section 5.0 of this report.

### **Bridging Programmes**

For RB Learners with higher literacy or English language knowledge, one or two semester bridging programmes (sometimes called Foundation programmes) are offered by many TEOs, particularly Te Pūkenga and universities (see Box 2.1). RB Learners may also need to demonstrate their English proficiency in an English for Academic Purposes course prior to bridging or foundation programme enrolment. Bridging or foundation programmes have some compulsory courses and some electives. They also count toward the allocated 200 weeks of Student Allowance.

## Box 2.1 Two Examples of TEO Foundation or Bridging Programmes

The University of Auckland (UoA) runs the **Tertiary Foundation Certificate (TFC)** programme. RB Learners are part of the UoA equity groups that are a particular focus of TFC. Only domestic students can enrol, and the fees are kept low. RB Learners on TFC can also access StudyLink (through which to apply for Student Loans and Student Allowance). Completing TFC gives them University Entrance.

Having completed TFC, a number of RB Learners go on to be very successful in their degree programmes. It is important that they come to TFC when they have a level of English that can support success and for that reason literacy is tested. UoA also recognise that Learners with certain backgrounds may take longer to complete TFC, needing perhaps 18, rather than 12 months to finish the eight required courses.

**New Start** is another a preparation programme option for those over 20 years of age, but Learners can't access Studylink with this course. New Start is part-time so is helpful for those needing to carry on with paid work whilst studying.

For RB Learners with a pre-intermediate level of English or higher, Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington offers the **English for Academic Purposes (EAP)** full-time 12-week programme. EAP can help RB Learners to develop foundational capabilities in academic literacy and university study skills.

Learners who successfully finish the EAP programme gain the Certificate of Proficiency in English (CertEnglProf) which enables them to go on to pursue further tertiary study at either undergraduate or postgraduate level. Graduates of this programme have gone on to successfully complete degrees and gain influential roles in government and non-governmental organisations.

These kinds of programmes enable RB Learners to become conversant and confident with subject language and concepts, computer use, tertiary study expectations and norms, academic language and interaction with classmates and staff. Graduates from such programmes have told us that they were able to discover new subject areas not considered previously, pursue new areas of enquiry in areas of interest, explore different approaches to study, navigate a new identity in the tertiary environment and be part of a community where people listened to their concerns and understood the many commitments they had.

In some cases, however, confusion over who RB Learners are and what they need, along with market pressure to attract and service international students within bridging or foundation programmes meant that some TEOs shifted away from the emphasis on English language training, charged higher fees, or removed places for RB Learners. When international student numbers dropped during COVID-19 because of border closures, some of these programmes were removed closing pathways for domestic RB Learners. Further, some bridging programmes into vocational training or degree programmes in regional TEOs have been disestablished further limiting RB Learners' pathways.

## **Scholarships**

There are growing numbers of scholarships which seek to support RB Learners. Some of these are from within TEOs themselves, some from charitable organisations like Rotary, and others from philanthropists such as the Sir Robert Jones' Refugee Daughters Scholarship. Increasingly TEOs also offer their own scholarships for RB Learners or learners who are first in family, from low-income families, who have disabilities or who may identify as LGBTQI+ and for which many RB Learners can apply. Despite this increase, the compounding factors identified within Sections 2.0, 3.0 and 4.0 of this report indicate that increased provision of grants-in-aid, scholarships and awards are still needed.

## **Summary**

As noted previously, all New Zealand TEOs are required under law to provide a fair, safe, diverse, and inclusive environment that promotes equal opportunities for all learners, including RB Learners.<sup>40</sup> While many TEOs now recognise RB Learners in their Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) policies and action plans, their smaller enrolment numbers or lack of visibility means that they receive less attention than other Learner groups. This is despite them sharing some similar characteristics with those recognised as experiencing historic disadvantage: Māori learners, Pasifika learners, first-in-family, learners from low-socio-economic backgrounds, and learners with disabilities.<sup>41</sup>

Table 2.1 presents a summary of provisions made by some NZ Universities for RB Learners in 2021. Despite the encouraging efforts being made, more consistently-recorded data, provision of financial support, dedicated staffing and coordination of efforts across the tertiary sector are needed if RB Learners are to achieve at the same rates as their peers. Some of these aspects inform particular Best Practice Guidelines.

As has been noted elsewhere in this section, while there are some standard national-level provisions (such as Student Allowance and Student Loans), provision of educational pathways, programmes and support services varies geographically so we encourage readers to do their own research into what is available for RB Learners in their own TEOs and regions, and to advocate for better data collection, monitoring and evaluation to improve RB Learners' equitable access to, and experiences within, tertiary education in this country.

**Table 2.1 Targeted Provisions for Refugee-Background Learners at some Aotearoa New Zealand Universities in 2021**

	RB Learners included in equity policy	Collects data on RB Learners	Scholarships/grants for RB Learners	Accepts SRJRD	SRJRD 50/50 agreement	Admission pathways for RB Learners	Webpage for RB Learners	Staff position to support RB Learners	RB Learner Club
Auckland	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
AUT			✓	✓	✓			✓	
Canterbury	✓			✓			✓		
Lincoln				✓					
Massey				✓					
Otago	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓			✓
Otago Polytechnic		✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓
VUW	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Waikato				✓	✓				

Source: Willette, 2020; NTN Members, 2021<sup>42</sup>

## 3.0 Refugee-Background Learner Pathways into Aotearoa New Zealand Tertiary Education

Since 2014, those people admitted through Aotearoa New Zealand's humanitarian immigration categories have come from 26 countries and four different continents, bringing with them many different languages and cultural practices.<sup>43</sup> This fact means that although they may share a history of forced migration, tertiary RB Learners may have very different pathways into the country and TEOs, which can then influence what curricula, support structures, and policies they may need.

Currently there are seven pathways into Aotearoa New Zealand TEOs. We list them here and briefly describe each in turn below:

1. UNHCR Quota
2. Refugee and Protection Status (Claim for Asylum)
3. Family Reunification (Refugee Family Support Category)
4. Refugee Sponsorship Programme (formally Community Organisation Sponsorship)
5. Special Residence Visas
6. Non-traditional Pathway
7. Descendent of Former Refugee

### 1. UNHCR Quota

A Quota Refugee is an individual who arrived through New Zealand's UNHCR Quota programme. Most – 1500 people per annum - of New Zealand's refugee-background population have been and are resettled through this pathway. The UNHCR screens applicants overseas for resettlement eligibility by assessing an individual or family's legal/physical protection needs, their potential prior experiences of torture and/or violence, medical needs, and risks/vulnerabilities associated with age, gender, sexual orientation, and disability. Immigration New Zealand also conducts screening off-shore as a follow up to the initial UNHCR screening.

Upon arrival in New Zealand, UNHCR Quota refugees are granted permanent residence status by the government, and undergo a 5-week orientation programme at Te Āhuru Mōwai o Aotearoa Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre, South Auckland. In the programme, they are introduced to NZ's social support systems, they participate in English language courses (and are provided with information about how to access them once they leave orientation), and they learn about day-to-day life within New Zealand. After completion, they are resettled at one of 13 different resettlement locations (see Figure 3.1), and receive resettlement support from Red Cross Refugee Services or other service providers. The Red Cross Pathways to Employment programme which helps with career planning and support to

achieve study and employment goals can be accessed at all times as long as clients are on a Work and Income benefit (see Section 2.4).

The learning needs presented by these individuals often vary widely within the category: some UNHCR Quota refugees can arrive with strong educational backgrounds, while others will have very disrupted or non-existent educational histories due to informal or irregular schooling, or the lack of provision of educational opportunities in refugee camps where they may have been resident (or born). Individuals may also have attending schooling in a second or third language while seeking asylum or applying for resettlement.

**Figure 3.1 Map of New Zealand Government's 13 UNHCR Quota Refugee Resettlement locations**



## **2. Refugee and Protection Status (Claim for Asylum)**

Individuals can also lodge a claim for refugee and protection status - more colloquially known as asylum - in New Zealand without being a Quota refugee. Unlike UNHCR Quota refugees who have travel expenses paid for by the New Zealand government, asylum-seekers cover the costs of their journey to New Zealand and file their claim for refugee and protection status while in the country - some immediately upon setting foot here, others may lodging a claim after living and working here for a number of years.

Lodging an asylum claim is a lengthy and expensive process which usually requires the help of a lawyer or immigration advisor to confirm the validity of the asylum seeker's claim to refugee status. Additionally, asylum-seekers encounter several restrictions while their claim is being processed that UNHCR Quota refugees do not. For example, they cannot leave New Zealand while their claim is being processed (unless they want to abandon their case), cannot work in New Zealand until their case is approved, and on their own they must find and pay for housing while awaiting their decision.<sup>44</sup> Organisations such as the Asylum Seeker Support Trust do offer some limited support to asylum seekers while their cases are being considered, providing emergency housing where possible and lending practical assistance depending on the individual's need.<sup>45</sup>

New Zealand is very selective about who is granted refugee and protection status: between 2014 and 2019, only 34% of asylum applications were approved (averaging 118 people granted asylum per year).<sup>46</sup> There are also increasing concerns about the treatment of people while they are seeking asylum, particularly associated with their detention in NZ prisons (although it is important to note that only a minority of asylum seekers end up here).<sup>47</sup> If asylum is granted, people become referred to as Convention Refugees and are entitled to work and receive the same government benefits as other New Zealand residents. After the refresh of the NZ Refugee Resettlement Strategy in 2023, and advocacy research carried out by Centre for Asia Pacific Refugee Studies at University of Auckland, they are now entitled to the same support as Quota refugees excluding time at Mangere centre.<sup>48</sup>

Convention Refugees may have high levels of education and employment histories in careers such as medicine, law, and journalism but find it hard to access work in New Zealand if their prior qualifications are not recognised. Many retrain or requalify within TEOs and do extremely well. Others find it hard to adapt to NZ's style of education and examination.

## **3. Family Reunification (Refugee Family Support Category)**

This pathway allows refugee-background individuals (who arrived as Quota Refugees or Convention Refugees, but not Community Organisation Sponsored Refugees), especially those living in New Zealand without immediate family members, to petition the government to invite family members living overseas to apply for resident visas. There are 600 Refugee Family Support Category places available each year and there is no cost to register or apply. Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) coordinate and pay for medical assessments. They also coordinate and pay the travel costs for approved cases. Sponsoring families are connected with resettlement support providers who help families plan for their



relative(s)' arrival. Since 2014, an average of 300 individuals per annum have been granted residency through this pathway (although there is currently a multi-year backlog of applications, partly as a result of suspension of this pathway during COVID-19).<sup>49</sup>

The New Zealand government requires family sponsors to be responsible for their family member(s)' needs throughout the processes of application and resettlement, particularly in relation to the provision of accommodation. Sponsoring families are connected with regional service providers who visit to offer advice and support.

Because family members arrive on a resident (not permanent resident) visa they do not qualify for a Job Seeker benefit (but can be granted financial support at the discretion of the case worker). That said, everyone with refugee-like backgrounds (including those sponsored by a former refugee or as asylum seekers) are able to access the NZ Red Cross Pathways to Employment programme which includes assessment of English competency and advice on potential pathways to realise educational and employment goals.<sup>50</sup>

Similar to the UNHCR Quota pathway, the tertiary learning needs of those who have entered New Zealand via a family reunification will be highly varied.<sup>51</sup> For example, some individuals will arrive with a greater English language proficiency than others, and some will have accessed tertiary education previously while others will have never had the opportunity to pursue formal education. Those arriving through this pathway are reliant on their family's knowledge of the educational systems and processes, which may vary considerably, and this can impact access into and navigation through tertiary education.

#### **4. Refugee Sponsorship Programme (CORS)**

The newest complementary pathway for refugee-background individuals to resettle in New Zealand is through the Refugee Sponsorship Programme. This was previously known as the Community Organisation Refugee Sponsorship (CORS) visa category which was first piloted in 2017-2018. This pathway admitted 24 refugee-background individuals to New Zealand sponsored, and supported through resettlement, by four approved community organisations. In the extended pilot programme 2021-2024 developed by Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) in partnership with Host International, the aim is to resettle 50 former refugees per annum for the next 3 years with settlement support provided by approved sponsors working in partnership with iwi and other key stakeholders.<sup>52</sup>

While refugees that come through this pathway receive a streamlined 2-week orientation programme at Mangere (similar to UNHCR Quota refugees), community organisations commit to provide them with resettlement services and to sponsor them for two years, providing them with housing, enrolment into government support programmes, advice about employment/education, and links to communities.

Because the UNHCR and NZ government select individuals for CORS who have "necessary skills" to make resettlement outcomes easier to achieve, they typically have stronger English proficiency, employment experience, and educational backgrounds than people who arrive via other New Zealand humanitarian pathways outlined above.<sup>53</sup> However, given the recency

of this pathway, the tertiary learning needs of the individuals who arrive via this channel are relatively unknown.

## **5. Special Residence Visas**

In some cases, people with refugee-like backgrounds have been granted Special Visas to enable them to leave conflict zones and shelter in New Zealand in the hope they can return home when the war ends. In 2021-22, Afghans who had supported New Zealand armed forces, fled conflict and arrived in New Zealand were permitted to apply for permanent residence. The 2022 Special Ukraine Policy was approved to enable New Zealand citizens and residents who were born in Ukraine or are Ukrainian citizens to sponsor Ukrainian family members and their immediate families to reside in New Zealand. Successful applicants have been granted a 2-year work visa, or study visa if they are 18 or younger. As of 11 March 2024, around 1,879 Special Ukraine Visas have been granted since the special category was created. In these situations, NZ-based sponsors are expected to provide resettlement support. As of December 2024 no such visa pathway has been extended to Palestinians.

## **6. Non-Traditional Pathways**

Some people who identify or affiliate with the 'refugee-background' label may not have not arrived via humanitarian visa pathways, or claimed asylum once in New Zealand. Instead, they may have entered the country via general immigration pathways (for example, skilled migrant visas or student visas).<sup>54</sup> The New Zealand government does not recognize these individuals as "refugees", yet they may share many similar narratives and learning support needs and can often be invisible within other initiatives. They may identify as having 'refugee-like backgrounds' and have felt compelled to leave their homelands in search of more tenable and safe lives.

## **7. Descent from Former Refugees**

The vast majority of RB Learners in TEOs will have been born in New Zealand and will have been educated within the NZ Education System. It is vital that TEOs recognise their domestic status and NZ residence or citizenship. They may be fluent in English (at least orally) and able to navigate institutional systems and social dynamics with relative ease. That said, they are also likely to have been, or continue to be, impacted by their parents' (or other family or community members') experiences of forced migration. Like Pasifika Learners born to migrant parents,<sup>55</sup> their learning support needs may be greater than their non-refugee background peers because of the expectations on them to be 'edge-walkers', moving within two worlds:<sup>56</sup> excelling in study while also honouring their family and community responsibilities.

**Figure 3.2. These are all Refugee-Background Learners**

Undergraduate cis-gender male RB Learner aged 19, who arrived as a UN Quota refugee into Aotearoa New Zealand at age 18, with limited English and a patchy secondary education. He is enrolled at a polytechnic and managing a part-time job.

Mature queer RB Learner aged 42 who was granted asylum in Aotearoa New Zealand two years ago after a distressing detention period. Their professional work experience and prior qualifications are not recognised so they have enrolled in an ESOL course and a trade qualification.

Second-generation cis-gender female RB Learner aged 21, who was born in Aoteroa New Zealand, is fluent in English and her parents' languages, and is now enrolled at a university and active in the RB student club and other leadership activities.

Postgraduate trans RB Learner aged 35, who immigrated to Aotearoa New Zealand on a skilled migrant visa and enrolled in a postgraduate diploma. They are still fleeing refugee-like circumstances and have not yet filed a claim for asylum. This is impacting their ability to study.

## 4.0 Refugee Background Learner Characteristics

As evidenced in Section 3.0, RB Learners have many pathways to settlement and into TEOs. Further, while the diverse range of experiences encapsulated within the label “refugee background” makes it challenging to develop a set of specific learner characteristics that honour all who affiliate with the category, international research has shown that many RB Learners do share similar characteristics that can play a part in their tertiary learning journeys. These can be summarised as learners who:

1. are multilingual;
2. may have experienced disruptions to their education;
3. tend to come from low socio-economic backgrounds;
4. have multiple commitments;
5. have diverse identities;
6. may have experienced trauma;
7. are likely to have experienced discrimination; and
8. are motivated, resourceful and resilient.

We briefly outline these characteristics below while also asking readers to keep in mind the previous seven different pathways into New Zealand and the many types of TEOs that can combine in particular ways with them to inform learners’ journeys and outcomes.

### 1. Learners who are multilingual

RB Learners often arrive in New Zealand with low English language proficiency. If NZ born, RB Learners may have relatively high English proficiency but still benefit from targeted support. Frequently, RB Learners struggle with the academic English necessary to understand and complete tertiary-level assignments even though they may present as near-fluent in every day spoken English.<sup>57</sup> This situation arises because many available English programmes for mature students prior to tertiary education teach language used in employment settings or for navigation of day-to-day life – individuals necessarily focus on the contexts most relevant to them at the time.<sup>58</sup>

RB Learners who arrive in New Zealand intermediate to high school aged need to acquire a minimum knowledge of English before they can cope with attending classes designed and delivered for their native English speaking peers. They are usually introduced gradually to subjects that are less linguistically demanding such as maths and physical education before progressing into other subjects. Unfortunately, this can limit young RB Learners’ exposure to subject-specific vocabulary, concepts, or practices.<sup>59</sup> Thus, a range of language barriers can result in RB Learners spending longer to understand and complete course content than their non-RB Learner peers.<sup>60</sup>

More positively, RB Learners often respond very well to foundation and bridging programmes which introduce them to tertiary academic study skills and English language

and subject-specific vocabulary. Further, RB Learners' multilingualism enhances their capacity to imagine, think creatively, and generate new ideas in ways that can enrich the tertiary classroom, the quality of their work, and TEOs as a whole.<sup>61</sup> In response to internationalisation, TEOs also are becoming more cognisant of the need to adopt language planning within their approaches to teaching, research and administration, which may better recognise and support multilingual Learners.<sup>62</sup> There are also increasing efforts internationally to decolonise TEOs through attention to the politics of language.<sup>63</sup>

## **2. Learners who may have experienced disruptions to their education**

Many RB Learners report having gaps in their educational journey where they were not able to attend school and were either taught informally by family/friends/the wider community, or not at all. These disruptions are often felt most acutely by those who encountered these gaps during their primary/secondary/high school years rather than those who encountered disruptions at a tertiary-level. A disrupted education can lead to many months or years of schooling being lost, placing RB Learners in a position of having to "catch up" with their non-RB Learner peers while also navigating a new language and/or new institutional systems and processes.

Disrupted prior education, in combination with low English language proficiency and/or inaccurate documentation, mean that schools may place RB students in classes that do not reflect their ages (e.g., a 17 year old student being placed in a Year 10 classroom in recognition of their English competence and their foundation knowledge of the subject). Some schools may place students in programmes only by age without considering external factors that may limit their ability to succeed within their age group, resulting in these RB Learners being placed in ESOL classes all day.

Additionally, RB Learners may not complete high school with the necessary qualifications for tertiary study (or complete high school at all), and may enrol in Private Training Establishments (PTEs) to pick up required credits or alternative qualifications. At the point of tertiary enrolment therefore, many RB Learners may be chronologically older than their non-RB Learner peers, which can have different implications for what kinds of support they may require, and which may enable them to bring a more mature orientation to their studies.

It is also important to note that for some RB families and communities, educational disruption often extends beyond the individual themselves. Generational disruptions to education – where parents, grandparents, and other close family members may not have accessed primary or secondary education and therefore struggle with literacy and numeracy – often further impact RB Learners' tertiary journeys.

## **3. Learners who tend to come from low socio-economic backgrounds**

The financial costs associated with tertiary education often pose a significant barrier to RB Learners. For some, inadequate information and over-estimation of costs means some potential RB Learners opt out of even considering tertiary study. For others who do proceed

to enrolment, researchers have found that RB Learners are likely to support themselves and/or their family while pursuing their tertiary studies (especially if they are older as noted above)<sup>64</sup> and the continued costs of remaining enrolled can present challenges to completing their qualifications. Employment obligations and financial pressures may make it more difficult for RB Learners to dedicate the necessary time toward their tertiary study (see 5. below), and add to their stress as Learners.<sup>65</sup>

Being 'first in family' is also very common, and as with other learner groups, being in such a position can mean that RB Learners may have little awareness of how Student Allowance, Student Loan, scholarships and TEOs work, or what financial and other support may be available. In a New Zealand context, RB Learners are often not made aware that there is a finite lifelong allocation of Student Allowance (200 weeks), and that English programmes from NZQA Level 1 onwards count toward these hours, meaning that it is not uncommon for them to run out of student allowance before completing their programme of study. Without timely and adequate knowledge, they can find themselves in more hardship than necessary.

Role models and visibility of successful RB Learners have also been identified as vitally important for motivation and aspirational confidence.<sup>66</sup> There can be significant differences between ethnic communities regarding prior educational attainment. Some ethnic communities with RB Learners may overall have a high level of tertiary qualified people in the 'parent generation,' meaning that attaining tertiary qualifications are often more normalised. In other ethnic communities, there were few opportunities to access tertiary education due to ongoing crisis and generational repression prior to resettlement, meaning that the 'parent generation' does not often have tertiary qualifications. Thus RB Learners from these communities who are enrolled in New Zealand tertiary education programmes may encounter more significant barriers from not having visible role models who understand tertiary education processes.

In addition, many families from refugee backgrounds are resettled into housing which doesn't adequately meet their needs. RB Learners typically come from larger families so there may be little private space to study or rest at home. They may not have reliable or consistent access to a personal computer or internet connection. There may also be expectations that 'study happens at school' and their time is called on to support family members within the household or overseas via social media. In some cases, RB Learners may not have parents or older relatives living with them, but instead be caring for other younger members of their family or community. Finally, the location of affordable or government-provided housing can also mean that transport costs and travel times into TEOs are high, again adding to the financial challenges these Learners face.

#### **4. Learners who have multiple commitments**

In addition to obligations to financially support their families noted above (see 3. above) RB Learners may be expected to help their family and community at cultural/religious events, with translation in interactions with government or other agencies, and with domestic duties and childcare. All of these aspects may provide comfort, belonging and meaning for RB Learners and honour their multilingualism and adaptability, but can also detract from the time needed to focus on tertiary study.<sup>67</sup> Demands can weigh heavily on Learners who want

to honour their parents and relatives who have endured so much to establish new lives in New Zealand. In addition, their family members may be unaware of the demands required to complete and succeed within tertiary education particularly if they are not literate in English and have not completed further study themselves.

## **5. Learners with diverse identities**

The diversity of RB Learners' cultures, languages, religions, ethnicities and nationalities as well as their migration histories and/or entry pathways into New Zealand inform RB Learners' ideas, talents, and creativity, and make TEOs more multicultural. This diversity also means that individual RB Learners are likely to be navigating different values, expectations, opportunities and worldviews as they walk between two or more worlds as noted above. No homogeneity can be assumed under the label of 'refugee background' and initiatives or clubs labelled as such will not appeal to all.

For many RB Learners, family, faith and community play large roles in their educational choices and lives. Family and community members may have strong expectations about what RB Learners study. Some research has shown that RB Learners within tertiary education are more likely to pursue high-wage, high-prestige qualifications (such as medicine, law, and engineering) and that family/community may influence these decisions – sometimes to the Learner' detriment.<sup>68</sup> Additionally, RB Learners may be pressured to *not* undertake tertiary study and instead prioritise paid employment to support family and community.

In many countries where RB Learners originate from, entry to tertiary education is highly contested. Once accepted, individuals in these countries can be generally assured of success within their studies. However, in a country like New Zealand which values second-chance education, open admission policies for mature students means that entry is just the beginning of an individual's tertiary education journey. Students in New Zealand are required to continually provide evidence of their learning throughout the programme (including in course assessments as well as exams), which may be unexpected for mature students coming from other tertiary education contexts.

Depending on the specific cultural, ethnic or religious background of each RB Learner, there may also be gendered expectations about what to study, where to study or about whether tertiary education is even desirable (for example, women may be expected to be involved in domestic duties and childrearing, while men may be expected to prioritise employment over education).<sup>69</sup> Importantly, relationships with family, community and God have also been acknowledged by many RB Learners as vitally important to their sense of wellbeing and success in life.<sup>70</sup>

Consistent with other tertiary learners, most RB Learners in TEOS are in their 20s. This means that they are experiencing intense personal growth as they grapple with their emerging adult status, who their families and culture expects them to be, as well as who they understand themselves to be. For RB Learners of diverse sexualities or with disabilities, their navigation of self-family-community-institution-society relationships and expectations may be particularly complex.<sup>71</sup>

In addition, a significant proportion of RB Learner are older juggling the demands of family life or sole-parenthood (particularly for women). They navigate other negotiations of identity as gendered and/or intergenerational norms are reworked during resettlement.

## **6. Learners who may have experienced trauma**

TEOs should not assume that *all* RB Learner will be traumatised by their forced migration experiences. Assuming that all refugee-background people are traumatised by their journeys reinforces harmful stereotypes of refugees as victims and individuals without agency or the potential to move forward with their lives.<sup>72</sup> In tertiary education contexts, viewing RB Learners through this lens can cripple their future aspirations and limit their future potential.<sup>73</sup> Just like any other tertiary learner, RB Learners may benefit from mental health support while undertaking their studies, but not all will need it.

That said, some RB Learners may have encountered traumatic and distressing situations or events as refugees or asylum seekers which continue to affect their learning, requiring more mental health support than some of their non-RB Learner peers.<sup>74</sup> Further, even if RB Learners may not have encountered traumatic experiences directly on their forced migration journeys, they may be concerned and/or be emotionally present for family members still in dangerous situations overseas<sup>75</sup> or supporting others coping with different aspects of trauma or post-traumatic responses here in New Zealand. Increasingly, researchers recognise that traumas can surface many years after arrival in a host country and be provoked by the post-settlement compound challenges of housing, health, employment, language learning and discrimination.<sup>76</sup>

## **7. Learners who are likely to have experienced discrimination**

Related to characteristic 6 above, RB Learners are highly likely to have encountered discrimination prior to, within, and outside of TEOs in New Zealand. RB Learners in various international studies have reported feeling that both their peers and TEO staff have been unaware of the diversity of the experiences encompassed within the label “refugee background”, and that many associate the label with negative stereotypes portrayed in the mainstream media (for example those of refugees being victims, helpless, traumatized, or in need of constant support).<sup>77</sup>

This discrimination associated with RB Learners’ ‘refugeeness’ may also be infused or compounded by unconscious or conscious bias based on their country of origin, ethnic group, skin colour, accent, religious identity, cultural dress, food choices, name (and perceived difficulty pronouncing it), English language ability, gender, sexuality, ability and perceived ‘class’.<sup>78</sup> Such bias may be felt from teachers and advisors prior to tertiary education, as well as from TEO staff (academic and professional) and other tertiary learners. For instance, in several Australian studies, Black African-heritage students reported higher rates of racism or discrimination than lighter-skinned students.<sup>79</sup> Muslim students face misunderstanding and discrimination associated with their beliefs, with Muslim women wearing hijab being particularly affected.<sup>80</sup> In many cases, based on biased or discriminatory



assumptions, responses and decisions of well-intentioned 'helpers', RB Learners are given inappropriate advice or prevented from realising their potential or aspirations.

Due to this discrimination, many RB Learners are reluctant to identify with the category 'refugee-background' and may be hesitant to disclose their identity to peers and staff members.<sup>81</sup> This lack of disclosure presents a challenge for TEO staff trying to advocate for RB Learners as many TEOs require numerical data about their student body upon which to base decisions about resource allocation and staffing. It also poses challenges for attempts to raise the visibility of RB Learners through clubs, media coverage and so forth, or to provide targeted information, support and scholarships.

At a national scale, ongoing discrimination and the lack of student disclosure impacts efforts to gather data across the tertiary sector to inform policy and planning for this learner group.

## **8. Learners who are motivated, resourceful and resilient**

Acknowledging all of the characteristics outlined above, RB Learners are also highly motivated. RB Learners do not take tertiary study for granted and frequently have high aspirations to use the knowledge gained to help their others in need overseas and in New Zealand. Research has consistently highlighted that forced migration experiences can increase RB Learners' resilience, adaptability and focus. The challenging journeys many have faced have empowered them to overcome barriers associated with accessing and completing tertiary education.<sup>82</sup>

As Mupenzi (2018: 124) notes, the very act of enrolling in a tertiary programme in a resettlement country like New Zealand is a powerful display of personal resilience and achievement given the many obstacles that often make it challenging to enrol.<sup>83</sup> That said, RB Learners must also be resourceful. Many are expert navigators of institutional processes and build effective relationships with TEO staff and other students to support academic and social outcomes. They also juggle multiple responsibilities and express commitment to raise awareness about their cultures and refugee experiences.

## 5.0 Refugee-Background Learner Journeys Through New Zealand Tertiary Education

Each Refugee-Background (RB) Learner's pathway into, and journey through, tertiary education is unique. In addition, the rich diversity of resettlement pathways, personal characteristics and specific experiences (as noted in previous sections) make it particularly challenging to develop a generic RB Learner journey to inform best practice guidelines.

In what follows, therefore, we have sought to reflect a range of possible experiences for a handful of (fictional) RB Learners related to:

- 5.1 Pre-access: outreach and relationship building
- 5.2 Access: pathways and admission
- 5.3 Participation: transition, engagement and progression
- 5.4 Attainment: completion and graduation
- 5.5 Transitions out: graduate destinations (employment and postgraduate studies)

We travel alongside 'Sai', 'Ely' and 'Jess' (fictional, composite identities) as they encounter ideal experiences entering and progressing through, and graduating from tertiary education.

Following these ideal experiences, we then identify the more common realities that such Learners face drawn from our lived experiences and efforts working with RB Learners. We also include some poignant warning tales from or about actual Learners in the tertiary sector (names have been changed) to highlight aspects of these realities.

In each case, the material presented is informed by existing research about RB Learners in tertiary education, frequently shared accounts within the NTN, as well as observations or narrative accounts from contributors to this document based on real life events.

As you read, we ask you lean into the experiential and felt dimensions of the Learners' journeys; to imagine yourself in their shoes if you will. Then we encourage you to consult the corresponding section A – E of the *Best Practice Guidelines to Support Refugee Background Tertiary Learners* to identify what steps you and your TEO can take to mitigate the common realities, learn from the warning tales, and enable more of the ideal experiences recounted here to become the new normal.

## 5.1 Pre-access: outreach and relationship building

### Refugee-background Learners' ideal experiences

'Sai' arrived with their parents through the UN Quota system, appreciated their time in Mangere Reception Centre, and then went through their local primary and intermediate schools. Since they were in Year 9, Sai has enjoyed the visits by TEO staff to their school. Sai has also gotten to know some staff by name as they frequently attend RB community events where they share clear and engaging information about the TEO in the community's first languages. They go out of their way to speak with Sai and others to share inspiring stories about RB Learners at the TEO. Knowing these stories and some of the RB Learners being showcased makes Sai want to be like them.

As a result of the visits, Sai signs up for a mentorship programme organised by the TEO which pairs RB Learners in Year 10 and above with RB tertiary Learners. Participation in this programme along with Open Days and Campus Tours means that prior to enrolling Sai and their family are very familiar with the TEO and understand what is expected of tertiary study. Sai's family, friends, and close community members appreciate how welcome everyone makes them feel every time they visit the campus, particularly for events such as diversity festivals where they can share their cultures and talents.

At home, Sai has access to a computer, reliable internet and enough English language understanding to explore TEO websites across the country.<sup>84</sup> These websites have specific advice for RB Learners which is easily searchable and which allows Sai to compare what they cost and what they offer. Sai feels inspired and optimistic that every TEO will be a welcoming place and will understand their needs.

More specifically, Sai is happy that each TEO's information is clearly laid out, easy to understand and comprehensive covering:

- important dates and advice about information evenings and sessions,
- clear details about transitional or bridging programmes, academic English language programmes and skill development workshops,
- information about prospective fields of study and services to support learning in them,
- admission criteria and enrolment instructions,
- contact details for staff with knowledge of RB Learner who look friendly and in some cases are also from refugee backgrounds,
- details of helpful grants and scholarships for RB Learner offered by the TEO as well as other organisations,
- tips about accommodation options and costs, as well as student allowance, budgeting and financial advice,
- helpful information specific to RB Learners of different genders, sexualities, ethnicities, abilities and religions,
- case studies, images and videos of RB Learners like them who seemed happy, honest and successful sharing helpful tips and insights,
- details of a mentoring programme for RB Learners involving more senior learners who can buddy and guide new learners during the first six months of their programme,

- links to student clubs where they can see images or videos of other RB Learners who look like them, as well as lots of different kinds of other Learners who appear to respect diversity and are having fun,
- information about a pan-TEO network of professional and academic staff who actively support RB Learners (the NTN),
- links to the TEO's Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Policy which shows RB Learners as a recognised group, and
- links to external agencies that work closely with the TEO to support RB Learners such as Red Cross Refugee Services and local organisations.

What particularly impresses Sai is that each website has succinct summaries of key information provided in their family's first language (as well as many others), which means that Sai's parents / family members and mentors can read it and help them to make more informed decisions. For Sai, the ability to include these people makes the decision-making process less lonely and daunting. It also helps Sai's parents / family members to have more realistic expectations about what tertiary study involves.

Although initially concerned about the costs of pursuing tertiary education, Sai is encouraged by all of the tailored financial support available for RB Learners at New Zealand TEOs. Many of these support partial or full payment of tuition and fees, and several offer living allowances including transport and living expenses. They mean that Sai can consider programmes which most interest them rather than be limited to those on offer in their resettlement region.

Another prospective RB Learner, 'Ely', obtained a tertiary qualification overseas prior to their recent resettlement in New Zealand. Unfortunately, during their forced migration journey, the physical evidence of this tertiary qualification was lost. A high achiever, Ely had always dreamed of completing a Master's degree, and has found a specific programme tailored to their interests in their resettlement city's TEO.

They meet with an empathetic postgraduate student adviser at this institution, who listens to their story, understands the situation, assesses their previous qualification, and verifies it as adequate toward entry into the Master's programme. The advisor also enables their access to a preparatory Foundation/bridging programme. Ely is happy to see that the programme is fees free for RB Learners who have recently arrived from overseas as well as others who have been assessed as needing a bit more support between high school and tertiary study. Ely appreciates how the programme covers English language content, academic writing, technology usage, and NZ academic culture. They also appreciate the opportunity to make lots of new friends before embarking on their Master's degree.

For Sai and Ely electing a TEO and programme of study, as well as sorting out finances and enrolment are so much easier than anticipated! Online processes are user friendly and everyone Sai and Ely interact with is welcoming, knowledgeable, enthusiastic, clear and supportive. Sai and Ely can't wait to get started and feel confident about what they need to do ahead of time to get ready. They look forward to Orientation.

## Refugee-background Learners' common realities

Unlike Sai and Ely, many prospective RB Learners have limited access to information about tertiary education (including but not limited to the different types of TEOs, different tertiary programmes, and enrolment procedures or costs) or, where they do have access, they find the information overly complicated, hard to navigate and difficult share with family and community members. Many TEOs do not actively recruit prospective RB Learners or engage with RB communities in their region or provide helpful pathways into tertiary study.

Finances have been cited as a major barrier for RB Learners seeking to access tertiary education. In New Zealand, some TEOs do provide targeted grants and scholarships, but none offer living allowances (ex: money to cover living expenses, food, transport etc.) to ensure that RB Learners can continue to stay enrolled in their studies. Currently, only one external scholarship, the Sir Robert Jones Refugee Daughters Scholarship, covers full tuition, fees and hostel accommodation expenses for female RB Learners aged 18-25 who intend to study away from their family and community.

Currently, many NZ TEOs offer foundation and bridging programmes for RB Learners and their migrant/international student counterparts, but not many provide tailored support or targeted pathways for RB Learners, particularly those wanting to enter into highly competitive programmes like Medicine, Dentistry and Law. Additionally, from our experiences bridging or foundation programmes may come at a cost (both financial and time) that can dissuade prospective RB Learners from enrolling in them. Further, bridging programmes at some institutions have been made unavailable to domestic students (including RB Learners) in favour of full-fee-paying international students. Finally, sometimes well-intentioned staff, who do not recognise RB Learners are domestic students, can provide them with incorrect (and costly) enrolment advice targeted toward international students.

Many RB Learners who have previously obtained tertiary qualifications overseas are excluded from TEOs in resettlement contexts because these institutions do not recognise their qualifications.<sup>85</sup> Additionally, tertiary qualification documents are often lost or confiscated during the forced migration journey, meaning that many RB Learners are unable to prove that they obtained them. The NZQA Qualification recognition service does offer assessment of RB Learners based on self-report if no certificates or transcripts can be provided by the learner or host country institution. However, their prior qualifications may be deemed to be of a lower level when compared to a similar Aotearoa New Zealand qualification. More commonly, individual TEOs determine whether or not they will recognise previously obtained qualifications. If institutions are not convinced by the strength of a previously-acquired qualification, they will often ask RB Learners to repeat or take courses. This process can be frustrating and demoralizing for prospective RB Learners resulting in them turning away from tertiary education as a viable option upon resettlement.<sup>86</sup>

## Box 5.1 Pre-Access: Warning Tale

Srey (pseudonym) was an experienced health professional in her home country. Srey wanted to continue to work in the same area in NZ but was advised to study English language courses and to gain NZ qualifications to meet registration requirements. Even though her oral language skills were strong, her academic listening, reading and writing skills needed a lot of development to meet the demands of tertiary study. Srey enrolled in the NZ Certificate of English Language (NZCEL) programme but struggled with her workload and the complexity of assignments. Additionally, there were several issues external to her programme that were beyond Srey's immediate control: an unstable housing situation, personal health issues, and unwell family members that she needed to look after. Srey was only able to attend 50% of her classes because of these challenges. She could not attend final assessments (which were modified to try to cater for her circumstances) and she did not pass the programme.

Srey returned to study the following trimester. She was very keen to attend as much as possible, develop her language skills and pass. A bilingual learning advisor began meeting Srey regularly to support her although once again her life circumstances were complex. Her health and housing situations had not improved: Her name was removed from Housing NZ lists because she turned down a house which she felt was inappropriate. Eventually, her name was returned to the list, and she shifted her family into a new house, which was stressful and energy consuming. Teaching staff realized that she wasn't attending and was unlikely to progress. At further meetings with the bilingual learning advisor and teaching staff, Srey explained the circumstances above, and added that she was often up until 2am resolving wider community issues. Despite the elevated levels of support for Srey, her tertiary study was severely impacted by the wide range of challenges she faced.

In the case of Srey, the TEO could have supported her earlier with more targeted pastoral care. However, it was difficult to offer flexibility within the NZCEL programme, with its pass/fail end point that can negatively affect her lifetime learner weeks and potentially impact future access to Student Allowance via StudyLink. A mechanism like Intensive Literacy and Numeracy ESOL funding and enrolment in a training scheme, rather than a full programme like NZCEL may have worked better for Srey and put less pressure on her and teaching staff.

## **5.2 Access: pathways and admission**

The first year of tertiary study often presents challenges as RB Learners adjust to this new life and navigate institutional systems and coursework expectations. While RB Learners encounter many of the same difficulties as other first-year tertiary learners, they also may encounter some unique challenges associated with the characteristics outlined previously in Section 3.0.

### **Refugee-background Learners' ideal experiences**

After being accepted into their programme of choice, RB Learner Sai is beyond thrilled to commence their studies. Sai is happy to identify as coming from a refugee background on the TEO enrolment form. Seeing that option makes them feel acknowledged and that the TEO is aware of RB Learners' unique experiences. The brief examples explaining what it might mean to come from a refugee background as well as what it would enable once enrolled help Sai affirm their choice to identify in this way.

Before teaching starts, Sai is invited to attend a specific RB Learner orientation event. At the event, Sai meets other RB Learners, tours the TEO, and becomes acquainted with services (such as learning support, equity support, library, a RB Learner Advisor and a RB Learners' club). There is also a pōwhiri and opportunity to connect with Māori students, which feels very significant to Sai. Lots of friendly people help Sai feel known and safe.

At the welcome orientation event, and at subsequent times during the teaching year, the RB Learner Advisor is available for questions, regularly provides information and study skills sessions (with learning support staff), and advocates on learners' behalf if they encounter difficulties within the TEO. Because the RB Learner Advisor is from a refugee background or refugee-like background themselves, Sai feels comfortable approaching them for support.

Using the enrolment data and regular reports from it, the RB Learner Advisor can see where RB Learners are enrolled across the TEO and knows where to target support to both Learners and teaching staff. The RB Learner Advisor also uses a dedicated email list to reach out to Sai and other RB Learners with opportunities within and beyond the TEO, and runs a mentorship programme which pairs them with an RB Learner a year or two ahead of them. As a result they feel knowledgeable about how the TEO works, and feel empowered to see other RB Learners succeeding and completing their tertiary education goals.

Sai also becomes acquainted with the friendly RB Learner Advocate associated with their programme. This Advocate is Sai's go-to contact person for questions/concerns about their specific programme, courses, and teaching staff. The RB Learner Advocate works very closely with the RB Learning Advisor as part of a pan-TEO network of Advocates who build the capacity of teaching and support staff to better understand and support RB Learners.

Sai has many opportunities to forge strong friendships and these continue as they progress through their TEO. They meet other RB Learners through RB Learner-focussed events, as well as through participation in RB Learners' Club. These relationships help them to succeed

and thrive as they feel their background and experiences are fully understood and valued. Sai also makes lasting friendships with non-refugee-background peers through interest-based clubs.

Alongside the above, Sai receives specific support to manage finances and buy a laptop. They have easy access to targeted learning support through their programme and the wider TEO, and are shown where there are helpful warm, quiet workspaces and access to 'hang out' spaces. They are able to plan and use their time effectively to minimise stress and to make the most use of opportunities to learn and strengthen their academic outcomes.

Throughout the first year, teachers in Sai's programme are friendly and approachable. Teaching staff take the time to pronounce Sai's name correctly. They make accessing the course material more inclusive to Sai (and wider English Language Learners) by slowing down their pace of delivery.<sup>87</sup> They also actively encourage Sai and other RB Learners to play an active role in class through more small group discussion, labs, tutorials and study.<sup>88</sup> Staff welcome learners to come to them with any questions or concerns about the course material, inside and outside the classroom, and are empathetic to their needs. Teaching staff are careful not to fall into stereotyping RB Learners, and instead encourage and promote the strengths of their learners to succeed in their courses.<sup>89</sup> Teaching staff make a point of incorporating content into their lectures that acknowledges and promotes cultural diversity to promote an inclusive learning environment.

Because of these inclusive and safe learning environments, Sai feels actively encouraged to participate and builds confidence to extend their networks to navigate their TEO competently. They feel a genuine sense of belonging as well as respect from others they encounter. Such experiences also help them make the most of guidance provided about what to do as they head towards second year or after completion of their programme. This information motivates Sai to work even harder in the second half of the year to get the best marks they can, and to begin planning well in advance for housing, scholarships or entry into specialist programmes (like law, medicine etc.).

## **Refugee-background Learners' common realities**

Only a few NZ TEOs collect data on RB Learners by offering students the option to select "refugee-background" on their enrolment forms. Beyond offering RB Learners an initial sense of acknowledgement by their TEOs, the data ensures TEOs (and the Tertiary Education Commission) better understand these learners and develop initiatives to improve learner success and wellbeing outcomes. However, some RB Learners may be unlikely to choose to identify in this way due to ongoing societal stigma as discussed in previous sections.<sup>90</sup> Therefore, all TEOs can assume that they have more RB Learners enrolled with them than may be evident from any enrolment data collected.

Not many NZ TEOs host orientation events specifically for RB Learners. However, where they are carried out, it is clear that their benefits build vital connections between RB Learners and key staff and between staff themselves. Where it is possible to run guided tours to orient Learners to the geography of the TEO and/or campus as well as a pōwhiri, these help to build Learners' confidence to move around and feel more connected to the place of their TEO.



New Zealand's nationally-designated student equity groups are typically supported by at least one identifiable staff member from the same group within each TEO. However, since RB Learners are not officially-designated as an equity group within national education policy, many TEOs do not currently have a RB Learner Advisor. Support is often ad hoc provided by well-intentioned teaching or other professional staff. However, specific knowledge about RB Learners may be missing or actions may be misplaced. It may also be hard to sustain support systems if key staff are reassigned or leave their institutions.

TEOs are often isolating and culturally-alienating settings for RB Learners, particularly during their first year.<sup>91</sup> Research has shown that first-year RB Learners often find it difficult to see themselves represented within the student body. First-year courses, which often have large class sizes, can be intimidating for RB Learners (as well as for other first-years) and contribute to feelings of invisibility. Additionally, research has shown that RB Learners are often discriminated against by both their staff and peers due to systemic racism, religious discrimination or gender bias associated with wider stigmas about 'refugees'. Teaching staff are often unaware and/or unsympathetic toward the challenges RB Learners may face.<sup>92</sup> They may not adjust their pedagogies and approaches making it harder for RB Learners to engage or keep up with work assigned. As a result, many RB Learners feel alienated in classroom spaces and tend not to speak up or contribute, missing out on valuable learning opportunities. These experiences then have a 'knock-on' effect as their confidence to engage and seek information beyond the classroom are reduced.

### **Box 5.2      Access: Warning Tale**

Isabella (pseudonym) completed NCEA, went straight to university and was somewhat unprepared academically for what was expected in tertiary study. Isabella's parents did not complete education in their home country, did not speak English and did not understand the demands of university study. They were very proud of her entry into university, but they continued to rely on her to translate for them at appointments and to run other errands, which was time consuming. At the same time, they expected her to finish her undergraduate degree in three years.

Isabella and her family faced many external pressures during this time: CoVID-19 was spreading uncontrolled in their home country and her close relatives were in lockdown and unable to work. A few relatives passed away from the virus. Her family in New Zealand, while grieving, also needed to financially support their distant kin. This put added pressure on Isabella to help at home while her parents and siblings went out to work. If she refused to help, her family would become cross with her, which meant that home was not an ideal place to study, especially during the periods of lockdown. Even with a tertiary student discount, Isabella could not afford the public transport fare to come to campus to study, and her family did not have reliable access to a car. Isabella was too scared to tell her family that she failed some of her courses and might take longer than 3 years to finish her degree.

As she progressed with her Politics degree, Isabella had a shaky grasp of her subject area. She did not read the news so was unaware of most of the issues used by her lecturers as examples. She continued to get Cs and Ds despite a concerted effort. She received help from student learning services with little effect. She was put on restriction at the end of her first year, prolonging her degree time. She has avoided telling her parents and was considering dropping out altogether because finding work was beginning to feel more achievable than completing her studies.

## 5.3 Participation: transition, engagement and progression

### Refugee-background Learners' ideal experiences

Sai has successfully completed first year and confirmed their programme of study. They received great advice about how to manage their student allowance and how to plan to complete their studies in the appropriate time. Although their classes are more demanding in their second and third years, the foundations laid in their first-year have helped them feel empowered to succeed and complete their certification(s).

Another RB Learner 'Jess', who arrived in New Zealand through the Family Reunification pathway with good English and a sound educational background, also feels settled and confident. After taking a range of courses during their first year, Jess wants to apply for a highly selective programme of study. They are encouraged to learn of an entry category for RB Learners into the programme, and that a few admissions slots annually are reserved for learners like them. Although there are no guarantees that Jess will gain entry to the programme, they feel more hopeful than they would have without the pathway, and are happy that the TEO acknowledges the potential challenges they and other RB Learners have encountered during their educational journeys.

As a result of the support and resources that Jess and Sai received during their first year, they keep connected with the RB Learner Advisor who helps them tackle various challenges, and they use their local RB Advocate when they have questions or need specific advocacy. As they progress through their programmes, the teaching and support staff they encounter remain friendly, warm, and empathetic. They are able to access ongoing financial support for their studies, which means that as their programmes become more intellectually challenging and time intensive, they stay engaged because they are not having to undertake shift or part-time work.

Jess and Sai's strong networks within and beyond their programmes mean that they also find time to have fun and develop other capabilities. Their TEO informs them about extracurricular activities and initiatives like leadership programmes, internships and volunteer possibilities. The TEO offers small grants that RB Learners can apply for to help fund their participation in extracurricular activities (ex: sport club membership fees or cost of an outdoor education course). In addition, the RB Learners' Club is very active with social events and advocacy. Some events help to connect Sai and Jess' families into the TEO and make communication about study easier at home. They find many moments of joy and belonging especially with their peers, and these contribute to their wellbeing and support their studies.

During their programmes, Sai and Jess continue in the mentoring programme with other RB Learners transitioning from being mentees in years 1 and 2 to being mentors in their final year. This programme is managed by the RB Learner Advisor: the mentors and mentees receive a training session each year to help them establish their relationship and goals. Their participation in it is also acknowledged on their academic transcripts as a leadership activity.

Towards the end of their academic or study programmes, Jess and Sai benefit from targeted information sessions about postgraduate programmes and scholarships which are provided in good time for them to meet scholarship application deadlines. They are helped to make the strongest applications they can by their mentors and support staff.

Alongside these activities, Jess and Sai have an opportunity to take up dedicated RB internships in industry, the services sector and/or government. There is also a lively careers expo annually where employers come into the TEO specifically to meet RB Learners. Making the most of vital careers advice and workshops, Jess and Sai build important social connections and networks that they carry with them into their working lives.

With all the academic, mentoring and work-oriented support opportunities, Sai and Jess complete their programmes successfully with their next steps in place enabling a smooth transition into further study or employment. They also get to participate in beautiful graduation ceremonies involving their families where their languages, cultures and RB life experiences are respectfully acknowledged and honoured. Their TEOs work with them to share their successes meaningfully with other students and their communities through various media. Their stories inspire others who might follow in their footsteps and actively work to change dominant narratives about former refugees.

### **Refugee-background Learners' common realities**

RB Learners - and members of other New Zealand equity groups - are often underrepresented in highly selective professional programmes (such as Medicine and Law), and by extension, underrepresented in these professions. Many NZ TEOs host programmes which have designated entry categories for learners from different equity groups. While some TEOs have entry categories for RB Learners for such programmes, many do not.

First-year tertiary RB Learners tend to be better resourced and supported than those in higher years. Many provisions targeted to support RB Learners focus on *access* to tertiary education rather than *retention* within it, which in part contributes to higher dropout rates for RB Learners in comparison to their non-RB Learner peers. In addition, while all New Zealand students under the age of 40 years have a life-long allocation of Student Allowance (approx. 200 hours of study) which includes programmes that prepare students for academic study, unless RB Learners are advised of this allocation and how best to use it to plan out their learner journeys, they may find themselves needing to withdraw because their allowance has run out.

While many TEOs are eager to support RB Learners' extracurricular activities, as a learner group are not formally integrated into staff job descriptions and KPIs, so provision for them is dependent on the goodwill and capacity of staff at any given time. Opportunities are missed to develop sustainable, integrated approaches with guidance from RB Learners themselves. In addition, RB Learners may be intimidated to join various activities or clubs without prior connections, or be unable to join because of their need to work part-time (to fund their education) or fulfil family and community obligations.

Without an integrated approach and action plan connected to TEO EDI policy, RB Learners receive piecemeal and sporadic, rather than holistic support. The lack of data and staff to monitor and evaluate it to inform appropriate and timely interventions mean there is little institutional understanding about how, when and why RB Learners progress or leave their programmes. This lack of understanding makes it hard for Student Advisors to give more appropriate and evidence-informed advice to RB Learners, particularly associated with Student Allowance allocation, course-load, and/or the technical or language competencies involved. It also means that proposals to run important skill-building or networking events have to be made and defended annually rather than being a part of the TEO calendar of events.

Further, even when RB Learners do achieve and complete their qualifications, they often remain invisible in TEO media channels or, if included, may inadvertently be used to reinforce dominant narratives associated with the 'traumatised or vulnerable refugee' resulting in feelings of exploitation for the RB Learners rather than being honoured and celebrated.

### **Box 5.3      Participation: Warning Tale**

Ismail (pseudonym) came to Aotearoa New Zealand with no formal education in his home country and extremely limited English. He spent the first two and half years building his language capabilities by completing an English for Academic Purposes course (1 trimester) and then Foundation Studies programme. Ismail was then accepted into a 4-year degree programme but was first required to complete a Certificate in University Preparation (CUP) course (1 trimester) even though he had successfully completed a Foundation Studies programme (2 trimesters) at another NZ university.

The fact that Ismail had realised his dream of being the first person in his family to go to university was a remarkable achievement in such a relatively short period of time and his starting point. However, although he didn't need to pay the course fees for the preparation programmes, there was a hidden cost that hit him before he could complete his final year: a compulsory honours year in his chosen discipline. Ismail was advised by Study Link that his student allowance would stop midway through trimester 1 of the fourth year.

In his case, having to catch up on both the language and the foundation subject knowledge meant that Ismail had used up his student allowance allocation. A letter to request an extension of his Student Allowance to Study Link was unsuccessful. The only reason an extension would be granted was if an exceptional circumstance had prevented him from completing a course, and Ismail had worked extremely hard to avoid failing any courses.

Ismail was already working a weekend job and so had no other recourse than to take out an extra loan to augment his part-time job and cover living costs. This left him with an extra-large debt at the end of his studies. This is an additional reminder of the cost it can take for former refugees to get to a level playing field with their NZ-born counterparts through tertiary education.

## 5.4 Attainment: completion and graduation

### Refugee-background Learners' ideal experiences

Ely, Sai and Jess all complete their programmes successfully in reasonable timeframes without accumulating too much debt. They benefited from completion scholarships and were nominated for awards based on their strong academic performances and leadership skills.

Their TEOs work with them to share their successes meaningfully with other students and their communities through various media. Their stories inspire others who might follow in their footsteps and actively work to change dominant narratives about former refugees.

They participate in beautiful graduation ceremonies involving their families where their languages, cultures and RB life experiences are respectfully acknowledged and honoured.

After graduating, all these RB Learners are invited to be a part of their TEO's RB Learners' Alumni Network which offered great opportunities to network after graduation and continue creating/developing professional relationships. Additionally, these learners are informed of opportunities where they can 'give back' to their TEO and provide the same mentorship opportunities to RB Learners that they had received during their studies.

They move out from their TEOs with their next steps in place enabling a smooth transition into further study or employment (see Section 5.5).

### Refugee-background Learners' common realities

Currently there is no data about how long RB Learners take to complete their programmes of study compared with their peers. Anecdotally, and given the challenges outlined in Sections 3.0 and 4.0, it seems reasonable that many take longer to complete and may incur more debt as a result (see also Box 5.5). While completion scholarships may be available in some TEOs for PhD level study, such support is lacking at lower levels.

There is also no data on how frequently (if at all) awards reflecting academic achievement and leadership may be made to RB Learners, or how they are featured (or not) in TEO success stories, social media or other publications. Outside of TEOs, the Somali community for many years has produced the *Somali Graduate Journal* to showcase Learners' achievements across the country,<sup>93</sup> and since 2020 RASNZ, which administers the Sir Robert Jones' Refugee Daughters Scholarship, has been producing an annual publication documenting and celebrating each graduating scholarship holder.<sup>94</sup> These publications are important and provide an example of what TEOs could also be doing on their websites.

How or whether RB Learners participate in graduation ceremonies is another area we know little about. It is quite possible that many families find it hard to meet the expenses associated with attending ceremonies. Some TEOs provide special or dedicated graduation ceremonies for RB Learners and that families, which include culturally-appropriate refreshments.

## **5.5 Transitions out: graduate destinations**

### **Employment**

We return to Jess' Learner journey, now in their final year of undergraduate study to see how their transition to employment is being supported.

#### **Refugee-background Learners' ideal experiences**

In their first year, encouraged by the RB Learner Advisor, Jess made an appointment with the Careers' Service to discuss their own strengths, areas of interest and possible jobs related to their programme of study. This was a great opportunity to sign up to their TEO's Career Hub website to be notified about job vacancies in specific sectors and to find out how to navigate the website and get information in future. It also prompted Jess to think about which courses to study and whether they aligned with their interests. Jess also started to attend their TEO's annual career expo, which introduced them early on to different job prospects and employers.

Just before Jess started their final year, they remembered the great resources and helpful advisors from the Careers Service and looked up the website to see what events and offerings were coming up. There were workshops on CV preparation, cover letters, job interviews as well as careers fairs and talks from employers. Additionally, these workshops covered 'soft skills' such as navigating group work, how to network, and give work presentations. Jess attended a couple based on their timetables, needs and interests. They signed up to be informed about upcoming events for the remainder of the year.

Having been told early on how crucial networking is in the Aotearoa New Zealand work environment, Jess actively reached out to instructors, tutors, friends and community members about types of jobs to consider in the future and what they might involve. Jess began to develop a small network of familiar faces they knew to contact as their career ambitions solidified. Jess knew they could rely on these trusted contacts to help them navigate the job market once they were ready to actively start job hunting.

In the last semester of study, Jess' teachers invited a few programme graduates who were now working to talk about the jobs they were doing, their experiences of looking for work and advice for new graduates. They talked about the importance of understanding workplace culture, the need to prepare for interviews and the value of getting feedback on CVs, cover letters and interview practice. One graduate had been assigned a mentor to support them into their initial period in the workplace which had proven invaluable as they navigated the new work environment, new systems, relationships and expectations of the job.

#### **Refugee-background Learners' common realities**

Across the world, refugee individuals (and particularly refugee background youth) face high rates of unemployment, underemployment, low-skilled and precarious work as compared with the wider population.<sup>95</sup> Compared to other learner groups, RB Learners encounter

unique and influencing factors which can make the transition from tertiary education to employment more challenging to navigate.<sup>96</sup>

RB Learners often do not have access to adequate information about or preparation for their resettlement country's job market and employment conventions.<sup>97</sup> This knowledge is critical for understanding occupational choices, applying for jobs, preparing for interviews, and navigating workplace culture. Networking in particular can be a challenge for RB Learners transitioning from tertiary education but often plays a crucial role in sourcing employment in many resettlement countries.<sup>98</sup> Because refugee background individuals are often encouraged into low waged employment upon resettlement, graduating RB Learners may not know many people in their community networks from whom they can seek advice who have experience navigating the higher waged employment job market.<sup>99</sup>

It is also important to note that resettlement country job markets are often discriminatory toward RB Learners due to names, language ability, gender, ethnicity, and racial background.<sup>100</sup> This discrimination can continue within the workplace, and RB Learners can be vulnerable to exploitation.<sup>101</sup>

#### **Box 5.4      Transitions out to employment: Warning Tale**

Lolonyo (pseudonym) spent two years trying to break into employment after graduating with an Honours degree in an applied discipline. During his study he was required to complete a work experience which resulted in being offered a 3-month casual contract with the employer. Although he gained some valuable NZ-based work skills, he struggled with the communication demands of a professional workplace. In his own words he described the 'soft skills' required as being similar to those needed by "a politician".

Reflecting on the difficulty he experienced navigating team work, taking and giving instructions, negotiating deadlines, prioritising competing tasks, getting and giving feedback on design work and knowing when to compromise or stand firm, Lolonyo seriously wondered whether he had been misled by the university advisors. They had asked him about his skills in maths, physics and chemistry concluding that if he felt confident with his knowledge in these subjects he would be able to cope with his preferred programme of study. In reality, he found these subjects were only crucial in the first year and after that, he found it hard to interact with other students especially in group projects. With the dynamics of team work, he suffered from a sense of isolation and struggled with the level of written skills required in constructing reports, proof reading and editing at an undergraduate level.

Lolonyo lamented that no one involved in his programme of study mentioned how important networking would be in Aotearoa New Zealand, and he felt very behind in making professional connections. Many friends from his refugee background community with fewer qualifications and lower marks had found good jobs through their professional networks. Lolonyo felt that if he had been told earlier that 'who you know' can be an important part of securing a job here, he would have started building his network sooner. He feels like he was placed at a disadvantage without this information.

Two years into his search for a permanent job, he is seriously considering giving up on working in his chosen profession and instead taking up an apprenticeship where he figures he could just get on with the job. He believes that trades may have less complex communication demands than the professional workplace he was originally dreaming of.

## Postgraduate studies

RB Learners in this phase of the learner journey often have clear visions for their research and career goals and are highly motivated to achieve their ambitions. It is important to recognize that some postgraduate RB Learners will have already completed postgraduate/professional qualifications overseas prior to enrolment in their NZ TEO and many will be seeking to re-enter their previous professions.

As noted for undergraduate learners previously, postgraduate learners are also diverse.<sup>102</sup> Some RB Learners start their New Zealand tertiary education journey as postgraduates, while others progress through multiple NZ TEOs and programmes first. Recognising this additional dimension of diversity within this learner group may inform different approaches to their induction, supervision and support.

### Refugee-background Learners' ideal experiences

As mentioned in Section 5.1, a high achiever, 'Ely' had always dreamed of completing a Master's degree, and has found a specific programme tailored to their interests in their resettlement city's TEO. They meet with an empathetic postgraduate student adviser at this institution, who listens to their story, understands the situation, assesses their previous qualification, and verifies it as adequate toward entry into the Master's programme. The advisor also enables their access to a preparatory bridging programme. Ely is happy to see that the programme is fees free for RB Learners who have recently arrived from overseas as well as others who have been assessed as needing a bit more support between high school and tertiary study. Ely appreciates how the programme covers English language content, academic writing, technology usage, and NZ academic culture. They also appreciate the opportunity to make lots of new friends before embarking on their Master's degree.

Ely electing a TEO and programme of study, as well as sorting out finances and enrolment, are so much easier than anticipated! Online processes are user friendly and everyone they interact with is welcoming and helpful. At the TEO pōwhiri, tour and orientation event they are able to connect to important services for postgraduate learners and meet other RB Learners like Sai and Jess who have progressed through undergraduate programmes in New Zealand. At programme level, they meet their RB Learner Advocate and sense that teaching and support staff are familiar with RB Learners and keen to help.

Ely, Sai and Jess have all gained scholarships or awards to support them in their postgraduate programmes. These scholarships are holistic and involve access to mentoring support and provision of a living stipend. The scholarships enable them to devote more time to their studies and to the development of peer relationships which evolve into professional networks after graduation.

Ely and Jess enrol in programmes with research components. Jess is taking Honours. This enables them to access Student Allowance alongside their scholarship and undertake a small research project. Ely embarks on a two year Master's with research programme (not supported by Student Allowance) with a view to later enrolling in a PhD. These Learners are



excited to work with their academic supervisors having been in contact with them during the application process.

Sai has opted for a professionally-oriented taught programme with internship. They thrive in the smaller, discussion based courses and orientation to applied learning, and move easily into their internship having built NZ-relevant confidence from undergraduate experiences. Their teachers and classmates welcome their perspectives and engage in inclusive learning processes.

The teaching staff and research supervisors are familiar with RB Learners and skilled in intercultural communication. Smaller class sizes and more one-on-one opportunities to engage with staff enhance their experiences.<sup>103</sup> Supervisors establish an agreement with Jess and Ely. The agreement provides clarity and security about timings and frequency of supervision meetings, technical or other resources their work may require, expectations of their working relationship, reporting processes and any other institutional requirements. Jess and Ely also receive study space, library access, and the ability to use labs (where relevant), equipment and printing. Small class sizes and the requirement to pursue a supervised research project allow Ely and Jess to develop close relationships to postgraduate teaching staff - particularly their supervisor(s) - over the course of their postgraduate journeys.

Throughout their studies, the lecturers and supervisors also champion the value of these learners prior tertiary qualifications and professional experiences, never underestimating their potential as learners and researchers because of their backgrounds. They encourage Ely, Sai and Jess to integrate aspects of own cultures/languages into their learning, assignments and research. Their consistent support and collegiality help facilitate Ely, Sai and Jess' many scholarly and personal successes.

They also create social bridges for these learners' to participate in postgraduate events like reading groups, lab groups, and training workshops. These opportunities build Ely, Sai and Jess' 'soft skills' associated with team work, professional interaction, informal presentations and discussion. Supervisors also access funds to support them to attend conferences, symposia, and professional gatherings through which Sai, Ely and Jess are able to develop social connections which smooth their subsequent transitions into employment and further study. Sai, Ely and Jess also feel valued through invitations to work as teaching assistants, research assistants and mentors or guest speakers. These experiences continue to foster their confidence, connections and augment their C.V.s providing them with valuable NZ work experience and opportunities to give back to younger learners.

Towards the end of their programmes, they are able to access targeted support if need be in the form of 'completion scholarships' allowing them to focus 100% on completing their last programme requirements. They also have access throughout their studies to hardship grants, free healthcare and counselling as well as academic learning services when needed.

### **Refugee-background Learners' common realities**

Postgraduate participation rates for RB Learners appear low in New Zealand, but no consistent data is collected across the sector. There are a number of reasons for low participation rates, some pertaining to challenges with immigration and 'refugee status',

(non)recognition of prior qualifications, and others tied to there being fewer targeted scholarships or lack of clear pathways and encouragement into further study. Financial awards and/or grants for RB Learners in New Zealand currently privilege undergraduate access into tertiary education and there are few financial awards tailored specifically to postgraduate RB Learners.

Not all staff that work closely with postgraduate RB Learners are aware of the complexities and assets of coming from a refugee background, or aware of the influential role they as staff members can play in their RB Learners' tertiary education journeys. Additionally, postgraduate learners tend to be mature students, meaning that many are more likely to have more pressured family obligations (for example, children to look after) which can impact the ability of RB Learners (and others) to access and succeed within postgraduate study. The two Warning Tales (Boxes 5.5 and 5.6) cover experiences of postgraduate study: one focusses on immigration and qualification recognition; the other on family pressures and lack of preparation.

### **Box 5.5      Transitions out - Postgraduate Studies: Warning Tale 1**

Fazel (pseudonym) excelled in tertiary studies in his home country and completed his Masters to a high standard. It was always his dream to undertake doctoral study and work in academia however, his proposed thesis topic was politically sensitive, and he didn't feel safe to study and live at home any longer.

Fazel applied to doctoral programmes across the world, and Aotearoa New Zealand was at the top of his list for places to study and settle afterward. He was offered a self-funded place in his preferred doctoral programme. However, before the university would enrol him, they required Fazel to take a prerequisite English language course even though he considered himself to be a fluent English speaker (all his prior studies had been conducted in English). Seeing the PhD as a good investment for his future, he accepted the unfunded place and English language required course. A month after his arrival on a student visa, he applied for asylum.

Because Fazel emigrated to New Zealand on a student visa, he had to pay international student fees for the compulsory English course. Through this, he incurred a large amount of debt. Fortunately, the PhD was cheaper due to the blanket domestic fees, but studying full time without funding was a monumental task and this severely impacted his quality of life. Access to the university's PhD scholarships was also very competitive and largely GPA-based. He was distraught to learn that the university didn't understand his previous university's marking scales for his degrees (he was near the top of his class) and valued them lower as a result.

Eventually, Fazel was granted asylum in New Zealand. He was somewhat hopeful that his refugee status would help him access more scholarships for refugee background students but most were targeted toward youth, undergraduates, and women. While Fazel did eventually source funding support, he incurred a massive amount of debt in the process which continues to cause him anxiety.

## Box 5.6 Transitions out - Postgraduate Studies: Warning Tale 2

Lee (pseudonym) arrived in Aotearoa in the mid-1980s with her family as part of the UN Refugee Quota programme. She grew up north of Wellington and it was instilled in her from a young age that she needed to attend university so she could get a “good job” and to live a comfortable life. Lee eventually enrolled at her local university and undertook a Bachelor of Arts degree. She enjoyed her time as an undergraduate, but despite being able to live at home with her parents while studying, Lee also worked three part-time jobs to pay bills and make ends meet. This impacted her ability and capacity to focus on her studies, and she did not do very well. Lee was not aware of the different scholarships and funding opportunities available to her at the time.

Soon after Lee graduated from university, she found a full-time job as a bank teller. For the next 10 years she took on various roles; from banking to being an English teacher in South Korea. She even started her own food business. Then one day she became a mother and her life and priorities changed. When her daughter was six years old, Lee decided to return to university to study towards a Master’s Degree. Lee was now 37 years old. This was a huge step for her because it had been 14 years since she graduated, but it was her dream so she took on the challenge and was determined to do better this time round.

The financial pressures of being a post-graduate student were particularly challenging. Fortunately, as a domestic student Lee was able to get a student loan from the government to pay for both her undergraduate and post-graduate degrees. At the start of her post-graduate studies, Lee was working part-time for a few months to continuing paying her bills and to provide for her daughter, but she quickly realised that being a working parent and studying was a lot to take on. Eventually Lee gave up her part-time job to focus on raising her daughter and her studies.

Lee has now completed her Master’s Degree and excelled in her achievements. Initially, Lee had planned to further her studies to undertake a doctorate, however, she was unaware of the complex application process and was unable to find a supervisor to support her thesis, so decided to put her PhD dreams aside for the time being and enter the workforce.

The main challenges that Lee faced as a postgraduate RB Learner were understanding the course criteria, navigating the support networks available and juggling study with parenting.

Lee soon realised that she lacked essential analysis and critical thinking skills, and had to re-learn a lot of concepts and study methods to overcome this challenge. Her lack of skills had emerged from not fully understanding the fundamentals of her subject during her undergraduate degree because of the other demands she faced at the time. Alongside other invisible challenges associated with parenting, at times she felt unsupported as she struggled to meet assignment deadlines and keep up with her peers.

## 6.0 Key Messages and Conclusions

### Key Messages

- RB Learners have diverse pathways into TEOs and come with an array of strengths and characteristics that can be learnt from, built on and celebrated without exploitation, or reliance on their resilience to complete tertiary studies.
- TEOs should be the 'duty bearers' and carry most of the weight in terms of enhancing the RB Learner journeys, and should do this in partnership with them.
- Best practice occurs when the responsibility and accountability sits across all stakeholders within a TEO, not just student support or isolated 'champions'.
- The communication of concepts, responsibilities and actions (documented within this report and the BPG) needs to be clear, systematic, deliberate and sector-wide. The NTN, in partnership with the TEC, has an important role to play in this regard.
- Continued recognition of RB Learners' and TEOs' diversity within the context of a shifting geo-political landscape requires persistence and adaptability to avoid one-size-fits all responses.
- A strong unified tertiary voice is necessary to make RB Learners a recognised equity group to ensure adequate ongoing recognition and resourcing to ensure their success.
- RB Learners have a right to education and supporting their success contributes to New Zealand meeting its obligations as a resettlement country as well as to socio-economic development.

### Conclusions

RB Learners continue to face structural barriers accessing and progressing through tertiary study. While progress is being made and there is encouragingly a growing interest and concern for this Learner group, as this report highlights, much more needs to be done. Fortunately, along with existing research and professional experience, RB Learners know what they need and what can support their educational outcomes. Fostering partnerships and systems that centre them and their experiences before, during and after their enrolment within TEOs have the potential to significantly enhance tertiary Learner journeys and augment resettlement efforts. Finally, the BPG associated with this report provide a clear set of actionable steps against which TEOs can report on their contributions to ensuring greater numbers of RB Learners experience holistic support and educational success.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> <https://www.tec.govt.nz/oritetanga-learner-success/new-oritetanga-tertiary-success-for-everyone/resources-to-help-support-your-learners/refugee-background-learners-resources/>
- <sup>2</sup> At the time of publication, there is no nationwide data about RB Learner enrolments, and there has been no publicly available research carried out within wananga.
- <sup>3</sup> Horner et al., 2006.
- <sup>4</sup> Evolve et al., 2005; Homework Club et al., 2005; Evans et al., 2008; Burford, et al., 2008.
- <sup>5</sup> CRF et al., 2011.
- <sup>6</sup> Sampson, et al., 2016
- <sup>7</sup> Sampson et al. 2016.
- <sup>8</sup> Reid et al., 2017.
- <sup>9</sup> Anderson et al., 2020; Anderson et al., 2022.
- <sup>10</sup> Anderson et al., 2023.
- <sup>11</sup> Kindon et al., 2021.
- <sup>12</sup> Willette, 2020.
- <sup>13</sup> Saleem, N. 2024.
- <sup>14</sup> <https://www.tec.govt.nz/oritetanga-learner-success/new-oritetanga-tertiary-success-for-everyone/resources-to-help-support-your-learners/refugee-background-learners-resources/>
- <sup>15</sup> See Tertiary Education Commission, 2020.
- <sup>16</sup> UNHCR, 1951, p. 14.
- <sup>17</sup> UNHCR, 2024.
- <sup>18</sup> McBrien, 2014.
- <sup>19</sup> Immigration New Zealand, 2013.
- <sup>20</sup> Immigration New Zealand, 2013.
- <sup>21</sup> McBrien, 2014; van Riemsdijk et al., 2024.
- <sup>22</sup> Rafferty et al., 2020.
- <sup>23</sup> Stephens, 2020.
- <sup>24</sup> McBrien, 2014.
- <sup>25</sup> UNESCO, 2015.
- <sup>26</sup> United Nations, 2015.
- <sup>27</sup> Naylor et al., 2019.
- <sup>28</sup> UNHCR, 2016.
- <sup>29</sup> UNHCR, 2019.
- <sup>30</sup> UNESCO, 2015.
- <sup>31</sup> UNHCR, 2016.
- <sup>32</sup> See Barbour, 2016; Dryden-Peterson, 2010; Ferede, 2010; Morrice, 2013; Perry & Mallozzi, 2011.
- <sup>33</sup> See Barbour, 2016; Dryden-Peterson, 2010; Ferede, 2010; Perry & Mallozzi, 2011.
- <sup>34</sup> <https://www.redcross.org.nz/get-help/help-for-refugees/>
- <sup>35</sup> <https://www.studylink.govt.nz/products/a-z-products/student-allowance/index.html>
- <sup>36</sup> It is important to note that the term 'refugee' and its definition is highly contested. Using the term 'refugee' to describe someone who has resettled in New Zealand is common within wider Aotearoa New Zealand society, even when individuals are no longer refugees once they arrive on our shores.
- <sup>37</sup> <https://www.studylink.govt.nz/products/a-z-products/student-loan/index.html>
- <sup>38</sup> <https://www.tec.govt.nz/assets/Funding-mechanisms/2024-funding-mechanisms/English-Language-Teaching-funding-mechanism.pdf>
- <sup>39</sup> <https://www.tec.govt.nz/funding/funding-and-performance/funding/fund-finder/refugee-english/>
- <sup>40</sup> Ministry of Education Framework Document, to be found.
- <sup>41</sup> ChangeMakers et al., 2011. It is important to note that these other groups have their own specific issues and position within NZ society.
- <sup>42</sup> The categories within the table include: Equity Policy (institution includes RB Learners within its institutional equity and diversity policy), Collects Data (institution collects data on RB Learners, usually through the use of enrolment forms), Scholarships/grants for RB Learners (institution has its own financial award(s) to support RB Learners), Accepts SRJRD (RB Learners can use the Sir Robert Jones Refugee Daughters Scholarship to enrol at institution), SRJRD 50/50 Agreement (institution covers 50% of the award offered by SRJRD, allowing the SRJRD to give out more scholarships annually), Admission Pathways (institution has special admission considerations for RB Learners, which may include reserved places for them within particular programmes of study or general

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undergraduate admission pathways), Webpage (institution has a webpage dedicated to RB Learners that includes resources to support them), Staff Position (institution has staff on their payroll that, within their job description, specifically support RB Learners), and Student Club (institution has a club for RB Learners).

<sup>43</sup> Refugee and Protection Unit, 2021.

<sup>44</sup> Immigration New Zealand, 2015.

<sup>45</sup> Asylum Seeker Support Trust, 2021.

<sup>46</sup> Refugee and Protection Unit, 2019.

<sup>47</sup> Amnesty International, 2021.

<sup>48</sup> Bloom, O'Donovan, ChangeMakers, and Udahemuka, 2013;

<https://www.auckland.ac.nz/en/education/research/research-centres-and-units/the-centre-for-asia-pacific-refugee-studies-/caprs-research/safe-start-and-fair-future.html>

<sup>49</sup> Refugee and Protection Unit, 2021.

<sup>50</sup> See Innes-Hill, 2021; Williams 2016.

<sup>51</sup> Choummanivong et al., 2014.

<sup>52</sup> MBIE and ThinkPlace, 2021.

<sup>53</sup> MBIE, 2019; Stephens, 2020.

<sup>54</sup> O'Rourke, 2011.

<sup>55</sup> ChangeMakers et al., 2011.

<sup>56</sup> Tupuola, 2004.

<sup>57</sup> Harris & Marlowe, 2011.

<sup>58</sup> See Bajwa et al., 2017; Ferede, 2010; Hannah, 1999; Morrice, 2013; Perry & Mallozzi, 2011; Perry & Mallozzi, 2017.

<sup>59</sup> See Bajwa et al., 2017; Ferede, 2010; Hannah, 1999; Morrice, 2013; Perry & Mallozzi, 2011; Perry & Mallozzi, 2017.

<sup>60</sup> See Baker et al., 2020; Benseman, 2014; Harris & Marlowe, 2011, Ollerhead & Baker, 2019.

<sup>61</sup> UNESCO, 2014.

<sup>62</sup> See Liddicoat, 2016.

<sup>63</sup> See Phipps, 2019 and Phipps & Fassetta, 2015.

<sup>64</sup> See Abamosa, 2015; Harris & Marlowe, 2011; Morrice, 2013.

<sup>65</sup> See Abamosa, 2015; Harris & Marlowe, 2011; Morrice, 2013.

<sup>66</sup> See Stout et al., 2018; Willette 2020.

<sup>67</sup> See Ferede, 2010; Harris & Marlowe, 2011; Harris et al., 2013; Joyce et al., 2010; Kong et al., 2016.

<sup>68</sup> See Naidoo et al., 2018; Willette, 2020.

<sup>69</sup> See Joyce, 2010; Perry & Mallozi, 2017.

<sup>70</sup> See Horner et al., 2006; Evans et al., 2008; Collie, 2007;

<sup>71</sup> See Chossière, 2021; Rugoho and Shimba, 2018.

<sup>72</sup> Jasperse, 2021.

<sup>73</sup> See Mupenzi, 2018; Harris et al., 2015.

<sup>74</sup> See Benseman, 2014; Joyce et al., 2010; Stevenson & Willott, 2007.

<sup>75</sup> See Benseman, 2014; Joyce et al., 2010; Stevenson & Willott, 2007.

<sup>76</sup> See Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2007; Fozdar, 2021.

<sup>77</sup> See Harris & Marlowe, 2011; Kong et al., 2016; Mangan & Winter, 2017; Mupenzi, 2018.

<sup>78</sup> See Kallio, Jouni, and Pascucci, 2019.

<sup>79</sup> See Harris and Marlowe, 2011; Mangan and Winter, 2017; Morrice, 2011; Naidoo et al., 2018.

<sup>80</sup> See Sulaiman-Hill & Thompson, 2011.

<sup>81</sup> See Horner et al., 2006; ChangeMakers et al., 2011; Mangan & Winter, 2017; Morrice, 2011; Mupenzi, 2018; Naidoo et al., 2018.

<sup>82</sup> See See Abamosa, 2015; Gately, 2015; Hannah, 1999; Joyce et al., 2010; Kanno & Varghese, 2010; Mupenzi, 2018; Naidoo et al., 2018; Perry & Mallozzi, 2011; Shapiro & MacDonald, 2017; Stevenson & Willott, 2007.

<sup>83</sup> Mupenzi, 2018.

<sup>84</sup> Universities New Zealand, 2021.

<sup>85</sup> See Hannah, 1999; Perry & Mallozzi, 2011.

<sup>86</sup> See Hannah, 1999; O'Rourke, 2011; Perry & Mallozzi, 2011.

<sup>87</sup> See Willette, 2020.

<sup>88</sup> See Yohani, 2013.

<sup>89</sup> See Mangan & Winter, 2017; Mupenzi, 2018.



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- <sup>90</sup> See Mangan & Winter, 2017; Morrice, 2011; Mupenzi, 2018; Naidoo et al., 2018.
- <sup>91</sup> See Harris et al., 2015; Joyce et al., 2010; Kong et al., 2016; Mupenzi, 2018; Naidoo et al., 2018.
- <sup>92</sup> See Harris & Marlowe, 2011; Kong et al., 2016; Mangan & Winter, 2017; Mupenzi, 2018.
- <sup>93</sup> <https://somaligraduatejournal.org/>
- <sup>94</sup> <https://rasnz.co.nz/scholarship/>
- <sup>95</sup> See Kuzhabekova and Nardon, 2021 and Nichols et al., 2019.
- <sup>96</sup> See Kuzhabekova and Nardon, 2021.
- <sup>97</sup> See Kuzhabekova and Nardon, 2021.
- <sup>98</sup> See Kuzhabekova and Nardon, 2021.
- <sup>99</sup> See Kuzhabekova and Nardon, 2021 and Lauer et al., 2012.
- <sup>100</sup> See Kuzhabekova and Nardon, 2021.
- <sup>101</sup> See Kuzhabekova and Nardon, 2021.
- <sup>102</sup> See Willette, 2020.
- <sup>103</sup> See Willette, 2020.