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## **Victoria University's Equity and Diversity Policy Consultation**

### **Introduction**

We would like thank Victoria University for the opportunity to provide feedback into the review of Victoria's Equity and Diversity Policy. ChangeMakers is supportive of the Purpose and Principles of the VUW Equity and Diversity Strategy 2010-2014 and in particular the Principle that states:

*systemic disadvantage should be recognised and addressed (p3)*

and the explicit link between the University's Strategic Plan 2009-2014 and the Equity and Diversity Policy.

It was also pleasing to note that measures of success have been identified, and the work that Victoria University is implementing to support students from refugee-backgrounds to enrol, study, and achieve at Victoria.

We would also like to acknowledge the commitment made by the University to enable all students from a refugee-background to self-identify on enrolment as a refugee from 2014. Such processes will enable the collection of data regarding numbers of refugee-background enrolments and the achievements of these students, and will go some way to address the paucity of data in these areas.

### **Challenges facing refugee-background students**

There are many well-documented barriers to tertiary education achievement commonly shared by refugee-background students<sup>i</sup>. These include:

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

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

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

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

- unevenness of the responses of TEIs to the new funding environment, which introduces geographic inequalities.<sup>ii</sup>

Given the barriers to achievement at tertiary institutions and the changes outlined above, refugee-background students face significant challenges in not only accessing tertiary institutions but succeeding at these institutions. These challenges are not dissimilar to those facing Pasifika students before they were recognised as an equity group in 2001.

While, as noted above, Victoria University has a recent history of implementing support mechanisms for refugee-background students, such mechanisms rely heavily on the goodwill of staff, rather than being underpinned by a University-wide strategic approach to these issues.

To address this and to ensure students from refugee backgrounds can participate and succeed at Victoria University, ChangeMakers recommends:

***The Equity and Diversity Policy is revised to include refugee-background students as an equity group***

The inclusion of refugee-background students as an equity group in Victoria University's Equity and Diversity Policy would ensure the systematic disadvantage that students from refugee background face could be addressed.

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# References

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<sup>ii</sup> O'Rourke, D. (forthcoming). *Closing Pathways: Refugee Background Students and Tertiary Education*. Kotuitui: New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences Online, Nov. 2011.