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REFUGEE EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

A Capability Perspective



TEBEJE MOLLA

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REFUGEE EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON EDUCATION, EMPLOYABILITY AND WORK

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A Capability Perspective

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

For the forcibly displaced, that welcome may one day mean the freedom to become.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
AHAY	African-Heritage Australian Youth
AHRC	Australian Human Rights Commission
AIFS	Australian Institute of Family Studies
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
AMEP	Adult Migrant English Program
ARC	Australian Research Council
ARWUSC	Australian Refugee Welcome University Sponsorship Consortium
ATAR	Australian Tertiary Admission Rank
ATEC	Australian Tertiary Education Commission
BNLA	Building a New Life in Australia
CALD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
CERD	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination
CLO	Community Liaison Officer
CMY	Centre for Multicultural Youth
DECRA	Discovery Early Career Researcher Award
DEWR	Department of Employment and Workplace Relations
DOHA	Department of Home Affairs
DSS	Department of Social Services
EAL	English as an Additional Language
EPRI	Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration
GCR	Global Compact on Refugees
GRF	Global Refugee Forum
HEPPP	Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program
HSP	Humanitarian Settlement Program
ICSEA	Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
ILO	International Labour Organization
IRC	International Rescue Committee
MCOAR	Main Countries of Origin of African Refugees

NESB	Non-English Speaking Background
NSW	New South Wales
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
RCOA	Refugee Council of Australia
RSSP	Refugee Student Settlement Pathway
SEAS	Special Entry Access Scheme
SES	Socio-Economic Status
SSI	Settlement Services International
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNSW	University of New South Wales
VACAP	Victorian African Communities Action Plan
VET	Vocational Education and Training
VTAC	Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Tebeje Molla is an ARC Future Fellow and Associate Professor in the School of Education at Deakin University. His research examines educational disadvantage and policy responses at the systemic, sectoral, and institutional levels, drawing on critical sociology and the capability approach to social justice and human development. His recent work focuses on the schooling experiences and educational attainment of African-heritage Australian youth from refugee backgrounds. In recognition of his influential contributions to the sociology of education—particularly his scholarship on equity, policy analysis, and the conditions of school engagement—Dr Molla received the Vice-Chancellor's Mid-Career Research Excellence Award.

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FOREWORD

Forced displacement is one of the major humanitarian, social, and policy challenges of the 21st century. As unprecedented numbers of people are displaced by conflict, persecution, and instability, the challenge extends well beyond providing refuge and formal access. It encompasses the far more difficult task of enabling refugees to build meaningful lives within educational institutions, labor markets, and social systems that were rarely designed with their particular circumstances in mind.

A gap often persists between symbolic inclusion and substantive opportunity. Despite policy commitments to equity and inclusion, many refugees continue to encounter systemic barriers, including policy invisibility, the nonrecognition of overseas qualifications and experience, racial discrimination, and limited access to social and economic resources. These structural constraints can undermine educational and employment opportunities, restrict social participation, and limit refugees' capacity to pursue the lives they value. As a result, many remain vulnerable in the classroom, the workplace, and broader society, despite formal commitments to their inclusion.

How can we challenge these systemic inequities and advance policy, practice, and research agendas that support meaningful integration to ensure that refugees can build lives of dignity, opportunity, and belonging rather than merely gaining formal access to institutions and services? It is therefore both timely and important that Tebeje Molla addresses these questions in his welcome book, *Refugee Education and Employment: A Capability Perspective*.

This book makes a compelling contribution to scholarship on refugee integration by shifting attention from the mere provision of educational and employment opportunities to the more fundamental question of whether and how such opportunities enable refugees to build lives of dignity, purpose, and self-determination. In doing so, it challenges prevailing policy approaches that too often equate access with inclusion that overlooks the extent to which opportunities translate into genuine capabilities and meaningful life outcomes.

A major strength of the book lies in its development and application of the *capability for integration* framework. This innovative framework provides a nuanced lens through which to understand the complex interplay between structural conditions, social contexts, and individual aspirations in shaping refugees' educational and employment trajectories. By moving beyond access-based measures of integration, it offers a powerful conceptual tool for rethinking refugee inclusion and contributes significantly to ongoing debates about social justice, equity, and belonging.

The book's focus on Australians of African heritage from refugee backgrounds—an important yet underexamined population—represents a valuable addition to the literature. Across five tightly integrated chapters, the analysis moves from education to employment while maintaining a clear focus on a central concern: whether opportunities are genuinely substantive and capable of supporting lives characterized by dignity, aspiration, and agency.

Overall, this is a thoughtful and original contribution that advances both scholarship and policy discussions on refugee integration. Its conceptual innovation and empirical insights make it a highly worthwhile addition to the Emerald book series on *International Perspectives on Education, Employability and Work* and an important resource for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners working in the fields of refugee studies, education, employment, and social inclusion.

Ly Thi Tran
Professor in the School of Education, Deakin University, Australia
Melbourne, June 2026

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My deepest thanks go to the African-heritage Australian parents and young people who gave their time and their trust, and who spoke with me about experiences that were often difficult to revisit. The book exists because of their generosity, and any insight it contains is owed to them.

Deakin University has been my intellectual home throughout this work, and I am grateful for the institutional support, resources, and collegial environment that made critical inquiry of this kind possible.

I am also grateful to Professor Ly Tran and Dr Nghia Tran, editors of the *International Perspectives on Education, Employability and Work* series, for the invitation to contribute, and for their careful review of the manuscript. Kirsty Woods, my commissioning editor at Emerald, has guided the project through publication with patience and good judgement. Thank you.

Finally, I owe a particular debt to colleagues and friends working in refugee education, equity research, and critical policy studies, at Deakin and well beyond it. The arguments developed here have been sharpened in conversation with you—at scholarly gatherings, and just as often in less formal settings—always to the benefit of the work.

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1

INTRODUCTION

ABSTRACT

Globally, forced displacement has reached unprecedented levels. For the small number of refugees who are resettled in a third country, arrival marks not the end of displacement but the beginning of a different and demanding challenge: building a life within institutions, labor markets, and social systems that were not designed with their circumstances in mind. This chapter opens with the concept of refugee integration, examining what it is, why it matters, and how it is pursued. It then describes what the book is about, followed by a methodological note explaining the data sources and analytical decisions that inform the empirical chapters. The chapter closes with an overview of the book's organization, tracing the argument as it unfolds across the four chapters that follow and signaling the moral as well as analytical stakes of the analysis undertaken.

Keywords: African refugees; Australia; capability approach; refugee integration; positionality

INTRODUCTION

The scale of human displacement in the world today is, by any measure, staggering. By mid-2025, more than 117 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, or human rights violations, including 42.5 million refugees, 67.8 million internally displaced people, and 6.86 million asylum seekers (UNHCR, 2025b), with the majority originating from a handful of countries consumed by prolonged and

devastating conflict: Sudan, Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, and Ukraine (UNHCR, 2025b). These are not abstract statistics; each figure represents a life disrupted by profound forms of instability and loss.

Africa carries a particularly acute share of this burden. The continent is simultaneously one of the world's largest producers and hosts of displaced people, with the war in Sudan alone having uprooted more than 14 million people by the end of 2024, constituting a third of the country's entire population, while the East and Horn of Africa and Great Lakes region hosted approximately 5.4 million refugees and asylum seekers (UNHCR, 2025a). These are not abstract statistics. Behind each number is a person, a family, a community, whose life has been shattered by forces beyond their control and whose prospects for return grow more distant with each passing year. The average duration of displacement now exceeds 20 years, and the international framework established to protect displaced people, anchored in the 1951 Refugee Convention and its foundational principle of non-refoulement, is operating under a level of strain it was never designed to sustain (UNHCR, 2025b). Despite the global nature of forced displacement, in the eyes of resettling countries, refugeeness remains unequal (Lingelbach, 2025): a hierarchy that shapes not only who is admitted, but on what terms and with what prospect of building a genuinely liveable life.

The international community has long recognized three durable solutions for refugees: voluntary repatriation to the country of origin, local integration in the country of first asylum, and third-country resettlement to a new home. In practice, the first two options resolve the vast majority of refugee situations or, more often, fail to resolve them, leaving millions in protracted limbo in host countries that are themselves under significant economic and political pressure. Third-country resettlement, which offers the most durable form of protection and the most structured pathway to a new life, is available to fewer than 1% of the world's refugees in any given year (UNSW Kaldor Centre, 2024). Historically, the United States, Australia, and Canada have been the most significant contributors to global resettlement, collectively providing the overwhelming majority of available places. But the suspension of the United States Refugee Admissions Program by the Trump administration in January 2025, which set the annual admissions ceiling at its lowest level in 45 years and halted approved refugee flights mid-process, has delivered the global resettlement system its most damaging institutional blow in decades, placing additional pressure on the remaining resettlement countries at precisely the moment when the need has never been greater (Basok et al., 2025; IRC, 2025). For those who do reach a resettlement country, the journey is far from over.

Resettlement, in its fullest sense, is not simply a matter of arrival. It encompasses a structured program of support designed to help newly arrived refugees establish a foundation for life in their new country, including access to housing, language tuition, health services, social orientation, and, critically, pathways into education and employment. These integration supports are both the practical expression of a resettlement country's humanitarian commitment and the principal mechanism through which that commitment is tested against reality. Whether those supports are adequate, relevant, and genuinely enabling, and whether they constitute real opportunities for refugees to build lives commensurate with their capabilities and aspirations, is a question that resettlement countries have been too slow to ask with the rigor it demands. It is that question, applied to the Australian context and to the experiences of African refugees specifically, that animates this book.

REFUGEE INTEGRATION

For those who reach third-country resettlement, arrival marks not the end of displacement but the beginning of a different and equally demanding challenge: building a life in a society that is not their own, in a language that may not be theirs, within institutions that were not designed with them in mind. This challenge has a name in policy and scholarship, namely refugee integration, and how it is understood, measured, and pursued determines, in ways that are both concrete and consequential, what resettlement actually means in practice for the men, women, and children who experience it. It is to that concept, and to the debates that surround it, that this section now turns.

Refugee integration has become one of the most prominent and most contested concepts in resettlement policy and scholarship. In contexts such as Australia, where humanitarian resettlement is framed simultaneously as a moral obligation and a nation-building project, integration is routinely presented as both the endpoint of the refugee journey and the benchmark against which resettlement success is assessed. Yet despite its prominence, the concept remains theoretically unsettled, normatively loaded, and unevenly operationalized across policy and research contexts. As Ager and Strang (2008) observed in what remains the most influential analytical contribution to the field, integration is frequently invoked as a policy goal without sufficient clarity about what it entails, for whom it is intended, or how it should be evaluated. Their framework addressed this ambiguity by defining integration as a multidimensional, dynamic process encompassing outcomes across four

interrelated domains: markers and means, comprising employment, housing, education, and health; social connections, including bonds within refugee communities, bridges across cultural divides, and links to mainstream institutions; facilitators, encompassing language, cultural knowledge, safety, and stability; and foundations, constituted by the rights and citizenship status that underpin everything else (Ager & Strang, 2008; Strang & Ager, 2010). A particular strength of this framework is its insistence that integration is not a state to be achieved but a process to be sustained, and that it is two-way: it requires adaptation not only by refugees but also by the receiving society. This insight is especially resonant in the Australian context, where multiculturalism is official policy but where refugees continue to encounter systemic barriers in education, labor markets, and public discourse (Molla, 2022, 2024). Subsequent scholarship has both built on and pushed back against this framework. Spencer and Charsley (2021) identify several core limitations, including its normative assumptions, its tendency to place the burden of adaptation on refugees rather than on institutions, and its failure to account for the structural inequalities, including racism, colonial histories, and global power relations, that shape integration outcomes for racialized groups. Phillimore (2024) extends this critique by arguing that many existing frameworks orient integration toward a *mere life*, characterized by survival and basic participation, rather than a *good life* defined by dignity, agency, and the freedom to pursue genuinely valued aspirations.

Refugee integration is actively promoted by resettling societies for a combination of reasons that are humanitarian, economic, social, and political in character. Understanding these rationales is important because they shape both what integration is designed to achieve and, just as significantly, what it is not designed to achieve. At a normative level, integration is framed as a moral imperative grounded in international protection obligations and human rights commitments. Valtonen (2016) situates integration within a social justice ethics, arguing that successful integration is essential to restoring refugees' dignity and enabling full participation in social life after the rupture of displacement. Economically, integration is increasingly justified in instrumental terms: employment, education, and skills recognition are framed as pathways to self-reliance, reduced welfare dependency, and economic contribution to the host society (Alshoubaki, 2024). This logic is clearly visible in Australian settlement policy, where employability has been progressively prioritized over longer-term educational, psychosocial, and relational dimensions of integration. Socially and politically, integration is promoted as a means of fostering social cohesion and managing perceived risks associated with cultural diversity, a rationale that, as Aldegheri et al.

(2025) observe, can produce policies oriented toward conformity and behavioral adaptation rather than mutual transformation and genuine inclusion. These rationales are not inherently problematic, but they become limiting and, for refugees, damaging, when integration is framed primarily as an obligation placed on the displaced person rather than as a shared and reciprocal societal project. Such framing obscures the structural conditions that shape integration outcomes, reinforces deficit narratives about refugees' capacities and contributions, and provides political cover for the withdrawal of the sustained institutional investment that genuine integration requires.

Across the integration literature, education and employment emerge with striking consistency as the two domains most central to both the process and the assessment of refugee integration. They function simultaneously as *means*, serving as the practical mechanisms through which refugees acquire language, skills, social networks, and economic stability, and as *markers*, constituting the measurable indicators through which host societies assess whether integration is occurring (Ager & Strang, 2008). In the educational domain, schools are not merely sites of knowledge acquisition; they are the primary spaces in which refugee-background young people form social bonds across cultural boundaries, encounter the norms and expectations of the host society, and develop, or are prevented from developing, the confidence, credentials, and navigational capacity that shape their longer-term trajectories (Otto et al., 2024). In the employment domain, work provides not only economic security but the social participation, professional identity, and psychological well-being that make integration substantively meaningful rather than merely administratively registered (Valtonen, 2016). Yet the literature is equally clear that access to these domains does not, on its own, produce integration. Otto et al. (2024) demonstrate that refugee-background youth encounter structural barriers, including disrupted prior schooling, lowered expectations, credential nonrecognition, and discrimination, that constrain their ability to convert educational participation into meaningful outcomes. Valtonen (2016) makes the same point in the employment domain: refugees may attain work yet remain chronically underemployed, precariously engaged, or unable to practise in fields commensurate with their qualifications. In both domains, the critical question is not whether opportunities formally exist, but whether the structural conditions are in place for those opportunities to be genuinely realized.

It is precisely this question, the question of whether formal opportunity translates into substantive freedom, that existing integration frameworks are least well-equipped to answer, and that the capability approach, as this book applies it, is specifically designed to address. The central limitation of

prevailing frameworks, including Ager and Strang's (2008) influential markers-and-means model, is their predominant focus on the availability of resources and opportunities rather than on the conditions under which those resources can be converted into valued outcomes. As Spencer and Charsley (2021) observe, integration discourse consistently frames refugees as agents who must take up available opportunities, without attending sufficiently to the systemic and structural constraints that determine whether doing so is genuinely possible. Sen's (1999, 2009) capability approach addresses this limitation directly by shifting the analytical focus from what is available to what is achievable, from resources to real freedoms, and from participation to substantive agency. Central to this shift is the concept of conversion factors: the personal, social, and environmental conditions, including language proficiency, recognition of prior learning, institutional culture, racial discrimination, family obligations, and prior educational disruption, that enable or constrain people's ability to transform formally available resources into the capabilities they have reason to value (Robeyns, 2005; Sen, 1999). In the refugee integration context, this framework insists that formal access to schooling or employment is necessary but not sufficient: the extent to which these opportunities constitute genuine capabilities depends on the substantive conditions of their provision, their relevance to the specific circumstances of refugee-background people, and the degree to which conversion barriers, whether structural, cultural, or institutional, have been identified and addressed. Phillimore (2024) captures the moral stakes of this distinction with characteristic clarity: the difference between a *mere life* and a *good life* is precisely the difference that a capability-based assessment is designed to reveal. It is that assessment, applied to the educational and employment experiences and outcomes of African refugees in Australia, that this book undertakes.

It is, however, imperative to acknowledge that the very concept of "refugee integration," and indeed the broader category of "integration" within which it sits, has been the subject of sustained and often searching critique within contemporary migration scholarship. A growing body of work argues that the term is normatively loaded, conceptually fuzzy, and politically dangerous. Rytter (2018) offers perhaps the most uncompromising of these interventions. He calls on social scientists to "write against integration" altogether, contending that the concept functions as an "empty signifier" whose meaning shifts according to political context. The result, he argues, is that newcomers framed as "unintegrateable" face a Sisyphean task in which "enough is never enough." Schinkel (2017, 2018) goes further still. For him, integration scholarship constitutes a form of neocolonial knowledge production.

By training its analytical gaze almost exclusively on migrants and their descendants, while granting white citizens an "integration dispensation" that exempts them from scrutiny, the field provides the factual apparatus through which migrants are perpetually problematized as "other." A related charge comes from Anthias and Pajnik (2014), who characterize integration discourse as "Janus-faced": it purports to concern incorporation while in practice marginalizing particular migrant groups, holding them up against a narrow and homogenized projection of national belonging.

Spencer and Charsley (2021) offer perhaps the most useful synthesis of these debates. They distil the critical literature into five core limitations that integration scholarship has historically failed to address. The first is its normativity, in which the empirical *is* slips quietly into the prescriptive *ought*. The second is its objectification of migrants as "other," standing outside an imagined mainstream rather than participating in shared social processes. The third is its outdated imaginary of receiving society as homogeneous and bounded, when in reality such societies are diverse, segmented, and structurally unequal. The fourth is its methodological nationalism, which obscures the transnational ties and mobilities that shape contemporary migrant lives. The fifth is its narrow focus on the characteristics that migrants themselves bring to the table, rather than on the wider configuration of institutional, structural, and societal factors that condition whether engagement is possible at all. Wieviorka (2014) makes a complementary point, arguing that integration has become a "nostalgic concept" evoked by those who long for an earlier sociological imagination, one in which society could still be conceived as a stable, bounded system into which individuals were dutifully socialized. Read together, these critiques expose how easily integration discourse can collapse into a one-way project of cultural conformity. Structural inequalities are obscured, and the burden of change is placed squarely on the shoulders of those with the least power to effect it.

Notwithstanding the force of these criticisms, this book continues to use the term *integration*, and it does so deliberately. The reasons are partly pragmatic and partly conceptual. As Penninx (2019) has argued in his measured response to Schinkel, the concept of integration performs fundamentally different functions in research and in policy. To abandon the term altogether would be to vacate the analytical terrain on which questions of power, membership, and structural inequality are most urgently being contested. Spencer and Charsley (2021) make a related point. Any alternative term, they observe, would face precisely the same critiques unless the underlying concept were itself reframed; and the term *integration* remains so widely used by scholars that to refuse it would be to forfeit participation in

the very debates this book seeks to enter. Klarenbeek (2019) likewise argues that the concept can be productively retained if reconceptualized as a process of boundary change in which all individuals are engaged, rather than as a one-way process imposed upon migrants alone. The challenge, on these accounts, is not to abandon integration but to reframe it.

This book takes up that reframing through the *capability for integration* framework developed in Chapter 2. Grounded in Sen's (1992, 1999, 2009, 2017) capability approach, the framework treats integration not as an end state of cultural similarity, nor as a set of behavioral outcomes to be measured against a presumed national norm. It treats it, instead, as a question of *real freedom*: the substantive opportunity refugees have to pursue lives they have reason to value. This Senian foundation matters because it resets the analytical question from the outset. The relevant question is no longer whether refugees have become sufficiently like the receiving society, the very move that Anthias and Pajnik (2014), Schinkel (2017, 2018), and Rytter (2018) rightly identify as the source of integration discourse's most damaging tendencies. It is, rather, whether the structural conditions are in place for refugees to convert formally available entitlements into substantive capabilities. The locus of evaluation thereby shifts in two directions at once: from the refugee to the receiving society and its institutions, and from the question of cultural conformity to the question of structural enablement. For this reason, the capability for integration framework is not vulnerable to the central charge levelled by integration's critics, namely that the concept blames migrants for outcomes shaped by structural forces beyond their control. Its evaluative gaze is trained, from the outset, on those structural forces themselves.

The framework also addresses, in a structured way, several of the five core limitations Spencer and Charsley (2021) identify. By assessing integration provisions against the criteria of sufficiency, relevance, and convertibility, it offers a systematic method for examining the material, institutional, relational, and social conditions that determine whether formally available opportunities can genuinely be taken up. This is the analytical move that allows the framework to resist the migrant-blaming tendencies the critics target. Poor outcomes, on this view, are read not as evidence of refugee deficit but as diagnostics of structural failure on the part of the host society. The framework's emphasis on conversion factors, drawn from Sen's (1999) and Robeyns' (2005, 2017) insight that identical resources produce radically different capabilities depending on the personal, social, and environmental conditions that shape their use, aligns directly with Penninx and Garcés-Mascareñas' (2016) recognition that receiving-society institutions are far