

# UNFOLDING TRANSITIONS:

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*A Collaborative Investigation of the  
Education and Career Pathways of  
African Youth from Refugee Backgrounds  
in South Australia*

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# Abstract

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Participation in, and access to, education and employment are key indicators of social inclusion and integration for refugees. Although the labour market integration of refugees has been a research focus, little is known about the experiences of African youth from refugee backgrounds as they make the post-school transition to education and employment in Australia. This study examined perspectives on the education and career pathways of African youth in metropolitan South Australia using an in-depth, qualitative, longitudinal case study approach. It sought to understand the education and career pathways of African youth from refugee backgrounds and identify factors and processes that influence these pathways over time. This study involved extensive collaboration with a Reference Group (comprising educators, service providers and researchers), and a group of African Community Mentors (comprising leaders and elders of South Australia's new and emerging African communities). These collaborative relationships were developed and maintained throughout the study.

This research sought to identify factors and processes that influence the education and career pathways of African youth from refugee backgrounds over time.

Multiple, semi-structured interviews were conducted over a 12-month period with: African youth ( $n = 14$ ) who were either attending school, or had recently made the post-school transition at the time of data collection; secondary school staff ( $n = 7$ ); Technical and Further Education (TAFE) staff ( $n = 4$ ); university educators ( $n = 5$ ); service providers ( $n = 3$ ); and African community leaders and elders with service provision roles ( $n = 5$ ). In addition, informal observations were conducted in the form of regular school visits and, where possible, student participants' school files were accessed and analysed.

Six key influences were found to shape the education and career pathways of African youth: previous schooling; English language skills; Australian mainstream schooling challenges and support; family support; academic achievement; and post-school preparation. A series of recommendations were developed from participant

interviews, and meetings with Reference Group members and African Community Mentors. From these recommendations, a professional development resource was developed for use in schools and pre-service teacher education courses. Together, the recommendations and the professional development resource are intended to contribute to our understanding of effective practice in supporting African youth from refugee backgrounds to make the post-school transition.

# Declaration

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I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person where due reference is not made in the text.

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Svetlana M. King

December, 2013

# Acknowledgements

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*In normal life we hardly realize how much more we receive than we give, and life cannot be rich without such gratitude. It is so easy to overestimate the importance of our own achievements compared with what we owe to the help of others.*

*Dietrich Bonhoeffer - Letters and Papers from Prison (1943-1945)*

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<sup>1</sup> This is a pseudonym to protect the identity of the participating school.

# Dedication

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*Ross William King*

*September 20, 1945 – January 11, 2014*

This thesis is dedicated to my father, Ross William King, who was a constant source of unconditional love and unwavering support throughout my life. He played a crucial role in shaping the formative years of my life. I will be forever indebted to him for making me the person I am today. Dad held my hand on this PhD journey, providing practical and emotional support which helped me to overcome many challenges and hurdles. I am so very grateful to have had such a positive and powerful role model in my life. I am fortunate that he was present at the time of submission of my thesis. My greatest sadness is that he will now only be present in spirit to witness the final stage of my PhD journey and beyond...

and

*Ivan Pecek*

*September 16, 1935 – August 26, 2013*

This thesis is also dedicated to my godfather, Ivan Pecek, who, like the young people in this study, survived war and subsequently overcame many of life's challenges, trials and tribulations. He lived his entire life with strength and determination. He was – and indeed will remain – an inspiration to me.

# Author Note

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Every human being is on a journey. Every day, as we go about our routines and daily tasks, we catch a glimpse of these journeys as our paths inevitably cross – at the bus stop, in the street, at the supermarket... These encounters are often brief and quickly forgotten. We also cross paths with one another in a much less superficial manner and with greater frequency – in the places where we live, work and study. We journey with others through our interactions with family, friends and colleagues. It is this latter ‘crossing of paths’ in which I have been privileged to engage, on my journey as a PhD student.

As explorers have demonstrated time and again, it is important to maintain records of journeys taken. This study is a record of my four-year journey, as I crossed the paths of an inspiring group of people; some younger in chronological age than I, but with life experiences beyond compare. I have been privileged to bear witness to the unfolding lives of 14 African youth as they made the transition from secondary school. I have observed their sheer determination and incredible resilience in meeting life’s challenges. I have also been inspired by those who work with and support these young people who, despite and in spite of multiple, complex challenges, remain dedicated to their work.

The stories in this study detail our separate, yet very much connected journeys, as we sought to understand the focus of this journey – the education and career pathways of African youth from refugee backgrounds. Over time, I have engaged with these young people in different ways – providing practical assistance with homework, greetings and brief discussions of progress in school corridors, and formal interviews in which they shared their thoughts, feelings, triumphs and anxieties in embarking on their post-school journeys.

In many ways, this thesis has been a journey. Consequently, I have used the language and discourse of journeys and travel in this thesis... itinerary, preparation, charting, foundations, mapping, tales, perspectives, discoveries, and new directions.



And now it is time for you, the reader, to prepare; for you are about to embark on a journey, crossing the paths of individuals whom you may never have encountered, even superficially. I sincerely hope that you enjoy this 'journey of journeys' as much as I have...

# List of Acronyms

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APC	All People's Congress
ASP	African Service Provider
ASSOE	Adelaide Secondary School of English
BSSO	Bilingual School Services Officer
CALD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
DECD	Department for Education and Child Development
ESL	English as a Second Language
IELC	Intensive English Language Centre
NAP	New Arrivals Program
NESB	Non-English Speaking Backgrounds
NPFL	National Patriotic Front of Liberia
RTO	Registered Training Organisation
SACE	South Australian Certificate of Education
SP	Service Provider
SSO	School Services Officer
ST	School Teacher
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
UE	University Educator
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
VET	Vocational Education and Training