

The Educational and Employment Aspirations of Somali High-School Students in Melbourne Some Insights from a Small Study

**Prepared by Yusuf Sheikh Omar
PhD candidate
Refugee Health Research Centre, Latrobe University**

With the Ecumenical Migration Centre, Brotherhood of St Laurence

Aqoon la'aani waa iftiin la'aanee

*Waa aqal iyo ilays la'aanee
Ogaada ogaada, dugsiyada ogaada
O aada o aaya walaalayaalow aada*

(Lack of knowledge is lack of enlightenment
Is homeless and lightless
Be aware, be aware of schools
And go to schools, go to schools
Brothers and sisters go to schools)

Abdullahi Qarshe (1961), the father of Somali literature and arts

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my deep gratitude to the Ecumenical Migration Centre at the Brotherhood of St Laurence, for its support and encouragement. My profound thanks to Janet Stanley for her advisory role, and to Deborah Patterson, also from the Brotherhood of St Laurence, for her valued editorial contribution. Rasika Jayasuriya and Melina Simmond also deserve special thanks for their professional guidance and contributions which were crucial in developing this report. Finally, many thanks to the Somali parents and students who supported and participated in this research.

1. Introduction

This research sets out to explore the educational and employment aspirations of Somali high-school students in Melbourne. It also sought to identify the barriers Somali students face in defining and achieving their educational and employment goals and develop a set of recommendations aimed at assisting Somali students to achieve these goals.

It is important to note that there is significant diversity within the Somali community in Melbourne, based on factors such as kinship, however this is not the focus of this study.

1.1 Data and methodology

Over seven months from May to September 2005 primary data was collected through personal observations, focus group surveys and individual interviews. A total of 48 people participated in surveys and interviews: 12 fathers, 12 mothers, 12 male students and 12 female students. All students were aged 16–19 years and were attending Somali ethnic school classes at the time of the interviews. Twelve mothers were informally interviewed as a group. The mothers were also attending classes at the Somali ethnic school. Twelve fathers were randomly approached at Somali shops and restaurants and participated.

1.2 A Brief History of Somali Education

The old traditional system of teaching and learning in Somalia involved the training of children and young people by elders in relation to methods and manner of utilising the environment, clan collective responsibilities and fighting skills. Later, nomadic schools were introduced with male religious leaders teaching children how to read, write and memorise the Qur'an and different units of Islamic studies such as Shariah law, Arabic grammar and aspects of Sufism. In these settings, pupils learnt by rote using wooden tablets. Traditionally, education in Somali has been male-oriented; the preferential treatment of boys was a reflection of broader traditions of decision-making where only adult men participated in community affairs.

During colonisation by the Italians and British in the 19th and early 20th centuries, western-style education was introduced to meet the needs of the colonisers. Seven years of such education were thought to be necessary and sufficient for those Somalis assuming administrative and low-level technical roles (Abdi 1998).

Post-colonial administrations, between 1950 and 1960, required the Italian government in south Somalia, under a United Nations Trusteeship, to prepare Somalis for independence, necessitating the establishment and development of a modern education system for Somali children and adult learners (Abdi 1998). With this, Somalis embraced the values of modern education and as Somalia gained independence in 1960, mass education was further promoted as a vehicle for national development. The Somali language was formally documented in 1972. This coupled with a mass literacy campaign in rural areas, resulted in a sharp increase in literacy rates from 15% to 55% in 1974 (Abdi 1998).

Political repression from the early 1980s to 1990 resulted in a significant drop in literacy rates to 36% for males and 14% for females (UNESCO 1991). To

understand the scale of deterioration, the gross enrolment rate for 4–23 year olds was estimated as being a low 14% in 1980, by 1988, that had slid back to 7% (UNESCO 1991). Virtually all educational institutions and resources, including schools, technical training centres and university facilities, became casualties in the mass destruction of the country’s total infrastructure (Abdi 1998). Somali children were denied their right to education, which is one of the fundamentals of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNESCO 1991). In summary, after ousting the former dictator, the nation state deteriorated and Somalia became a good example of a “*Failed State*”, with “*the communal mind of people being in a coma*” (Afrax 1994, p.233).

As a result of the recent civil disruption, many Somalis fled their homeland and sought asylum around the world. Over the last decade, Australia has accepted a large number of Somali refugees (Omar 2004, p.7). The Somali community is the youngest emerging language group; in 2001, 40% of Somali speakers were under the age of 15, and in Melbourne this figure was 41% (White et al. 1999; Clyne et al. 2005, p.19).

2. Parents’ Perspectives

“Sumadii awoowiyo sinji waa ma guuraan” (Somali proverb)

The marks of my grandfather and ethnicity are ineradicable

To gain an insight into the perspectives of Somali parents with respect to their children’s educational and employment goal and opportunities, 12 Somali mothers and 12 Somali fathers (not from the same families) living in Melbourne were interviewed.

2.1 Family composition

Tables 1 and 2 below describe the household composition of the parents interviewed. The smallest of these families consisted of 4 people: mother, father and two children. The largest of these families comprised 13 people: mother, father and eleven children. The total number of children in the 24 families represented was 113, with the total number of parents 43. The mean number of persons in each family was 6.5. Only two families had other relatives living in their homes; one family resided with three non-immediate relatives and another with two non-immediate relatives.

Table 1: Household composition of mothers and fathers interviewed

	Mothers	Fathers
Mother and father	7 (58%)	12 (100%)
Only mother	5 (42%)	0
Children for all 12 families	65 (Average: 5.5 children per family)	48 (Average 4 per family)

The main difficulties associated with large family sizes articulated by the mothers and fathers were:

- overcrowding at home;
- lack of space and a quiet environment to study;
- lack of privacy; and
- increased care responsibilities for older children.

2.2 Parents' Education

Parents' educational attainment ranged from none to tertiary post graduate level. Mothers were clearly less educated than fathers: only 1 out of the 12 mothers had gained a tertiary degree, compared with 6 out of the 12 fathers. Furthermore, 2 out of the 12 fathers had obtained a postgraduate degree, while 2 out of the 12 mothers had never been to school at all.

Table 2: Level of education of mothers and fathers interviewed

Level of Education	Mothers	Fathers
Post-graduate	0	2
University	1	6
Finished secondary	7	2
Started secondary	1	3
Started primary	1	1
Never went to school	2	0

Research has demonstrated that refugee parents who have a strong educational background and who work towards improving their language skills and academic competencies by attending courses and obtaining degrees in their receiving country are able to better assist and support their children in achieving educational goals (Bhatnagar 1981, pp. 40–37; Niitamo 2004). It is thought that these parents are able to better monitor and guide their children with educational matters as they progress through the acculturation process faster than less educated parents.

Conversely, the low educational levels and low occupational status of some parents may be detrimental to their children's future educational achievements (Simon and Rothermund 1986, p.17). This is particularly pronounced in the case of uneducated mothers as, in Somali culture, mothers are the first persons to teach their children. Research demonstrates that uneducated Somali parents often have few possibilities to prepare and assist their children with home assignments, and the tradition of oral communication means that written notes from school often end up in the waste-paper basket (Niitamo 2004; Schaid 2004). Furthermore, when parents can not communicate with the mainstream community, children often assume the role of interpreters, which further contributes to the reversal of roles between generations and commonly serves to undermine parents' authority (Niitamo 2004).

2.3 Parents' Occupations

A significant number of mothers interviewed (8 out of 12) work within the home, i.e. they do not have a formal job or attend further education classes. Two mothers were employed at childcare institutions, while the remaining 2 were students. As indicated in Table 1, 5 of the mothers interviewed were single parents. Four of the mothers interviewed had husbands that were out of work, while 3 had husbands that were employed (one as a student, another as a taxi driver and the third as a businessman).

Five of the 12 fathers interviewed were employed; 3 as taxi drivers, one as a butcher and one as a self-employed businessman. Five fathers were unemployed, all of whom had tertiary degrees (undergraduate or postgraduate). One of the remaining two fathers was a student, while the other preferred not to reveal his employment situation. Regarding their wives, 6 out of the 12 were housewives with no formal income. Two were students, 2 were employed in childcare and business and the remaining 2 are unknown. Interestingly, all 12 of the fathers interviewed were married, whereas only 7 of the mothers interviewed were married, with the remainder being single parents.

In summary, the majority of the mothers and fathers interviewed were unemployed, which may impact negatively on their children's educational achievement and job aspirations. Anisef (1975) emphasises that parents' occupational status, particularly that of fathers, plays an important role in influencing children's future educational and employment plans. Anisef's research on the relationship between fathers' occupations and their children's future occupations found that 73% of those students with fathers employed in high prestige jobs intended to enroll in universities, whereas only 51% of those students with fathers in low prestige jobs have similar plans. The study indicates that children's career trajectory often follows that of their fathers with respect to occupational status (Anisef 1975).

The present small study indicates that Somali refugee parents in Australia with higher levels of education, particularly fathers, are more likely to be unemployed: the five fathers who were unemployed had tertiary degree or postgraduate qualifications.

2.4 Perceptions of Children's Education

Somali parents are very aware that appropriate education is needed for their children to secure a good job in the future. For example, parents made statements such as:

"I like our children to be well-educated to obtain the highest qualification from universities to teach our coming generations" (Father)

"I would like to say that education is light for all human beings, so we have to support our children's education" (Mother)

In the eyes of Somali parents, children are also regarded as future providers for their parents, families, relatives and the Somali community. So they wish their children to have access to quality education that will lead to well-paid employment. They also wish their children to have education opportunities that they did not have when growing up in Somalia.

These ideas are supported by research in other countries. For example, Niitamo (2004) describes how Somali parents living in metropolitan Helsinki demonstrated high levels of interest in their children's schooling. Studies in Norway show similar results, reaffirming that the Somalis' belief that education is a buffer against unemployment, crime, lack of direction and general drifting. XX More broadly, research indicates that migrants in general have high educational aspirations for their children (Elder & Kloproge 1989, p.18). According to Elder and Kloproge, *"despite the fact that most students from migrant (and refugee) families are in weak positions in term of socio-economics and education, their positive views and high expectation for their children's education make them hold what can be described as middle class values"* (p. 24). Parents wish for their children to acquire educational credentials that will allow them to gain social status and occupational security in the country of resettlement (Elder & Kloproge 1989).

The findings of this research clearly disprove the perception of some teachers and writers that Somali parents are not interested in their children's education. Somali parents settling in Australia, however, may not understand how the Australian education system functions. For example, parents may need to understand that Australian education encourages a student's ability to reason, have independent thought and demonstrate creativity, whilst Somali education typically emphasises memorising, dictating and rote learning. Tutoring children at home, the parent-school relationship, extra-curricular sports and academic activities and family and community excursions are also important features in the Australian approach to education and unfamiliar in the Somali education system, and Somali parents need to be assisted to understand the importance of these features. The parents may also not understand how to best help their children because of language barriers, the strangeness of the new environment, their own educational levels and the survival culture that the Somali community continues to live in. In addition, in Somali culture, the role of parents is to prepare their children and send them to school, leaving the teachers and schools administrators to teach and discipline the children. (Omar 2005).

2.5 Perceptions of Job Choices

Both mothers and fathers stated the following jobs were preferable for their children: medicine, nursing, teaching, engineering and mechanics. Fathers additionally saw aircraft piloting and business as desirable career paths. In general, these are jobs that are highly valued and well-paid in Somalia.

All 12 of the mothers and 10 of the fathers interviewed thought that girls and boys should work in different professions.

Generally speaking, mothers and fathers both wanted their daughters to work in the medicine, nursing or childcare. Mothers articulated three additional professions: teaching, secretarial work and religious work. Fathers also saw working with computers, banking, economics, law, air stewarding, research and journalism as appropriate. In contrast, most of the mothers and fathers said that engineering, mechanics, piloting and academic positions would be appropriate for their sons. Fathers additionally thought the army, banking, skilled vocations, economics, law, business, sports and computing jobs were somewhat desirable.

Some mothers but no fathers have an inclination for theological education and employment for their children. For instance, one mother said, *“I beg my Allah to enable them to have an Islamic education and good job”*.

Many Somali parents would prefer their children not to undertake employment in the arts, namely theatre, music and dancing as it is seen to be in conflict with Islamic values. In general, there is also a preference to avoid professions heavily dominated by Anglo-Saxons, such as employment in the police force and army.

2.6 Perceptions of Preferred Country of Employment

When asked in which country/s they would prefer their children to work in the future, 4 mothers singled out Somalia as their preferred country for their children while 8 generalised about all Muslim countries (including Somalia) without specifying any in particular. Most importantly, none of the mothers mentioned Australia as one their preferences for their children’s workplace in the long term.

Five of the fathers singled out Somalia as a desired working destination. Four chose Muslim countries Three fathers would like their children to stay and work in Australia.

2.7 Involvement in Children’s Education and Employment-Related Decision-Making

All 12 of the mothers and 10 of the fathers interviewed said that they actively talk with their children regarding educational and employment goals. Their reasons for doing so included the desire to give their children advice, nurture and train them, understand their likes and goals, encourage them to think about their future, help them to make plans, and inform them of the long-term benefits of knowledge and education. Two fathers said that they do not talk with their children about education and employment, one of whom justified his attitude by saying,

“I don’t like to cause a headache for my children because they are still very young. I only talk with them about God and how they could worship him.”
(Father)

Reasons for talking included:

“...because I like every good thing for them. I advise them to think about good jobs for their life and hereafter.” (Parent)

“I often remind them that education is the key for good life but it is a very tough path and a very challenging one.” (Parent)

2.8 Perceived Barriers to Children’s Attainment of Educational and Employment Goals

Seven out of 12 of the mothers considered the exposure to other cultures as a challenge for their children, whereas only one father articulated cultural issues as problematic.

“The issue of culture is a big challenge. Our children are growing up in this culture and grasping it while we as parents are in shock and surprise with this culture.” (Mother)

Both mothers and fathers, however, agreed that lack of educational support at home and in the community, as well as poor English skills, hindered their children’s achievement of educational goals and job aspirations. According to some parents:

“There is no good mentor or successful role model who warns children away from a bad path.” (Father)

“Children greatly need educational support at home but fathers most of time are out of homes while mothers have not enough education to help them.” (Father)

2.9 Desire for Assistance, Advice and Information

All of the mothers interviewed and the majority of the fathers (10 out of 12) would like assistance, advice or information to help them in supporting their children to achieve their educational and employment goals. They indicated that they need assistance in helping their children to differentiate between Islamic culture and non-Islamic culture, as well as assistance with developing their abilities to appropriately discipline their children and teach them good manners. According to one parent:

“Children need help to know differences between Islamic culture and non-Islamic culture. So I need help in that area.” (Mother)

Parents desired assistance to overcome the generational gap between themselves and their children. As one parent stated,

“If I get an advice about my children’s soul purification and manners I

will be grateful. I need help about how to overcome differences because I have different views from my children.” (Mother)

Both mothers and fathers mentioned the necessity of educational support and the teaching of culture and Islam. Yet there were some issues that were only raised by the mothers, such as the need to tell children about their country of origin and perhaps take them there to see their people and motherland. Mothers also mentioned the importance of families being able to practise religion in Australia, teaching children planning skills and reminding children of why they are in Australia. Fathers, on the other hand, discussed the role of recreational activities and volunteering in supporting children to achieve their educational and employment goals.

3. Students’ Perspectives

“Nin (qof) yari inta uu geed ka boodo ayuu talo ka boodaa” (Somali proverb)
While a young person may have the ability to jump high over tall trees, this does not reflect the height of their wisdom and ability to judge a situation which will develop with age and experience.

The following information is drawn from interviews and surveys conducted with 12 Somali female and 12 Somali male students in Melbourne, all of whom were aged between 16 and 19 years at the time.

Table 3: School year of student participants

Female		Male	
Year 10	3	Year 10	5
Year 11	5	Year 11	4
Year 12	2	Year 12	3
High school completed	1	High school completed	0
University	1	University	0

3.1 Experience of Frequently Changing Schools

Table 4 below indicates the number of years that the students had lived in Australia and the number of times they had changed school during this period. While there are significant variations, most of the students had resided in Australia for over 4 years, with some having arrived in Australia over 14 years ago. On the other hand, a small number of students (just 3) had only been in Australia for 1–2 years. Since their arrival in Australia, most of the students had changed schools at least 2 or 3 times. Some had changed school 6 or 8 times, with the highest number of changes being 11 in 6 years.

Table 4: Number of years in Australia and number of times changed schools

Boys	Years in Australia	No. of times changed schools	Girls	Years in Australia	No. of times changed schools
	4	3		1	1
	4	2		2	2
	5	3		2	2
	7	2		4	3
	8	3		5	8
	10	3		5	2
	11	2		6	11
	11	3		7	2
	12	3		8	3
	12	6		11	6
	12	0		11	6
	13	4		14	3

Traditionally, Somali people are nomads, constantly moving with their stock in search of water and grazing and constant movement from place to place is central to Somali culture (Omar 2005, p.6). As expressed by Ahad and Gerrad (2004, p.22), *“the rejection of a sedentary existence is no doubt a feature of nomadic populations whose freedom may be likened to that of flocks migrating birds”*. Somalis’ lifestyle in the urban areas is therefore underpinned by their desire to frequently relocate. In Melbourne, some Somali families move from suburbs for housing reasons or to have better access to Islamic institutions such as mosques or Islamic schools. They also move to join their extended relatives and the Somali community in other suburbs. Nonetheless, frequent moving necessitates that children change schools often.

Frequent school changes can greatly disturb a child’s educational experience, and hence have a negative impact on their long-term employment opportunities. Bhatnagar (1981, pp. 20–39) points out that many new immigrants move residence within the first few years of settlement to areas of second and third settlement. With frequent changing of schools, development of good English language skills and academic progress can be challenging (Bhatnagar 1981).

3.2 Family Composition

Five boys and 4 girls lived with their mothers only at the time of interview, while the remainder of the students live with both parents. This data correlates with White’s observation that *“a majority of the young Somalis [in Melbourne] lived either with their parents or with their mothers”* (1999, p. 20). Only 3 students had relatives other than their parent/s and siblings living with them.

The absence of one parent, particularly the father experienced by more than a third of students, can be extremely negative for children’s development in collective

communities such as the Somalis. Research on Somali youth in London indicates that aggression, violence, absence from school and high school drop-out rates can be attributed to depression and poor motivation resulting from family separation (Omar 2005, p.13). Overall, lack of positive adult male role models limits children's capacity to develop self-esteem and a good sense of appropriate social and personal boundaries.

3.3 Perceived Value of Education and Employment

Like their parents, the majority of the students said that they valued education. However, a minority of them believed that having a job and making money was better than studying.

“Education is good because it gives you good job and life ... Good education good job you know ... if I don't get educated I can't (help) myself when I get older.” (Male focus group participant)

Generally speaking, the female students interviewed had higher educational aspirations than the males. During the focus group discussion, the majority of students agreed that female students of the Somali community are academically more successful than males. As a result, more female Somalis gained entrance into university, generally into the course of their first or second preference.

"Because girls concentrate more ... they are more determined than boys ... Boys play too much ... Boys have more freedom to go outside but girls stay at home and do more study ... Girls have only one option to go out of home: weddings or celebrations." (Male focus group participant)

Other research also indicates that the future plans of Somali females are more ambitious than those of Somali males (Siukonen 2004). This finding, however, is at odds with Bhatnagar (1981, p. 37), who reports that migrant male students have considerably higher aspirations than migrant female students. This may be because migrant male students receive from their parents greater encouragement to strive academically than migrant female students. (Anisef 1975) points out that with respect to traditional gender roles, males internationally have been socialised for educational and employment achievement while females have been socialised for domestic and marital roles.

Based on participant observation, it is hypothesized that the academic excellence of Somali females in Melbourne will continue into their tertiary studies. Yet after they get married and have greater domestic responsibilities, they may be limited in the time which they can devote to their academic pursuits.

Overall, both female and male students valued education and learning, reconfirming the results of White's research (1999, p. 21), which concluded that *“a positive outlook towards education was also reflected in the (Somali youth) responses...*

education seemed to be valued in its own right, as well as being a potential stepping stone to future employment or further study". Eleven of the 12 female students confirmed that they know what profession they would like to enter, as compared with only 9 of the male students.

The majority of the students acknowledged that achieving their employment aspirations would require post-secondary school education. It has been argued that the high levels of motivation and ambitious aspirations of students from migrant and refugee backgrounds contribute greatly to high rates of school retention, even more so than high intellectual capacity (Bhatnagar 1981, p. 37-38). These also assist in the completion of tertiary education, which paves the way for their competing with the local population for middle-class jobs.

The following case study illustrates the educational success that young Somali students can achieve.

Shifa Hussein: An Example of an Aspiring Young Somali in Melbourne

Numerous magazines and newspapers have reported on the many achievements of Shifa Hussein (including the *VCE Bulletin*, *Education Times*, *VCAA Bulletin*, *Heidelberg Leader*, *Sunday Age* and *Herald Sun*). Reports highlight that Shifa Hussein, a Year 12 student and captain at Banksia Secondary College, has led her school and local community towards a greater understanding of tolerance. Shifa has won a score of awards for her efforts. She has tirelessly helped others by providing counselling for Somali students, organising a Somali girls' play for multicultural week, and acting as a liaison between her school and the Somali community. She has put her energies into making the world a better place and has become involved with many charities including World Vision, the Anti-Cancer Foundation and Wesley Do Care. She has coordinated forums and completed a leadership course for African youth and multicultural youth training with Visy Care. She has won several academic awards for her outstanding achievements. Professor Kwong Lee Dow, Chair of the VCAA, commends Shifa, stating "*Shifa's efforts have certainly made a significant difference in overcoming cultural barriers and making the school and wider community more informed in creating a greater depth of cultural understanding*". Shifa's motto is: "*Anyone can do what they want*". Indeed, both the Somali and broader Australian community need more young people like Shifa.

3.4 Barriers to Understanding How to Achieve Future Aspirations

Research highlights that while Somali students in western countries often have high educational and employment aspirations, they often possess little understanding or awareness of how they might attain these aspirations (Omar 2005, p.15; Birman 2001, p.10). The students in this study expressed their desire to become

programmers, engineers, accountants, doctors and so on. However, they had difficulty envisioning the steps they need to follow in order to achieve these goals. Such difficulty may stem from:

- lack of understanding of how western education and employment systems function;
- lack of knowledge and skills to plan ahead (most young Somalis are living in “survival mode”);
- lack of positive role models, i.e. members of their community who are professionally progressing in Australia;
- difficulty in adapting to their new life in Australia;
- lack of solid educational background; and
- cultural influences, e.g. planning for the future does not hold great importance in Somali culture as Somalis are originally nomadic people that tend to act spontaneously.

In spite of the fact that many young Somalis have trouble understanding the steps they need to follow some were able to identify that attending good schools, working hard, having patience and good organisational skills are important steps for achieving educational and employment success. Also they believed that having good friends to lead them to the right place is important.

“You have to know what to be, a professor or whatever job you want, and then you make the right choices regarding what subjects you want to take and the kind of work experiences you do. You need to have your university degree”. (Male focus group participant)

3.5 Gender and Employment

Culturally, Somalis believe that males and females should be engaged in different occupations. Seven out of the 12 female students interviewed stated that they would like to become a doctor or nurse, while 4 female students indicated they would like to enter teaching, politics, the police force or the fashion design industry. In contrast, 8 out of the 12 male students interviewed stated they would like to work in the engineering sector or related fields such as building, aeronautics, motor mechanics, architecture, interior design and decoration, civil engineering and industrial design. Three male students did not make a choice but the remaining male student revealed he would like to be a policeman. The equal interest of one female and one male is striking because, in Somali culture, a career in the police force is not associated with women, especially in a non-Muslim environment.

Previous research also confirms strong correlations between migrant parents’ and students’ educational and employment plans (Bhatnager 1981, p.37). However, there were a few cases in which the parents had higher aspirations for their children than the children had for themselves.

Many of the female students are motivated by their compassion for others. Many expressed that they want to help others, for example, by teaching the illiterate, giving money to needy persons and healing the sick.

Research conducted in Finland has found that young Somalis commonly desire to help in the rebuilding of Somalia (Siukonen 2004), a theme that was also apparent in this research.

“I want to help my own people in Somalia one hundred per cent. They need help. Who else helps them if you can’t help them you know ... I want to go back and help them until they are civilised. Because they are too uncivilised now, because they can’t even agree on having one President. They kill each other.” (Female focus group participant)

A number of the male students expressed strong feelings regarding their responsibility toward their families overseas, stating that they wished to help them once they secured employment and began to earn their own money. One female student, who has decided to pursue a career in biology, attributed her choice to religious motives:

“[I want] to see the miracles of Allah in the human body.” (Female focus group participant)

A small number of students thought that status was an important factor influencing their choice of career:

“[I want] to be a famous (fashion) designer in my future”. (Female focus group participant)

Finally, many of the students considered personal interest and earning money as very important in their considerations.

3.6 Perceptions of Parents’ Aspirations

Six out of the 12 female students interviewed stated that they believed their parents want them to become either a doctor or nurse, whereas only 2 male students thought the same. Five female students expressed their desire to work in professions different from those chosen by their parents. For example, a female student who wished to become a policewoman believed that her parents would prefer her to be a housewife. Another female student who wanted to work in politics said that her parents planned for her to become a nurse. When asked why she believed her parents wanted her to be a nurse she replied:

“I really don’t know. Maybe one day I will go back and do something for my country (Somalia).” (Female focus group participant)

Two female students, who would like to work in science or medicine, emphasized that their parents would like them to study Islam due to their belief that religious work will help their daughters to succeed in this life and hereafter or judgment day. A paper presented at the 9th Congress of Somali Studies (Fangen 2004), held in Denmark in 2004, argued that compared with male children, Somali girls are raised with much greater restrictions regarding their future educational and employment opportunities.

3.7 Perceptions of Voluntary Work

A majority of students interviewed (8 females and 9 males) emphasised the importance of volunteering in order to pursue a successful career. Students had reasons for volunteering included wanting to help people, learn different skills, get work experience, socialise with others, identify if they like a particular job or not, promote their skills to others, gather referees, get more *Ajri* (God's reward hereafter), have something to include in their resume, have the opportunity to join waiting lists or gain 'real life' experience as opposed to theoretical experience.

A small number rejected volunteering:

"Because you need to be at school to learn and volunteering is not that sort of subject". (Male focus group participant)

"Because if a person wants to become something like a doctor, he doesn't need it". (Male focus group participant)

3.8 Level of Consultation with Parents

Students often consulted with their parents, friends, teachers and carers regarding educational and employment opportunities because they believe these people have wisdom, good information and more experience in life and study.

"Because our parents know more than us because they were born before us ... because they are your parent s... they should know what is good for you ..." (Focus group participant)

"Your mum can read your mind ... because your parents' decision makes you happier than your own decision." (Focus group participant)

Yet some of the students acknowledged that while they respect their parents' views, in the end they made their own decisions.

"You should respect your parents and their points of view and everything but at the end of the day it's up to you. It is your life. Your parents are not processing for you what you want to do and what you don't. You consider their decisions and they give an opinion ... and I think your parents don't say: 'Let me decide your life for you' ..." (Female focus group participant)

Previous research confirms that Somali youth have a high level of respect for their parents' opinions (Siukonen 2004). Research also highlights the great connection that Somali children have with their families (Birman 2001, p.10). Beside other role models, a small number of students indicated their willingness to also consult with youth community workers or welfare employees.

3.9 Financial Influences on Educational and Employment Choices

Refugees and asylum seekers in Australia, including Somalis, usually have to start from scratch and receive a monthly allowance from the government that barely covers their most basic needs (Niitamo 2004). White (1999, p.20) confirms that the socio-economic situation of Somali youth in Australia is generally poor. As a result, money for children's leisure activities and education is often limited. Scarce monetary resources are further reduced by remittances sent to Somalia. Research indicated that refugee children whose family were more secure economically in their country of origin often have a better sense of security and opportunities for schooling during settlement (Niitamo 2004), this study did not cover this.

The majority of the students in this study (10 out of 12 in each group) believed that financial considerations influence their educational and employment goals. Many felt that if they have the money to allow them to study at good schools and pay university fees, this will result in their receiving a good education and later on a good job. Students' comments included:

"...because money helps me to do anything I want e.g. pay fees" (Male focus group participant)

"I can go [to] good schools and can go [to] a university" (Female focus group participant)

Two students of each sex believed that money would not affect their goals because their community and families would offer support regardless of the costs. As they put it:

"Because my community would support me... the family will support you no matter how much money it is." (Female focus group participant)

3.10 Strengths for Achieving Educational and Employment Goals

Previous research found that Somali women seek refuge in the Islamic faith during the settlement period in strange and hostile environments (Mohamed 2004, p.3). Strengths included:

"Having faith in everything that I do. Knowing that I will never give up as long as I have Allah (God) on my side." (Female focus group participant)

Female students also named their understanding, good memory, good intentions and social skills as their strengths.

Male students, on the other hand, considered their abilities, educational skills, physical strength, determination and willingness to face all challenges as their strengths:

“I am smart, strong, fit, willing to accept any challenge that is coming to face me.” (Male focus group participant)

3.11 Barriers to Achieving Educational and Employment Goals

A number of female students believed that their domestic responsibilities were barriers to achieving educational and employment goals. They commented:

“Yes, housework. Noisy house (is a challenge). I need a quiet place.”
(Female focus group participant)

Amongst the Somalis, it is also very common to hear remarks such as: *“Why they [waste] their time? At the end of the day they will be housewives and their husbands will take [over] their responsibilities”*.

Research that compared the roles and responsibilities of Somalis and Finnish girls found that Finnish girls tended to spend their time sitting and talking in cafeterias, dancing in discos and shopping, whereas Somali girls tended to stay at home, help their mothers with the housework and take care of the smaller children in the family (Salmela 2004). Somali girls in Finland had to balance the demands of informal education at home, such as learning ‘women’s tasks’, with those of formal education (Niitamo 2004). For some Somali parents, the informal education of daughters at home is as important, if not more so, as formal education (Niitamo 2004).

Overall, female students in Melbourne thought that their poor English language skills challenged their abilities to achieve educational and employment goals. Male students, on the other had, considered the difficulty of the VCE exams in Year 12 and limited resources as significant barriers. Both sexes expressed the need for additional tutoring, good teachers, help with English and mathematics, more educational programs, family and financial assistance and counselling to support their potential at school.

4. Settlement Issues

“Geyiga ama geedka aadan aqoonin midna gabaad kuma siiyo” (Somali proverb)
Neither the land nor the tree that you don’t know and affiliate with will give you shelter.

4.1 Equity in Opportunities

According to Jupp’s maximalist approach to settlement (Jupp et al. 1991), an ethnic group can only be considered successfully integrated when the broader society is able to provide a range of social, religious and educational facilities to the ethnic clientele. When asked about their feelings about future educational and employment opportunities in Australia, the vast majority of the Somali students reported positive emotions. The students generally reported multiple feelings of hopefulness, excitement and determination. According to one female student:

“I am excited about future employment and education opportunities because I hope that it works out for me.” (Female student)

Table 5: Students’ feelings about future educational and employment opportunities in Australia

	Hopeful	Determined	Excited	Confused	Anxious	Completely Hopeless
Female Students	7	4	7	2	2	0
Male Students	5	7	5	1	2	3
Total	12	10	12	3	3	3

Three male students felt completely hopeless regarding their future prospects:

“Allahu Aalam (only Allah knows). No hope.” (Male student)

When asked whether or not they felt Somali students had the same opportunities as other Australians in relation to all types of education and employment in Australia, the majority of students felt positive about their access to different resources, with 8 of the female and 9 of the males feeling that there was equity.

A few, however, felt that opportunities are not equal within Australia, attributing this to their religion:

“Because I am a Muslim woman, there are things that I can’t do, so some fields of employment is not right for me, like places where you have to have short clothes.” (Female student)

“Racial tensions have risen and I am now not so hopeful of Australia’s multicultural attitude because they might be hesitant to give foreigners jobs.” (Male student)

4.2 Alienation from Australian Society

Jupp and colleagues (1991) argue that successful emergence / integration may take up to a lifetime to achieve. Taking the minimalist approach, however, they argue that at the very least a community cannot be considered to be integrated until its members are not alienated from Australian society and do not attract hostile attention from the majority.

The results of this study clearly indicate that many Somali students do not feel that they, or their family, are truly part of Australian society (see Table 6). The majority of students felt that they were more accepted by their school community and immediate neighbours than they were when in public places or using services.

Table 6: Students' perceived acceptance of themselves and their family within Australian society

	School	Neighbourhood		Public Places		Public Services
	You	You	Your family	You	Your family	Your family
Female Students	10	6	8	5	5	6
Male Students	10	10	6	6	3	5
Total	20	15	14	11	8	11

For those who expressed their alienation from Australian society, the majority regarded their religion (Islam) and terrorism to be major factors precipitating their exclusion:

“Since all those things that has happened in the world you feel like everyone is looking at you and scared of you.” (Female student)

“I don't know if people accept me or not because I am an African person, Muslim, and if they see me they run or walk as fast as they can from me because they think I am [a] terrorist or Muslims are terrorists.” (Male student)

Many students also felt that the broader Somali community was also not accepted in Australia for reasons including race, religion and skin colour.

Positively, several students said that they felt accepted within Australian society because of their Australian citizenship and the multicultural nature of Australia:

“Because I have got Australian citizenship and feel like I am accepted.” (Female student)

“Because Australia is a multicultural nation which accepts all people no matter what.” (Male student)

Conversely, 11 females and ten males feel accepted within the local Somali community.

“We are Somali and Somali people and regardless if you know them or not they will help you” (Male student)

“Because it’s my culture and I speak the same language and they make us feel welcome” (Male student)

Of the three students that did not feel part of the Somali community, two quoted tribal issues as the reason for their exclusion.

4.3 Maintenance of Core Values and Beliefs

For an ethnic group to be considered integrated within Australian society, its broad social character should not be significantly different from the norm. The group must also be able to maintain its culture and language without hostility from the majority (Jupp et al. 1991).

When asked to describe how they thought they were similar to and different from other Australians, many articulated the following similarities: speak the same language (English), attend the same schools, live in the same environment /country and share common citizenship. In addition, several students commented on the issue of common humanity:

“They are human and we are human.” (Male student)

Cultural practices and beliefs, language, race, physical appearance and skin colour were all mentioned as differences. Religion and skin colour stood out as the differences the students perceived as most significant between the two groups:

“I am black, they are white, we have our own religion and the only similarity is that we live in the same country.” (Male student)

“My religion, I am black, my culture, and my religion does not allow me to be the same as Australians because they hate me.” (Male student)

4.4 Social/Self-Exclusion

The majority of female students and minority of male students indicated that they felt socially are excluded in Australia. The difference between genders could be interpreted as resulting from males’ increased capacity to integrate and adapt to life in Australia more quickly. For instance, in answer to the question, *“Do you feel*

that Somali community is included in Australian society?”, 7 out of 12 girls believed it was not. In contrast, only 5 out of 12 male students agreed. Interestingly, 9 out of 12 males and 5 out of 12 females believed the Somali community was, in fact, included in Australian society, and they (Somalis) were part of this multicultural society, but Somalis were excluding themselves from the mainstream society.

Several students commented on how the Somali community may actually seek to exclude themselves:

“Somalis are accepted by most Australians but Somalis make themselves felt out.” (Female student)

Participant observation suggests that female students in particular seek to exclude themselves from the mainstream, the reasons for which may relate to their feelings of difference due to their wearing of the *Hijab* (scarf) and religious dress.

Similarly, research on Somali women in Denmark has concluded that members of this population self-excluded themselves from society, claiming that the visible differences they present – having dark skin, being Muslim and speaking Danish with an accent – create stigma and discrimination (Jagd 2004). While Somali women residing in Denmark did not necessarily have personal experiences of discrimination in the labour market, many often had this perception (Jagd 2004).

Such behaviour seems to be commonplace amongst migrant women globally. According to Ward and colleagues (2001, p.107),

“In many cases women are more isolated from members of the receiving culture, particularly if they are unemployed or lack requisite language skills. In addition, women are often perceived as cultural gatekeepers, teaching their children about ethnic customs and traditions and nurturing identification with heritage, culture, norms and values”.

Some of the Somali students interviewed ascribed their exclusion to the belief that some Australians prefer only white-skinned people to be residents of Australia. Others found that some Australians talked to them in a way that served to exclude them and that recent media coverage of Muslims had created an exclusive atmosphere:

“The media perspectives have made all Muslims terrorists and they are now judged in that light.” (Male student)

“Because Somalis are black and on top of that they are Muslims.” (Male student)

While the majority of students feel they were accepted by their schools and immediate Australian neighbourhood, many of them did not feel they or their families were part of Australian society, particularly in relation to public institutions and places. For example, only 11 out of 24 students felt they were accepted in Australian public places, while even fewer (8 out of 24) felt that their families were part of Australian public places.

It is believed that the more young people adapt and interact positively with members of their receiving country, the more they will increase their chance of securing employment, developing social skills and being accepted by broader society. This belief is supported by research on refugees and migrant students who attended German schools which revealed that these students achieved higher educational and occupational success than those who had not gone to German schools because the social contacts the students had developed with their mainstream classmates influenced their adoption of mainstream values (Simon & Rothermund 1986). In contrast, social exclusion hampers young people's success in education and employment in the new environment; Elder and Kloproge (1989) confirm that poor contact between migrant families and mainstream society can lead to migrant children's poor cognitive development.

4.5 Multiple Long-Term Plans

The majority of the male students expressed their desire to live in Arab countries or Australia, whereas the majority of female students stated they want to work in Somalia. Interestingly, Australia was the second preference for employment for male students, above Somalia. In contrast, female students placed Somalia as first preferred country while Australia lagged behind England as a place to work and live in the long term. Many students had plans for working in more than one country in the future. Often the preference to work in Arab countries reflected the belief that there are many job opportunities in these Muslim countries.

“I want to work in Arab countries because I am confident that they would like an Australian educated person.” (Male student)

“I want to work (both) in Australia and in Somalia because Australia is the place I grew up and Somalia because Somalia is my homeland and I want to help them.” (Female student)

Dichotomous future planning is typical for the young Somali diaspora. Research on Somali youth in Finland reveals that travelling backwards and forwards is an option that many consider, as they feel an obligation to make a contribution to Somalia. Others prefer the option of staying in the resettlement country they know. This confusion in making plans for the future may be ascribed to diasporic life and development of multiculturalism in young people (Siukonen 2004). It can also be attributed to their frustration and bleak vision of their future in western countries (Birman 2001). Researchers in the United States discovered that *“their view of their*

future here in (USA) was not hopeful. Indeed, many stated that in the future they hope to live in Africa, another third world country, or go back to Somalia. What lies behind this concern is the bleak picture of their current situation. They talk about difficulties they face adjusting to life in U.S., and several expressed concern that they do not see members of their community progressing here in U.S.” (Birman 2001, p.10).

Research in Norway indicates that the desire to return to Somalia may interfere with young people’s motivation and ability to integrate into their receiving country, develop local skills and establish a stable life (Ward 2001, p.110).

5. Implications

Offering educational and training opportunities to parents is central to supporting students in the long term. In this small scale study, those parents, in particular fathers, with higher levels of education had higher levels of unemployment. This may lead to the devaluation of education among the Somali community. To ensure that well-educated fathers can be positive role models within the community, we strongly suggest that government and concerned groups offer training and assist in the securing of employment that is compatible with an individuals’ qualifications, skills and capacities.

While Somali parents are clearly very concerned about their children’s education and future employment, they do not understand how they can concretely assist their children achieve their goals. Somali parents would benefit from information that helps them to better understand the differences between the two educational systems, as well as greater access to English language classes and awareness programs about Australian values and way of life and the meanings of diversity and multiculturalism.

The educational and employment aspirations that parents have for their children reflect the careers that are highly valued and well paid in Somalia. Parents require support to assist their children in developing educational aspirations that are congruent with the needs of the employment market in Australia. Parents also need advice and support in understanding that children need to have the freedom to choose their own career trajectory.

In this research, a number of parents and students revealed that they have a strong preference and future plans for their children to work in Somalia or another Muslim country. Such plans may be unrealistic, as from other migrant communities that came to Australia in a similar situation to the Somali community, very few have returned to their countries of origin. In addition, the idea that “*I will go back*” undermines settlement efforts and opportunities to gain local experience, develop local job skills, integrate into the mainstream community and seek employment in Australia. To avoid unrealistic plans of returning to Somali, parents and students should be supported to build stable lives in Australia during the settlement period.

This research indicates that parents, in particular mothers, are frustrated about their children's exposure to western culture and therefore we recommend programs and events for Somali parents to help bridge cultural and intergenerational gaps. These programs should focus positively on diversity, the valuing of other cultures, harmony, acceptance and tolerance. It is also very necessary to remind refugee parents that children who grow up in Australia will almost inevitably adopt much of the Australian culture.

A significant number of Somali students in Melbourne reside with only their mothers. This may impact on their educational, professional and behavioural development. Single Somali mothers and their children require special supports and continuing advice.

Changing school frequently can have a detrimental affect on children's learning, in particular their reading and writing skills. It is essential to increase awareness within the Somali community of the possible negative consequences of changing schools.

We need to encourage successful Somali youth to be good role models for other young people and support them in organising events, ceremonies and celebrations to promote their community's culture and capacity to contribute to Australian society.

Somali students have high aspirations regarding their future education and employment, yet often lack understanding of how to attain their goals. We urge schools and the Somali community to assist them in better understanding the education and employment systems and the steps they need to take to achieve their future plans. These can focus on the importance of time-management skills and encouraging opportunities for voluntary youth activities to gain local experience.

Somali students have high aspirations for their educational and professional future and these good intentions deserve to be preserved, retained and utilised well. Young people need to be provided with opportunities to become involved in creative activities and inspiring youth programs so that they may develop their skills and capacities. For example, programs may include leadership seminars, discussion sessions, educational activities, student competitions, recreational activities, camping, arts, public speaking, creative writing, reading groups and volunteering within and outside of the Somali community.

Providing educational tools and learning facilities (such as computers, relevant books, video resources and photocopying machines) within the Somali community, from which both children and parents can benefit, is crucial.

Creating counselling services for young people and parents is essential. These should be staffed by qualified people from the Somali community, as well as professionals from mainstream services.

Implementing these recommendations could bring about significant positive changes within the Somali community as a whole and within the younger generations in particular. This will help to address the social exclusion being experienced by many Somali students in Melbourne, particularly female students,

and enhance their ability to feel included and valued in mainstream Australian society.

7. References

Abdi, A (1998), *Education in Somalia: History, Destruction, and Calls for Reconstruction*, Vol. 34, No. 3, Taylor and Francis Group, London, U.K.

Afrax, M (1994), *The Mirror of Culture: Somali Dissolution Seen through Oral Culture*, Lynne Publishers, Boulder Colorado.

Ahmed, A (2004), *Role of the Somali Father Following Relocation in Melbourne*, (thesis), La Trobe University, Melbourne.

Ahad, A and Gerrand, V (2004), *Italian Cultural Influences in Somalia*, La Letteratura Post-Coloniale Italiana, Istituti Editoriali E Poligrafici Internazionali, Pisa, Roma, Italy.

Anisef, P (1975), 'Consequences of Ethnicity for Educational Plans Among Grade 12 Students', in A Wolfgang (ed.), *Education of Immigrant Students: Issues and Answers*, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Toronto, pp. 122–36.

Bhatnagar, J (1981), *Educating Migrants*, St. Martin's Press, New York.

Birman, D, Trickett E and Bacchus, N (2001), *Somali Refugee Youth in Maryland*, Report Prepared for the Maryland Office for New Americans and Maryland Department of Human Resources, U.S.A.

Diesow, A (2004), *Renomadism in Diaspora: The Case of Somali-EU Citizens*, a Paper Presented at the 9th International Congress of Somali Studies, September 3–5, Aalborg University, Denmark.

Elder, L and Kloproge, L (1989), *Different Cultures*, Swets and Zeitlinger, Amsterdam.

Fangen, K (2004), *Identity and Symbolic Ethnicity among Somali Immigrants in Norway*, a Paper Presented at the 9th International Congress of Somali Studies, September 3–5, 2004 Aalborg University, Denmark.

Good, A (1999), *Somali Refugee Perceptions of Factors Impacting the Learning of their Children in High Schools* (Dissertation), University of Massachusetts Amherst, U.S.A.

Jagd, C (2004), *Motivation, Identity and Agency: Strategies to find Employment at the Danish Labour Market*, a Paper Presented at the 9th International Congress of Somali Studies, September 3-5, Aalborg University, Denmark.

Jupp, J, McRobbie, A and York, B (1991), *Settlement Needs of Small, Newly Arrived Ethnic Groups*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra.

- Kallehave, T (2004), *Strategies for Recognition: Process of Inclusion and Exclusion*, a Paper Presented at the 9th International Congress of Somali Studies, September 3–5, Aalborg University, Denmark.
- Kambouropoulos, K (2003), ‘Tolerant Teachings Lead to VCE Award’, *Education Times*, 9 October, Melbourne.
- Mohamed, H (2004), *Somali Immigrants in Finland: Somali Woman Between Two Cultures*, a Paper Presented at the 9th International Congress of Somali Studies, September 3–5, Aalborg University, Denmark.
- Niitamo, A (2004), ‘Somali Youth in the Context of Schooling in Metropolitan Helsinki: A Framework for Assessing Variability in Educational Performance’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol. 30, No.1, pp.81-106
- Omar, Y (2005), ‘Young Somalis in Australia: An Educational Approach to Challenges and Recommended Solutions’, *Migration Action*, Vol. XXVII, No. 1, pp.6-18.
- Simon, J and Rothermund, D (1986), *Education and Integration of Ethnic Minorities*, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, London.
- Salmela, A (2004), *Did You See Her Standing At The Market Place? Moral Purity And Socio-Spatial Behaviour Of Somali Girls In the City of Turku, Finland*, a paper presented at the 9th International Congress of Somali Studies, September 3–5, Aalborg University, Denmark.
- Schaid, J (2004), *Somali Immigrant Settlement in Small Midwestern Communities: The Case of Barron, Wisconsin*, University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire, U.S.A.
- Siukonen, S (2004), *Future Planning in Diaspora: Educational Goals of Somali Adolescents in Helsinki, Finland*, a Paper Presented at the 9th International Congress of Somali Studies, September 3–5, Aalborg University, Denmark.
- Sturman, A (1985), *Australian Education Review No 22: Immigrant Australians and Education*, Australian Council for Educational Research, Camberwell, Victoria, Australia.
- UNESCO (1991), *World Education Report*, UNESCO, Paris.
- VCAA (2003), *Shifa Hussein*, VCAA BULLETIN, No. 7.
- Wakholi, P (2005), *African Cultural Education: A Dialogue with African Migrant Youth in Western Australia*, (master’s thesis), Murdoch University, Western Australia.
- Ward, C, Bochner, S and Furnham, A (2001), *The Psychology of Culture Shock*, 2nd ed., Routledge, London.
- Wolfgang, A (1975), *Education of Immigrant Students Issues and Answers*, the Ontario Institute, Toronto, Canada.

White, R, Perrone, S, Guerra, C, and Lampugnani, R (1999), *Ethnic Youth Gangs in Australia Do They Exist? Report No. 4 Somali Young People*, Australia Multicultural Foundation, Australia.