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Improving employment and education outcomes for Somali Australians

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ENQUIRIES

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Executive summary

Recent decades have seen a substantial increase in the arrival of Australian migrants from Somalia and other countries within the Horn of Africa. Around half of the 16,000 Somali Australians currently live in Victoria, forming a diverse and relatively young community in and beyond Melbourne. Somali Australians have brought with them a belief in the importance of education, and they access both vocational and higher education at higher rates than other Australians. Despite these high levels of tertiary education access and participation, outlooks are sub-optimal, with relatively high levels of unemployment and socio-economic disadvantage. What explains the gap between education access and employment outcomes, and how might we improve the overall employment outcomes of Somali Australians?

To explore these questions, we conducted a mixed methods study examining employment motivations, experiences, and outcomes of Somali Australians. In interviews with Victorian university students, graduates, and community leaders we found a consistently strong commitment to education, high parental and community expectations, and a relative employment benefit from possession of a higher education degree. Interviewees spoke of their resilience, desire to contribute back to their communities, and generally positive experiences of university. Those who were members of a leadership program, Himilo Community Connect, also spoke of the impact of that program on their employability, and our research revealed several innovative internship programs operated by large employers, which are helping some Somali Australians to transition successfully from education to the workforce.

Overall though, employment outcomes for Somali Australians are stubbornly poor. The gap in outcomes is not explained by different levels of educational attainment. Indeed, a Somali Australian with a Bachelor Degree is about as likely to be unemployed as another Australian who has left school at Year 10 or earlier. Higher education improves employment outcomes for all groups, but not all degrees are treated equally. Our interviewees spoke of unconscious bias and, in many cases, explicit discrimination, during the application and interview stages of employment. Discrimination typically included negative perceptions of names, accents, skin colour, religion, and clothing. Conclusions from our previous research within universities correlate with these findings, with many new migrants being subtly but effectively silenced within and beyond the classroom. Both our qualitative research and the national data confirm that racism and discrimination remain prevalent, and that further strategies are required to tackle bias within schools, universities, workplaces, and communities.

A second challenge facing many Somali Australians is a paucity of networks and social capital. Within university, a dearth of networks and connections is often exacerbated by a belief that academic grades are more important to securing employment than extra-curricular activities and work-integrated learning. We found a need for greater facilitation of networks, mentors, peer relationships, events, internships, and other programs designed to build social capital and increase access to opportunities. Potential strategies include an expansion of targeted internship programs among employers and governments, the involvement of university students and alumni in promoting peer relationships and mentoring, and the expansion of community leadership programs.

More broadly, our findings confirm the need for greater education on the benefits of workforce diversity, and a sustained, strategic approach to improving social inclusion. Too many Australian migrants are qualified yet unemployed, multilingual yet maligned for their accent, community-minded yet isolated, and aspirational yet overlooked. Economic prosperity and social cohesion depend on strong education and the provision of meaningful employment opportunities for all Australians.

Recommendations

Higher education institutions

Education and training

Develop a workforce with understanding of, and expertise in, cultural diversity. This work could include initiatives such as:

- Providing training to professional and academic staff around diversity, intercultural competency and unconscious bias;
- Harnessing the voices of culturally diverse students, including Somali Australians, to inform the training of staff and students;
- Ensuring staff diversity on selection panels and at senior management levels, and develop roles for staff with expertise in equity and diversity, e.g. chief diversity officers;
- Ensuring that applicants for senior management and academic roles are required to submit a diversity statement outlining their understanding of, and commitment to, cultural and other forms of diversity;
- Developing initiatives similar to the UK's Race Equality Charter, by which universities can be assessed and accredited on their commitment to cultural diversity.

Admissions, curriculum, and assessment

Recognise, reward, and promote cultural diversity within admissions, teaching, and assessment. This work could include initiatives such as:

- Developing course curriculum, subjects and pedagogical expertise around cultural literacy and safety, unconscious bias, and inclusive excellence;
- Reducing potential bias in assessment, e.g. by removing student names from assignments and exams;
- Providing greater recognition of non-traditional extra-curricular activities, such as contributions to community and family, and employment that occurs outside of traditional work-integrated learning activities;
- Providing information widely and early to all students regarding the range of extra-curricular activities available and the potential employability benefits of participation, and specifically promoting employability activities to Somali Australians.

Careers

- Provide specific training for careers staff on student equity issues, including disparities in participation and outcomes, and cultural and financial barriers to participation in extra-curricular activities;
- Ensure that university careers advice and services are promoted to all students and monitor participation of Non-English Speaking Background (NESB) and low socio-economic status (SES) students in work-integrated learning opportunities and other activities;
- Expand the involvement of Somali Australian university students and alumni in promoting peer relationships and mentoring;
- Work closely with employers and community organisations to consolidate employment pathway initiatives, professional networks, and leadership and mentoring programs for Somali Australians.

Employers

- Promote the importance of workforce diversity and social inclusion. This work could include:
 - Designing, implementing, and evaluating programs to educate employees, with the involvement of culturally diverse staff;
 - Developing application processes in which names are removed to prevent bias;
 - Ensuring that selection panels comprise diverse staff, and that a demonstrable commitment to diversity is a key selection criterion;
 - Recognising and rewarding staff who demonstrate a commitment to diversity, and establishing senior roles focussed on inclusive excellence and productive diversity initiatives;
- Develop specific initiatives to attract more Somali Australians and culturally diverse employees;
- Expand targeted internship programs and tailored employment pathway initiatives for Somali Australians, working closely with universities and community organisations;
- Facilitate networking opportunities, mentors, peer relationships, events, and other programs designed to build social capital and increase access to employment opportunities and development for Somali Australians.

Australian Government

- Work with industry and employer groups to address discrimination, unconscious bias, and other barriers to the employment of Somali Australians;
- Support the expansion of networking opportunities, targeted internship programs, community leadership programs, and employment pathway initiatives for Somali Australians;
- Support targets for the employment of culturally diverse Australians, including Somali Australians, across the public sector.

List of abbreviations

AAIP	African Australian Inclusion Program
ACMID	Australian Census and Migrants Integrated Dataset
ANCP	Ancestry Multi Response
IEO	Index of Education and Occupation
IT	Information Technology
JSS	Jesuit Social Services
NAB	National Australia Bank
NZ	New Zealand
NESB	Non-English Speaking Background
SEIFA	Socio-Economic Index for Areas
SES	Socio-economic status
UK	United Kingdom
VET	Vocational Education and Training

Project background and report structure

Project background

This research project was led by La Trobe University's Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research in consultation with Himilo Community Connect. Funding was provided by the Department of Health and Human Services and the Banyule City Council.

The purpose of the project was to develop national research into the facilitators and barriers to the employment of Somali Australians who have studied at university. The researchers sought to answer four research questions:

1. What motivates Somali Australians to access university, including their self-identified strengths?
2. What are the facilitators and barriers to employment for Somali Australians who have studied at university?
3. What are the workforce experiences of Somali Australians who have studied at university?
4. How can universities, community, and government organisations better support Somali Australians to access employment?

Data was collected via:

- analyses of national datasets;
- semi-structured interviews with Somali Australians who have studied at a Victorian university; and
- semi-structured interviews with community leaders.

Report structure

This research comprised four main phases: analysis of national datasets; interviews with Somali Australian students and graduates; interviews with community leaders; and a desktop analysis of employment programs. The report covers each phase and provides recommendations for universities, employers, and governments.

Phase one involved the analyses of national datasets to create a sophisticated picture of the educational attainment and employment outcomes of the Somali Australian community.

Phase two comprised 28 in-depth interviews with individuals from the Somali Australian community. Participants included university students, graduates and workforce employees who have studied at university. Participants were asked about university motivations, aspirations and self-identified strengths; job readiness; challenges and facilitators in accessing employment; work experience; and recommendations to improve employment outcomes for Somali Australians.

Phase three involved six interviews with key community leaders. Participants were asked for their professional perspectives on the facilitators and barriers to employment for Somali Australians.

Phase four involved a desktop review of employment programs targeted to support Somali Australians and related new migrant groups. A number of innovative programs were revealed by this analysis, along with a greater need for more structural reform to reduce bias and expand social capital and networks.

Context

Previous research confirms the importance of higher education for new migrants, and those from refugee backgrounds in particular (Ferede, 2012). University study can facilitate positive social, emotional and cognitive experiences, providing new migrants with increased confidence in their own skills and abilities (Joyce et al., 2010) and capacity for negotiating cultural diversity (Harris et al., 2013). In addition, our own research suggests that new migrants bring strengths and different perspectives to the classroom that can enrich the learning experience of other students (Harvey, Mallman, Szalkowicz & Moran, 2018). Nevertheless, students from refugee backgrounds in Australia often struggle to access and/or succeed in higher education because of structural and attitudinal barriers. These limitations include a privileging of certain forms of ‘cultural capital’ within university admission processes, and related limited recognition of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). Everyday experiences of bias and discrimination are often found in the treatment of audibly different accents by students and staff (Harvey & Mallman, 2019), surface segregation of groups of students (Milem, Chang & Antonio, 2005), and subtle marginalisation within classrooms (Harvey et al., 2018).

Overall, new migrants achieve relatively low university employment outcomes, and are still often under-represented in higher education (Terry et al., 2016). Graduate outcomes for those from non-English speaking backgrounds, including many students from refugee backgrounds, involve lower salaries overall than those enjoyed by graduates from English-speaking backgrounds (Graduate Careers Australia, 2016). Importantly, new migrants are also often more likely to work in professions for which their degree is not required or relevant (Ho & Alcorso, 2004), with a segmentation of the labour market creating disadvantage for those from migrant and refugee backgrounds. Discrimination because of visible difference, e.g. skin colour, clothing, is also an evident contributor to workforce discrimination and underemployment (Colic-Peisker, 2009). Such discrimination is particularly problematic given evidence of the value of diversity to teaching and learning, social cohesion, and economic productivity.

Despite substantial research on the educational and employment experiences of new migrants, little research has been conducted specifically on the experiences of Somali Australians, who represent a relatively new and fast-growing migrant group. As this report reveals, such research is important both because there are common and growing challenges among migrant groups, but also notable differences between groups that suggest a need for tailored initiatives alongside broader strategies to promote productive diversity. In particular, the experiences of Somali Australians suggest a need to reconsider assumptions about intergenerational progress among migrant groups, acknowledge and address the depth of workforce discrimination and bias, and interrogate the relationship between educational attainment and employment outcomes.

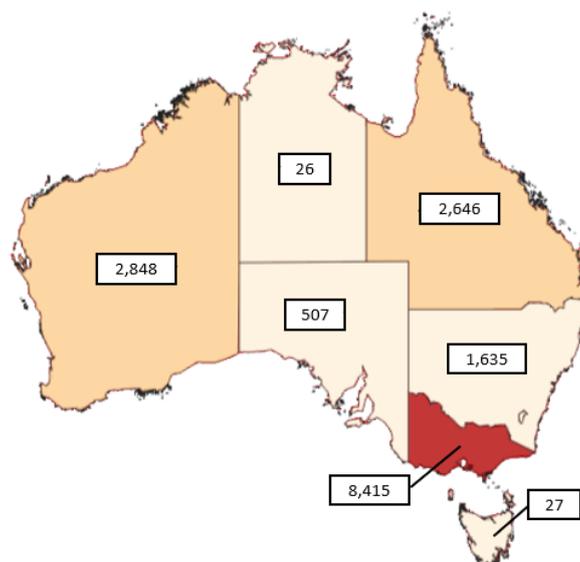
The following section provides the context for our qualitative research on Somali Australians, and includes relevant geo-demographic, education, and employment data. Analysis of the data reveals a rapidly growing community striving to attain educational qualifications and employment, but typically unable to translate education into strong employment outcomes. Relatedly, the relative socio-economic disadvantage of Somali Australians is manifest, and reveals a need for targeted action and policy reform. Data particularly highlight the need to investigate the causes of employment gaps and to develop research-informed strategies to close those gaps. Notably, we highlight the particular difficulties faced by Somali Australians who hold tertiary qualifications,

compared with their non-Somali counterparts. Most data in this section are based on the Australian Bureau of Statistics' 2016 Australian Census of Population and Housing (see Appendix A).

Geographic dispersion

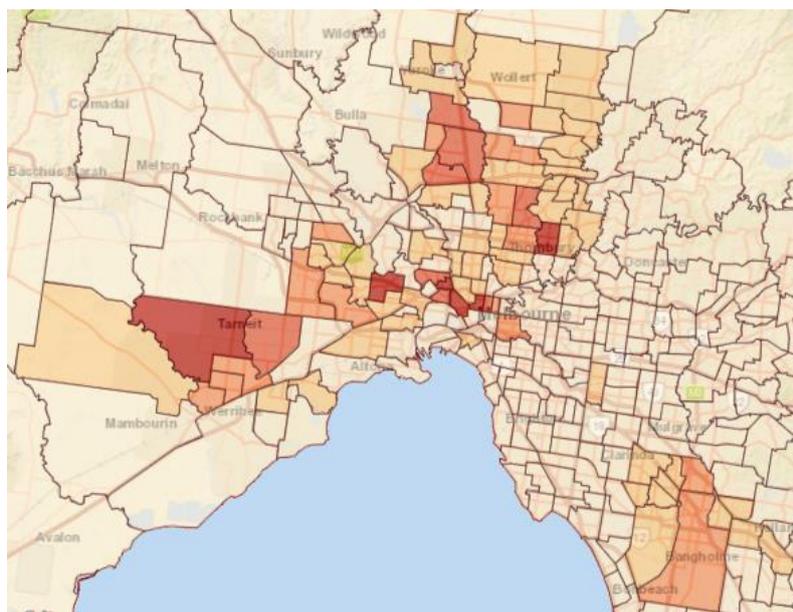
According to the 2016 Australian Census of Population and Housing, 8,415 Somali Australians live in Victoria, representing about 50 per cent of the Somali community in Australia. Western Australia and Queensland both have substantial populations relative to the size of their populations.

Figure 1: Choropleth map of the distribution of the Somali Australian community around Australia.



Analysis of the geographic dispersion within Victoria shows that 99.9 per cent of the Somali Australian population resides in areas classified as major urban areas. Figure two highlights that there are clusters of Somali Australians in Melbourne's inner north (in areas containing substantial public housing, like Flemington, North Melbourne, Carlton), the northern suburbs of Heidelberg West and the Campbellfield area, and the western suburbs around the Braybrook, Tarneit and Truganina areas. The Statistical Area 2 with the largest number of individuals with Somali ancestry is the Heidelberg West area, with 919 individuals with Somali ancestry. This represents approximately 6.5 per cent of that area's residents.

Figure 2: Choropleth map of Statistical Areas 3s by the number of individuals with Somali ancestry.



Migration patterns

Data from the 2016 Australian Census of Population and Housing shows that 62 per cent of the Somali Australian community were born overseas. In total, 26 per cent of the rest of the Australian population were born overseas.

Figure 3 shows the year of arrival for migrants by ancestry. In general, Somali migrants began arriving in larger numbers in the early 1990s, increasing in number until 1998. There was a lull in migration during the early 2000s, before there was a second wave of migration from 2009 onwards.

Figure 3: Proportion of migrants by year of arrival to Australia and ancestry.

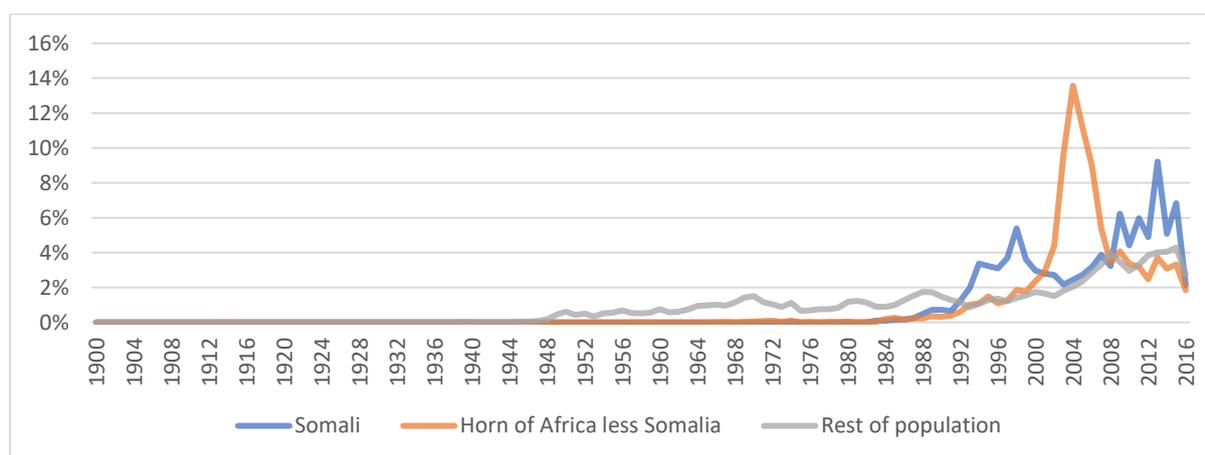


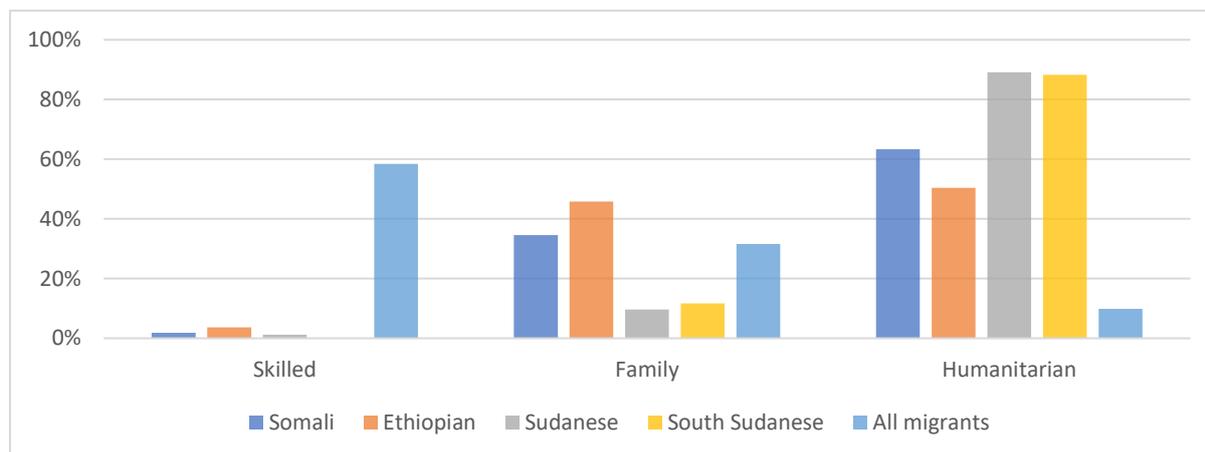
Figure 3 also shows the migration patterns of the ‘Horn of Africa’ comparison group¹. There is a much steeper increase in the curve during the years of 2002 through to 2008. According to the

¹ We included a comparison group of ‘similar’ migrants from three countries surrounding Somalia in the ‘Horn of Africa’: Ethiopia, Sudan and South Sudan. These three comparator countries were selected partially due to their geographic proximity, but also because they represent similarly sized migrant populations who largely settled in Australia on humanitarian grounds.

census, 57 per cent of migrants from the ‘Horn of Africa’ comparison group arrived during this period.

The Australian census does not collect any information regarding the visa types of individuals, however, the Australian Bureau of Statistics have released a separate dataset called the Australian Census and Migrants Integrated Dataset (ACMID), which does include such data. Figure 4 displays the broad visa type for all migrants who arrived in Australia between January 2000 and August 2016.

Figure 4: Visa type for migrants who arrived in Australia between January 2000 and August 2016.



Data source: Australian Census and Migration Integrated Dataset (ACMID) via Tablebuilder

It highlights that migrants from Somalia, and the other ‘Horn of Africa’ countries examined in this report, are all much more likely to have been granted a visa based on humanitarian grounds than for their skills compared to all migrants over this period. Amongst the ‘Horn of Africa’ cohort there are also interesting differences in the proportion of migrants granted a visa on a family basis. According to this data, Somali Australians and Ethiopian Australians were much more likely to have arrived on a family visa compared to those of Sudanese or South Sudanese ancestry.

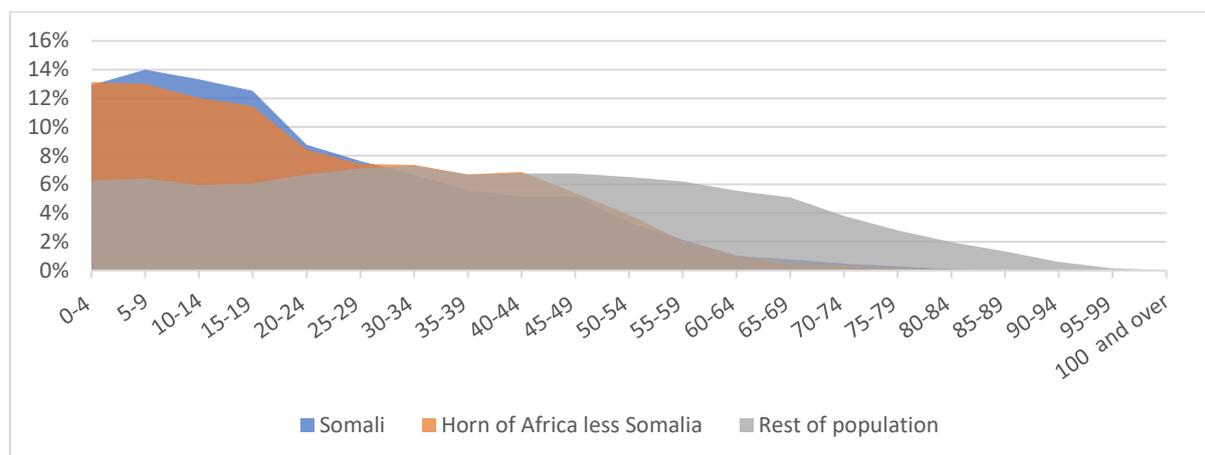
The differences in the visa types of migrants are particularly relevant when examining the outcomes of Somali Australians. Since 59 per cent of all permanent migration is via a skilled visa, the educational and employment outcomes for most migrants is relatively high; whereas humanitarian migrants usually have lower levels of educational attainment. The ‘Horn of Africa’ comparison group was created to enable more nuanced comparisons.

Age profile

The overall age profile for those with Somali or ‘Horn of Africa’ ancestry was much younger than for the rest of the Australian population². Figure 5 shows that 53 per cent of the Somali Australian population is below the age of 20, compared to only 25 per cent for the rest of the population. A similar pattern was detected for those from Ethiopian, Sudanese and South Sudanese ancestry.

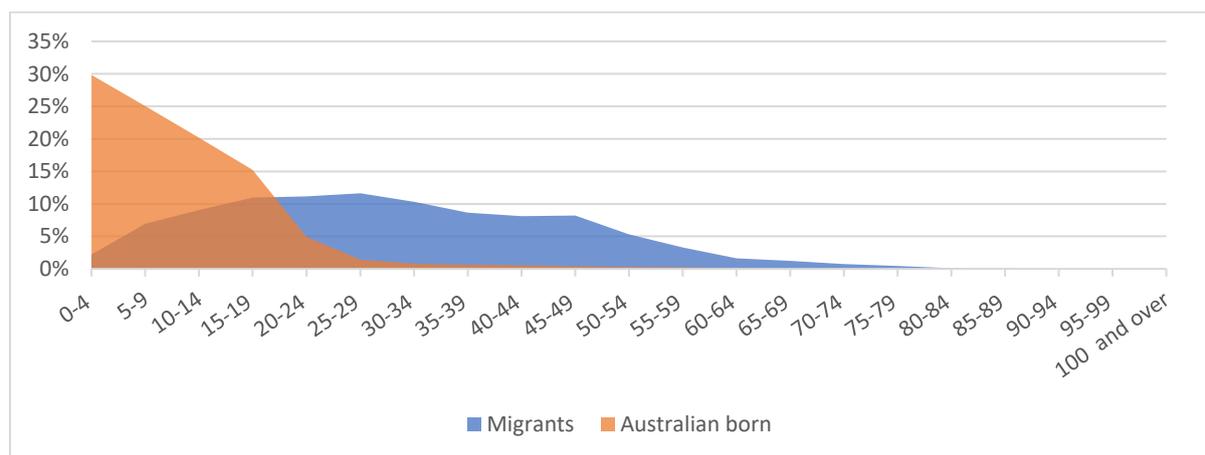
² The ‘rest of the population’ comparison cohort represents the entire Australian population except those who identified themselves as having Somali, Ethiopian, Sudanese and South Sudanese ancestry.

Figure 5: Age profile of those who have Somali ancestry compared to those who do not have Somali ancestry.



When age is examined by those who migrated to Australia and those who were born in Australia, we find that not only is the Somali Australian population on average much younger than the rest of the Australian population, most young people were born in Australia. This is highlighted in figure 6, which shows that 90 per cent of locally born Somali Australians are under the age of 20.

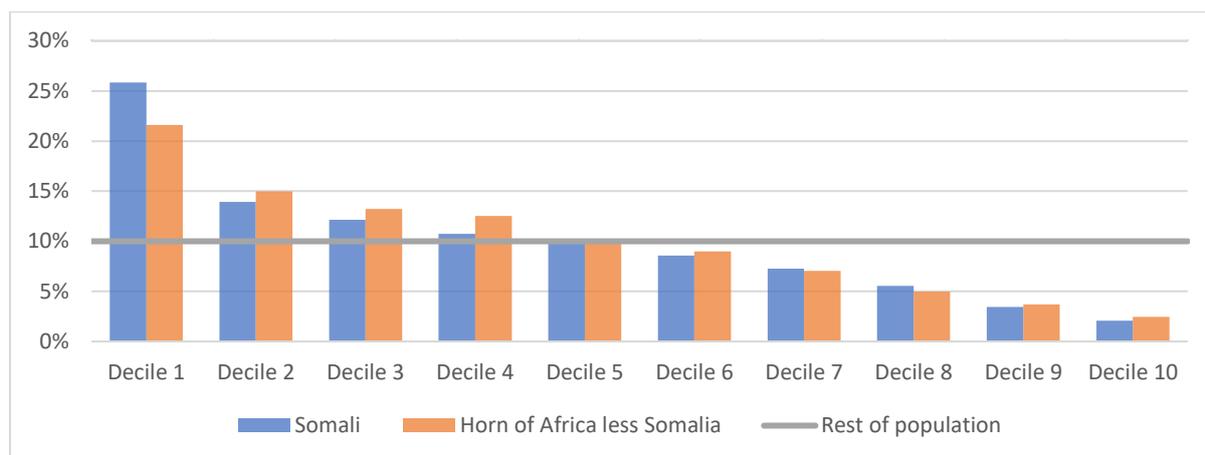
Figure 6: Age profile of migrants and Australian born individuals who have Somali ancestry.



Socio-economic disadvantage

The analysis examined Socio-Economic Index for Areas (SEIFA) data to broadly examine the relative level of disadvantage of the Somali community based on where they lived. Figure 7 shows the results by decile for the Index of Education and Occupation (IEO), which is commonly used within analysis of disadvantaged students in higher education. It shows that both Somali Australians and the ‘Horn of Africa’ comparison group experience significant disadvantage. Somali Australians were more than twice as likely to be in the bottom decile compared to the overall Australian population.

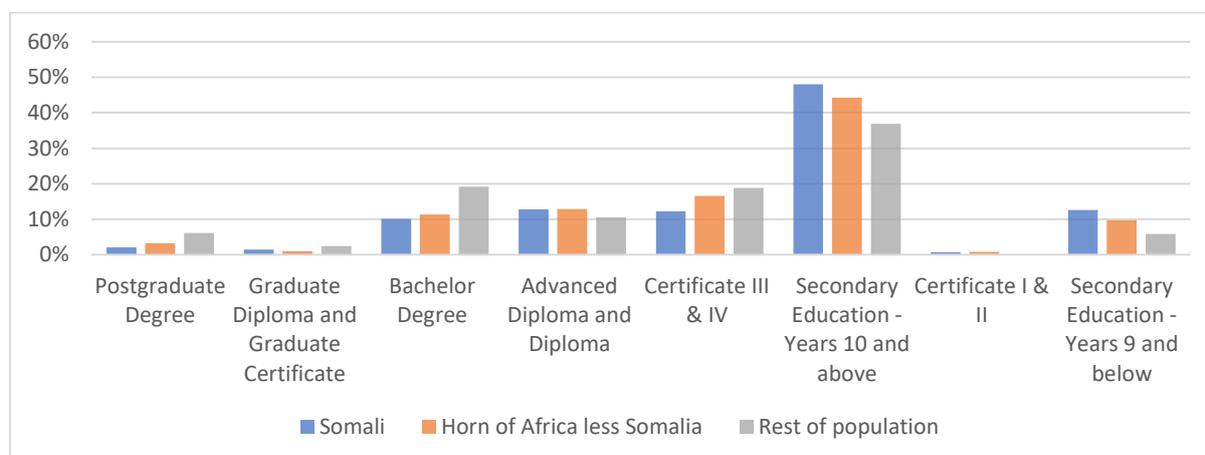
Figure 7: Index of Education and Occupation (IEO) by ancestry.



Education

We examined the levels of educational attainment for Somali Australians and compared the results to the ‘Horn of Africa’ and the rest of the population. Figure 8 shows that overall educational attainment rates are lower for Somali Australians and the ‘Horn of Africa’ compared to the rest of the Australian population. We found that 13 per cent of Somali Australians between the age of 15 and 64 have attained a university qualification, compared to 27 per cent of the rest of the Australian population.

Figure 8: Educational attainment of those who have Somali ancestry compared to non-Somali individuals. Individuals aged 15-64.



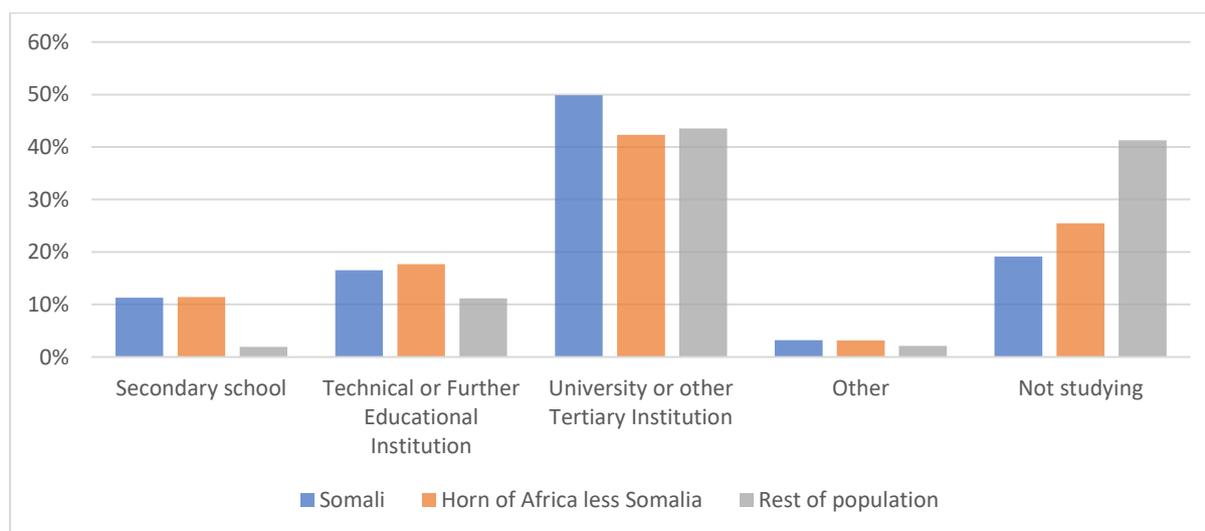
Somali Australians are more likely to have secondary education than the rest of the population. Interestingly, both Somali Australians and the ‘Horn of Africa’ comparison group reported slightly higher rates of Advanced Diploma and Diploma completion than the rest of the population.

Our analysis also found that there are some differences by gender. Somali Australian females are less likely to have attained a university level qualification compared to males, whereas an opposite trend is apparent in the rest of the population. The analysis also showed that educational attainment for Somali Australian migrants (i.e. born overseas) was generally lower than that of migrants from other cultural backgrounds, which is presumably related to the large proportion of Somali Australians who migrated to Australia on humanitarian grounds.

While Somali Australians were less likely to have attained a bachelor level or higher qualification, there is evidence that younger, Australian born, Somali Australians are enrolling in higher education institutions at higher rates than the rest of the population. This trend means that, over time, the attainment gap is likely to be reduced or eliminated entirely.

Figure 9 shows the education enrolment status of individuals aged 19 at the time of the census. It shows that Somali Australians are more likely than both the ‘Horn of Africa’ comparison cohort and the rest of the Australian population to be enrolled in a university or other tertiary institution. Somali Australians and the ‘Horn of Africa’ comparison cohort are also more likely to be enrolled in a vocational education institution compared to the rest of the Australian population.

Figure 9: Education enrolment status for individuals aged 19 by ancestry.

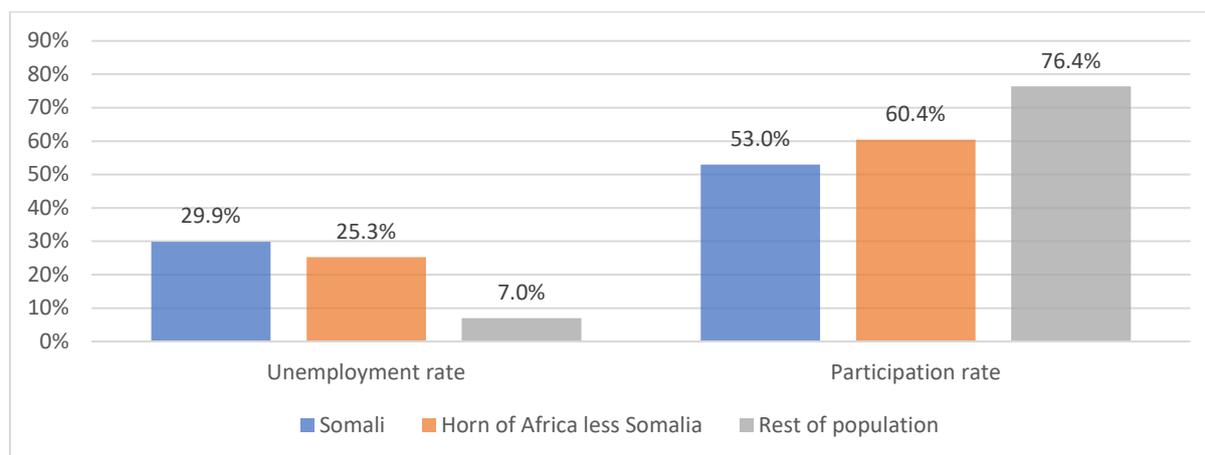


Interestingly, the results also show that both Somali Australians and those with ‘Horn of Africa’ ancestry were more likely to be currently enrolled in secondary school than the rest of the Australian population. This trend could suggest the education of young Somali Australians is more likely to have been delayed or interrupted. There were also some differences apparent by gender. Females are more likely to be enrolled in some form of education at 19 years of age compared to males. Both males and females are overrepresented in education compared to the rest of the population.

Employment

Census data suggest the unemployment rate for the Somali Australian community is similar to that of the ‘Horn of Africa’ comparison cohort, but both are substantially higher than the rest of the Australian population. Figure 10 shows that the unemployment rate for Somali Australians was 29.9 per cent compared with 7 per cent for the rest of the population.

Figure 10: Unemployment and labour force participation rates for individuals aged 15-64 by ancestry.



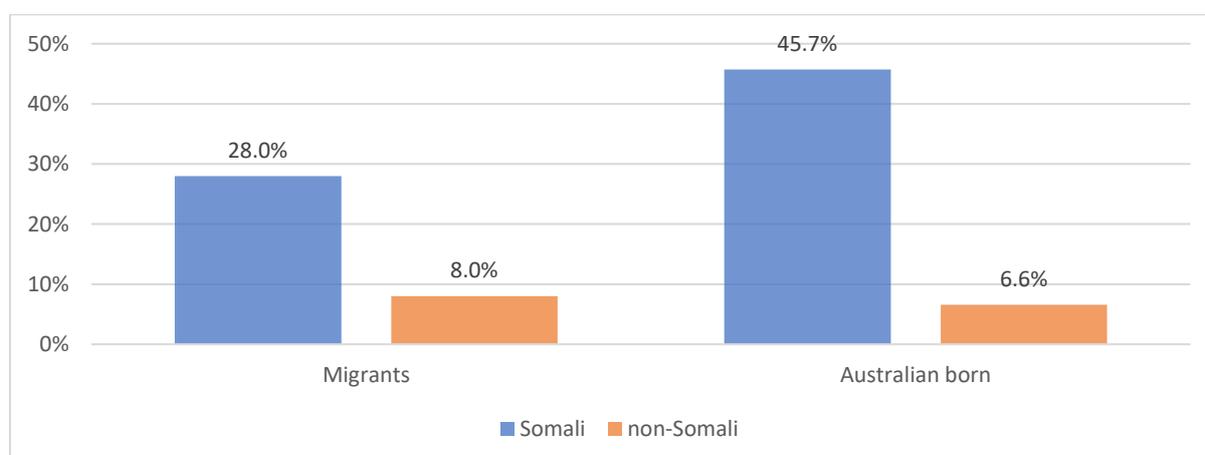
Based on these figures, Somali Australians are more than three times more likely than other Australians to be unemployed. When examined by gender, we found that the unemployment rate for male Somali Australians was 27.7 per cent compared to 32.7 per cent for females.

The participation rate, which is the proportion of individuals who were either in employment or seeking employment, was much lower for Somali ancestry. Indeed, 53 per cent of those who were between the age of 15 and 64 were participating in the labour force, compared to 76.4 per cent of those who did not have Somali ancestry. Deeper analysis of the cohort who were not participating in the labour force found a significant proportion, 63 per cent, were enrolled as part-time or full-time students.

There were comparatively large differences in labour force participation between the Somali Australian community and the rest of the population by gender. For the Somali Australian community, males were 45 per cent more likely to be participating in the labour force compared to females; in the wider community, males were only 12.4 per cent more likely to be participating in the labour force.

Figure 11 shows there is a relatively large difference in the unemployment rates of Somalis who migrated to Australia, who have an unemployment rate of 28 per cent, and those who were born here, who have an unemployment rate of 45.7 per cent.

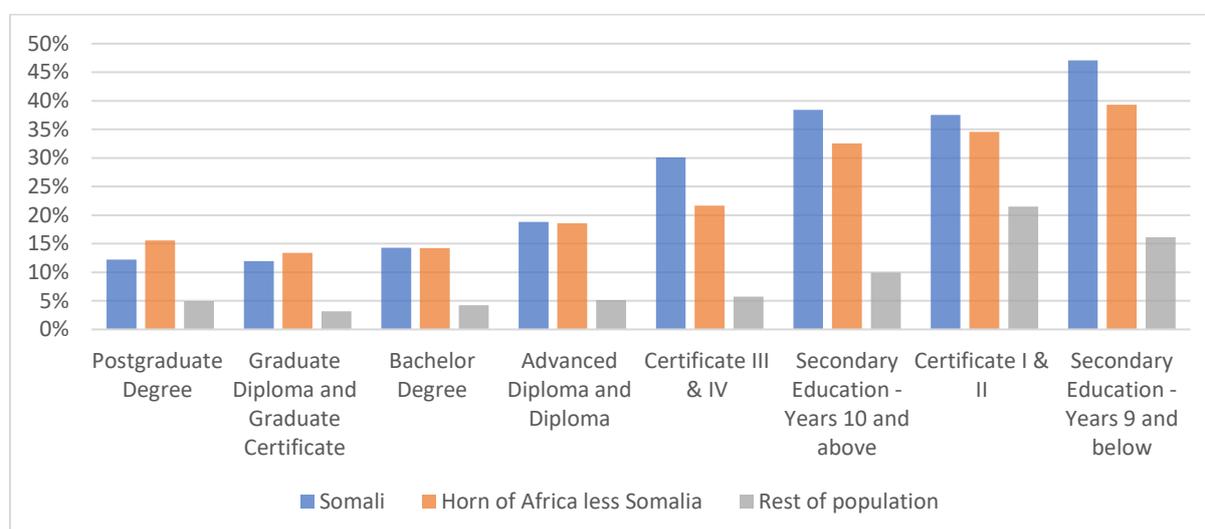
Figure 11: Unemployment rate for individuals aged 15-64 by migrant status and ancestry.



It is likely that age is an important factor in the higher than average unemployment rates of locally born Somali Australians. Youth unemployment is widely acknowledged to be a significant issue in Australia and the age profile of locally born Somali Australians is comparatively young, with 90 per cent under the age of 21. Nevertheless, it is striking that second generation migrants currently experience worse outcomes than first generation migrants.

Analysis of unemployment rates by the level of education attained shows that while further education certainly improves employment rates, a gap between Somali Australians and the rest of the population remains. For example, figure 12 shows that the average unemployment rate for university educated Somali Australians reduced to around 13 per cent, which is still substantially higher than the average of 4 per cent for the rest of the population. Employment outcomes were worst for Somali Australians who had obtained Year 9 secondary school level of education, reporting an unemployment rate of 47 per cent. Broadly speaking, university educated Somali Australians had an unemployment rate similar to those who had failed to complete Year 10 in the rest of the population.

Figure 12: Unemployment rate for individuals aged 15-64 by the level of education attained.



We further examined unemployment rates by level of educational attainment and their migration status. While the total number of Australian born Somalis who are old enough to have attained a post-school level qualification was relatively small, we found that Somali Australians born overseas had better employment outcomes compared to those born in Australia irrespective of their level of education. Again, age is likely to be a factor in the educational gap between Somali migrants and Australian born Somali Australians.

Occupation

The Australian census collects information of the occupations worked by the Australian population, which is coded into the Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations. Somali Australians are more likely to be Community and Personal Service Workers and Machinery Operators and Drivers compared to the rest of the Australian population. These are roles that typically do not require a university qualification. Overall, Somali Australians were much less likely to be employed as Professionals, which typically require a university level qualification and includes occupations like lawyers, pharmacists, teachers, doctors and accountants. They were also much less likely to be employed as Technicians and Trades Workers, which includes occupations such as

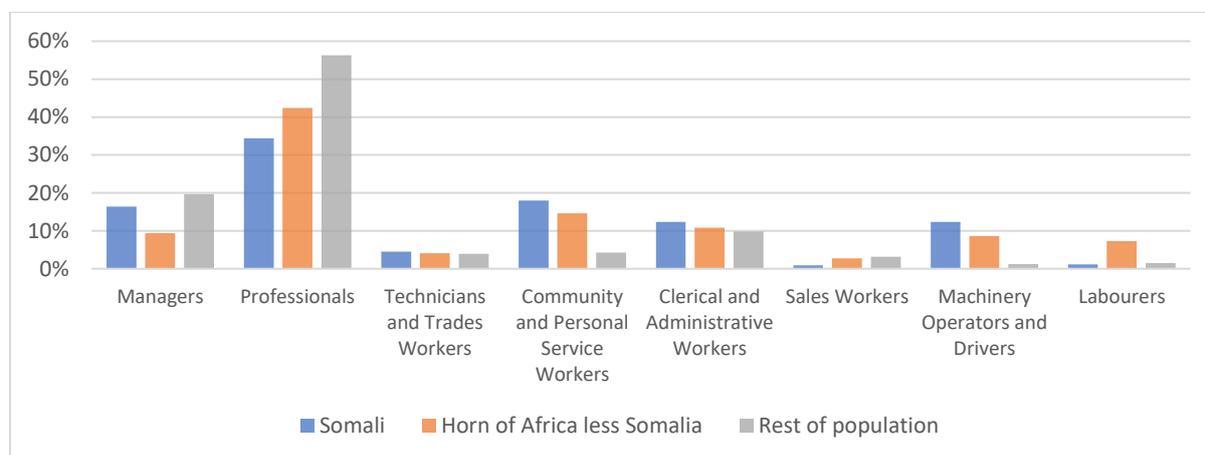
plumbers, electricians, mechanics and panel beaters; and Managers, which includes jobs like farm managers, chief executives, and finance managers.

It is also interesting that there appear to be differences in the occupations worked by Somali Australians and those worked by the ‘Horn of Africa’ comparison group. For example, those within the ‘Horn of Africa’ cohort are much more likely to be employed as Labourers compared to Somali Australians.

As part of the analysis we examined the occupations for those who were employed full-time and who had completed a Bachelor Degree or higher. Figure 13 shows that a greater share of Bachelor qualified Somali Australians are employed within Professional occupations, but they are still less likely to be working in a professional occupation compared to the rest of the university qualified population. By contrast, Somali Australians were only slightly less likely to be working as a manager.

Bachelor qualified Somali Australians were substantially more likely to be working as Community and Personal Service Workers (e.g. hospitality, personal care attendants), Clerical and Administrative Workers, and Machinery Operators and Drivers compared to the overall population.

Figure 13: Occupations of university educated full-time employed individuals aged 15-64 by ancestry.



When this data is further dissected, we find that even in fields of education where those of Somali ancestry are overrepresented, such as the Health field of education, Somali Australians were 20 per cent less likely to be employed in a health professional occupation compared to the rest of the population. The same is true of IT professionals; despite Somali Australians being 36 per cent more likely to have studied in the Information Technology field of education, they were 18 per cent less likely to be employed as an IT professional compared to the rest of the population.

The occupations that Bachelor qualified Somali Australians were overrepresented in compared to the rest of the population were: Road and Rail Drivers (16 times more likely to be employed in this occupation compared to the rest of the population), Carers and Aides (nearly 5 times more likely) and Mobile Plant Operators (more than 3 times more likely).

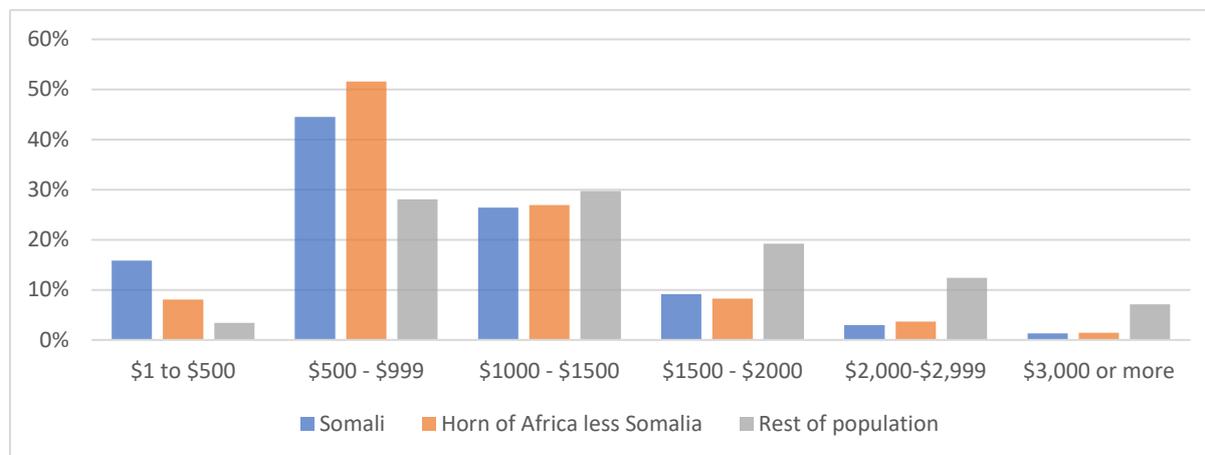
The occupations that Bachelor qualified Somali Australians were the most underrepresented in were: Business, Human Resource and Marketing Professionals, Education Professionals, Design, Engineering, Science and Transport Professionals.

Income

Analysis of the average weekly income for Somali Australians found that, similar to the ‘Horn of Africa’, they have typically lower incomes compared to the rest of the population. Figure 14 shows

that for Somali Australians between the age of 15 and 64 and working full-time, 40 per cent earn a weekly income above 1000 dollars, compared to 68.4 per cent for the rest of the Australian population.

Figure 14: Weekly income for full-time employed individuals aged 15-64 by ancestry.



Section summary

Somali Australians comprise a highly urbanised community, concentrated in cities such as Melbourne, and with members substantially younger on average than other Australians. The community faces socio-economic disadvantage, high levels of unemployment, and a tendency to be employed in lower-paying jobs rather than professional careers. Education improves the employment chances of Somali Australians, but those with Bachelor degrees still face dramatically higher unemployment rates than other Australians who hold the same qualifications. Relatively high levels of access and participation in tertiary education do suggest a closing of the education attainment gap in the future, and provide strong evidence of motivation that can be harnessed by the education and employment sectors. However, translating this rising educational participation into positive employment outcomes remains a major challenge, and will clearly require strategies by governments, employers, education providers, and communities. In the next section we explore some of the causes of employment disparities through the voices of Somali Australians, including the experience of discrimination and unconscious bias and the relative paucity of social capital. We also highlight the strengths that Somali Australians bring to universities, communities, and employers, and the related need to consider diversity as central to productive learning and employment spaces.

Somali Australian community: interview analysis and findings

The previous section outlined the relative youth, socio-economic disadvantage, and high unemployment rates of Somali Australians, despite relatively high levels of university access. Indeed, the data revealed a specific problem in the under-utilisation of Somali Australians' tertiary qualifications. Strikingly, we revealed that Somali Australians are over-represented in vocational and higher education, yet their graduate employment rates remain relatively poor. Gaps in employment, therefore, cannot be explained by gaps in educational attainment. Indeed, a Somali Australian with a Bachelor Degree is no more likely to be employed than a non-Somali Australian with a school level education. Our qualitative research focussed on this particular issue. While tertiary education remains critical to improving employment outcomes, we sought to understand why Somali Australians are not seeing the same employment benefits from tertiary education as other Australians. In this section we therefore explore the particular facilitators and barriers to employment for those who are studying at, or have graduated from, university by capturing their voices.

We conducted 28 semi-structured interviews with university students and graduates from the Somali Australian community. Our interviews particularly addressed university motivations, aspirations and self-identified strengths; job readiness; challenges and facilitators in accessing employment; work experience; and recommendations identified by Somali Australians to increase employment outcomes. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed and analysed inductively and deductively for content and themes using NVivo 12 software. An interpretative phenomenological approach to the analysis was applied (Denzin 1989; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). This approach allowed us to draw on the interviewees' personal perspectives, reflections, and narratives to examine the meanings the participants made of their own experiences. Given that the selected participants were voluntary respondents, the primary limitation of the qualitative research is that the population sample is likely to exclude those who had explicitly negative experiences. Further, most of the participants were affiliated with Himilo Community Connect, which obviously represents only a sample of the Somali Australian community in Melbourne.

Participant details

Sixteen of our participants were students and 12 were graduates. Most were female (64 per cent) and born overseas (53 per cent), while half were enrolled in a Bachelor Degree. Approximately half of the participants were working when the interviews were conducted. Table 1 presents a summary of the participant characteristics.

Table 1: Participant characteristics.

	Number of participants (n=28)	Proportion of participants
Gender		
Male	10	36%
Female	18	64%
Migrant status		
Migrant	15	53%
Australian born	10	36%
Unknown	3	11%

University student or graduate		
University student	16	57%
Graduate	12	43%
Education enrolment status		
Enrolled in a Bachelor Degree	14	50%
Enrolled in a Postgraduate Degree	4	14%
Not studying	9	32%
Unknown	1	4%
Field of Education		
Food, Hospitality and Personal Services	0	0%
Creative Arts	1	3%
Society and Culture	8	29%
Management and Commerce	5	18%
Education	3	11%
Health	8	29%
Agriculture, Environmental and Related Studies	0	0%
Architecture and Building	0	0%
Engineering and Related Technologies	1	3%
Information Technology	0	0%
Natural and Physical Sciences	2	7%
Employed		
Yes	15	54%
No	10	35%
Unknown	3	11%

University aspirations, motivations and self-identified strengths

Respondents were strongly motivated to attend university. Most participants indicated that their aspiration to study at university was positively influenced by their family's encouragement. The following comment was representative:

'Education has always been a top priority in my family. My dad is really educated. My mum is really educated in life. After she graduated high school she didn't really go to university or anything. I feel like education is the key to everything, not to just success. I've always wanted to go to university. I've always wanted to graduate from a higher institution. That was really important to me' (student G).

Several interviewees remarked that their families expected them to go to university and that they felt a sense of responsibility to make their family proud. A participant said: 'It was kind of an expectation to be honest [...] It's just pretty much making mum proud, get an education, making sure that I can stand on my own two feet' (graduate G). Similarly, another participant remarked:

'What motivated me. Probably parents. Coming here as refugees, having nothing, and making them proud. Show them what we're worth and like they've come for something since they fled war from their country, civil war. And then come here just to make a better future for us and for them' (student H).

Participants also highlighted that their family trajectory encouraged them to attend university. Most voiced that their families had experienced difficulties and they were now in an environment where they could take advantage of opportunities, such as studying at university. For example, one participant said: 'My parents obviously hold education in high esteem. They didn't get an opportunity to get a proper education back in Somalia, so they were motivating me to get a high education degree' (student F). Another participant outlined:

'My mum wanted me to finish university as well, because of the lack of opportunity she had while she was growing up. When we were growing up, she really wanted us to get a good education. My family was a big part of me choosing to go to university' (graduate B).

Participants felt that having a higher education qualification would allow them to improve their labour-market prospects and help their personal development. Some participants felt that entering university would help them secure a job or a better job: 'you do see that in terms of employment, they will have certain qualifications that they require you to have' (student B).

Interviewees indicated that their desire to help others and give back to their community also motivated them to attend university. One graduate said:

'I was obviously coming from a refugee background and coming from Somalia, I guess there's a certain pressure to attend university, get a good job, and support my family and support people back home as well. I think that was kind of a main drive into why I got into university and the aspirations for it. Also, to bring about change within our community as well' (graduate H).

Indeed, a few respondents remarked that some of their personal strengths included empathy and the desire to give back to their community. One respondent said: 'I think one of my personal strengths would be being able to understand other people, what the people actually really need, in a sense. I can kind of relate to what they need' (graduate H).

Other strengths identified by the interviewees were high levels of motivation, persistence and confidence. Several participants remarked that being persistent and confident had helped them with their studies and career development. For example, one graduate said:

'I think my perseverance, not giving up. And I find that that's really common within Somalis, especially Somali women. It's something that we're taught from our Mums, just because they've been through so much that you're taught that giving up isn't really much of an answer. I've found that really uplifting. And also, I think just building my confidence and being confident in who I am, in my identity, in my field, just being a confident person has really helped me within my career' (graduate G).

Overall, participants had high aspirations and motivations to enter university, consistent with the national data showing over-representation of Somali Australians in university. The majority of interviewees were highly motivated by their parents and families to attain a higher education qualification, and felt that a degree would help them secure employment or find a better job. Indeed, respondents believed that securing a good job would allow them to support their families and give back to their community. The desire to help others and give back to their community were some of the strengths identified by this group.

Job readiness

Notably, most participants who had studied at university felt that they did not have a good understanding of what they had to do to find a professional job compatible with their qualification and were uncertain about their career pathway. This is illustrated by one person's account:

'In my degree, no-one ever told me that these were the possible jobs you could get, or these were the avenues you could go to. [...] For me I had to finish university and figure it out all on my own. And be stuck for a little while' (graduate B).

Respondents suggested that universities could do more to help Somali Australians who have studied at university to access employment. Most reported that they had not used their university's career services. One interviewee outlined: 'No, I did not [use the University's career services]. I heard about it, but I was not very familiar with it' (graduate E). Others said that they were not aware that their university provided career support. One respondent explained: 'I never used that [career services] because I didn't really know that it was. I never heard of people using that, or I didn't know that it was a valid option for me' (graduate B). Indeed, several participants said that they did most of their research into careers and career pathways on their own. The following student's comment is representative:

'Literally just personal research. I've never had anyone really come and speak to me about pathways like that [...] I've never actually had anyone come to me and say "Oh, I've finished a Bachelor of Health Science and this is what I'm doing" and all that kind of stuff, so I really don't know anyone that's actually finished this degree' (student A).

Further, several interview participants affirmed that they did not have the right job networks or connections to find work experience related to their field of study while they were studying at university. For example, one graduate said: 'I never had the opportunity to actually get ready, build networks, speak to [my] lecturers, there's no bridge there' (graduate D).

Also significant is the fact that a group of participants explained that they were not required to undertake work-related activities, such as an internship or a placement, as part of their degree. Still, interviewees remarked the importance of undertaking internships, placements and other work-related activities while studying at university. Some interviewees further explained that they wished they had known the benefits of accessing work-related activities while they were studying at university. One graduate voiced:

'I see people in university and the first thing I tell them is, make sure you do an internship, or make sure you're working on the side. Because for me, I didn't work until I finished my degree and when I graduated, I thought jobs would be flying at me, and I could apply for the first job and get it. And that's not the way that it was. And doing Arts, I didn't know exactly where I belonged and what field to look for a job in. My degree didn't have any internships or placements, or anything like that. Once I finished it was really tough for me to find a job' (graduate B).

Meanwhile, a few participants felt that their background made it harder for them to find a work-related experience, such as an internship or placement, while studying at university. One interviewee explained:

'They [career services] make it seem like it's nearly impossible for you to even land an opportunity because of the selection criteria and the language that you need to use to upload to

apply for the internships or the placements or the internships or whatever. It's just really confronting and like you just think, oh my God, what chance do I have when they select, 0.1% and that 0.1% is probably going to be John Hall or Samantha [...] They're the ones that are going to get it. I'm not even going to bother with this' (graduate C).

Nevertheless, a group of participants highlighted that studying at university had helped them build confidence and that this was generally beneficial to secure a job. For example, one interviewee claimed: 'When I was in school, we didn't really have that confidence, but then when I went in to university I gained that confidence' (student D). Another participant explained:

'I think it [my confidence] definitely developed while I was studying. I think it comes with age as well, with exposure to different environments as well. Because I used to go to an Islamic school in high school and a lot of things weren't really exposed to me the way that university really opened up my eyes to the world. I think with time I really did come out of my shell' (graduate B).

Most participants were involved in volunteering activities within the Australian Somali community. Some of the reasons for volunteering included the desire to help others and their community. Some participants even created their own organisation to support their community, including the La Trobe Somali Student Association. One student noted: 'with La Trobe Somali Student Society, I was the co-founder and the vice president and then the second year, because I was in my final year, I decided to take a role that didn't have as much commitment, so I was in charge of event management' (graduate G). Another participant said:

'Last year, me and a group of friends came together, and we co-founded a not-for-profit organisation. We would provide mentoring, tutoring and sporting activities for a group of young people roughly aged 10 to 15' (student B).

Nevertheless, some participants did not consider these experiences as volunteer work. A student explained: 'Within my community, we do volunteer work. It's not even seen as volunteering. A lot of the work that we do is volunteer, but it's not classified as volunteering, you know?' (student C).

Meanwhile, a small group of interviewees who had mentors explained the benefits of mentoring. Interviewees said that their mentor gave them access to information, networks, and helped them better understand their career goals, with one student remarking that:

'I have two mentors, one for personal and one for education. They do both help me in my life, one is for my career progress to find the right job, how to go about jobs, how to go about interviews, which is great' (student H).

Again, some participants highlighted that joining university clubs and societies such as La Trobe University's Somali Student Association helped them develop networks and meet other students and graduates. For example, one student said:

'We have the Somali Society at La Trobe, they were pretty helpful if you every needed any help with anything [...] They have some mentoring programmes as well, and they brought in people who had graduated. That was pretty good as well especially in like year two now even though I did three years I still don't know what I want to do' (student D).

Overall, interviewees confirmed that universities could play a greater role in supporting Somali Australians who have studied at university in accessing employment. Institutions need to better

promote the employability services already offered, and provide targeted support for cohorts that lack strong job networks and face work discrimination. Indeed, further work is required to ensure that this group can access work-integrated learning programs and gain work-related experience while studying at university.

Challenges in accessing employment

Most participants outlined that they found it hard to find a job related to their field of study, despite being qualified. This is illustrated by one graduate's account:

'It was a really challenging time to be honest as a graduate, when you see people that didn't go to university and that were finding full-time work and it was pretty much like, what's the point of going university if it's going to be this hard finding a role?' (graduate G).

The most commonly cited challenges of finding employment were lack of: strong connections and networks; information, assistance and guidance; knowledge to plan ahead; and work experience. For example, one student opined that some of the challenges in accessing employment included not having strong networks and the lack of understanding about careers and career pathways:

'What makes it challenging is not knowing the people within the industry. I think networking is really important, so knowing the people within the industry would really help in gaining employment. And just being, I think, aware and identifying different career paths and just all the career options, exploring the different career options' (graduate E).

Another graduate explained that the lack of strong networks, guidance and mentorship made it difficult to find employment:

'In terms of challenge, I think just not having the networks. I didn't have any network of people. I finished my degree and I didn't know a single lawyer. And not having anyone be able to guide me in terms of which direction to go in or just simply explain to me the different types of firms, big firms, small firms, different aspects of law, how they function. I didn't have any of that, whereas other students did' (graduate J).

Another interviewee outlined that not having relevant work experience made it hard to find employment: 'experience I think is the biggest one, because you have to work your way up, no-one's going to hire anyone from just university, with no experience in anything' (graduate B). Another interviewee underlined that the lack of understanding of how obtaining a degree translates to employability made it hard to find a job:

'If I did try to pursue it in my career, I wouldn't know where to look. [...] I feel like people can get a job when they do nursing for example, or teaching. But if you do a science course or an arts course, no one can really help you' (graduate L).

Similarly, one student implied that some of the challenges in accessing employment included the lack of information, assistance, and guidance during the application process:

'For me although I didn't work in my last year, I've been looking and I've been looking now and it's very hard. Just like rejection letter after rejection letter or sometimes like no replies. It's like I don't know why, why I'll not be accepted. I've fixed up my resume, I've gone to people to help fix up my resume. I can't even get in to the interview stage. It is so frustrating' (student D).

Meanwhile, participants voiced that discrimination and unconscious bias were also barriers to employment for Somali Australians. Several participants felt they had experienced discrimination and unconscious bias during the recruitment and selection process. A couple of respondents suggested that they were not getting job interviews because of their names, religion, clothing and skin colour, with one student remarking that:

‘Just being with all that negativity that's happening in the whole media, like being Muslim and being African gangs and all these little things are not really helping cause as soon as, let's say you go for an interview, you have a Muslim name, you're African, unless you know that manager, if someone else has the same qualification as you, they'll take the other guy. They'll take the other guy 100%. It's tough, it's very tough and not many of us are lucky to have that kind of connections’ (graduate G).

The same participant also highlighted that work discrimination and the lack of job networks or connections made accessing employment difficult. Again, this statement was also outlined by other participants:

‘Maybe things that I don't even know of, maybe having the long, complicated name on the resume. When they first see you and I'm wearing a hijab, all those little biases that are present in the world, that we can't really change. And most times not having a connection as well’ (graduate B).

A couple of participants who struggled to find a job decided to undertake a postgraduate degree, with one student remarking that:

‘To be honest, I made that decision as soon as I finished my undergraduate degree. Before I started, I didn't think I was going to do my masters that quick. It's because I'd look at different jobs and try and apply for different jobs. I applied for so many jobs, and I kept on getting rejected. A lot of the jobs I looked at were similar to the requirement that they would teach you in a masters degree, so I thought maybe a masters degree would be the best option for me at the moment. If I can find a job while I'm doing my masters, it would be like two birds with one stone kind of thing’ (graduate H).

The same graduates believed that pursuing a postgraduate qualification could help in accessing the job market. Similarly, a student voiced she was considering further study as she had a lack of understanding about her career options and pathways:

‘No-one's ever told me that you can get a job with the degree that I'm going to have at the end of this year. I don't even know if there are jobs out there that will take people that have just a Bachelor of Health Science and that's it. I think someone told me once that you need further studies to actually get a proper job or else, you'll just be doing regular jobs where you don't necessarily have a specialty or anything like that’ (student A).

Most participants who have studied at university struggled to find employment related to their field of study. The challenges most cited by participants included lack of strong job networks and connections, absence of mentorship or guidance, lack of relevant work experience, and work discrimination. This trend may partly explain our earlier finding that Somali Australians are less likely to be employed compared to the rest of the population with a similar level of educational attainment.

Facilitators in accessing employment

Interviewees noted that the main facilitators in finding employment included strong job networks and connections, mentorship and career guidance, and building confidence. A participant opined that having strong professional networks and developing confidence had helped her find a job:

‘Networking, that really did help me. Just putting myself out there and I think, as a graduate, I was really shy, I didn't know how to approach the workplace or the workforce or how to just make my mark. And I've learnt throughout the time that I have been in the workforce now, that it's really important to express what you're interested in to make those connections and just putting yourself out there’ (graduate G).

Further, the same graduate remarked that having strong networks in the workforce was also crucial for her career development: ‘I've learnt that like, even now in my workplace, that it's really about who you know and the kind of connections that you have. And I wish I knew that earlier’ (graduate G). Another interviewee also noted the importance of having strong job networks: ‘I think that knowing someone that knows someone is important. I feel that was the little gateway for me to enter. With that came a lot of positive outcomes’ (graduate B). Again, a student said that networking had helped him develop connections:

‘One thing that helped me was LinkedIn, getting that connections on LinkedIn, networking and that. Going to a lot of networking events, going to a lot of events where people are there and just showcasing yourself, telling people what you do and that. Which really helped with it’ (student H).

Another student outlined that having a ‘champion’, can help open doors to employment:

‘It'd have to be somebody giving you an opportunity. That was the main thing for me. If that guy had not given me that opportunity it wouldn't open other doors for me because it would've been like the same thing every other application that I did before then. It would've been excess of 200 applications. I was applying daily. Every day I would apply for something else’ (student F).

Indeed, a couple of participants outlined that mentoring had helped them improve their skills and progress in their career. For example, an interviewee claimed: ‘there was very good people at council. There were two who mentored me and guided me along my way and that helped me, sort of strengthened me’ (student F). The same participant also outlined that one of his mentors had given him valuable advice on how to apply for a job:

‘We had a police officer who was a volunteer coach. He volunteered his time to coach us [...] He was really a good mentor. He gave us some good pointers on when we are applying for a job. Sort of language to use, even the etiquette of conducting yourself. That was helpful’ (student F).

A few respondents affirmed the benefits of systematic employment pathway initiatives, such as Himilo Community Connect and the African Australian Inclusion Program (AAIP). Participants said that Himilo Community Connect’s leadership program had helped them gain work experience, build job networks, connect with mentors, and obtain information, advice and guidance about careers and career pathways. This is illustrated by one person’s account:

‘I would say that it was very useful [Himilo Community Connect] so that it can open up career options and what people really wanted to do. I think that would be really useful for graduates.

Because that would help identify different career paths and identify the skills and just explore what they really want' (graduate E).

Another participant said:

'We had people come in [Himilo Community Connect], we had people that were in different jobs and they came in and they taught us about how they got into the jobs, how long it took them, you know. Like different experiences, what they had to face in order for them to get to where they were, some of them were really successful. And which is always helpful' (student E).

A couple of interviewees remarked that Himilo Community Connect had helped them gain relevant experience. One graduate said:

'For me, I got lucky [finding employment] because Himilo started around that time so especially with my field of business management they hired me as a project manager here. So that just worked perfectly for me. I worked here for about a year and then I got another job opportunity for [name of the employer] so that was better pay and it was in the City, on Collins Street, so I thought, better opportunity for me, keeping moving around instead of just sticking to one job' (graduate F).

Another graduate claimed:

'After I'd done my university, I was like, I need to gain a bit more experience, so I joined Himilo just helping out here and this little bit I was doing. So basically, that was me trying to find experience with the youth and different groups' (graduate I).

Overall, the interviews confirm that developing strong professional networks and connections can help Somali Australians to find employment and that universities and community, or government, organisations can facilitate those connections. The findings also confirm that systematic employment pathway initiatives can assist this group to gain relevant work experience, develop networks and connections, and find relevant employment. Our analysis also highlights the opportunities for universities and community, or government, organisations to work with employers to mitigate work discrimination and improve employment outcomes.

Work experience

Several participants said that they had experienced unconscious bias and discrimination within the workforce. Discrimination typically included negative perceptions of names, skin colour, religion, and clothing. This is illustrated by one person's account:

'When I was working for [name of the organisation], I remember asking for a space to pray in, because I have to pray, I'm a Muslim. I told my supervisor, I just need five minutes out of the day, in any office room, in any small space, any room I'm okay, and that's all I need. And he said, "You know what, I'm sorry the rooms are only for supervisors and people high up. You are going to have to pray in front of everybody." We have an open floor plan. And he said, "You're going to have to pray next to your desk." I felt that is the only thing I ask, and I felt I was really being discriminated against because it's my right to practise my religion, and I should feel comfortable in that' (graduate B).

Another participant who experienced discrimination in the workforce provided a few examples of how it manifested:

‘Just anything that normally you wouldn't say like, oh, you know, it must be really hard for you to be dressed like this in summer. How do it this way around the clock? Do you wear your scarf all the time? Do you get to feel suffocated? You feel like that your religion kind of favours men? I think that are disrespectful, I think. And that are not curious questions’ (graduate C).

A different graduate who had experienced unconscious bias in the workforce remarked that this might have been related to an under-representation of Somali Australians or people with similar religions or beliefs in the workforce. The participant also underlined that employers generally lack an understanding of the benefits of diversity in the workforce:

‘Within the workforce, I have experienced unconscious bias. I wouldn't say it's straight out discrimination. And a lot of it would be because of the lack of education or the lack of representation of people that come from my culture or that practise my religion within a general workforce. So, things just like, taking time off for work when I had a religious day, I found in my first year to be quite difficult. Just explaining that, you know, I'm not sure exactly what day Eid might fall on because of the nature of how we practise our religion. Or things like explaining why I can't shake with my left hand. And I didn't find that people were doing it out of racism or discrimination, it's just that they didn't know, or they've never come across it. So, it was a learning opportunity more than anything’ (graduate G).

A couple of participants also posited that the provision of training on productive diversity for employers might increase their chances of accessing employment and career progression. For example, one graduate said:

‘It could be as simple as even providing training for those people to just be aware of, generally people would do things that they used to. And what big companies and organisations generally are used to, is employing people that they know and they feel comfortable with. And like that's the path that they've always chosen and when there is something different, it's getting out of their comfort zone’ (graduate B).

Others also explained that having supportive leadership, teams and supervisors made them feel welcome and more productive. For example, one student remarked:

‘It makes a difference in how I'm able to do my work knowing that my team and my manager support me. I know that I have that support. It allows me to not only be myself but also to work to my optimum’ (student F).

Again, another participant said:

‘In my case, my first role in the department I worked in the [location] office and they didn't actually have a prayer room in there, but because when I started a lot of my friends were also working in the same office we actually got a prayer room set up. It was just things like that that you could see that there was a change happening. It's really nice to see that leadership was really invested in making us feel comfortable and safe’ (graduate G).

Our interviews reveal a number of barriers around both conscious and unconscious bias, and highlight the importance of providing training on productive diversity for employers.

Recommendations

Participants were asked about what universities and community, or government, organisations could do to increase the employability of Somali Australians who have studied at university. Most participants suggested that universities could help students develop strong networks with employers and access work-integrated learning programs and work-related activities. One student remarked:

‘I think having the opportunity to network or gain some experience into the fields that you're studying. Being able to hear or talk to people that are in that field. I think the main thing is experience’ (student I).

Another participant suggested that the provision of targeted placements and internships could help Somali Australians to access employment:

‘I think that they could support by offering internships or cadetship programmes into employment or even as a way to get some experience. Because what tends to happen is that within our community, we really struggle to get that foot in the door. Once, if somebody can get a six months internship with an organisation and gets some experience, then later on they have something sound on their resume where they can take to the next employer and be like look, I've got a bit of experience with such and such organisation’ (student F).

Several participants claimed that mentorship programs could also assist Somali Australians to find a job. This is illustrated by one person's account:

‘Even say a mentoring programme where you are partnered up with someone that's already in the field, so that you're not the first person doing everything by yourself. Or maybe having a buddy system within the Somali graduates and undergraduates so they can help them within similar fields, like buddying up. That would really helpful, because much of the time people from Anglo Saxon backgrounds [...] have a lot of connections because obviously they've been here much longer than we have. And we're a relatively new community to Australia (graduate B).

Similarly, another student highlighted that hearing successful stories of other Somali Australian graduates could be beneficial:

‘I think doing more mentor programmes like they did with the Somali Student Association. I feel like every year the students graduating but we hear nothing about like Somali Australians, we hear nothing about them. We don't know what they are doing, we don't know if they are working’ (student D).

Indeed, universities and community organisations could facilitate networking sessions, as well as information sharing, where Somali Australians could share their successful professional journey and work-related experience.

Participants also advocated the need to have tailored support programs for Somali Australians. One interviewee explained:

‘I think, programmes just tailored for say people from my own background. Because it's hard, you know. I imagine all graduates have a hard time finding work, but it's an extra step that we go through being black, being Muslim, it's just a lot to carry’ (graduate G).

Clearly, most respondents affirmed that tailored employment pathway programs could assist Somali Australians to overcome barriers to employment. A student highlighted:

‘I think that the thing that Himilo do, they have the leadership programme, they have all these different programmes that help assist young people in to getting jobs. I think that they should have that kind of organisation going on in all the municipalities, everywhere. It’s a really good programme that should start as soon as you finish university (student E).

Other participants also suggested that it would be beneficial to provide training around conscious and unconscious bias to employers. Such training could potentially mitigate work discrimination and outline the benefits of diversity in the workforce:

‘The other thing could be giving the employees the people that are in management some culture training, so they understand that it’s not appropriate and it’s not allowed, it’s not right to behave certain ways. Discriminating someone because of their name or the way they look, I think that they need to see beyond that in order for them to, break down those barriers. So that would help’ (graduate C).

Taken together, participants suggested that access to networking initiatives, work-integrated learning programs, work-related activities, and mentorship programs could increase the employability of Somali Australians. Participants also explained that systematic employment pathways for Somali Australians could be beneficial, as they could assist participants to gain work experience and, in many cases, find employment. Further, our findings reveal the need for universities and community, or government, organisations to partner with employers committed to diversity, equity and inclusion. Universities could also prioritise cultural diversity in the allocation of work-related activities. Moreover, participants suggested that training employers around conscious and unconscious bias may help address work discrimination and highlight the benefits of diversity in the workplace.

Section summary

Our qualitative analysis confirmed high levels of motivation and employment aspiration among Somali Australian university students and graduates. Consistent with the national data trends, our interviewees typically believed strongly in the importance of higher education and were supported by their families and communities. Many interviewees were motivated by a desire to give back to their communities, both within Australia and Somalia. The importance of a higher education qualification to secure employment was emphasised, but many interviewees lost some belief in this connection after experiences of workforce exclusion and marginalisation. Participants often struggled to find employment related to their field of study, which correlates with the national data on the under-utilisation of Somali Australians’ higher education degrees. Taken together, we found that the main challenges faced by the Somali Australian community when accessing employment were discrimination during the recruitment process, a paucity of networks and social capital, and a relative scarcity of relevant work experience. In particular, the interviews highlighted how issues such as unconscious bias play out in specific contexts, whether through negative judgements around skin colour, clothing, and names, or intolerance of religious observance practices.

By contrast, many participants spoke about the positive impact of employment pathway initiatives, such as Himilo Community Connect’s leadership program, on their employability. Mentoring programs within and beyond university, cadetships and internship programs within particular firms, and peer clubs and societies were all highlighted as facilitators of employment and social capital.

Collectively, the findings confirm the pressing need for universities, workplaces, and communities to expand initiatives to facilitate employment and address workforce bias, and the need for Somali Australian voices to inform the design and operation of such initiatives. In the next section we further explore the barriers and facilitators to employment for individuals from the Somali Australian community through the voices of community leaders.

Community leaders: interview analysis and findings

The previous section explored the employment motivations, experiences, and outcomes of individuals from the Somali Australian community through the voices of those who studied at, or graduated from, a Victorian university. These interviews confirmed high levels of motivation and commitment to study, and strong employment aspirations. However, our interviews also revealed that workforce discrimination remains prevalent, particularly during the recruitment process, and that further strategies are required to address unconscious and conscious bias within workplaces. Further, we confirmed a general paucity of networks and social capital that was limiting access to, and knowledge of, employment opportunities and pathways. Such findings confirm a need for programs that build not only specific employability skills, but that promote peer connections and networks with a broad range of employers. This section captures the perspectives of six Somali Australian community leaders to explore further the employability challenges, and to examine potential strategies to address these challenges and to maximise the benefits of higher education.

We conducted interviews with community members considered leaders in the Somali Australian community, staff of community and non-government organisations, and business owners. Interview participants drew on years of direct or personal experience working closely with Somali Australians and African Australians. The interviews covered leaders' perspectives on the facilitators and barriers to employment for Somali Australians. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed and analysed inductively and deductively for content and themes using NVivo 12 software.

Challenges in accessing employment

Community leaders explained that the Somali Australian community typically believed that having a higher education qualification would result in accessing a good job. This is illustrated by one person's account: 'community thinks, "Go to university, and then you'll have high qualification and better job"' (community leader A). Nevertheless, the community leaders explained that Somali Australians who have studied at university faced several challenges in accessing employment, despite being qualified. Major barriers for Somali Australians to finding employment were work discrimination, lack of networks and work experience, and absence of mentoring.

The issue of work discrimination arose in nearly every interview with community leaders. Similar to the experiences of the students and graduates, the community leaders also highlighted that conscious and unconscious bias in the hiring process proved a significant barrier to Somali Australians' employment. Interviewees suggested that employers, in many instances, form an opinion about candidates based on their names, religion and skin colour. For example, one leader explained:

'I think it's one of the biggest obstacles is we have many underlying discrimination in this country. That's a fact. We know that. I think the worst two people in this country are black and the Muslims, and Somalis happen to be both. The black and then the Muslim. So, there will be discrimination because of the skin colour. There will be discrimination because of the names' (community leader A).

Again, a different participant remarked that discrimination is a real issue during the recruitment and selection process, particularly for African Australians:

'Discrimination is definitely rife. We see continually that people with African surnames, African names are not getting through the mainstream recruitment channels. Their CVs are just not getting even to the second level screening. They don't get interviews. I would say racial bias and

discrimination is a major issue [...] Getting through the racial bias and discrimination within the recruitment system is definitely a challenge' (community leader D).

All the leaders we interviewed said, in various ways, that Somali Australians' lack of professional networks was another barrier in accessing employment. Participants noted that the absence of professional networks and connections, particularly within the corporate sector, made it difficult for this group to find a job related to their field of study. A participant said:

'I would say there the main issue stems from discrimination, but also a lack of networks, a lack of Australian networks within Australian corporate communities. Depending on what school they've been to, if they haven't been to a school or a university that establishes the networks within Australian corporate culture for them and links them at that stage, it's very difficult to then make the jump from university into employment without networks. That's a big issue' (community leader D).

The same participant also outlined that people from the Somali Australian community may not necessarily have relatives or friends who have professional networks or connections. Similarly, the participant explained that this group might not know people who can provide mentorship and advice on their career options: 'if their friends and families don't know anyone then it's really hard to find the right job or what you're after' (community leader C). Indeed, some interview participants affirmed that universities could do more to help African Australians to build networks and connections while studying at university.

Further, almost all participants remarked that the lack of work experience was also a barrier when trying to find a job. Community leaders opined that Somali Australians were not necessarily accessing work-related experiences, including placements and internships, while studying at university. Participants also claimed that many university graduates lacked the knowledge to plan ahead and were also uncertain about their career pathway, with one participant exemplifying that:

'A lot of young people, they come to us, the main challenge is not having previous experience. That is number one. So we have a lot of university degree graduates. Some of them from a financial background, they have done economics, financial banking, some of them have done health that they want to nursing, others would have done admin, business admin and it's just they come to us and be like "I've got this. What can I do? I need a job"' (community leader C).

Meanwhile, several community leaders outlined that finding work-related experiences while studying at university could sometimes be very challenging, particularly if students need to find their own placement or internship. Again, interviewees said that work discrimination could also be a barrier when trying to find work-related experiences while studying at university. A few participants also suggested that universities could play a greater role in supporting students who face work discrimination to find work-related experiences. For example, one participant said:

'It can be really difficult to even get an internship. Depending on what kind of course people are studying, I guess that's where the issue of discrimination and racial bias comes in because people have to apply to do internships in the same way they apply for a job. Depending on what course they're doing, there may be many people competing for internships within any given company. That's where those latent indirect issues of discrimination and bias come in as well. It can actually be difficult to even be proactive and get those internships happening within the university, which is where the university I think can play a real role in using the relationships and the university brand to leverage that influence to try and create those networks and create those pathways for communities that may be facing discrimination or racial bias' (community leader D).

Another participant also highlighted that many Somali Australian parents value academic achievement, therefore young Somali Australians may not always be encouraged to work and study at the same time:

‘And then when they come to the course, we are coming from a culture where academic is so important. Achieving academic is severely important, so the parents may not be open for the children to be studying and working at the same time. "No, no, no, it will distract you. You need to get high marks. You need to achieve high qualifications. Finish your academics first." Well, in Australia, they work hand in hand. I think that's another aspect where it's also part of the course but at the same time it's part of the culture’ (community leader A).

Finally, several interviewees explained that young Somali Australians generally lack confidence. For example, one claimed:

‘Sometimes just self-confidence. These young people, these young Somalis lack self-confidence, they lack self-esteem. And I think in university they don't develop those skills because they're still within their Somali friends [...] they hang together. And they're not really learning new things apart from what the subject is’ (community leader E).

Overall, the community leaders provided important perspectives on the challenges in finding employment for Somali Australians and African Australians. Similar to the interviews with the Somali Australians, the community leader interviews confirm that the main challenges in accessing employment for this cohort include lack of professional networks, connections, work experience and mentoring. Community leaders also identified discrimination in the workforce as a major challenge in accessing employment for this group.

Facilitators in accessing employment

Community leaders suggested that the most useful employment pathways to support successful transition of Somali Australians into work were programs that included opportunities to develop work-related experience and strong professional networks. Participants also noted the benefits of providing training on productive diversity for employers.

One participant suggested universities could further incorporate work-related activities into their courses: ‘I think looking at the majority of the course and having some sort of element of work placement, I think it will be crucial’ (community leader A). Again, a different interviewee explained that undertaking placements while studying at university could be a facilitator in finding employment:

‘Incorporating a placement or a work experience programme into the course, that will be good. Maybe even if it's not, for example, a course or like a work placement, maybe organising for field trips to other employers or other businesses or even having some businesses coming in and doing information sessions about a day of a life of the CEO’ (community leader C).

Some interview participants also affirmed that Somali Australians could benefit from better understanding how to list their volunteer experience on a resume and articulating how this experience helped them gain transferrable skills. One interviewee noted that initiatives which specify the skills gained by participants could be valuable:

‘Many new arrivals don't necessarily know how to do that [represent volunteering on their CVs]. Plus they don't get any sort of a certificate that says these are the professional skills that that person has employed. I did come across a programme just recently which did say they had like 22

skills that anybody who was coming through [name of the program] would gain. When people graduated they said they've got 20 of these skills' (community leader B).

Further, several participants also noted that Somali Australians would benefit from networking and mentoring. For example, one interviewee highlighted the value of developing professional networks while studying at university:

'If we're talking about tertiary qualified people, then creating the links during the years of university study with employers in the fields that the person is focussing on, it's all about the networks, and it's a really difficult thing to do, but that is probably the thing I would call out more than anything else because if a person has networks and they're able to get themselves into work experience, paid or unpaid within that sector, then they're able to demonstrate their capability and put themselves forward. Whereas, jobs often go to people within informal networks rather than being advertised in the open market' (community leader D).

A different participant, who had developed a professional network initiative for Somali Australians, explained the benefits of networking, including opportunities to share information and access to jobs and job opportunities.

'Let's say there's a job opportunity in that organisation or once a month. That's 100 job opportunities. Why don't we have a platform that these 100 people share these opportunities to say, "Hey, I work in this company, there's an opening who's looking for it?" That's why I created that professional network so we can share that information (community leader E).

A few community leaders also outlined the importance of providing training on productive diversity for employers, particularly when running employment pathway programs. This is explained by one person's account:

'We sometimes do cultural awareness training with the employers. They do offer [name of the organisation] that as a cultural training awareness, which is some employers, it's just they are not used to working with people from different backgrounds and it's fine if you don't know how to. So that's why the training exists' (Community leader C).

Another interviewee explained that human resources professionals would also benefit from participating in trainings on diversity and inclusion:

'HR professionals don't get any training in diversity and inclusion and they're not necessarily seen as being the fount of information about how, why this is important. So without any understanding or knowledge in that space or ability to articulate why it's not, my agenda model doesn't work for cultural diversity. You end up without anybody within corporates that's really skilled at being able to do what they do' (community leader B).

The same community leader highlighted the positive value of cultural diversity in the workplace:

'You're going to wake people up to the power of diversity, in general, that they've got and just try and get them beyond the visible difference piece and just recognise diversity is a powerful, powerful thing. And what are the things you can put in place in order to enhance that and get people demanding that they have more diversity?' (community leader B).

Taken together, community leaders stated the need for further provision of employment pathways or initiatives for Somali Australians that provide an opportunity to develop professional networks, mentoring and work-related experience. Indeed, participants outlined that universities could do more to help Somali Australians and African Australians develop professional networks and

undertake work-related experiences while at university. Similar to the interviews with the Somali Australian community, the leader interviews emphasise that employers would benefit from participating in training on productive diversity, particularly around the benefits of diversity in the workforce.

Section summary

Similar to the interviews with university students and graduates, community leaders highlighted employment challenges including workforce discrimination, a scarcity of professional networks, and a relative lack of work experience. However, community leaders also noted issues around self-confidence and leadership, in many cases derived from, or exacerbated by, experiences of discrimination. Programs are therefore required to support personal attributes, confidence, and motivations beyond specific employment training, and in addition to employer-led initiatives. Ultimately, community organisations and higher education institutions will need to work closely with employers committed to diversity, in order to address the structural and attitudinal barriers to employment of Somali Australians. In particular, our interviews confirm the need for further education on the broad benefits of workforce diversity.

Opportunities and strategies

The previous sections have shown that Somali Australians face multiple employment challenges, including widespread discrimination and limited access to networks and broader social capital. However, research also confirms that Somali Australians typically possess high educational aspirations and motivations, community values, and intercultural skills that strengthen universities and workplaces. Improving employment outcomes is thus a priority of both social justice and economic productivity. In recognition of these priorities, some employers have developed targeted programs to increase their workforce diversity and raise Somali Australian participation levels. Similarly, some universities have developed programs that provide specific careers services to groups facing post-graduation employment challenges.

Table 2 provides examples of employment initiatives offered by Australian organisations to assist job seekers, including African Australians, to access employment. These initiatives attempt to build the skills, networking and employment outcomes of job seekers by promoting the benefits of diversity in the workforce, partnering with employers to increase employment opportunities, providing pathways into employment through training and work experience, offering leadership programs, and providing mentorship and networking opportunities.

Table 2: Selected employment initiatives provided by organisations in Australia.

Initiative	Organisation	Description
A Taste of Harmony	A Taste of Harmony	Provides Australian workplaces with the opportunity to celebrate the diversity in their workforce.
African Australian Inclusion Program (AAIP)	Jesuit Social Services (JSS) and National Australia Bank (NAB)	Provides six months paid, supported work experience at NAB and a pathway to ongoing employment in the Australian business sector. Participants gain exposure to Australian workplace culture, build all-important networks, update their CV with local experience and obtain a reference at the end of their placement to help them with job hunting.
CareerSeekers	CareerSeekers	Provides in-depth preparation and support to both refugees and people seeking asylum who are either currently studying at university, or looking to restart their professional career in Australia.
Given the Chance	Brotherhood of St Laurence	Supports disadvantaged job seekers into paid employment by partnering with a variety of businesses across different industries. Participants and employers are fully supported prior to and during the employment program to maximise positive outcomes.
Himilo Community Connect	Himilo Community Connect	Seeks to increase participation, build capacity, create valuable connections and open opportunities for success in education, employment health and social cohesion from within the Somali Australian community in the Heidelberg West area.
John Holland Pathway Program	Jesuit Social Services (JSS) and John Holland	Provides qualified engineers from migrant and refugee backgrounds the opportunity to gain professional experience in the engineering, infrastructure, building or rail industries in Australia.

Melbourne Employment Forum	Melbourne Employment Forum	Connects with community leaders, government, training bodies, job and support services, and businesses to improve pathways that lead to employment outcomes for African Australians in Melbourne. The program seeks to build the capability of African Australians and increase employment outcomes.
Somali Professional Network	Somali Professional Network	Provides a global platform where Somali professionals, entrepreneurs, and students can network and showcase their talents.
Victoria Police Diversity Recruitment Program	Victoria Police	Seeks to increase the representation of African Australians from refugee and other backgrounds in Victoria Police. The program is designed to assist and provide support to African Australians applying to Victoria Police.

Source: Information from organisation websites – www.jss.org.au, www.melbourneemploymentforum.org.au, www.bsl.org.au, www.careerseekers.org.au, www.victoriapolicediversity.org.au, www.tasteofharmony.org.au, www.somalipn.com, www.himilo.org.au.

Programs such as the ones outlined above could be expanded to other organisations and sectors, and have typically received positive evaluations. In the longer term, there also remains a more fundamental need to pursue workforce diversity through structural reform. At university level, such reforms could include training of both professional and academic staff around diversity, intercultural competency and unconscious bias (Harvey, Mallman, Szalkowicz & Moran, 2018), including how to promote effective and equitable groupwork activities. Other specific measures could include the removal of student names from assignments and exams to minimise potential bias, and greater recognition of non-traditional extra-curricular activities, such as contributions to community and family, and employment that occurs outside of traditional work-integrated learning activities (Stuart, Lido & Morgan, 2011). Ensuring staff diversity on selection panels and at senior management is another priority, with such measures needing to extend beyond a focus on gender to include ethnic diversity, ableism, and other forms of diversity.

For employers, similar needs arise for application processes in which names are removed to prevent bias, and training for staff on how to manage and harness diversity. Ensuring that selection panels themselves comprise diverse staff, and that candidates are asked to reflect on diversity, equity, and inclusion, can all help to promote a stronger organisation and culture. In particular, organisations could actively educate staff on the benefits of diversity to productivity, as documented comprehensively through international research (Milem, Chang & Antonio, 2005). Targeted programs are important, but a greater overarching need exists to normalise and understand diversity as central to productive work and learning.

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Appendix A: Method

Ethics approval for this research project was granted by the La Trobe University Human Ethics Committee (ref: HEC19073) on 3 April 2019.

Stage one of this project examined the higher education attainment and the employment outcomes of Somali Australians. Most of the data from this section of the research was based on the Australian Bureau of Statistics' 2016 Australian Census of Population and Housing. The census data was accessed from the TableBuilder crosstabulation platform. Except for the choropleth maps which shows the geographic dispersion of Somali Australians in Victoria, all the data cited in this report is for the entire Australia population.

To protect the privacy of individuals, the TableBuilder platform uses 'perturbation' to adjust cells by small random amounts. Given the size of the Somali Australian cohort is comparatively small, it is likely that this process may have a disproportionate impact on our analysis. This means that other users of TableBuilder may not be able to perfectly replicate the results cited in our analysis. These random adjustments will not impact the broad findings of the report.

The Somali Australian cohort were identified in this data using the Ancestry Multi Response (ANCP) variable. Respondents to the Census questionnaire were asked to list up to two ancestries, which are combined to form the ANCP variable. This variable was selected over other options, such as language spoken at home and country of birth, to include as many second-generation migrants as possible. The total number of Somali Australians identified in the Census was 16,175.

We also included a comparison group of 'similar' migrants from three countries surrounding Somalia in the 'Horn of Africa': Ethiopia, Sudan and South Sudan. These three comparator countries were selected partially due to their geographic proximity, but also because they represent similarly sized migrant populations who largely settled in Australia on humanitarian grounds. The 'rest of the population' comparison cohort represents the entire Australian population except those who identified themselves as having Somali, Ethiopian, Sudanese and South Sudanese ancestry.

This report uses data from the 2016 Australian Census of Population and Housing to measure differences in unemployment rates between Somali Australians and the comparison cohorts listed above. Unemployment rates calculated from Census data are inevitably different from those published in the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Labour Force Survey, which is the official instrument for monitoring unemployment rates. The discrepancy is caused by differences in scope, collection methodologies and treatment of non-response. While internal comparisons are valid, the unemployment figures cited in this report cannot be compared to Labour Force Survey estimates.

The analysis also includes some data from the Australian Census Migration Integrated Dataset (ACMID) to investigate the nature of the migration of the Somali community to Australia. The ACMID is a customised data set that links census results to administrative migration data collected by the now Department of Home Affairs. It includes migrants who arrived between 1 January 2000 and 9 August 2016 and is created by linking the two data sets using a combination of deterministic and probabilistic methodologies. The linking process was able to successfully link 88 per cent of individuals in the migration dataset to the data collected in the census. In this sense, the data is not a true census and the estimates derived from it will have a small margin of error.

Stage two and three of the project involved collection of qualitative data, including:

- 16 interviews with Somali Australian students
- 12 interviews with Somali Australian graduates

- 6 interviews with community leaders.

The interviews were semi-structured and covered facilitators and barriers to the employment of Somali Australians who have studied at a Victorian university. The interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes.

Whilst not representative in size, this exploratory sample of people from the Somali Australian community and community leaders allows the identification of key issues and patterns in the varying experiences of this group. All interview data was de-identified. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed and analysed inductively and deductively for content and themes using NVivo 10 software (QSR International, 2012). An interpretative phenomenological approach to the analysis was applied (Denzin, 1989; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). This allowed us to draw on the interviewees' personal perspectives, reflections, and narratives to examine the meanings the participants made of their own experiences.