

**Submission  
No 208**

**INQUIRY INTO VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND  
TRAINING IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

**Organisation:** Green Connect Illawarra

**Date received:** 14/08/2015

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## Background and overview

Green Connect Illawarra is a social enterprise set up to create employment opportunities for refugees and young people. Why? First, because the unemployment rate for them is so high. Young people sit at double the local unemployment rate and for refugees only 31% have a job 5 years after resettlement. Second, because they represent a flash point. Both young people and newly arrived refugees risk long-term unemployment – and poverty and dependency – if they don't break the cycle early.

We work with and in the context of education, training and service providers to maximise employment opportunities for these two groups. This includes vocational education and training providers. Last financial year we employed 122 resettled refugees and young people.

We are making a submission to provide information about our experience of the introduction of Smart and Skilled on young people and resettled refugees.

Two things have happened with the introduction of Smart and Skilled:

- Young people and resettled refugees have not enrolled and/or dropped out of vocational education and training as they cannot afford the fees and are unwilling to take on significant debt without a solid prospect for employment
- People from a refugee background with a permanent resident visa (not a humanitarian visa) cannot afford the fees and are ineligible for VET-FEE HELP, so cannot access vocational education and training.

## Case study

Emmanuel Bakenga came to Australia as a refugee from the Democratic Republic of Congo, the sole survivor in his family, and having spent seven years in a refugee camp in Uganda.

He holds a degree in Social Work gained in the Democratic Republic of Congo, that is not recognized in Australia.

He started work with Green Connect two years ago as a general team member. His past experience in social work and community development, his support for other Green Connect staff on the job, and his commitment to making life better for refugees led us to employ him part-time to mentor and support other staff members.

At the same time he was working to gain a Diploma in Community Services so that he could get even better at supporting other refugees.

However, the introduction of Smart and Skilled saw the cost of his course go from \$104 to \$4,380. And while Emmanuel's permanent resident visa allows him to study under Smart and Skilled, it does not entitle him to Federal Government support in the form of VET FEE-HELP.

Because Emmanuel can't pay his course fees up front, nor gain a loan, he cannot study.

Of course, Emmanuel is not alone.

## Recommendations

- Scrap fees for people studying at TAFE to ensure access and equal access to education and training
- Work with the Federal Government to give all people from a refugee background the same access to education and training (including related concessions, loans, exemptions, etc) as Australian citizens