

The Banality of Exclusion in Australian Universities

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Abstract

The systematic exclusion of asylum seekers from Australian higher education reveals much about present day Australia. This essay begins with a brief context and outline of the international refugee crisis and Australia's reaction. Next, consideration is given to how this nation has identified itself historically and how it has behaved in recent times towards refugees. Australia's values are then discussed in relation to those of Canada, a similar country in many ways. With this context established, this article then turns to examine the specific issue of access to higher education for young people seeking asylum. Implications of this exclusion and what it means for national identity is discussed. Arendt's theory of bureaucratic indifference is employed to interpret and understand Australia's behaviour. The main contribution of this article is the connections made between asylum seekers, educational exclusion, higher education, national identity and Arendt's theory, that may have application in other contexts.

Introduction

Internationally unprecedented numbers of refugees travelling and waiting in camps have brought out the best and worst aspects of humanity, and this applies across the globe. Traditionally, egalitarian values and a mythology of fairness have been espoused in Australia, stemming from its colonial and convict past. Hardened attitudes towards refugees and those seeking asylum have significant implications for Australia, which was formerly seen as a responsible and compassionate international citizen. Policy and processes that accommodate and process refugees and asylum seekers¹ in the West have been scrutinised within different scholarly disciplines, and Australia's recent poor record in this area has been well documented (e.g. Manne, 2016; Rose, 2015; Slee, 2015; Effeney and Mansouri, 2014; Marr, 2011). However little has been written about the specific issue of access to higher education in that context. How and why systematic educational exclusion occurs and what it means for Australian identity is discussed using Hannah Arendt's 1960s conception of evil as unquestioning and uncritical ordinariness.

Context

To provide some background for this discussion about access to higher education for asylum seekers in Australia, some contextual information is briefly provided here. Hannah Arendt's mid twentieth century conception about the *banality* of evil provides an explanation of what happens to public policy when ordinary people act thoughtlessly and uncritically in the face of orders and direction from above. Towards the end of this essay, this theory is employed to assist with how we should understand how and why Australia treats asylum seekers as it does. Further, this theory assists in the examination of the contemporary political discourse surrounding asylum seekers in Australia, particularly as it relates to the exclusion of the young from higher education.

¹ An asylum seeker is 'an individual who has sought international protection and whose claim for refugee status has not yet been determined' (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR, 2009).

The second major context for this discussion is the extraordinary scale of the international refugee emergency. Before the Syrian crisis, it was estimated that there were more than 45 million refugees and displaced persons in the world (UNHCR, 2009, 2013; Naidoo *et al*, 2014). Since then the United National High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that 65.3 million people who have been forcibly displaced because of persecution, conflict and human rights violations. Of these, 40.8 million are considered internally displaced persons, 21.3 million being refugees and 3.2 million are seeking asylum (Refugee Council of Australia, 2017a).

The Australian Context

Decisions made by successive governments about those seeking asylum in Australia have plummeted to new depths since the turn of the century with increasing levels of politicisation. To garner electoral support, particularly from socially conservative voters, both major political parties supported the establishment of inhumane and expensive off shore detention centres on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea and Nauru. The recent report, *State of the Nation 2017: Refugees and People Seeking Asylum* (Refugee Council of Australia, 2017b), is confronting reading as it outlines in detail how Australia systematically punishes asylum seekers and spends billions of dollars spent in that punitive process that might otherwise have provided assistance and support for these people. Despite Australia's positive record of resettling more than 870,000 refugees since World War II, it is now "the only country in the world that sends people who come by boat to tiny poor islands, where they are detained, and for some at least, seem set to reside there for the rest of their lives" (Refugee Council of Australia, 2017b, p. 4). There is little doubt about Australia's legal obligations towards asylum seekers (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2016) but deliberate policies characterised as cruelty and abuse (Amnesty International, 2016) continue.

Less attention has been paid to the 30,000 people who live in the Australian community, and who arrived in Australia prior to 2014 who are seeking protection and asylum (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2016). The processing of their claims for refugee status is protracted and the rules and entitlements differ, depending on arrival dates. Successive national governments, on both sides of politics, sought public support for their tough stance on asylum seekers. The negative discourse about these people has been promulgated by politicians, the bureaucracy, the be readily interpreted as an ugly extension of those familiar 'law and order' campaigns routinely seen in many countries, that are less focused on evidence than perception and continue to prove electorally successful.

These people live a quiet and precarious existence within the Australian community, mostly unnoticed or ignored, while they wait for their claims for asylum to be assessed. An impenetrable system of visa allocation has been developed by successive governments, who have lost sight of the compassion shown by earlier generations. In the mid 1970s and 1980s, for example, thousands of Vietnamese asylum seekers were accepted and in 1989 Prime Minister Bob Hawke granted permanent visas to 42,000 Chinese students in Australia at the time of the Tiananmen Square massacre (Chan, 2015).

Several different types of visa for those seeking asylum which have been repeatedly amended as different governments came into power. The majority of those who live in the

Australian community have been released from detention on Bridging Visas E (BEV) and eventually become eligible to apply for Temporary Protection Visas (TPV) or Safe Haven Enterprise Visas (SHEV). Each of these entails different entitlements regarding work rights, access to healthcare and welfare assistance. The number of years these visa holders can remain in Australia varies but it is usually three or five years, leading eventually to a legal hearing regarding refugee status (see Department of Immigration and Border Protection, 2017). Many organisations have spoken out about the multitude of issues involved, and many scholarly articles have been published, but it can be confusing and difficult terrain to navigate. And educational issues certainly get lost. However, it's relatively easy to discern the political capital of the fear campaign, especially in the context of the 60 million displaced people worldwide.

It's important to note the difference between the entitlements and standing of migrants (immigrants), refugees and asylum seekers in this country. Australia's Skilled Migrant Program welcomes application from individuals seeking to move to live in Australia. The economic value of these individuals to the nation overrides other concerns. Refugees who have been formally recognised as such are assisted by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), are also welcomed and resettled into Australia, but there are actually very few of them. In 2015, only 5211 people entered Australia in this way (Karlsen, 2016, p. 5). A person seeking asylum, however, flees their country of origin and in many instances, arrives without documentation to substantiate their claims. Further, Being categorized as an asylum seeker is equivalent to 'knocking at the door', having clearly crossed a border between countries, but needing to meet the additional criteria for being classed as a 'refugee' (Goodnow, 2014, p. 140).

National Identity

Australia's cultural mythology emerged from its harsh convict history. Traditionally, egalitarian values have been championed as important to historical narratives of national identity (Tranter & Donoghue, 2015). As Tim Winton, one of our most celebrated authors, commented:

Australia's long tradition of egalitarianism was something people my age learnt about at school. I recall teachers, dowdy folk of indeterminate politics, who spoke of "the fair go" with a reverence they usually only applied to Don Bradman or the myth of Anzac.

Australia's fairness was a source of pride, an article of faith (2013, p. 25).

As others have noted, this egalitarian myth didn't apply to Aboriginal Australians, the Chinese on the goldfields, or women and a long shadow of institutionalised racism was cast (Slee, 2015; Marr, 2011). The White Australia Policy infamously and systematically excluded non-whites from emigrating and the grossly unfair mechanisms for exclusion are seen in embarrassing displays in Migration and Immigration Museums around the country. The long term existence of that policy also reveals high levels of complacency and disinterest that seems to continue, deeply embedded in the national psyche (Megalogenis, 2009). This traditional version of egalitarianism holds true for those who are uncritical and comfortable. The majority are excluded from the 'the fair go' narrative, including the LGBTQI community, those with disabilities and pretty much anyone from anywhere else (Moran, 2011; Grimshaw, 1994). Artfully, Winton alludes to this exclusion in those few words above.

Focused on the documentary-reality television program *Go Back to Where You Came From* (2012) about Australian attitudes to asylum seekers, Sauter and Bruns (2014) analysed the associated twitter feeds. They concluded that this multi-platform capacity allows for contemporary Australians to 'engage with public policies and form their own and others' opinions, and perhaps speak out to effect change' (p. 21). However, as the participants in the program articulated polarised opinion, both positive and negative, my argument is firstly that reasoned debate about public policy should not be led by reality television and secondly, the manipulative discourse about asylum seekers has succeeded in being pervasive and persuasive and unlikely to be unravelled by truth or fact.

Canada versus Australia

Despite the image Australia likes to present of itself as the land of the fair go, it actually does little towards settling refugees, in comparison with other countries. In 2016 Canada settled 25,000 Syrians, whereas in 2015 and 2016 Australia settled only 3,790 displaced persons from Syria and Iraq (Department of Immigration and Border Protection, 2016). Comparisons between Australia and Canada are often made, but in respect to asylum seekers they are very different. The Canadian government website that explains its immigration system begins with the following introduction:

Our compassion and fairness are a source of great pride for Canadians. These values are at the core of our domestic refugee protection system and our Resettlement Assistance Program. Both programs have long been praised by the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR). Refugees are people who have fled their countries because of a well-founded fear of persecution, and who are therefore unable to return home. Many refugees come from war-torn countries and have seen or experienced unthinkable horrors...Refugees come from around the world and many make their claims in Canada...the asylum program works to provide refugee protection to people in Canada who have a well-founded fear of persecution or are at risk of torture, or cruel or unusual punishment in their home countries (Government of Canada, 2016).

In contrast, the Australian Government's Department of Immigration and Border Protection website provides a clear indication of very different values and beliefs. On the welcome page of the website a link is provided to 'Information to help illegal maritime arrivals in Australia resolve their immigration status'. Clicking onto this link and venturing further into this website makes it very clear that anyone arriving in Australia by boat is perceived as 'illegal':

The Australian Government has removed access to the Immigration Advice and Application Assistance Scheme (IAAAS) from all illegal arrivals. Therefore, there will be no new referrals to IAAAS for illegal maritime arrivals (IMAs) or unauthorised air arrivals (UAAs). The arrangements for access to the IAAAS for primary processing for authorised arrivals (AAs) are unchanged; this includes the need to meet certain criteria (Department of Immigration and Border Protection, 2017).

Nevertheless, resettled young people (including asylum seekers) in Canada 'tread a thin line between vulnerability and empowerment in pursuing their educational goals' due to financial constrictions and family responsibility (Shakya *et al*, 2010; Ferde, 2010). As argued shortly, this is quite different from system-level deliberate exclusion seen in Australia.

Tolerance and compassion for displaced persons in the global north has been stretched by the volume of asylum seekers from Syria and African nations, resulting in a significant international policy issue (Effeney & Mansouri, 2014). The election of Donald Trump has heralded a new era for anyone outside the US wanting to get in and the Brexit vote in the UK alongside the rise of nationalist political leaders in Europe all indicate that nationalism and negative regard for the displaced is likely to increase. In Australia, the rise of jingoistic nationalism and flag waving is increasing and is cause for alarm (Fozdar, Spittles & Kartley, 2015), contributing little in the way of compassion, inclusion or even tolerance for refugees or asylum seekers. The complacency and disinterest of Australians that Megalogenis (2009) observed, seems to be hand in glove with this nationalistic behaviour.

The Discourse

The ways that Australian politicians and government representatives speak about people seeking asylum warrants a separate paper, but is touched upon here in order to complete this contextual section. As in other countries, Australian politicians have been accused of routinely using language to dehumanise those seeking asylum and to promulgate fear and moral panic (Rose, 2016; Martin, 2015; Zembylas, 2010; Marr & Wilkinson, 2004; Curtis, 2004). Images used in the media further those aims (Lenette and Cleland, 2016). Effeney and Mansouri (2014) describe the ‘us and them’ mentality that differentiates between those who are entitled and those who are not. They argue that the Australian government fuels these perceptions because it:

consistently and deliberately errs on the side of nationalism, invoking the national prerogative to define and control “our” boundaries, to maintain “our” culture and distribute “our” resources, as “we” deem acceptable. This discourse strikes a chord which the majority of Australian voters who are beholden to an ideal of the democratic liberal political system as neatly and rightly delineated between members and non-members (p. 15).

The use of specific language and metaphor for political purposes has been well documented (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; O’Brien, 2003; Vallis and Inayatullah, 2016). Discourses circulated by the Australian political machine are peppered with metaphors of ‘people smugglers’, ‘stop the boats’, ‘illegals’, ‘queue jumping’ and the like which have served to support the discourse and government policy (Rose, 2016; Clark, 2013; Marr, 2011; McKay, Thomas & Kneebone, 2011; Marr & Wilkinson, 2004). The more embedded a metaphor becomes in our language, the more invisible and subtle its effect can become. Effortlessly, these metaphors become widely used in everyday language instead of critical thinking, or indeed thinking at all. In this way metaphors can be seen to not only describe reality—but to create it (Vallis and Inayatullah, 2016). This point about critical thinking is important and I return to it shortly.

The Australian discourse about asylum seekers means that ‘more people now hold strongly negative views of asylum seekers than strongly positive ones in Australia (Markus, 2012 cited in Sauter and Bruns, 2014) with prejudice towards this group well established (Pederson & Hartley, 2015). As Ball (2007) observed, “Discourses often maintain their credibility through their repetition, substantive simplicity... and rhetorical sophistication” (p. 2). In Australia, the discourse about asylum seekers has translated into a general

understanding that governments are in fact saving lives. This has occurred despite clear evidence to the contrary (Reilly, 2016; Phillips & Spinks, 2011). This perception is reinforced in Australia by images depicting despair, death and rescue, that originate from Europe (Lenette and Cleland, 2016). By embedding this metaphor into everyday communication, it has become accepted as reality. Together with the name change to 'The Department of Immigration *and Border Protection*' (italics mine), successive governments on both sides of politics have succeeded in conveying the significance of saving lives and being rightly tough on people smugglers, but as Slee (2015) points out,

Collapsing asylum into a debate about people trafficking deflects from the broader set of questions that beset public policy. Saturation of media space and time with people smuggling panics and disturbing imagery of deaths at sea occludes all else. Centring election debate on 'stopping and turning back the boats' distracts public attention from the suite of asylum issues and sustains the exclusion of displaced populations. Unwittingly or deliberately we become spectators, and thereby agents, in a global and local project of exclusion (p. 36).

Educational Exclusion

In this section how those seeking asylum have been excluded from Australian universities is outlined. The complex recent history of government reaction to those seeking asylum in Australia, discussed earlier, together with the continuing offshore detention controversy has continued to be scrutinised. However, systematic educational exclusion has been not received much in the way of public attention. Little reporting in the media has occurred about how government and university funding rules construct an impasse to higher education for those seeking asylum.

An estimated 7,000 young people between the ages of 18 and 25 are living in Australia and seeking asylum (Refugee Council of Australia, 2015, p. 4). Generally, this is the age when most university students are completing undergraduate study around the world. Children and adolescents who are seeking asylum in Australia are permitted to study in Australian government primary and secondary schools. In some states, assistance is also provided for asylum seekers to study in vocational education courses. With the support and encouragement of their teachers and families, many young people successfully complete school and receive offers of places from universities. The *Catch-22*² paradox is that they are classified as international rather than local students, so to accept a place at university, they must pay substantial tuition fees at high international rates. Despite meeting entrance requirements and being made offers of university places after successfully completing secondary schooling in Australia, many young people are excluded from higher education while they wait for their applications for protection and asylum to be heard, a process that can take many years. Interestingly, no comment was made about this issue in the government funded technical report: *Supporting school-university pathways for refugee students' access and participation in tertiary education* (Naidoo *et al*, 2014) but it is clearly a key concern for the Refugee Council of Australia (2017d).

² *Catch-22* is the title of a classic American novel (Heller, 1961) and has become a reference to absurdly paradoxical situations arising from contradictory bureaucratic rules.

Internationally, children and young people seeking asylum are highly likely to have been through upheaval and exposure to violence, yet face ‘a maze of bureaucratic categories that determine what they may do’ (Goodnow, 2014, p. 329). Within the Australian context this is particularly pronounced when it comes to accessing higher education. Despite individual students earning places at government funded universities because of their performance in the Australian school and examination systems, enrolment is not possible because of bureaucratic and political imperatives. As Hirsh and Maylea (2016) point out, there are few good reasons why those seeking asylum should be denied access to tertiary education, given that the majority of asylum seekers will have their claims granted (see also Phillips and Spinks, 2011; Karlsen, 2016).

With only a few private exceptions, Australian universities are funded by the Federal government, which provides tuition subsidy and funding for inclusion under the Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program (HEPPP) program that ‘aims to ensure that Australians from low SES backgrounds who have the ability to study at university have the opportunity to do so’ (Department of Education and Training, 2016). For the purposes of this discussion, the other relevant funding schemes are the Commonwealth Supported Place (CSP) subsidised tuition program for undergraduate courses and the Higher Education Loan Programme (HELP) (Australian Government, 2016). All three of these funding schemes exclude asylum seekers, who are not deemed to be ‘local’ students for university, despite asylum seekers being local enough to attend schools in government systems.

The amount of time between arriving in Australia, being granted temporary protection and then gaining citizenship, takes many years. When this coincides with youth, the educational implications are significant. Education is linked to social inclusion and exclusion (McLaughlin *et al*, 2013) and educational success is directly connected with employment and earnings (Thursfield *et al*, 2012). As the World Health Organisation and the World Bank (2011) note, ‘Education contributes to human capital formation and it is thus a key determinant of personal well-being and welfare’ and not supporting young people in education ultimately ‘has high social and economic costs’ (p. 205). So it has particular significance for these displaced group of motivated and resilient young people. Hirsch and Maylea (2016) argue that while Austria, New Zealand, the US and the UK also exclude asylum seekers from higher education,

What is relatively unique to Australia is the exclusion of asylum seekers and refugees from education as a mechanism for making Australia less attractive to prospective refugees. From this perspective, this policy of punishment and deterrence can be viewed together with turning back boats and offshore processing and detention (p. 20).

The Refugee Council of Australia’s ‘Education for All Campaign’ (2017e) specifically takes up this issue of access to education calling on Ministers of Education at both National and State levels to act. The Equity Practitioners in Higher Education Australasia lists this as one of its priority issues (2017) and an independent report recommended that:

That the Commonwealth government urgently investigate the asylum seeker situation in terms of the barriers to access to study at the tertiary level, with a view to addressing the concerns that have been consistently raised by many key community and academic sources (Terry, Naylor, Nguyen and Rizzo, 2016, p. 6).

A dozen Australian universities currently offer a small number of scholarships that allow those seeking asylum to attend university (Refugee Council of Australia, 2017c; Hirsch and Chia, 2015). Some of these scholarships also provide living allowances, structured support processes in addition to tuition costs. While these scholarships are gratefully received by the individual recipients and support agencies like the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC), there are nevertheless problems associated with them because they offer stopgap measures. These scholarships represent a spirit of generosity and humanity but they have emerged from charitable imperatives. And charity can readily become a substitute for real justice and charity may even be ‘wrong when it’s used to patch up the effects of the fundamental injustices that are built into the structure and values of a society’ (British Broadcasting Commission, 2016).

The Australian government already provides financial support for greater inclusion at universities under the HEPPP scheme alongside subsidies for tuition in the CSP scheme as well as the system of student loans under the HELP scheme (see above section). However, this system of inclusion excludes those seeking asylum who have already been routinely dehumanised within the discourse. Losing heart and hope is highly likely for young people who have achieved at school, been offered a place at university on the strength of their independently assessed achievements, but who are systematically blocked from accessing higher education. By contrast, in Canada, young people from refugee backgrounds, young people develop stronger aspirations for higher education after arriving in Canada (Shakya *et al*, 2010).

Importantly, how young people view themselves will inevitably influence their capacity to engage with education and society. This has particular significance for the young people who are the focus of this article (asylum seekers, aged 18-25, with aspirations to attend university) who remain trapped in uncertainty and refused access to higher education. Correa-Velez, Gifford & Barnett (2010) note that the young people who participated in their study did not see themselves as victims of their refugee past:

...the majority of young people in our study arrive in Australia with a set of positive resources for successfully negotiating the settlement challenges. Despite their difficult childhood experiences, they meet these new challenges as adolescents with agency, not as victims. They have high potential for making a good and successful life in Australia. This in turn provides a compelling argument for developing more innovative and flexible strategies for participation in education and employment... (Correa-Velez, Gifford & Barnett, 2010, p. 1402).

For asylum seekers, however, “...being denied access to education was just another symptom of being stuck in limbo, an experience they were only too familiar with throughout their process of seeking asylum” (Hirsch and Maylea, 2016, p. 21).

How can we make sense of this?

Robert Manne (2016) considers several explanations for Australia’s harsh behaviour towards asylum seekers, noting that the deterrent measures of mandatory detention and temporary protection continued long past the time when they had become redundant as the boats had stopped arriving in Australia. He asks, “How is the purposelessness of this cruelty—which is presently rendering the lives of 30,000 refugees or asylum seekers in Australia miserable—to be explained?” (p. 1). He provides a persuasive argument that the

need for the policy has long gone, noting that a rigid bureaucratic mindset has retained the asylum seeker system for no real purpose and offers, “One reason for the purposeless cruelty of the current asylum seeker policy is, then, the severe case of groupthink—the willingness of intelligent people to still their critical capacities in the interest of conformity—that now afflicts Canberra [Australia’s capital and seat of government]” (p. 2).

Manne also observes that he doubted that the officials responsible for administering Australia’s asylum seeker policy were sadists and then proposes an explanation drawing upon Hannah Arendt’s 1960s work. In her portrayal of Otto Adolf Eichmann as a diligent bureaucratic criminal, Arendt (1963/2006) asserted that it was his ordinariness that predisposed him to become the worst criminals of his time (Elon, 2006). For Arendt, evil is not radical or obvious like the laughing villain, but is banal. Evil, she theorised, is the consequence of not thinking critically, not raising questions and believing in government policy and associated propaganda. For Arendt, evil is the rule-following Eichmann, who “always thought within the narrow limits of whatever laws and decrees were valid at a given moment” (Arendt, 1963/2006, p. 157) including the Final Solution, without question and with attention to effective implementation. Further, “As Eichmann told it, the most potent factor in the soothing of his own conscience was the simple fact that he could see no one, no one at all, who actually was against the Final Solution” (p. 116). Arendt argued that Eichmann evidently believed he had not done anything wrong but had loyally worked to support and enact state policy as was his duty (p. 21).

In a different time and context altogether, writing about China’s one child social experiment, Mei Fong (2016) outlines the extent of the bureaucracy involved in implementation of that policy along with the inherent cruelty involved. She reports that local people paid to police the policy (that included forced late-term abortions), ‘consoled themselves with the thought that they were doing their duty and carrying out an important national directive’ (p. 68).

My point here of course, echoes Robert Manne’s assertion that the most plausible explanation for Australia’s unreasonable treatment of asylum seekers lies in Arendt’s characterisation of evil as banal. This banality—predictability, ordinariness, dullness, unoriginality—embraces the compromised politicians, the compliant officials, the complicit media as well as the complacent and uncritical amongst the rest of us. Believing—or not questioning—what is essentially propaganda and spin, and uncritically following policy and direction from superiors, appears to contain the elements of Arendt’s banality of evil. As Manne notes, “how evil acts might be perpetrated by conventional individuals because of their blindness, their loss of the capacity to see what it was that they were doing” (p. 3) is at the heart of Arendt’s conception and its application here.

I now return to the young people who have earned a place at university in Australia, but are unable to enrol because of government funding rules and exclusions. The future wellbeing of young people seeking asylum in Australia, for some, is closely tied to access to higher education. As Allsop, Chase & Mitchell (2014) observe, young people in the UK connect their own subjective wellbeing to whether or not they have a long term plan with a clear future trajectory. As noted earlier in this essay, the key time for undergraduate study in most countries is between 18 and 25 years old. Australia’s policy about asylum seekers and

university funding processes ensure that these young adults remain in a state of ‘illegality’ (De Genova & Peutz, 2010, cited in Allsop, Chase & Mitchell, 2014) poverty, and worst of all, in a state of limbo where hope and planning for the future is on hold.

Excluding all but the fortunate few, who receive charitable scholarships from higher education institutions, means that the trajectory for the majority of these students is predetermined. Destined to a precarious existence and limited economic security is a high price for individual young people to pay. And as the vast majority of them will eventually be processed and become Australian citizens, over a period of about ten years, what will this mean for Australia in the longer term? This motivated group of capable students continues to be denied hope and the chance to envisage futures for themselves, for no discernible reason. Further, as Hirsch and Maylea (2016) assert, denying these young asylum seekers access to higher education is part of the overall policy of punishment and deterrence. What does this say about Australia and its national identity? Slee asks, ‘Might it be said that the architecture and culture of schooling is a mirror to society?’ (2015, p. 42). And does Australia’s acceptance of the manipulated discourse about asylum seekers (from politicians, bureaucracy and the lower echelons of the media) indicate a lack of regard that is inherently evil in the banal, everyday sense outlined by Arendt? Most notably in its February 2017 report, the Refugee Council of Australia lists eight priorities for the year. At the top of the list is: ‘End the punishment of people seeking asylum’ (Refugee Council of Australia, 2017b).

Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been to examine the complex situation whereby organised and systematic educational exclusion of young asylum seekers from higher education occurs in Australia. This has been considered within national, political, theoretical and international contexts. After locating this discussion within a framework of global displacement and historical national identity, Australia’s values about asylum seekers were compared with the more humane values espoused by Canada. The specific issue of exclusion from higher education for asylum seekers was detailed next. The discussion then turned to examine the discourse about asylum seekers and what it means for Australia. Hannah Arendt’s conception of the banality of evil was employed to help understand widespread attitudes towards the displaced. Why Australia’s irrational policy and cruel practices towards those seeking asylum have not been more widely questioned has been investigated. How to comprehend and explain these issues has proved difficult, so employment of Arendt’s theory has allowed some sense to be made of the poor behaviour of this wealthy country that once showed great compassion. In conclusion, this article has offered the educational community a starting point regarding the complex educational, legal, moral, ethical and bureaucratic issues by examining one harsh and unforgiving exclusionary educational practice. Above all, it is hoped that this article raises awareness about the harmful effects of playing out deterrence and punishment policies on the young, in any country.

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