

their claims, no effective machinery exists to ensure that recognition is given to the educational, technical and professional qualifications possessed by the refugees.¹⁴

5.61. The question of what is to be done for the illiterate members of the Vietnamese and Timorese communities, is a matter which we believe has not yet been tackled seriously by the Government or any of its departments. In the Committee's view, the little action which has been taken to date is entirely inadequate given the time which has elapsed since the arrival of these refugees.

5.62. Under the circumstances, therefore, it is particularly important that the Vietnamese (like other migrants) be given realistic encouragement to learn English: that is, be provided with financial support while attending English classes, irrespective of their current level of proficiency. Moreover, as the contribution of the wife's income will be needed to keep many families economically viable, the Committee believes that adult and young women should be given equal opportunities with men for learning English and obtaining job qualifications.

Lack of opportunities for job retraining and the inability of the Vietnamese to compete for apprenticeships

5.63. Prior to their departure for Australia, the Vietnamese refugees were informed in Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia, that 'A number of people will have the opportunity of retaining in a new field of work if they want to'. They were further informed that 'if suitable work in your field cannot be found, the Government has a training scheme for learning a new trade, and during the time you are training, you will receive an allowance for you and your family'.

5.64. It was the Committee's experience, however, to learn that few if any of the Vietnamese were provided with opportunities to retrain and that most were unhappy about their present employment which, it was felt, did not suit their talents, previous training or their interests. The Committee has mentioned previously that a number of refugees finally accepted employment out of fear that non-acceptance of an offer might result in the cessation of the 'special' unemployment benefits which they were being paid, together with the fact that their inability to speak English prevented them from undertaking some form of retraining.

¹⁴ In reaching this conclusion the Committee notes the comments and findings of the Australian Population and Immigration Council from p. 57 of its report on the 1973 Immigration Survey *A Decade of Migrant Settlement*

Qualifications which are subject to recognition difficulties.

26. Since 1969, a Committee on Overseas Professional Qualifications has been responsible for collating information on qualifications which entitle their holders to enter professional practice in overseas countries, and has negotiated with professional organisations and registration authorities in order to review recognition practices in this country. The range of qualifications which fall within the Committee's frame of reference is nevertheless limited, and no official body exists which is empowered to review recognition procedures for all types of overseas qualifications.

27. As table 10 makes clear, the types of overseas qualifications which are most subject to recognition difficulties are outside the scope of the Committee on Overseas Professional Qualifications. Least recognised overseas qualifications were qualifications in commerce and administration (41 per cent not recognised); qualifications in technical fields (41 per cent not recognised); and qualifications in the electrical trades, the clothing, footwear and textile trades, and the motor trades (34 per cent not recognised). It should be emphasised that 'technical' qualifications are not technician level qualifications. They are *any* qualifications in technical subjects other than tertiary, technician, trade or commerce/administration qualifications: examples are certificates in basic electronics or boiler attendant certificates.

5.65. For the record, as of July 1976 only 8 of the 524 'hard core' Vietnamese refugees who were admitted to Australia during 1975, have been given the opportunity to undertake some form of retraining as part of the National Employment and Training Scheme (NEAT)—1 in New South Wales and 7 in Queensland. In addition, of the 7 Queensland-based refugees, 6 did not complete their training—4 left the firm concerned and found employment elsewhere, one left due to pregnancy and the other is now unemployed. Similarly, none of the Vietnamese refugees have been able to secure employment as an apprenticed tradesman—in spite of being told before their departure that:

The Commonwealth Employment Bureau will provide a special way for helping the young people find work, and that means will include vocational guidance, to assist the young people find suitable work.

To become a proficient tradesman, there is an apprenticeship scheme, usually of five years' duration. During that time the apprentice receives a proportion of a tradesman's wage, and that proportion increases each year.¹⁵

In fact, at the time the refugees arrived, the apprenticeship vacancies for 1975 had been filled as employers had already recruited at the beginning of the year as is the usual practice. No mention was made of the fact that there were more young people seeking apprenticeships in 1975 than available positions and that the ability to communicate and to read and write English was, in most trades, a prerequisite. It was to be expected, therefore, that at the end of 1975—beginning of 1976, the Vietnamese were unable to compete successfully against Australian school-leavers for apprenticeships commencing in 1976—as employers preferred young people whose educational standards were adequate to meet the demands of the technical college courses which were involved.

5.66. It is obvious that a great deal of confusion has arisen in the refugees' minds because the reality of life in Australia has not measured up to the assurances which were given to them in Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia prior to their departure for Australia. This has occurred because of misinterpretation on their part and as a result of having received assurances which could not possibly have been fulfilled.

5.67. Although some of these problems could have been avoided had the Department of Labor and Immigration consulted with officers of the Commonwealth Employment Service during the drafting of the document, this apparently was not done. In fact, having drawn the attention of the Department of Employment and Industrial Relations to the document in a letter dated 8 July 1976, the Committee was informed by them on 29 July 1976 that 'This Department was unaware of the existence of the document handed to the refugees prior to their departure for Australia'.

¹⁵ *Brief Points for Vietnamese Refugees coming to Australia—Concerning Young People (Youth)*, Appendix 1, p. 103.

Failure to recognise the interdependence of the matters of education, employment and economic independence

5.68. In the words of Dr Jean Martin:

Our findings so far point strongly to the fact that, unless positive initiatives are taken to help the adolescent and adult Vietnamese gain the knowledge of English and qualifications necessary for reasonably-paid and stable jobs, then many breadwinners will have broken and highly unproductive employment histories and many families will suffer periods of economic hardship and will from time to time become dependent on social services.¹⁶

From the information available to the Committee these predictions appear to be, unfortunately, all too true for many of the Vietnamese—some of whom will become unemployable as they acquire a progressively unsatisfactory employment record.

5.69. While official decisions on some of these questions have certainly been taken, or decisions are being made as a routine application of general policy, the Vietnamese have no overall picture of their employment situation, and neither does it appear to be the responsibility of any one authority to grasp the interdependence of these several questions of education, employment and economic independence.

Income maintenance and financial burdens

5.70. The inability of many refugees to find reasonably-paid and stable jobs has meant that considerable numbers of them are beset with financial difficulties. The larger families of 10-12 (or more) individuals face particular problems in finding rental accommodation which is adequate for their needs and which is also within their financial reach. In Victoria, for example, the move into the community is seen to present considerable difficulties with as much as \$500 being required to cover bond, rent in advance, and other costs. We are aware of the fact that in addition to providing furniture and other household goods, charitable organisations have found it necessary to provide cash payments to individual refugee families—for bond money, to assist with rental payments and, in some instances, to supplement social security 'incomes'.¹⁷ In the Committee's judgment this attests clearly to a continuation of the refugees' financial and related problems which are unfortunately lost sight of by government instrumentalities when families depart from hostels and begin to merge into the community.

¹⁶ *The Vietnamese Study*, Jean I. Martin, 1 June 1976, Appendix 4, p. 151.

Dr Martin, who is a Senior Research Fellow in Sociology at the Australian National University, was appointed by the former Prime Minister to conduct a five-year study into the settlement experiences of the Vietnamese refugees admitted to Australia during 1975. (Further reference is made to this study at p. 83 and Dr Martin's brief progress report *The Vietnamese Study* is reproduced at Appendix 4, p. 141.)

¹⁷ e.g. A widow with six children obtained employment on a wage of \$90 per week. This was inadequate for her to move into a home but the Society of St Vincent de Paul arranged for the rental of a house at \$30 per week, paid the widow a subsidy of \$10 per week and assisted with \$10 food vouchers, clothing and the children's school needs.

A family comprising an incapacitated husband, wife and three children was assisted, again by the Society of St Vincent de Paul. Following inquiries, the wife indicated that she had attended a law school in Vietnam and was placed in an intensive English language course. This was followed by an advanced course. The wife is now attending a Catholic teacher training course. The Society of St Vincent de Paul arranged accommodation for this family—a home unit at a rental of \$30 per week—and is to subsidise rent by \$15 per week for the duration of the three year training course.

5.71. In the Committee's opinion it is essential that income maintenance schemes encourage self-help and allow normal Australian living standards to prevail rather than lower them and/or perpetuate poverty. This should be so for refugees, migrants and for all other Australian residents. We were concerned to learn, therefore, that in the case of the refugees such encouragement is not given—at least in a number of instances.

5.72. The Committee was informed, for example, that the Vietnamese refugees were ineligible to receive regular pensions and supporting mother's benefits because of their inability to meet the prescribed residency requirements. While a special benefit was paid to the refugees at the same rate, they were disadvantaged financially in that their permissible earnings—over and above their pensions—were lower than that allowed for other Australians. Their predicament can be illustrated in concrete terms using the following examples:

- (a) Widow's pension: As of November 1975, a widow's pension for a mother with two children provided \$77.50 fortnightly to the mother, \$15 for each of the two children, plus a mother's allowance of \$12 if one of the children is under six years (or \$8 if over six years); total allowance \$119.50. Her permissible fortnightly earnings were \$40 for herself plus \$12 for each child; total \$64.00. Hence her total potential income was \$183.50; per fortnight.
- (b) Special benefit: On special benefit the same mother would again receive \$77.50 fortnightly for herself and \$15 for each child (but no supporting mother's allowance); total \$107.50. Her permissible fortnightly earnings amounted to \$12.00 bringing her total potential income to \$119.50.

Compared with the potential income on a widow's pension, person (b) is disadvantaged by \$64.00 per fortnight.¹⁸ Furthermore, while the refugees are in receipt of 'special benefits' they are ineligible to receive a number of important fringe benefits—such as reduction in the amounts paid for transportation fares, telephone rental, general council rates and water rates, the entitlement to a 'pensioner health card', free dental service, hearing aids and so on. As the majority of the 'problem families'—particularly the families with only female breadwinners and aged persons with dependent children—are illiterate and therefore have a low potential for rehabilitation and employment, these groups face a future of low income maintenance for five years (the qualifying period of residency) at a level lower than that for other Australians.¹⁹

¹⁸ At the current (i.e. October 1976) rates, the fortnightly differential is again \$64.00 in favour of the person receiving a widow's pension. (Although the widow's pension and the special benefit payment have risen from \$77.50 to \$82.50 per fortnight, the other amounts remain as quoted in the above illustrations. Hence (a) now has a total potential income of \$188.50 per fortnight compared with (b)'s total potential income of \$124.50 per fortnight.)

¹⁹ At Wacol Hostel it is understood that seven female breadwinners and their families and four aged persons—three of whom have dependent children for whom a home must eventually be made—were in receipt of special benefits. A further problem-group included four male-breadwinners with their own children and other young relatives to support. All of these face a high risk of breakdown under financial pressure, housing difficulties, schooling needs, language problems and so on, and will need long term emotional support and possibly extensive material assistance.

5.73. While voluntary agencies continue to show their willingness to assist refugees over these types of problems, the Committee believes that our reliance on them for direct financial support is most unsatisfactory. Clearly the responsibility belongs to the Federal Government. Accordingly we believe that residency requirements should be waived in deserving cases. Similarly, a double orphan's allowance should be paid in certain circumstances. In situations where it cannot be established whether a child's parents are dead or alive or whether they have been sent as refugees to other countries and are in no position to contribute to the support of their children, the children should automatically qualify for the double orphan's allowance. This would be of considerable assistance to an older brother, sister, aunt, uncle, cousin and grandmother etc., to maintain the family—especially since the evidence indicates that the wage they earn as unskilled labourers (or the money they receive whilst on special benefit) is inadequate for the maintenance of the extended family. A specific example of this is the 80 year old grandmother with five grandchildren aged 5-15 years.

5.74. At the other end of the scale, however, the Committee notes that some of the refugees were fortunate enough to bring reasonable sums of money into the country when they arrived. The number of persons in this situation is unknown.

Lack of positive action in providing opportunities for rural resettlement

5.75. Little or nothing of a positive nature has been done by government departments to explore the possibilities which exist for placing the rurally-oriented Vietnamese refugees—and particularly those who reside at Wacol Hostel—in some form of rural occupation where they could be in close proximity to one another. This is in spite of the fact that the prospect of finding alternative settlement opportunities for this problem group looks very bleak indeed, and it is likely that a number of them will be dependent on social welfare payment for many years to come and possibly for the remainder of their lives. These families are for the main part very large (some have 12-16 members) and are without means. The elderly members are in all probability unemployable and would normally have depended on their families for support. Most of this group have had little or no education and some are illiterate in their own language. It is unlikely that these people will ever learn to speak, let alone read or write, in the English language. They are in the main, peasant farmers who continue to look to the family unit for mutual support and to the larger group for a sense of security.

5.76. At this stage the Senate Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee is unaware of any plans on the part of government departments directed towards the finding of meaningful solutions to the settlement problems of these particularly unfortunate people. This reluctance to grapple with the problem of rural employment is in sharp contrast to the work of voluntary agencies, private individuals and other organisations who have offered a

number of opportunities involving accommodation and land to the Vietnamese. Although some of these have been successful and others have failed, the efforts of individuals, voluntary organisations and some of the hostel settlement committees to find practical solutions to the problems of rural settlement have been positive ones. By comparison, the extremely cautious and conservative approaches adopted by the Department of Social Security and the Department of Employment and Industrial Relations/Commonwealth Employment Service—of limiting their involvement in such matters to counselling the refugees as to the detailed disadvantages which were associated with particular offers²⁰—fell short of positive action and, suggests a negative attitude and/or closed mind as to the possibilities in this field. In one instance the Committee received contradictory comments from these organisations²¹, suggesting that there had been both a lack of concern for the scheme under consideration and a lack of detailed knowledge of it.

5.77. With regard to one offer to settle 39 Vietnamese on a northern Queensland property—on a share-farming basis—the Committee is particularly concerned that a request for continued payment of special benefit until an initial crop was harvested was rejected by an unsympathetic Department of Social Security on the grounds that it constituted a request for financial backing for a business venture—rather than viewing it as a possible means of assisting persons who are otherwise likely to endure hardship for many years to come. The Committee is aware of a number of factors which the Department took into account in reaching this conclusion—including the absence of a formal agreement setting out the precise terms of the share-farming arrangements, the absence of a cash flow budget for the project, and the general vagueness of the offer. Nevertheless in view of the obvious attractiveness of the offer, the Committee sees these reasons as insufficient justification for not entering into direct negotiations with the company on behalf of the refugees with a view to clarifying the matters of concern.

5.78. The Committee notes that the seemingly negative stand taken in this Queensland instance was in sharp contrast to the innovative 'cultural communicator' scheme which was established in New South Wales as a result of joint effort by officers of the Commonwealth Employment

²⁰ e.g. the Department of Social Security stressed to the Committee that 'many offers of employment in rural areas, while usually well intentioned and aiming at the well-being of the Vietnamese often fall far short of meeting the basic necessities required if these people are to settle successfully in Australia. Some offers smacked of exploitation and care was taken to counsel the refugees on the possible implications of offers considered not to be in the best interest of the refugees. Consideration was also given to the high degree of isolation of some areas offered where there was an absence of other Vietnamese for support and a shortage of basic facilities which are essential if the Vietnamese are to become familiar with the Australian way of life.' (Similar comments were made by the Commonwealth Employment Service.)

²¹ In the Department of Social Security's letter dated 8 July 1976, we were informed that 'Another family which moved to Gatton with the assistance of the Catholic Immigration Authorities and the Gatton Apex Club appears to be settling satisfactorily'. We were *subsequently* advised in the reply from the Department of Employment and Industrial Relations/Commonwealth Employment Service dated 29 July 1976 that with regard to the Gatton Apex Club offer, 'Suitable accommodation was not available for persons accepting this offer and the work was of a seasonal nature only. The offer was considered to be unsuitable for these reasons.'

Service, social workers from the Department of Social Security and the management of Lysaght Brothers & Co. Pty Ltd. This project involved the concepts of group employment and housing for 11 Laotian refugees and the training of one of their members as a cultural communicator. Although benefits would obviously flow to the company, the scheme was not shelved on the basis that it constituted government backing for a business venture. Indeed, it was seen as an opportunity to exploit the extended pattern of living, which is characteristic of Indochinese refugees, and thereby promote group cohesion and identity as a means of obtaining stability in employment.²²

*Correction of
birthdates and other
personal details
provided by the
refugees*

5.79. The Senate Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee is aware of a number of refugees who have incorrect birthdates and other personal information recorded on what, in many cases, constitutes their sole document of identity, viz. an 'Authority to travel to Australia'. Seven such documents (held by Vietnamese refugees formerly at East Hills Hostel) were forwarded to the Sydney Office of the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs for correction during mid-February 1976. They were returned to the hostel welfare officer unaltered and without explanation early in June 1976. Further approaches to the Department resulted in their return to the Sydney Office. On 14 July 1976 they were again returned to the hostel unaltered. In the case of the refugees who were brought to Wacol Hostel, the Committee understands that 40 or more mainly young Vietnamese males also have incorrect information recorded on their documents. Needless to say, we envisage serious problems arising in future years when claims are made by these persons for pensions and other social security entitlements.

5.80. The Committee notes that for the cases lodged to date in which changes have been sought by the refugees, the Department has been unable to accede to their requests due to the lack of acceptable supporting evidence or other reasons to justify the amendments. Indeed we were informed by the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs that 'in considering cases of this nature the Department has a responsibility to the Australian community as a whole. Its approach, therefore, must be consistent irrespective of the nationality or status of the persons concerned. In the absence of acceptable supporting evidence it has no option but to decline such requests for change.' Furthermore:

all the Vietnamese refugees referred to were counselled, when interviewed in connection with their applications for migration to Australia, that they should make truthful statements and give correct information of the personal details of themselves and members of their families.

Each family was then seen again individually. Their authorities to travel to Australia, applications for registration as aliens and incoming passenger cards were handed to them to read and to declare that the information recorded was correct. They were informed that once they signed those documents, they would henceforth be known in Australia by the names and the

²² Details of the 'cultural communicator' scheme are set out in Appendix 2, p. 119.

dates of birth given and that they would not be able to change this information later in Australia.

It was impressed upon them that if the information in those documents was false there could be problems in Australia in regard to social security benefits and other aspects of living here.

The information so recorded now forms part of the Aliens Register and the passenger movement record maintained by the Department. Persons who gave false or inaccurate information, e.g. regarding their dates of birth, may have created problems for themselves. In the light of the careful counsel given to them in group sessions and at interview, official records could not be changed without substantially valid reasons or corroborative evidence of such changes.

5.81. In the Committee's view this is unsatisfactory and there is clearly a need for the declaration of a general amnesty to facilitate the once-for-all tidying up of such problems. We have quoted the departmental position in detail as we believe it is indicative of its attitudes and reasoning. It appears that the refugees are to suffer because of the rule-bound, conservative and inflexible approach of administrators/bureaucrats who are trapped within and by their own precedents and institutions. No consideration has been given to the individuals concerned or their motives in giving false information which we suspect to be extremely complex. The Department overlooks the absolute impossibility of many of the Vietnamese being able to provide documentary evidence in support of their claims. In effect the Department appears to take the stand that correction of this information is too difficult a task and one which would create a new precedent thus encouraging persons of other nationalities to seek similar consideration. We believe that this illustration provides concrete evidence of the deep-seated attitude held by the Department that everybody should be treated as equal rather than being given equal opportunities and access to entitlements. We are further concerned that the Department of Social Security—which has responsibility for attending to the welfare problems of the refugees, as well as paying them the benefits in question—believes that the matter of the correction of this information is one for consideration only by the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs.

*Family reunions
and reunification
policy*

5.82. The Committee believes that family reunions should be pursued as a matter of high priority for those Vietnamese refugees who were admitted to Australia *as special cases* during 1975. This should be done both on grounds of humanity towards the Vietnamese who were separated from their kin and because, in the long term, the family is likely to prove the best safeguard against emotional distress and economic hardship.

5.83. From the information available to the Committee, it is clear that such an approach has not generally been adopted in the case of the 1975 intake of Vietnamese refugees. Of the 201 Vietnamese who arrived at East Hills Hostel on 20 June 1975, applications were lodged by telephone on 26 January 1976 (and 9 and 10 February by mail) on behalf of eight sponsors nominating 35 persons for entry to Australia. Five of these cases

totalling 15 persons have been successful as of 20 August 1976.²³ Of the 323 refugees who arrived in August 1975, 18 sponsors lodged applications in January 1976 (followed by perhaps a dozen more) nominating relatives for entry into Australia; one of these applications has been successful.

5.84. On 21 January 1976 a press announcement by the Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs indicated that Australia intended to offer sanctuary to a further 800 Indochinese refugees. The Minister's statement at the time indicated that those to be considered would be refugees *who had already applied* (emphasis added) to Australian Embassies or who had in some other way indicated through official channels including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees that Australia was their choice for a new home. The statement indicated further that :

Preference will be given to refugees closely related to people already living in Australia. The priority would be to recruit spouses and dependent children with their families to Australia. Then we will consider parents, fiancés and fiancées, non-dependent children, brothers and sisters, and other refugees who have special relationships with Australia.

5.85. The Committee is concerned that although the intention of the statement was reasonably clear, it aroused unnecessary expectations among the Vietnamese in Australia. The evidence suggests that it was misinterpreted by Vietnamese and Australians alike. The 18 nominations for sponsorships which were lodged by the Vietnamese at Wacol Hostel appeared to be a case in question—four were completed on 23 January, nine on 27 January and five on 28 January. All were lodged with the Brisbane Office of the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs shortly after 28 January 1976 apparently in response to this press statement. We suspect further that the visit to Westbridge Hostel of an official from the Sponsorship Section of the Department of Social Security in Sydney—which was made at the request of the Cambodian, Laotian and Vietnamese refugees who arrived there during March 1976—resulted partly from emphasis which was given to family reunifications in this press statement. We suspect also that the counselling given to this group prior to their departure from Bangkok—concerning nomination procedures for immediate relatives and others who might qualify for entry into Australia under normal immigration occupational criteria—added to their expectations and resulted in 60 heads of families making formal applications nominating a total of 487 family members for entry to Australia. To date no reunifications have occurred and a number of nominees have been informed that their applications had not been accepted as they failed to meet the existing family reunion criteria or employment categories.²⁴

²³ These reunification cases comprised the following categories of persons—June arrivals: a wife; a nephew. July arrivals: a brother and his two children; the fiancé of an eldest daughter. August arrivals: a wife and her seven children and a sister.

²⁴ As of 13 April 1976, family reunion criteria included spouses, minor dependent children and aged or dependent parents of persons already living permanently in Australia. The employment criteria included certain professional and sub-professional workers, craftsmen, particularly in the metal and electrical fields, and some others (not specified) with special skills in short supply.

5.86. Because the Vietnamese family is an extended group embracing a very large number of individuals, the Vietnamese aspirations are likely to appear totally unrealistic to Australians (an illustration of which is provided from the above figures). This is not a good reason, however, for our failing to discriminate between the more urgent and less urgent cases. It is also suggested that the present guidelines for the selection of migrants are inappropriate as a basis on which to assess the position and claims of refugees. At the time of preparing our report, the Committee was unaware of any criteria which would allow for the reunification of additional members of the refugees' families, other than the normal restricted migrant entry criteria, viz. spouses, minor dependent children, aged parents and specified occupational categories.

*Communication
with the refugees*

5.87. The problems which have been experienced in dealing with the needs of the 1975-76 refugee intakes, indicate clearly the requirement for the production of documents and information sheets (of concern to the refugees) in Vietnamese and the use of the refugees' language in individual communications to them. Without this effort on our part, further confusion, misinterpretation and lack of comprehension will occur as English meanings are transformed during translation and subsequently modified in the process of being conveyed by word of mouth from one Vietnamese refugee to another.

5.88. It is clear to the Committee that in most instances the contacts which the Vietnamese have made with other people, whether government officials, employers, voluntary workers or teachers, etc., have occurred to a considerable degree in a context of mutual misconception and ignorance. We are concerned about the effects which this lack of comprehension—particularly on the part of the Vietnamese—may be having on refugees themselves, viz. of encouraging them to become passive, uncomprehending participants in situations where other people take the responsibility for their well-being and make decisions for them. This is a particularly insidious and self-reinforcing situation in that we believe there are many people working with refugees and migrants (particularly within government departments) who now take for granted the fact that there is always a lack of communication and accept this as the normal situation.

5.89. Ironically, the unquestioning compliance of the Vietnamese is often an advantage for officials to get things done in terms of their own jobs—such as paying social service benefits or finding employment.

5.90. In Dr Martin's words:

Since there are virtually no bilinguals in the hostel groups, nor more than one or two among the officials and other Australians involved with the settlement of the Vietnamese, verbal communication takes place through interpreters or by means of signs, gesture and an extremely limited use of language. Of the official interpreters employed by government departments, very few have been trained for the job, some are untrained as interpreters but competent, and some have had no training and possess a poor command of English. Australians have not always been sensitive to the role of interpreters in selecting

what is communicated, to the power which interpreters can wield or to the fact that the interpreters used have not in all cases been accepted and trusted by the Vietnamese.²⁵

5.91. The use of the Vietnamese language in both oral and written communications is of fundamental importance, in the Committee's view, if we are to give practical application to the basic principle that refugees and migrants should be assured of full access to the statutory services and forms of support or assistance to which they are entitled.

5.92. Whilst practical assistance has been given to them in this regard in the protected environment of the hostel, we are concerned that serious problems will arise as refugees move out into the community—particularly in the absence of visible and easily accessible source of information and liaison, to assist both the Vietnamese and also officials and others in contact with them during this transition stage of the next year or so.

*Post-hostel
follow-up work with
the refugees*

5.93. The Committee agrees with Dr Martin's conclusions concerning the need to appoint social workers, assisted where necessary by trained interpreters, to provide continuing assistance to the Vietnamese with welfare needs and problems, during the early stages of their settlement in the community. By implication persons appointed to fulfil these functions ideally would have to be bilingual. In Dr Martin's assessment, the period during which the Vietnamese would need special help, over and above the regular community welfare services, would be at least two years from the time of their arrival.

5.94. The Committee believes strongly that such social workers should constitute the major point of contact for the refugees once they have left the hostel and should provide them with the means of access to services and benefits to which they are entitled. Insofar as the evidence suggests that the existence of the Telephone Interpreter Service is unknown to most Vietnamese and they rarely use it, the existing extremely limited practice of making follow-up visits to the refugees (or arranging for grant-in-aid social workers from voluntary organisations to make these visits) must be extended, rather than relying upon the Vietnamese to initiate contact in times of need.

5.95. Insofar as refugees can be encouraged to make use of the Telephone Interpreter Service we welcome the announcement made in August 1976 concerning the installation of dual telephones within offices of the Department of Social Security which will enable staff to dial immediately to the interpreter service and hold a three-way conversation with the refugee. While we regard this development of the Telephone Interpreter Service as most valuable, we do not see it as a replacement for personal social worker contact with the refugees.

²⁵ *The Vietnamese Study* Appendix 4, p. 150.

Information provided to the Vietnamese refugees by the Australian Selection team in Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia

5.96. Although we have made reference previously to the assurances given to the Vietnamese prior to their embarkation to Australia, the Committee wishes to make a number of additional comments about the handwritten document which was provided to the refugees in Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia.²⁶ At the outset we wish to record our observations concerning the numerous generalisations which were made in the document together with the fact that, whilst on the one hand it avoided giving essential information, on the other hand it provided assurances which could not possibly be fulfilled. Much of this information was clearly misleading to the Vietnamese who either misunderstood or over-optimistically interpreted its assurances concerning the assistance they would receive with accommodation, employment, job-retraining, education and the payment of unemployment benefits.

5.97. The following extracts from a translation of the document indicate how readily a misleading picture might have been conveyed:

There is no need to be concerned about finance for your family, because you have yet to start work, for you will receive free board and lodging.

After you have been here one week, you will receive a small amount of 'pocket money' in addition to free board and lodging.

Employees of the employment service will help you find work, free of charge. If you wish to study English, this can be arranged also free of charge for you.

A number of people have the opportunity of retraining in a new field of work if they want to.

If you are unemployed for any period of time, you need to put your name with the Commonwealth Employment Bureau, and they will make every effort to find suitable work, if you are skilled in a particular field. During the time you are out of work, you will receive an allowance of \$A36 each week for single people and \$A60 for a family. Each child in the family will receive \$A7 per week.

If suitable work in your field cannot be found, the government has a training scheme for learning a new trade, and during the time you are training you will receive an allowance for you and your family.

The Commonwealth Employment Bureau will provide a special way for helping young people find work, and that means will include vocational guidance, to assist young people find suitable work.

To become a professional tradesman, there is an apprenticeship scheme, usually of 5-years duration. During that time the apprentice receives a proportion of a tradesman's wage, and that proportion increases each year.

Most diplomas issued outside Australia are not usually recognised straight away here. This is very important for those who are doctors and dentists or other professional people and for those people who have been trained in a vocation, e.g. plumbers and electricians. But the government will do all it can to help so that you can follow a profession and/or a vocation suitable to your capabilities and experience.

5.98. The resulting feelings of disillusionment and of having been let down manifested themselves clearly in the petition which the Vietnamese refugees at Wacol Hostel provided to the Committee during its visit on 7 May 1976, having attempted unsuccessfully to bring it to the attention of the Federal Ministers for Immigration, Social Welfare, Education, Health

²⁶ Refer to Appendix 1, p. 103.

and Labour.²⁷ It is ironic that the Vietnamese' ignorance as to the proper method of lodging a petition together, perhaps, with their preference to use a middle-man to achieve their ends, prevented the matters which they wished to raise from being given the attention which they deserved. On inquiring about the petition the Committee was informed by the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs that, 'An English translation of a petition said to have been lodged by Vietnamese refugees at Wacol Hostel, Brisbane, and dated 5 October 1975, was forwarded by Mr Manfred Cross, M.P., to the Acting Senior Assistant Director (Immigration) in Brisbane on 27 October 1975'. As the copy of the petition received by the Department was not addressed to any person or authority,²⁸ a copy was forwarded to the Department of Social Security which seemed to be the Department most directly concerned with the matters covered in it, and it is understood that the Director of that Department in Queensland replied to Mr Cross on 19 November 1975 assuring him that 'the points raised in the document submitted by you will be carefully considered'. Copies of the petition were subsequently dispatched by the Brisbane Office of the Department of Social Security (on 2 December 1975) to the Brisbane Offices of the Department of Labor and Immigration, the Department of Education, and to the Hostel Manager at Wacol for their information and/or possible action. To the Committee's knowledge, little if anything of a practical nature eventuated from the refugees' attempts to obtain assistance.

The Committee has referred in detail to this matter as we believe it is a concrete illustration of the way in which the disadvantages experienced by the socio-economically under-privileged are often compounded because of their inability to gain access to the very forms of assistance which are available to help alleviate their particular problems.

5.99. Finally, and reverting once again to the information provided to the refugees in Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia, we note that although the matters referred to in the document are of considerable concern to a number of departments and government agencies, none appears to have been consulted by the then Department of Labor and Immigration concerning its preparation. In fact, the Department of Employment and Industrial Relations was not aware of the existence of the document until 8 July 1976 when the Committee drew the Department's attention to it in seeking further information. Given the refugees' basic concern to find a permanent place of refuge, the Committee believes that the provision of advance information in such general terms prior to the refugees' embarkation was both unnecessary and undesirable. By comparison, however, intending migrants in more normal circumstances would require such information (and in greater detail) before reaching their decision on migration.

²⁷ The petition is reproduced at Appendix 3, p. 127 together with an English translation which was prepared for the Committee.

²⁸ The petition is reproduced at p. 137 in the form in which it was received by the Brisbane Office of the then Department of Labor and Immigration.

*Identifying and
recognising the
special
circumstances of
refugees*

5.100. In relation to the Vietnamese refugees, these events demonstrate the essential requirement for the co-ordination of one department's selection activities with other departments' post-arrival activities. Such co-ordination was absent in the case of the 1975 intake of Vietnamese refugees and, to a lesser extent, in the case of the 1976 Indochinese refugees.

5.101. Throughout the inquiry the Committee has been made increasingly aware of the importance of identifying the special needs of the refugees. We are aware that the Vietnamese (and other) refugees experience many problems in common with normal migrants but believe that to the detriment of the Vietnamese, too much emphasis has been placed by departments on these similarities and insufficient emphasis given to the unique problems which they face. The following paragraphs (which have been drawn from the report at Appendix 4), refer briefly to those aspects of the situation of Vietnamese refugees in Australia which are the direct result of their being refugees and not normal migrants.

5.102. In the present circumstances the Vietnamese cannot return home, nor can they (with rare exceptions) go to any other country. As the current returnee rate of approximately 25 per cent for all migrants shows, these are highly realistic options for many migrants, and their very existence can take much of the tension out of the frustrations and disappointments which are often experienced in the early years of settlement. For the Vietnamese, as for other refugees, the realisation that they cannot go home confirms the sense that they have lost control of their own destiny.

5.103. Secondly, the Vietnamese arrived here after a period of physical hardship, emotional distress and extreme anxiety about the future. They did not 'choose' to come in any true sense of the word and often did not realise the finality of the decision they had made when they accepted the offer to resettle in this country. At the time of this decision they were in no state to profit from such efforts as were made to inform them about the conditions they would encounter and they arrived encumbered with misinformation and bewildered by conflicting rumours and unanswered questions.

5.104. Thirdly, almost all these refugees were separated from close relatives during flight from Vietnam, and families still feel themselves to be incomplete and deprived because some members are in Vietnam or in the United States or Canada or because their whereabouts are unknown. Anxiety over the welfare of relatives and loneliness at being apart from kin are the feelings that continue to dominate the emotional life of a considerable number of these refugees and make them apathetic about the future.

5.105. Fourthly, the great majority of Vietnamese arrived in Australia without money, clothes or personal belongings. Except for a few families

who succeeded in bringing jewellery or other assets with them, the Vietnamese are attempting to begin 'from scratch' in establishing themselves economically. The enormity of what this involves can only be appreciated when one recalls that even Australian families, with the benefit of housing and other capital goods accumulated over the years, often find it difficult to make ends meet in the present inflationary economic situation.

5.106. Fifthly, the Committee draws attention to the fact that the Vietnamese refugees were admitted to Australia during 1975 as *special cases*, i.e. the normal migrant selection criteria relating to health, character, occupation/economic viability and settlement prospects were not applied; instead, the refugees were admitted on the basis of their inability to obtain offers of resettlement from any other country. Since their arrival—and until the Committee commenced its probing into the practical matters of their settlement—they have received little or no *special assistance* with their settlement and have been regarded as normal migrants. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that there has been both a lack of departmental concern for the Vietnamese now that they are here in Australia, and a lack of overall co-ordination of departmental effort with the efforts of others who are attending to their welfare.

The need to discriminate positively in favour of 'hard-core' refugees and other disadvantaged persons

5.107. This lack of positive discrimination in favour of the refugees is irrefutable evidence of the complete lack of policy for the acceptance of people into Australia as *refugees* rather than as normal migrants. Just as the admission of refugees for reasons of humanity involves relaxing the normal selection criteria, so also do our continuing responsibilities to these refugees entail some modification of normal settlement practices.

5.108. The Committee notes, however, that whilst intake criteria have been varied for refugees in the past, the settlement criteria are scarcely varied at all. Clearly there is a need to discriminate positively in favour of 'hard-core' refugees such as the Vietnamese and Timorese and other disadvantaged persons.

5.109. Finally, the Committee quotes from the report by Dr Martin that:

... justification for the action proposed is related to the general question of the evolution of social policy. Major policy changes are commonly stimulated by specific attempts to resolve specific, local problems. At the frontiers, small-scale innovations stretch the boundaries of accepted views and action to the limit (and sometimes beyond). These efforts may not be seen by anyone as experiments, but they nevertheless demonstrate new possibilities, both of *perceiving* issues and of *doing* something about them. The development of one of our major national policies concerning migrants, the Child Migrant Education Program, provides an example. After a number of abortive and isolated endeavours in all States during the fifties and sixties, several Victorian schools began in the mid-sixties seriously developing new approaches, which demonstrated both the needs of migrant children and ways of tackling those needs, and this experience became the major influence in determining the scope and thrust of the Commonwealth program inaugurated in 1970.

Change does not and cannot occur evenly, and for the community as a whole to benefit from more humane migrant settlement policies, established

practices have to be re-thought and a range of ways of responding to migrant needs have to be tried and demonstrated with particular groups in particular situations. To a modest degree, the Vietnamese might appropriately be thought of as catalysts of change in settlement policies, just as their being brought to this country in the first place broke new ground in terms of intake policies. Since it so happens that there has been a more systematic attempt to observe and understand the Vietnamese since they came to Australia than has been the case with any previous migrants or refugees, we stand to learn more than is normally possible about the impact of our settlement policies on the group itself and ultimately, of course, on the larger community.³⁹

5.110. Two additional obstacles which are shared with other migrants, but which are significant in the Committee's view because of their degree of severity are:

- the Vietnamese' cultural background and their almost alien value system compared with that of European migrants; and
- the fact that the small numbers of the refugees admitted to Australia—together with their wide diversity in their lack of common religion, ethnic background, place or origin, or education, etc.,³⁰ provide little opportunity for the development of viable ethnic associations which are characteristic of the other migrant groups in Australia and which, in their case, generate a considerable degree of solidarity, mutual self-help and formal group structures.

*The significance of
Vietnamese culture,
tradition and
identity*

5.111. During the course of the inquiry, a considerable body of information was received concerning the need to consider the cultural background of the Vietnamese, their thought pattern, value system, and the code of ethics which governs their interpersonal relationships if we are to understand their behaviour in Australian conditions.

5.112. Appreciation of these matters would have added enormously to an increased awareness of the problem of communication, the Vietnamese' use of middle-men to resolve issues, the priority which they attach to the reunification of families and their desire to be fitted into this new society with self-respect and dignity. With regard to the latter point, we conclude in the context of their cultural heritage that much more is at stake in their being fitted appropriately into a vocation which is suited to their station, background and training, than is comprehended by the average Westerner.

³⁹ *The Vietnamese Study* Appendix 4, p. 153.

³⁰ The Committee notes from the information obtained by Dr Martin that the refugees from Vietnam as a group are quite unrepresentative of the population and society of Vietnam. Migrant populations rarely constitute a cross-section of the community they come from, but in the case of refugees selected on humanitarian grounds the unrepresentativeness is particularly marked. The Vietnamese have a high proportion of dependants, aged and young, and sick, and a correspondingly low proportion of workers. There is a wide gulf in terms of culture, experience and aspirations between the few well-educated and the many with little education. There is also a major division in terms of ethnic origin (about 70 per cent of family heads Vietnamese, 30 per cent Chinese), together with further overlapping divisions in terms of religion (about 60 per cent of individuals Catholic, 40 per cent Buddhists and ancestor worshippers), and place of origin (more than a third of family heads from the south, the rest equally divided between the north and centre).

5.113. There exists in the community, beside the Vietnamese themselves, a number of academics, public servants, army personnel and others who know a great deal about the Vietnamese and their country. Many of them could have been used as resource personnel in seminars or discussions bringing together groups of officials, people working in private agencies, churchmen, teachers and others. Regrettably, however, there was little evidence to suggest that the Government, its various departments or the voluntary organisations had considered the cultural background of the Vietnamese to be of sufficient significance to warrant the tapping of such sources of information. In New South Wales, some recognition was given to the importance of the Vietnamese background and an information paper on culture, family systems and customs was prepared and distributed by the Sydney Office of the Department of Social Security to those in contact with the refugees. More often than not, however, and particularly within Commonwealth Hostels Limited, we were perturbed to discover a long-standing attitude along the lines that 'as the refugees are now living in Australia they must fit in with our way of life—and the sooner they learn to do so, then the better for all concerned'.