

'Universities must play their part in tackling the plight of refugees, "the greatest moral issue of our time", speech by Professor Ian Jacobs, UNHCR World Refugee Day Breakfast event, 16 June 2017

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I am honoured to be here - to support UNHCR's World Refugee Day. I cannot claim any special expertise in the topic - my background is as a doctor and surgeon, a professor of research, a charity worker and a university leader. But I will offer some reflections as someone who like many of you feels passionately about what is one of the greatest moral issues of our time, and the role that we as citizens of developed nations can and have a responsibility to play, in tackling the plight of refugees.

Today, much of the planet is on the move. Many have no choice. Faced with wars and conflict, with discrimination and persecution, with extreme poverty and the impacts of environmental change, people are leaving their homes in search of security, looking to rebuild shattered lives. Many who set out never arrive. Those that do often find hostility and racism, further persecution and, increasingly, rejection.

With the ugly phrase 'Go back to where you came from...' ringing in their ears, many find themselves stranded in filthy, crowded camps, stateless, penniless, exposed to exploitation, to prostitution, even slavery; their children growing up around them in poverty, confusion and shame. To place a wall between who they are and who we are is to deny our own humanity.

Yet in the name of security, of social cohesion, of supposedly protecting national values, or simply because of xenophobia, the fear of strangers, the world - preoccupied with keeping people out - is creating more walls and barriers than ever before, a process that adds to, rather than reduces, fear and anxiety.

Fortunately there are some leaders who feel the moral obligation to act. Angela Merkel is an impressive example – in 2015 she described the refugees arriving in Germany as "people who are running for their lives" stating "It is our damned duty to help refugees. I am proud that we are giving a friendly welcome to refugees".

We must follow that example and find solutions. Universities must play their part. In the growing climate of political instability, and in the absence of substantive leadership in many nations, universities can emerge as not only institutions for learning and for research but also agencies for social justice and policy improvement and active, positive change.

THE CHALLENGE IS IMMENSE

In 2017, according to UNHCR, forced displacement has reached its highest level since records began. More than 65-million people are forcibly displaced worldwide, an extraordinary number; around one-third of those 21 million are refugees, while the rest are internally displaced or asylum-seekers. UNHCR states 1.2m refugees need to be resettled and that 34,000 people are displaced from their homes every day by conflict or persecution. In the face of these numbers there are only 225,000 resettlement spots available globally each year – only enough for just 1 weeks displaced people. The number resettlement spots will be even smaller next year as the USA under the Trump administration has cut it's quota which was increased to 110,000 by Obama to just 50,000.

All of these people badly need our help. Yet our systems for governing these crises, these human tragedies, have not kept pace. A study published last year by Oxfam¹ showed the world's five wealthiest countries - the United States, China, Japan, the United Kingdom and Germany, collectively making up half the global economy - are hosting fewer than five-percent of the world's refugees. The Refugee Council reports that from 2005-15, 140,000 refugees were resettled in Australia accounting for just 0.99% of the 14 million globally – so Australia ranked 26th overall and 46th relative to national GDP. By contrast, the five countries that have taken the most refugees - Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Pakistan and the Occupied Palestinian Territories - host a staggering 50 percent of the world's refugees, while making up less than 1.5 percent of the world's economy.

One would hope that it would be enough to appeal to people's humanity to achieve collective action – but that is clearly not enough. We also need to convincingly explain the benefits to nations and society of accepting refugees.

History provides examples. In 1945, in the aftermath of World War Two, an estimated 20-million displaced persons were roaming the European continent, desperate for food and basic shelter. Millions were resettled in many nations - Australia among them – and over the postwar decade a grave humanitarian crisis was averted. Europe rebuilt and largely prospered, and Australia and the United States and Canada and New Zealand and other nations who took the refugees

of Europe also prospered, not least because these newcomers who arrived with barely a suitcase also brought with them their survival skills and determination and energies and talents to 'make a go of it'. There is no doubt many in this room whose parents and relatives were amongst them, and whose lives are better for the experience. Australia is undoubtedly better for the experience. Now, half a century on, that cycle of taking in refugees for their benefit and for ours can, and should, be repeated.

This is not only a moral imperative, but one that to me makes sound economic sense.

There is ample evidence of the social and economic contributions made by refugees. A World Bank report² in 2015, looking at Turkey which hosts over two-million Syrian refugees, found that while their arrival had displaced some domestic workers, it also pushed up wages through increased demand for goods and services. Another report from the OECD³ showed that after initial impacts, the cost decreases rapidly as the labour-market integration of refugees improves.

In 2011, the Immigration Department published a report it had commissioned from Professor Graeme Hugo which tracked the contributions of first and second generation refugees in Australia since 1975. The study revealed that on average they had higher levels of education than the Australian-born population; greater entrepreneurial qualities (five of the eight billionaires in Australia in 2000 were of humanitarian settler background); and often higher levels of participation in both paid and volunteer work. In other words, they are some of Australia's most productive and successful people.

The International Monetary Fund in 2016 emphasized that refugee arrivals in Europe will be a source of long-term benefit in the region, addressing skills gaps, labour shortages and an ageing population. Sweden took more refugees per capita than any other country in Europe in recent years and had the biggest economic boom in five years.

So the widely-accepted view that refugees are a burden on the economy is at worst misinformed and at very least short-sighted; as they become part of the local community, refugees often forge ahead with their determination to succeed. Research from around the world shows that host communities typically benefit greatly from the skills and innovation that refugees bring. In some cases, new markets and supply chains are created, and greater economic gains ensue for everyone. Facilitating employment and educational opportunities for refugees helps them to re-establish their sense of dignity, normality and purpose.

Even with that evidence, there is still much concern - and hostility - to the idea of accepting more refugees.

Compassion and empathy are essential, but not enough. What the world needs, what the refugees need, is action - based not on political agendas (politics is too often what caused them to be refugees in the first place) or on 'alternative facts', but on knowledge and on expertise. Where will it come from? One part of the answer is, from universities.

SO WHAT CAN UNIVERSITIES DO?

Universities are of course institutions of higher education and research, but they are also beacons of freedom and tolerance, and openness to individuals no matter their national origin or religion. And increasingly, they need to be centres of action. At UNSW Sydney we are focused heavily on practical outcomes and we believe that a great university must be a servant of society and of the global community; a hallmark of that is playing a major role and an active role in transforming humanity for the better.

As one example the UNSW Institute for Global Development has set the goal over the next decade of improving the lives of one-million people - in the South Pacific, in Asia in Myanmar, in Africa in Uganda. We have over 250 projects in public health care, climate science, energy and water, sexual and reproductive health, maternal health, AIDS/HIV, and defence and security. One result will be to keep more people in their own homes, to improve their lives in their own lands.

Last year we launched our Forced Migration Research Network, to foster connections between researchers working across diverse disciplines and to partner with government, UNHCR, NGOs, settlement service providers and refugee community groups. The logic here is straightforward: there is not a 'refugee problem', but many problems that come together to create the 'refugee situation' - a multi-disciplinary, multi-sector approach will give us a much better understanding what drives refugees to take the actions they do, how they can be resettled in Australia, and raising awareness in creative ways.

We also have the informed analysis of the Andrew and Renata Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law, established in 2013 at UNSW as the world's first centre dedicated to bring a principled, human rights-based approach to refugee law and forced migration in Australia, the Asia-Pacific region, and influencing public policy debate and legislative reform.

And we have our ambitious program of UNSW Grand Challenges, taking on the big issues that are dominating the global agenda. Currently we are focusing on three: climate change,

migration and refugees, and inequality. On these interrelated issues, universities can and should play a greater role. Our resources can have massive impacts on the lives of refugees, whether in medicine or crisis management, in law or language teaching or even philosophy. Empathy, respect and the acceptance of others matters as much as more practical issues around resettlement, education and employment.

Action is also needed by government. One step would be to act on the call of my colleague at UNSW Professor Jane Macadam the Director of the Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law for Australia to respect its non-refoulment obligations – that is the fundamental principle of international law which forbids a country receiving asylum seekers from returning them to a country in which they would be in likely danger of persecution based on “race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion”.

I was surprised to read that Australia is the only country whose law explicitly excludes this from consideration in dealing with asylum seekers. Acceptance of international obligations would as Jane noted “flip our focus towards the responsibility to provide protection as part of a global cooperative effort rather than deflecting those in need.... Offshore processing could not continue and families would not be separated. Children’s best interests would be a primary consideration .. refugees would be welcomed in to Australian society quickly, resulting in greater cultural, economic and social benefits”. Wishful thinking perhaps – but the right humane approach for a country that aspires to respect human rights.

I am also enthused by the ethos and actions of Canada through it’s private refugee sponsorship scheme which has existed since 1978. The Canadian model allows community organisations, groups of concerned citizens or businesses to sponsor refugees. Private sponsorship places are *additional* to government-assisted places. This allows the government to scale its resettlement program, but maintain a baseline level of government places.

The scheme has been a great success with approximately half of Syrian refugees resettling having private sponsorship and more than 200,000 refugees have been resettled since 1978. Research shows that privately-sponsored refugees generally obtain better settlement outcomes than government-assisted refugees. There are some problems - for example, researchers have argued that private sponsorship groups are often unprepared for the scale of their responsibilities but there is no doubt about the success of this approach.

I was delighted to hear in the 2017-18 Budget announcement that Australia will include 1,000 refugee places in a scheme modelled on the Canadian programme. Under this newly established Community Support Programme that will come into effect on 1 July businesses,

families, and individuals in the community will be able to propose refugees and humanitarian entrants for resettlement in Australia.

This is alongside a welcome commitment to increase the Australian Refugee and Humanitarian Programme to provide 18,750 in 2018-2019 an increase from 13,750 places offered in previous years. The government states that *the Community Support Programme modelled on the Canadian scheme will provide a sustainable model of private sponsorship for refugees that minimises costs to governments and increases the chances of successful integration and settlement outcomes*. This is an encouraging initiative if it operates in addition to, not as a component of, Australia's existing refugee and humanitarian quota so that protection can be extended to more people in need.

So there are ways in which we can intervene in a positive way for all in our society. We must rise to our moral responsibility as members of the global community whilst also making the case for the benefits refugees bring through the skills they bring with them, the work they do filling gaps in the labour market, their entrepreneurial drive, their long term impact on economic growth and the cultural heritage they bring.

Today, I personally and on behalf of UNSW give the strongest backing to Australia for UNHCR's We stand together WithRefugees campaign - to send a clear message to all governments that they must act with solidarity and shared responsibility to ensure every refugee family has somewhere safe to live; that every refugee child gets an education; and that every refugee can work or learn new skills to make a positive contribution to their community. In presenting the petition of the WithRefugees campaign to the United Nations General Assembly in 2018, UNHCR will be representing the voices of citizens from around the world.

In this and many others ways we can set the example to others, to our communities and to the world. We all have a responsibility to act in the interest of society, of all societies - and of those in desperate need, most of all. That ultimately is what makes us human, and will bring benefit to all humanity.

Thank you.

Professor Ian Jacobs is the President and Vice-Chancellor of UNSW Sydney.