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# The Peter McMullin Centre on Statelessness

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## The Peter McMullin Centre on Statelessness

In 2018 the Melbourne Law School's Peter McMullin Centre on Statelessness will begin operation under the leadership of Professor Michelle Foster with the objective of undertaking research, teaching and engagement activities aimed at reducing statelessness and protecting the rights of stateless people.

Its location in the Asia-Pacific means that it will be based in a region where this issue is particularly salient. The Centre will increase the availability of high-quality data, information, and knowledge about the causes and ramifications of statelessness in our region through legal, qualitative and quantitative research on statelessness.

The Centre will be based at Melbourne Law School and will draw on inter-disciplinary expertise from all parts of the University of Melbourne.

The Peter McMullin Centre on Statelessness will fill a critical gap in academic research and engagement on the issue of statelessness and is currently the only university resident and supported institute of its type. It will work cooperatively across university disciplines and indeed universities but, going beyond that, it will also foster close ties with international and regional bodies working directly on the problem of statelessness.

The Centre is being established by a very generous philanthropic gift over 10 years from Peter and Ruth McMullin, and has strong support from the University of Melbourne, which will enable it to consolidate its activities and grow well into the foreseeable future.

The Centre will benefit from guidance and support from an Advisory Board which will include persons with broad practical experience working on statelessness problems. Erika Feller, former UNHCR Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, and current Vice-Chancellor's Fellow at the University of Melbourne, has been involved in the establishment of the Centre and will sit on the Advisory Board.

## The Importance of Finding Solutions to Statelessness

According to the United Nations, there are at least 10 million stateless people in the world.

The 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons establishes the legal definition of stateless persons as individuals who are not considered nationals under the operation of the laws of any country. Behind that legal definition, the reality of the conditions for stateless people can be one of extreme vulnerability. The lives of stateless people can often involve struggles with respect to aspects of everyday life that citizens take for granted. They may struggle to access: medical care, employment, education for their children, permission to travel, or even the right to marry. In some cases they face protracted periods in detention or more extreme forms of persecution by government forces.

There are many causes of statelessness, including some of the same forces that create refugee flows and push people out of their home country. Indeed, statelessness is one root cause of displacement in itself. Yet most stateless people have been living for generations in the same country but have never been recognised as citizens. Others have been citizens but lost that citizenship due to discriminatory laws that target people on the basis of their race, religion or ethnicity or which denies women the right to retain their nationality if they marry a foreigner or the possibility to pass on their nationality to their children. Sometimes, statelessness is caused simply by poorly drafted nationality laws or as a consequence of states breaking up. The 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness aims to prevent statelessness from arising yet the UNHCR estimates that a child is born into statelessness every ten minutes.

As there are multiple causes of statelessness, there will not be one simple solution to the problem. But with the problem only escalating, it is essential that focused attention be given to seeking solutions.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which is the UN organisation with the mandate to address statelessness, has the ambitious goal of solving the problem of statelessness by 2024. The Centre aims to support this important commitment by undertaking empirical, policy and scholarly work to ensure that political solutions are targeted, strategic and likely to be effective.

## Key Areas of Strategic Focus

The focus of the Centre will be to develop teaching, research and engagement projects with three major aims:

- To properly understand the scope, scale and reasons for statelessness in order to develop targeted and effective responses to it;
- To work towards reducing and, over time, eliminating statelessness; and
- Until statelessness is eliminated, working to protect the human rights of stateless people within the countries in which they reside.

As an Australian-based Centre, there will be a particular focus of work on Australia and the Asia-Pacific region but the Centre will also be engaged in global solutions to the problems of statelessness. Key projects in the first few years of the Centre will include the following:

- The Centre will establish a web-based database of quality, up-to-date information, legal analysis, research and data collection tools on statelessness in the Asia-Pacific.
- Education is a key strategic aim of the Centre as there is an urgent need to build capacity in both understanding and dealing with the complex dimensions of statelessness. The Centre will contribute to knowledge and education about statelessness by developing and delivering teaching and training in both university settings and in the wider community.
- The Centre will establish the groundwork for developing multi-institutional, multi-disciplinary projects that seek to address priority areas of research. The Centre's research work will initially focus on two key research themes. The first thematic area will be to develop, implement and support research projects to improve qualitative and quantitative data and analysis on stateless populations in the Asia-Pacific where there are known gaps. The second thematic area of the Centre's research will be to contribute to the development of legal frameworks in the region.

## How to Get Involved

The core Centre staff comprises the Director, two full-time research fellows and a Centre Administrator. The Centre will also establish a Scholar in Residence program and offer opportunities for PhD students. The Centre aims to facilitate a community for scholars, students and activists through workshops, conferences and other outreach activities.

If you are interested in learning more about the Centre, you can keep up to date with developments by sending an email to: [law-statelessness@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:law-statelessness@unimelb.edu.au)