

Jobs for Refugees and Migrants Project (Jobs Ramp)

Leading Australia Foundation Ltd trading as the Life and Career Centre,
Toowoomba, Queensland

This project also relates to:

Education

The Jobs for Refugees and Migrants Project (*Jobs Ramp*) is a three-year project to improve the employability of the refugee and culturally and linguistically diverse populations in Toowoomba, with a particular focus on the Sudanese community. The project assists clients in their journey towards seeking employment and further training through a focus on personalised support and empowerment.

The Life and Career Centre first became involved with culturally and linguistically diverse clients who were seeking employment in Toowoomba in 2004. The Centre was recognised as having the ability to provide a more personalised service to refugees by taking into account where a client comes from, their qualifications and their English literacy levels.

The challenges that refugees and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds encounter while seeking employment and training differ from those that other Australians face. Many refugees lack skills and work experience because of prolonged stays in refugee camps where they have had no opportunity to work.

Jobs Ramp addresses three significant key issues that affect these communities, namely:

- workplace literacy and numeracy
- a lack of knowledge of the Australian workplace environment and a lack of local work experience
- a lack of viable public or private transport networks to enable people to get to and from work.

Identifying a need and consulting the community

Recognising the increasing population of refugee and people from culturally and linguistically

diverse backgrounds, the Centre conducted a formal needs analysis with community members and researched employment rates in the region by obtaining data from the Queensland Department of Employment and Industrial Relations.

The Sudanese and the West African community leaders in Toowoomba were involved in the consultation stage and also in regular meetings to report progress and discuss issues that needed community involvement for resolution.

The community leaders hosted the first of a series of planned community consultations using interpreters. Two of the staff engaged for *Jobs Ramp* in 2006–07 were Sudanese trained interpreters and both were paid for their services. Community attendance was very low so the remaining planned meetings were abandoned. Instead the community leaders spoke to their communities informally and referred participants to the program informally.

Support agencies involved with settling culturally and linguistically diverse and refugee communities were also consulted. What emerged was a need for an individualised program for clients that would improve their outcomes.

Publicising the project

The Centre initially began producing flyers and getting in touch with media outlets as well as contacting the local African community radio station to publicise the project.

However, project coordinators soon found that the most successful publicity was by personal recommendation. Most people come to the Centre after hearing from friends about the assistance available. Many newly arrived Sudanese refugees now see the services provided by the Life and Career Centre as a continuation of the settlement assistance provided when they arrived in Toowoomba. Leading Australia Foundation CEO, Garry Hansford, said:

A lot of new clients just arrive at the Centre at the end of their six month assisted settlement period, often even earlier, keen to access assistance that will improve their employability.

The project

Five staff were employed to run the program which in 2006–07 had a budget of \$459 000. Funding was provided by the Queensland Government Department of Employment and Industrial Relations under the *Skilling Queenslanders for Work Initiative*. Funding is only year-to-year, with no guarantee of recurrent support.

The focus of work with the Sudanese community over the three years of the project was to deliver the Queensland Government-funded *Breaking the Unemployment Cycle* and *Skilling Queenslanders for Work* programs in the area of vocational training and work preparation.

In order to run *Jobs Ramp*, the Life and Career Centre worked in partnership with the Sudanese Community Association of the Darling Downs, the Southern Queensland Institute of TAFE, HB Training, Challenge Learning Institute, Toowoomba Education Centre, the Training and Employment subcommittee of the Refugee and Migrant Settlement Support Interagency, and the then Toowoomba City Council (now part of the Toowoomba Regional Council).

The project covers the areas of workplace language literacy, numeracy and career planning assessment; intensive workplace re-entry training; a work experience program; and a driving lessons program.

Workplace language literacy, numeracy and career planning assessment:

Workplace literacy and numeracy is a key issue affecting refugees' employment prospects. It is an obstacle not only for those seeking regular ongoing employment, but also for those wanting casual employment. Some level of literacy and numeracy is usually needed in the workplace. English literacy is also a vital skill needed to read job advertisements and apply for work.

Lack of literacy and numeracy skills has meant that many Sudanese-born people in Toowoomba are only able to access low paid seasonal jobs, such as in agriculture. Nevertheless, many Sudanese jobseekers seek casual employment

immediately, and therefore do not attend and benefit from their *Adult Migrant English Program* classes and other vocational training.

Each *Jobs Ramp* client was given an initial assessment to identify any gaps in skills and training. The assessment allows a personalised program to be developed for each individual. Clients are entitled to 150 hours of language, literacy and numeracy training related to the workplace with a special focus on improving computer skills using a content-based learning approach.

Embedding language, literacy and numeracy teaching into a computer training course achieved better outcomes because the computers give participants a context for learning English that is relevant and useful to them. Many commented that being able to complete online forms, send and receive emails, and even prepare letters with graphics and photos to mail back to relatives was a highlight of the course.

Intensive workplace re-entry training:

The project addresses cultural barriers to employment. Participants are educated about the Australian work environment and what employers expect. They are given access to intensive workplace re-entry training, such as job search coaching and the job application service. They can also access pre-vocational training. Pre-vocational courses are conducted in construction, aged care and childcare.

Over the 2006–07 financial year, 112 refugee and culturally and linguistically diverse clients were assisted with job searching, job search coaching and further assistance with employment applications.

Work experience program:

Toowoomba City Council and not-for-profit organisations hosted a work experience program from February to June 2007. The Queensland Government's *Community Jobs Plan Work Placement Program* offered placements to 12 individuals.

Each placement was full time for 16 weeks. The Toowoomba City Council took eight of the 12 refugees, and provided work experience in eight council departments. The Life and Career Centre took two participants, and the Toowoomba Education Centre and Concordia Lutheran College placed the other two.

Sudanese refugees, 11 males and one female, filled all 12 places. All work experience was predominately in office administration with some other job-specific duties as required by the placement.

Supervisors received cross-cultural training as a part of working with the refugees. Council supervisors were trained in cross-cultural issues as a part of the Council's staff development program. Toowoomba Education Centre and Concordia were assisted with cross-cultural awareness training, and the Life and Career Centre also conducted a specific training session for all designated supervisors before the placements started.

Of the 12 participants completing work placements, seven are now employed and three have enrolled for full-time study at university.

Driving lessons program:

Transport services in Toowoomba are very unreliable and this especially affects shift workers trying to get to and from work at unusual hours. A driving training program was established to attempt to overcome this key barrier to employment.

Driving lessons and the licence test are funded as part of the program. The project has the capacity to allow for 50 students. Over the two years of the project 88 participants were assisted. Sixty-one participants have obtained their provisional licences to date, with more to come. This represents a 69 per cent success rate.

The program started with bilingual-assisted road rule classes before participants ever stepped into a vehicle. Bilingual-assisted off-road driver training at the local showground followed. Formal lessons were then run to deal with space orientation, use of a steering wheel and controls, reversing and parking.

A buddy system was established where two refugees shared a one-hour lesson, each driving for half the lesson and in the back seat for the other half. This allowed participants the opportunity to be in a car and learning for double the hours normally possible with the same funds. It also provided the opportunity for those with poorer English to be supported by someone with better English.

New driver training laws were introduced in Queensland on 1 July 2007. Learners are now required to log 100 hours of training behind the wheel with an eligible (licensed for two years) passenger before sitting for a test. This law works well for Australian-born young drivers who can rely on their parents or a relative to help them attain the required hours. However, most refugees do not have access to a vehicle and/or a family member or relative who is an eligible learner's passenger. Paying for 100 lessons would currently cost around \$4000. It is now, therefore, much more difficult and costly for refugees to attain a licence and the Queensland Government driver training funding is no longer available.

Achievements

Jobs Ramp worked with over 120 clients and has achieved excellent employment and training outcomes. Many of the refugee clients have recommended the project as they feel it has been a way to overcome barriers to gaining employment.

In 2004–05, the program assisted 60 refugee and culturally and linguistically diverse clients and achieved employment outcomes for 46 per cent.

In 2005–06, the Centre achieved employment or full-time study for 72.5 per cent of their refugee and culturally and linguistically diverse clients. During this second year of the program, 80 such clients were helped to find jobs.

In 2006–07, the program worked with 112 refugee and culturally and linguistically diverse clients, with employment or full-time study outcomes of 70.5 per cent.

The Life and Career Centre's dedication to this project encourages the Sudanese community to also stay committed for the long-term. Many participants set sustainable and realistic training and employment goals for themselves.

Clients are saying they feel more accepted and welcome in the region and therefore more empowered.

There is a general increase in positive outcomes for clients in employment or full-time study, particularly for refugee women in childcare and aged care studies.

Challenges

The Life and Career Centre has received funding for 2007–08 for a program that delivers the same intensive workplace re-entry training but to other target groups as well as refugees. To date, only 11 of the 102 have been filled by refugee participants. One of the challenges for the program is securing ongoing funding. Funding is needed for a project focusing exclusively on refugee and culturally and linguistically diverse job seekers, and in 2008-09 the state government funded a different organisation to do this.

Advertising specific elements of the project, such as computer courses, to the African community in Toowoomba was a complete failure, no doubt due to the low readership of newspapers among refugees with low English literacy levels. Informal word-of-mouth proved the best way to recruit and involve the community.

Student numbers in classes fluctuate due to their seasonal work commitments.

It was initially difficult to plan language and literacy support until staff were fully aware of how much support the refugee students actually needed.

Key factors in the project's success

A recurring issue throughout the project was that every group of people trained had different needs and experiences. It was important to maintain a flexible approach when working with people with a low level of English proficiency and adapt the program to each person. Having the necessary funding to be able to build in this flexibility was vital. Garry Hansford said:

What makes this program special is that we have the ability to customise a solution for every client.

Key messages and advice for setting up a similar project

The key messages identified as being integral to setting up a similar project include:

- secure long-term funding
- conduct research through community consultation and planning
- have the project fit the client by gaining an understanding of clients' needs and treating them as individuals.

Contact

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Profile > Aleu

Aleu is one of the 'Lost Boys of Sudan' who fled his homeland due to civil war in Southern Sudan. He left Sudan alone and he went to Ethiopia where he lived for several years before arriving in Kenya's Kakuma refugee camp.

Aleu spent his youth in refugee camps. He was so young when he was forced to flee Sudan to seek asylum in neighbouring countries that he does not remember the experience. He loves Australia because he has finally found peace.

When asked why he had joined the *Jobs Ramp* project, Aleu said that his dream was to study. He began studying computers and English at TAFE. He was very positive about the program because he had been consulted about his needs and given the assistance he had requested.

Aleu felt he could really start to enjoy life in Australia, as he was able to come with his dreams and aspirations and feel optimistic that they would be fulfilled.

During the project Aleu worked as a customer service and administration assistant for the Life and Career Centre. He has learnt information technology skills and English and has gained work experience.

Aleu left the Life and Career Centre in June 2007. After gaining his heavy rigid driving licence, Aleu found work with a courier company. He is completing tertiary entrance studies in preparation for enrolling in a theological college in 2009.

photo > Aleu, from Sudan



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