African refugees: improving employment outcomes through training and work placements

Ibrahim Diab, Victoria University & NCVER

Abstract

Refugees face various barriers in attaining employment. There are a number of models that aim to overcome these and facilitate processes of achieving employment through training and work placement. Many refugees undertake training courses and work placements but do not necessarily attain employment. What this research investigates is what is required to improve employment outcomes through work placements.

The research is based on a literature review of world ‘best’ practices in assisting refugees to attain employment. Additionally semi structured interviews conducted with training providers and employers provide data about improving employment outcomes through work placements.

The research findings indicate that optimal employment outcomes requires a number of structured supports including i) initial counselling, orientation and assessment of the client; ii) assigning a workplace buddy or mentor; and iii) advocacy placements with employers who have genuine prospects of employment at the end of the work placement an ethic of social responsibility.

This research has practical applications for training and employment organisations that work with refugees (and other disadvantaged groups). It provides a framework improves the prospects of their clients attaining employment.

Introduction

In late 2008 a pilot program called the Employment Pathway Project (EPP) was set up. This program was funded by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC). One of the aims of the project was to provide migrants and refugees a pathway to attaining work through training and work experience. Only those clients who had previously been enrolled in an Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) were eligible to participate in the program. The AMEP is a program that is also funded by DIAC and it entitles eligible migrants to 510 hours of free English tuition to help them settle successfully in Australia. Refugees are able to access a further 100 or 400 tuition hours depending on their age, pre-migration experiences or limited schooling (DIAC, 2012).

The EPP model was based on 60 hours of classroom teaching delivered by a qualified English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher and 60 hours of practical warehouse training which took place in a simulated warehouse at the Victoria University Industry Skills Training site in Werribee, Victoria delivered by qualified warehouse trainers. It also included 60 hours of work experience with a warehouse employer and 20 hours of post placement support which included resume writing, job searching and Job Network Provider support to assist students in finding jobs and further training.

The EPP warehouse course targeted students whose English proficiency was rated around 1 in the four macro skills of Speaking, Listening, Reading and Writing. Such students were considered to have ‘basic transactional proficiency’ that is, an ability to satisfy own basic
everyday transactional needs. English proficiency levels are determined based on the International Second Language Proficiency Ratings (ISLPR) scale developed by Wylie and Ingram (2010). The ISLPR scale ranges from 0 to 5. A 0 rating describes language behaviour as ‘unable to communicate in the language’ and 5 as ‘native like proficiency’.

Warehousing was regarded by the EPP a growth industry that was capable of providing employment to people with basic English skills. Many of the students who participated in the EPP course were refugees from the Horn of Africa (HoA). Though there were successes (3 students with ISLPRs of 2 and above gained employment from their host employer) no student with ISLPR of 1 was able to attain work as a result of undertaking this course.

In 2011 NCVER funded an investigation into the barriers encountered and the facilitators required by Horn of African refugees with low literacy in attaining employment through training and work placements. This paper presents some of the findings of this NCVER funded research.

**Background**

Every year Australia accepts around 13 000 refugees and they have on average unemployment rates three times higher than the average Australian. Migrants with limited English are around three times more likely to be excluded from employment than the population average (Ziguras, 2006 cited in Barraket, 2007). Refugees are particularly at risk with 43% of working-age refugees remaining unemployed 18 months after arrival in Australia (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2006, cited in Barraket, 2007).

Where is the Horn of Africa?
The Horn of Africa (HoA) is geographically located in the north east of Africa and encompasses Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia and though technically not part of the region Sudan and South Sudan. South Sudan was formerly part of Sudan before it gained independence in July 2011. Sudan and South Sudan has also been included for the purpose of this research paper as they border this region and many of the issues that face the Sudanese are similar to the Horn of Africa communities (ECCV, 2007). The term Sudan also refers to South Sudan for the purpose of this research paper as much of the literature and statistics quoted were published before South Sudan’s independence.

**Horn of Africa Settlement in Australia**

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006, (2011 statistics will become available in June 2012) 30,620 HoA born people resided in Australia. Unemployment rates for the HoA community ranges between 14 – 30% (see table 1 below). This compares to about 5% for Australian born. They also have significantly lower formal education levels. Depending on the country of birth, it ranges between 18%-38% compared to 8% for Australian born.

Further, statistics produced by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs Settlement Database (cited in Ethnic Communities’ Council of Victoria 2007), 22.4% of HoA refugees have 6 years or less of education and about half of those 3 years or less. High unemployment rates and low education levels are two indicators of disadvantage that make The HoA Communities amongst the most disadvantaged communities in Victoria (ECCV, 2007).
Table 1 Horn of Africa Communities in Australia Unemployment and Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Birthplace</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Unemployment rates 15 years and over (%)</th>
<th>No qualifications 15 years and over (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sudan</td>
<td>19 050</td>
<td>28.5</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somalia</td>
<td>4 310</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethiopia</td>
<td>5 640</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eritrea</td>
<td>1 620</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Literature Review**

The literature review in this paper focuses on some aspects from the NCVER report (African refugees: improving employment outcomes through training and work placements, in press 2012). Two areas of investigation included in the paper included i) the barriers encountered by HoA refugees in attaining employment through a work placement programs; and ii) the practices and strategies used in Australia and in other countries in overcoming the barriers or facilitating HoA refugees in finding work.

*Why the focus on employment?*

Employment is a key factor that enables refugees to integrate into their host society. “Getting this job, I feel more settled in Australia. I think 90 per cent of the people I know are from [my work]. It’s more than a job. I cannot express... I just want to open my heart and show you what is inside, because it’s such a change” (Employee, Burkinabè, Community Organisation sited in Olliff, L, 2010).

Ager and Strang (2008) developed a conceptual framework defining core domains of integration. Integration is a difficult term to define but for the purpose of this study it is useful to use Ager and Strang’s (2008) definition of integration as being “in an integrated community, refugees should have the same rights as the people they are living amongst. This shared basis of entitlement was seen as an important prerequisite for refugees to live harmoniously with non refugees” (p176). Ager and Strang referred to these rights and entitlements as the *foundation to integration*. Ager and Strang identified the sectors of employment, housing, education and health as the four *markers and means to integration*. Employment has consistently been identified as a factor influencing many relevant issues, including promoting economic independence, planning for the future, meeting members of the host society, providing opportunity to develop language skills, restoring self-esteem and encouraging self-reliance (Africa Educational Trust 1998; Bloch 1999; Tomlinson and Egan 2002 cited in Ager and Strang, 2008). Employment is a key facilitator in the integration of new migrants and therefore has long been considered one of the key factors in the integration of refugees into society (Mesthenos and Ioannidi, 2002; Robinson, 1999 cited in Phillimore, 2009).

Most citizens within a country have the cultural knowledge to seek out and develop the bonds and links that assist in obtaining employment. Most refugees do not due to the absence of cultural specific knowledge that facilitates the social links and bonds that in turn provide the
social connections to the employment sector (Ager and Strang, 2008). Many programs that are instituted to assist refugees in attaining employment endeavour to overcome these barriers by providing cultural and language knowledge and to opening avenues for refugees to tap into the employment market. The facilitators commonly used to assist refugees into accessing employment can range from providing language and cultural tuition, mentoring, work experience, and familiarising refugees with networks that could assist them.

**Barriers**

For many African refugees there is a significant barrier before they have even started courses that aim to assist them into employment. The Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC 2010, p2-3) has identified increasing mistrust and cynicism by community members of training providers and programs. Community respondents in each of the various states reported feeling increasingly cynical of training providers and programs, particularly as those having completed a course or program had found themselves out of pocket and without a job.

Secondly, research shows that regardless of the host country, limited knowledge of the labour market was recognized as a significant barrier to employment (ECCV, 2007; European Commission, 2010 and Olliff, 2010). This knowledge (or skill) pertains to three different stages in the labour market integration process. The first two, searching for a job and applying for a job deal with entry or access to the labour market. The third one, performing on the job and knowledge of the working culture, deal with advancement or upwards mobility within the labour market. (European Commission, 2010). HoA refugees’ lack of knowledge of Australian workplace culture can make them feel isolated and excluded (RCOA, 2008).

A third factor, especially with regards African refugees has been the ‘visibility factor’. Colic-Peisker (2007) states that “the perception of discrimination depends on culturally determined sensitivities and also expectations. ... Our data indicates that discrimination in the labour market on the basis of racial and cultural visibility is quite common” (p17).

**Best Practice**

In reviewing best practice Phillimore’s (2010) research found “that a combination of well structured work experience combined with positive employer participation.....is necessary for maximising refugee’s chances of employment” (p215). Such research indicates that an integrated approach is the most favourable in increasing employment outcomes for HoA refugees. Research (Olliff 2010; European Commission 2010) identifies approaches provided by targeted employment services that were successful. Several factors for success were identified including the need for a transparent approach with clear communication between the refugee, employer and placement agency. The following provides a brief description of four of these.

*Counselling and Advice:* genuine understanding of the needs of the refugee includes an assessment of the refugee’s language and work capabilities and cultural needs; and then developing a realistic achievable pathway to jobs that can be done by refugees given their individual skill sets.

*Education and training:* this not only includes skills sets for the job but also cultural training about work and work behaviour. It also seems beneficial that employers are familiarised with
the refugees’ culture. This assists in breaking down cultural misunderstanding that would otherwise make it difficult for refugees to settle into their new work environment. It must be added that “(a)lthough very important, raising education and language skills alone without integrating other aspects ... for example, focused on preventing discrimination or involving employers and ensuring continuity will not solve problems of an insufficient labour market integration of third country migrants” (European Commission, 2010. p 85).

**Mentoring:** good mentors provide the refugee with a support mechanism to assist in integrating into the work force and into society in general. Mentors are important role in telling what nobody else will; providing honest advice and assisting in helping them to ‘learn the ropes’.

**Work placements:** need to be genuine and provide the refugee with a ‘foot in the door’. It provides a safe and supportive environment that allows the refugee to gain work experience. Effective work placements monitor the refugee’s performance, enable honest and transparent feedback and should lead to genuine job offers. It requires considerable skill to team up the refugee’s needs and skill sets with the right employer; and to negotiate and monitor the process. The role the refugee advocate plays cannot be underestimated for their specialised skills sets in recruiting and accepting employers. They also seem to play a vital role in breaking down potential employer discrimination towards refugees.

**Programs that work**

There are a range of programs that have been developed and evaluated that demonstrate successful outcomes for refugees. These programs are both local and within Victoria as well as international in Europe and Great Britain. Given the Chance (GtC) is a program run by the Brotherhood of St Laurence (Victoria), is a targeted program that is designed to facilitate refugees into employment. Critical elements within this program comprised individual pathways planning, case management and referral; work placements and support in the workplace. The importance of work experience to developing strong support for employers, and mentoring the refugee are significant aspects attributed to the success of the GtC program (Olliff, L, 2010) with a reported 58% success rate. This is compared to the reported 42% successful outcomes generated through Job Network intensive assistance. This program was run over the same period as GtC however the average cost per program participant of GtC was $1,925 compared to $2,900 for Job Network intensive assistance (Mestan 2008; Kyle et al 2004; Olliff, 2010.).

The European Commission (2010) detailed innovative and best approaches by 15 European countries in assisting migrants and refugees into employment. Many of the countries used integrated approaches that included a multiple strategies:

- **Education and training** – a focus on not only work skills and culture but also language, intercultural, language and labour market knowledge;
- **Counselling and advice** – a focus on labour market aspects as well empowered to take over their own labour market situation and become independent (‘help for self-help’);
- **Mentoring and coaching** –is a valuable factor in the assisting refugees in retaining employment with the host employer and preventing job abandonment.

Further for internships or placements to work well, there should be realistic expectations that participants will be hired afterwards. Moreover, networking increases the possibility of finding
employment (because of informal recruitment processes) and should also include employers. A successful project based on an integrated case management approach, ‘Samen Werken in Kleur’ in the Netherlands targets black, migrant and refugee women many with low levels of education. It has been reported that this program achieved a successful placement score of 90% where success is defined by a contract renewal after 6 months. About 50 women participate in the project at any one time and new participants are only accepted once a successful outcome has been achieved.

Finally, The Yorkshire Refugee Job Placement Project exhibited similar elements:

- **Strong and clear registration** – to identify clients’ needs and aspirations;
- **Providing support to beneficiaries and employers** – at all stages of the employment stages.
  
  The project acts as an ‘honest broker’ when dealing with success and conflict;
- **Education and training** – it is a useful means for familiarising and absorbing refugees into new jobs and plays a major role in refugee empowerment; and
- **Mentoring** – it not only assisted some refugees with their employment issues but also with other integration issues.

Williams (2006) reported that 183 refugees (78%) who completed work placements gained employment with the host employer. Further, using a sample check of those (50%) placed with employers, 94% were still in their jobs at 13 weeks and 86% at 26 weeks.

It is worth noting that within the reported NCVER program and associated research nothing was found that specifically reported on the experiences of HoA refugees with low literacy trying to access work ready and pre-employment programs. This suggests not only the value of this research but also the need to undertake further research in this area.

**Methodology**

This paper presents some aspects from the NCVER report, ‘African refugees: improving employment outcomes through training and work placements’ (in press). The research used semi structured interviews that were conducted with seven participants. The aim of the interviews was to find out what organizations were doing to assist refugees obtaining employment through a structured training program and how this was facilitated. Interviews were held with three training providers that offered work placements as part of their training program, employers from hospitality and aged care, and a careers educator. The interviews were recorded and analysed for themes. Themes that emerged for investigation ranged from counseling and orientation to mentoring to advocacy and employer recruitment and finally to success outcomes. These themes form the basis of the analysis of data presented in this paper.

**Findings and discussion**

The research findings in this paper relate to the themes that emerged about how a training program for HoA refugees undertaking the EPP warehouse course could provide better employment outcomes. The following provides some description of five themes that emerged from the research

**Assessment, counseling and orientation**

Students were accepted into the EPP warehouse course on the basis that interest was shown and a willingness to participate in a work placement. In contrast, the three training providers
required more rigorous induction including having a broad assessment, counseling and orientation procedures for each participant. It was not good enough that clients just wanted to do the course as a sole selection requirement as providers also saw the need for more discernment of fit to ensure a successful experience and outcome for the refugee. As one provider put it “I assess their literacy and numeracy skills ..... I learn about them.....what’s there story I suppose, what do they want and plan to do, there might be a short term goal and a longer term goal.....so I tend to spend half an hour to an hour with each person, then I get to know them so I can link them with a job that is right for them. ......or are there other partnerships with other organisations that support that individual so that they can come aboard” (RTO 1).

Cultural training
The EPP warehouse course delivered cultural training to the students to assist them manage the workplace experience however no formal arrangements were made to inform the employers about the students. One training provider commented “we’ve done cultural awareness with the employer, where they come from and their backgrounds.....about the war” (RTO 1) when referring to the Sudanese students. Another remarked that “we teach the employer to be up front” (RTO 2). In addition, the providers in building their networks with industry get to know their employers and the working culture at those organisations and as a result they are also able to prepare the students to fit into the workplace culturally.

Mentoring
Mentoring or as one employer called it, ‘the buddy system’ is an integral part in many of the employment programs. Usually the employer partners the mentor with the refugee with assistance and advice from the training organisation. RTO’s recognise the need as “we train employers to support refugees at work”(RTO Interview 2). The value in applying the buddy system to work was shared with one employer in the hospitality industry commenting “to make the program successful, they need to be buddied up with some one for a period of time.....having the staff there to mentor them is crucial” (Employer 1). The period of mentoring can vary. One employer usually allocates a month but can extend it to two months if required. One training provider who also gives out-of-work mentoring that consisted of, how to catch public transport and how to dress, gets previous students and uses them as role models to address new students. Depending on the refugee and their needs a mixture of employer embedded mentoring and outside mentoring is typically used.

Advocacy and employer recruitment
This seems the most important factor in increasing employment outcomes for HoA refugees. An advocate or manager who can persuade employers with genuine employment prospects at the end of the training to take on refugees is a vital role. It is the manager who must ensure the person undertaking the work placement can do the job. Two training organisations were able to negotiate that when refugees were on work experience they actually got paid at award or training wages. There was also an expectation that at the end of the work placement there would be a job offer should the refugee’s work performance meet the standards in the workplace. A training provider remarked “I only train if there is a job. I train people specific to that job” (RTO 1) and another, “I’m looking at the job seeker and the job and then I try to stitch it up comprehensively” (RTO 2). In addition, employers must meet certain criteria before
accepted for placement by the RTO. One provider mentioned “I choose my employers carefully, who can develop a buddy system, work with me with changes” (RTO 1).

**Discrimination and racism**
The literature suggests that a major barrier for refugees obtaining employment is racism and discrimination. This was not an issue that emerged in the interviews within this research. In part, this may be due to the work of the RTOs and their relationships with their employers since RTOs screen the employers. Equally an aged care employer commented that though there was no racism shown by staff, it was evident that elderly Anglo Saxon residents showed racist behaviour towards the African workers and it made work life difficult for them. There was another example of a physical altercation between a young worker and a refugee but the interviewee could not state whether it was racism or loutish teenage behaviour. Once the issue was dealt with at the workplace no further issues arose between the refugee and the teenager.

**Program statistics and success outcomes**
The EPP warehouse course had many elements of an integrated approach as discussed above. However the experience of both the students and employers of the EPP warehouse course may have been enhanced and improved if the following could have been included and instigated in the program:

- More thorough assessment, counseling and orientation of prospective students/participants
  - By not just accepting refugees solely on the basis of their need to gain work but making use of academic/literacy and numeracy assessment and matching clients/participants willingness to the work is work with their needs, skills and abilities is also crucial for success.
- Employers who can offer genuine employment opportunities arising from the work placements. Research shows that employers are out there who have the jobs that HoA refugees with low literacy can successfully undertake. The EPP warehouse course placed a large number of refugees into a warehouse distribution centre for a major charity and that was only possible due to the 2009 Victorian Black Saturday bushfires when the charity needed ‘seasonal’ workers. Although the work experience with the charity was invaluable for the HoA refugee, it was unlikely to lead to ongoing employment.
- Placements are facilitated by skilled advocates.
  - Advocates, who have the skills to establish contacts, liaise and maintain relationships with employers are important. The ability to negotiate with the employer work for a refugee at the end of the work placements is significant. It requires understanding of how a refugee can meet the expectations of the employer and equally advocate for and develop an understanding that the employer will take them on.
- A formal mentoring system was initiated.
  - This skills to establish mentors, recruit employers, negotiate employment conditions, meet both employer and refugees needs, troubleshoot any problems that may arise and maintain the networks. This particular aspect did not happen with the EPP warehouse course and while the teaching and training were adequate the connections with industry networks was missing. Students were placed with any employer willing to accept them without thought about employer selection in all instances. Employers such as Bunnings would require staff with high communication skills so students with higher English skills were placed there. As a result two students were offered jobs at the end of the work placement.
The workplace course/s researched claimed a degree of success in both the provision of workplace skills and experience and eventual ongoing work opportunities. It was not possible to get data that related to HoA refugees and those with low literacy rates specifically. The data reported here referred to refugees in general and included a proportion of African Refugees with low literacy. One training provider was able to report a success rate of about 40% of its clients attaining “sustainable permanent part time or full time positions” (RTO 3) through the host employer. Another provider has success rates close to 60%, and a further provider who dealt predominately with African women quoted 36 out of a group of 67 were able to gain regular work as casual part time staff with the hospitality employer. The nursing home employer also put about 40% of the HoA students that did work placement “on the bank” and would call them up on a regular basis to do casual shifts. Finally, an employer in the hospitality industry was able to maintain about “50% of the staff on the books” (Employer 1) from the HoA who had done their work placements with them.

Conclusion
This research has found that there are a number of barriers and facilitators to Horn of African refugees with low literacy in attaining employment through training and work placements. This research has shown that these experiences are also those shared by other programs both nationally and internally. The research findings in this paper support the notion that optimal employment outcomes requires a number of structured supports including i) initial counselling, orientation and assessment of the client; ii) assigning a workplace buddy or mentor; and iii) advocacy placements with employers who have genuine prospects of employment at the end of the work placement an ethic of social responsibility.

This research therefore has practical applications for training and employment organisations that work with refugees (and other disadvantaged groups). It provides a framework improves the prospects of their clients attaining employment that goes beyond a willingness to seek and engage with work but also the skills and abilities they require, the willingness for employers to work with refugees and the advocacy skills of others who can broker a successful experience for both the refugees and the employer.

Acknowledgements
This research is supported by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research and is funded through a Community of Practice scholarship. These scholarships aim to build researcher capacity in the vocational education and training (VET) sector through providing those working in the VET sector the opportunity to learn about research and investigate a workplace based issue.

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