



# Pilot Learner Driver Project for Humanitarian Entrants

Multicultural Council of Wagga Wagga, New South Wales

Humanitarian entrants living in Wagga Wagga, a regional city in New South Wales, were given training to enable them to gain their New South Wales provisional one (P1) driving licences over a 12-month period during 2006–07.

The initiative was funded as a pilot project. It covered the costs of driving lessons and tests for 16 people. The goal of the project was to help as many students as possible attain their provisional driving licences.

Humanitarian entrants who have settled in regional Australia often live in areas where public transport is either non-existent or offers schedules that do not align with times of employment and/or school. Many jobs require a driving licence. Parents in rural areas who cannot drive may be unable to use childcare because of an unreliable public transport system.

Lack of access to transport exacerbates the isolation many newly arrived refugees already feel when they arrive in Australia. Refugees are forced to rely on others for transport, thereby hindering their ability to be independent and quickly settle successfully.

The cost of obtaining a New South Wales P1 licence is exorbitant for many refugee families who often arrive with no resources. Many recently arrived refugees have large numbers of children and their financial circumstances are very strained. A risk also existed that some people, possibly with limited experience, were driving before obtaining a valid licence.

## Identifying a need through community feedback

Settlement Planning Committees meet around Australia and consist of representatives from federal, state and local governments, non-government organisations, volunteers and members of the community. They meet regularly to discuss the needs of recently arrived humanitarian entrants.

Local community members who worked directly with the humanitarian entrants voiced the idea for this 12-month pilot project in the Riverina

Settlement Planning Committee. The Australian Government Department of Immigration and Citizenship, which was represented at the meeting, decided to fund the pilot project.

Ray Mullins is a volunteer member of the Settlement Planning Committee from Sacred Heart Refugee Support Group. He works as a volunteer with the Wagga Wagga Multicultural Council. Ray said:

Most of the refugees are from Africa. If you think about a person coming from an African situation and perhaps having lived in a refugee camp, then their access to a motor vehicle is pretty limited.

## Selecting the learner drivers

The pilot program was advertised in the local Wagga Wagga newspaper and through word-of-mouth. There was enormous interest in the project, with word spreading as far as Goulburn.

Around 40 people applied for the 16 driving spots. There was a good mix of gender, age and ethnicity, with the majority of applicants originally from the African continent.

The selection criteria used were that students must be humanitarian entrants who had lived in Australia for less than five years, had sufficient English skills to understand instructions from a driving instructor, and were at least 16 years of age. Only one person from each family could apply.

Successful applicants were informed that they would be required to complete their driving lessons within 12 months.

## The program

The Multicultural Council of Wagga Wagga office gave the selected students an information session before they began their online study for their Driver Knowledge Test to obtain a learner's licence. Students accessed the sample test questions in English on computers in local libraries or TAFE colleges. They were given three opportunities to pass a sample Driver Knowledge Test.

Once students had successfully passed their Driver Knowledge Test, they began practical driving lessons. Students were given the option of manual or automatic cars to help them pass the practical test within 50 hours of learning.

The Multicultural Council of Wagga Wagga contracted two local driving schools to teach the 16 students 50 hours of logged driving time in order to fulfil New South Wales Roads and Traffic Authority P1 licence requirements. All 50 hours of lessons were free for the students.

The program also covered the cost of sitting both the Driver Knowledge and P1 tests once only. If students were unsuccessful the first time, they would be required to pay for a second attempt at the test.

Several students supplemented the tuition hours provided under the pilot with private lessons to obtain their P1 licence. On average, students took around 63 hours of tuition to successfully obtain their P1 licence, but one took as many as 108 hours.

## Achievements

At the end of the 12-month project period, 13 students had successfully obtained their P1 licences. The students all gained self-confidence and their self-esteem has improved.

Several students have now obtained permanent employment as a result of being able to drive. Others are training for forklift and bobcat licences.

The practical driving lessons encouraged students to make their own decisions, clearly a crucial ability in a driving context and one they need confidence in using, in a new country.

Students who were originally reluctant to make their own driving lesson appointments became more confident through practice. They were less intimidated by the experience of telephoning a company and using an unfamiliar language and skill set.

## Challenges

Initially the Multicultural Council of Wagga Wagga had difficulty finding driving schools to participate in the pilot.

Many participants found it difficult to fit in driving lessons around work and study commitments. In Wagga Wagga, a large number of the students work at the local meat works.

This physically strenuous work (10 hour shifts on a meat packing assembly line) meant many students found it difficult to concentrate during their driving lessons. In addition, some students initially had difficulty keeping their driving lesson appointments due to different cultural concepts about time.

Wagga Wagga driving instructor, Glen Gaudron, said many of the students had little, if any, experience driving in a car, even as a passenger, and therefore had far greater hurdles to overcome than do local students. For this reason, and with the benefit of hindsight, it would have been better if the students had not been given the option of choosing a manual or automatic car, but had all been trained in automatic cars.

The concept of steering was completely alien for many students. However, after a driving trip to the Snowy Mountains in New South Wales, students dramatically improved their steering skills after navigating steep and winding roads.

A key obstacle has been the short timeframe of the pilot project, with a few students not being able to complete the required 50 hours of driving lessons within the year. One student had to withdraw late in the program and his replacement had insufficient time to succeed.

Requirements in New South Wales have recently changed and students now need a minimum of 120 hours of driving in their logbooks before they can attempt the driving test. The increase would significantly affect the cost and timeframe of any additional programs. Hourly charges for driving school instructors are currently \$50 to \$60.

## Key factors in the project's success

The learner drivers demonstrated tremendous determination to succeed in an area that was alien to them. Their motivation and resilience made the driving pilot a great success. Thirteen achieved their provisional driving licences and two others had almost achieved them at the completion of the program.

The dedication and innovation of the driving school instructors really made a difference for each student. The instructors had little prior experience in teaching students from a refugee background and so their commitment was all the more appreciated.

Wagga Wagga driving instructor Glen Gaudron's patience and tolerance made the difference for a group of students that was vastly different in experience from the average local student.

## Key messages and advice for setting up a similar project

To establish a similar project, in either a rural or urban setting, agencies should be mindful that many students are either working or studying and must make time outside their busy schedules to come to lessons.

Agencies should arrange access to interpreters for students who may have difficulty completing the Driver Knowledge Test. All students selected for the program should, however, have sufficient oral and verbal skills to understand and respond to directions from a Driving Instructor.

Students would benefit from practising steering on car simulators or go-carts before getting behind the wheel. This strategy is a relatively inexpensive way of developing basic skills.

Using suitably accredited driving schools and instructors is important. Driving school cars should be checked for age and appropriate safety features, such as ABS brakes and air bags, and there should be sufficient automatic vehicles for all those who prefer or need them.

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## Profile > Constance

**Constance** is a mother of seven children that were aged between three and 19 years old at the time she completed the driver training. She came to Australia with her family in early 2004.

She is from Southern Sudan but due to the war was forced to flee her homeland. She and her family lived in Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya for nine years. Constance said:

It's different here. I miss everything, friends and relatives. There's nothing left. I've almost lost hope. It's just because I have children that I continue.

In Kenya, Constance was concerned about the welfare of her two eldest children, both teenage boys. She is grateful for the education they are getting in Australia. She said:

In Kakuma I saw a lot of things. People who didn't have education didn't know what to do. That's why some children started drinking and smoking and taking drugs. If someone has access to education and knows what he or she wants, then they have a good foundation.

Constance is studying welfare at TAFE and is also a volunteer at the Multicultural Council of Wagga Wagga where she learnt about the driving pilot.

For Constance, learning to drive has been a mental escape from her day-to-day life in Wagga Wagga. The small amount of money she receives from Centrelink to support her seven children meant luxuries like driving lessons were not possible.

Constance obtained her PI licence, and now hopes to get a loan to buy a car. She hopes she will be a positive role model for her children when they decide to learn to drive.



## Profile > Rita

**Rita** is from Liberia and was 19 years old when she completed the training. Rita said:

Because of the war in Liberia we went to Ivory Coast. In 2003 because of the fighting there we went to Guinea and lived in a refugee camp. The UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) was looking after the camp. People were helping the vulnerable women and my mum's name came up.

Rita arrived in Australia in 2005 and settled in Wagga Wagga with her mother, younger brother and two younger sisters.

Rita does not remember much about her life in Liberia because she was too young when she left but she does miss the familiarity of her culture and her home and the lack of responsibility she had as a child before she arrived.

Rita said:

I miss everything. Everything is different here. I have to learn a new language, do new things. It's really, really hard and it's still difficult after two years. It's not difficult because Wagga's a small town. It's because everything's left to me in the family, as Mum didn't go to school. I have a lot of responsibilities. She's a victim of the war.

Rita also found school in Australia a challenge.

In Africa I was really good at school. When I got here, they put me in the middle of Year 11 and I didn't know what was going on. I only had one woman to help me. We had a lot of problems.

She looked forward to her driving lessons every week and found maneuvering roundabouts and changing lanes the most challenging part of driving. Rita successfully obtained her P1 driver's licence.

Today Rita's life in Wagga Wagga involves full-time employment as a qualified nurse's aide at a local aged care facility. As part of her work involves shift work, she would not have been able to undertake this work without her driving licence in the absence of public transport at unusual hours. While studying at TAFE, she worked at the local abattoir during the holidays and this enabled her to save money to buy her car.

photo > Rita, from Liberia