



Given the Chance

Brotherhood of St Laurence, Ecumenical Migration Centre,
Melbourne, Victoria

This project also relates to:

Education

Given the Chance is a targeted labour market program that develops social, educational and employment pathways for refugees and humanitarian entrants. The Ecumenical Migration Centre developed the program in 2002, in response to refugees' need to have the best chance of engaging in meaningful and sustainable employment.

The program addresses labour market barriers faced by refugees, matches participants with mentors from the business, community and government sectors, and provides work experience opportunities and customised job search training specific to each participant's needs. The program has been run very successfully since 2002 but still lacks ongoing funding.

Recently there has been greater acknowledgement of the needs of refugees as a group and the considerable barriers they face to labour force participation. Barriers include poor English language skills, education and training, labour market knowledge, access to formal and informal employment networks, poor provision of advice (including guidance and training), cultural transition and pre-arrival experiences.

Many refugees have endured years of disadvantage as a result of fleeing their countries of origin. Often they have spent many years in refugee camps living in extremely difficult conditions. They lack possessions, recent work experience and community networks. Many have experienced torture and trauma.

Family reunion issues, discrimination in the labour market, inability to access childcare, lack of relevant skills or unrecognised qualifications, lack of transport, and low self-confidence, are also barriers to employment. There is also a lack of understanding by service providers of the refugees' ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

The *Given the Chance* program recognises these barriers and understands that for refugees and humanitarian entrants to enter and sustain employment, they need to build an understanding of the Australian labour market, including the work culture. Through the program, participants build professional networks and gain Australian work experience. They are provided with ongoing support and advocacy and are able to enter the workforce and sustain employment.

Employment gives refugee and humanitarian entrants the opportunity to provide for their families, contribute to their new home and feel part of Australian society. By capitalising on their own personal attributes and experience they rebuild their trust in society, along with their sense of identity.

Program partners are Coles, the ANZ Banking Group Ltd, St Vincent's and Mercy Private Hospitals, Avteq P/L and SJB Architects. The program also has relationships with many smaller businesses for work experience placements and/or jobs.

Identifying a need by consulting research

Labour market outcomes research suggests that available settlement and employment services are not adequately addressing refugees' employment related needs. Research further indicates that unemployment rates among refugees and humanitarian entrants are extremely high, despite the desire of most refugees to find employment. For many refugees, employment means the opportunity to take control of their lives both financially and emotionally.

The benefits of providing effective employment assistance to overcome barriers refugees face in the labour market have been identified as including:

- reduction in the dependency ratio
- savings in income support payments and reduced reliance on community services
- long-term earnings and expenditure
- business development

- potential to reduce skills gaps
- improved community health
- greater community capital.

Community consultations

Focus groups of refugees, community leaders and service providers were all consulted when the initial pilot program was being developed and designed.

A reference group made up of key stakeholders from business, community and government was formed for the pilot. The group was charged with conducting ongoing community consultation and incorporating feedback into the design features of the pilot.

After the pilot was undertaken, work experience surveys were conducted and the mentoring and intensive course were evaluated.

Commissioning research

Independent research commissioned from the Victoria University Equity Research Centre, *Looking for cost effective models of assistance for refugees* (2004), examined the extent to which available job assistance services were able to respond to the specific needs of refugee jobseekers. The research confirmed the findings identified in the initial pilot focus group.

This research found that the pilot program was having a significant impact on reducing the economic and social exclusion that many refugees experience. Moreover, it found the *Given the Chance* program was not only more effective, but also more cost-effective, on a per participant basis, than the Job Network intensive assistance.

This comparison did not consider the additional value of the voluntary assistance secured by the *Given the Chance* program through the involvement of community mentors. While this in-kind support provided to the program can be seen as an investment by the community, the participation of mentors also represents a significant benefit in terms of its potential to build social capital.

Given the Chance is also informed by a Churchill Scholarship study tour of refugee employment, education and training programs across the United Kingdom, Italy, Sweden, the Netherlands and the United States that was undertaken by one of the project staff. Findings from the study

tour and recommendations were incorporated into a report and included:

- a long-term approach to mentoring to enable both participants and mentors to gain maximum benefit from the program
- engagement of people from various cultures and life experience in order to build cross-cultural understanding, knowledge and tolerance, both in the community and in the workplace
- the opportunity to establish relationships with business as an important part of employment outcomes for refugees.

Recruiting participants

Participants are recruited through engagement with leaders of their communities and the communities themselves, and through referrals from health, education and other service providers.

The sole entry requirement, in addition to refugee status, is that the participants' English language skills are at conversational level, estimated at Australian Second Language Proficiency Ratings Level 1 to 1.5 or higher, depending on the requirements of the employment field in which the participant aspires to work.

All participants are asked to enter into a 'participation contract' before starting the program, to ensure they fully understand the process and requirements, and are committed to completing the program.

Matching refugees with mentors

Participants are matched to trained and supported voluntary mentors, primarily based on synergy between the refugees' career goals and the mentors' professional expertise, but also with regard to gender, age differences and regional proximity, where possible. The volunteer mentors are interviewed and selected based on:

- agreement to commit to fortnightly meetings with their mentee for at least one year
- sufficient professional and life experience to be able to resource a mentee
- empathy regarding the nature of the refugee experience
- police checks
- attendance at induction training.

A preparatory workshop is held to look at generic mentoring principles and skills through the filter of refugee experience. For example, the workshop examines the art of asking questions and building trust while respecting cultural differences and not triggering memories of traumatic events some refugees have experienced. The training also clarifies the role and activities of the job mentors, and the program parameters and provides mentors with guidance on how to manage both their own expectations and those of their mentee.

Information is provided on the work preparation course for refugees. Mentors receive ongoing support through regular mentor meetings and a monitoring process that responds to needs arising in the course of the mentoring relationship with participants.

Intensive work preparation course

Once participants are recruited and matched to mentors, they attend a 12-week intensive work preparation course three days a week, combined with a two-day a week work placement that enables participants to practise what they are learning in a supported environment.

Workshops focus on developing key competencies for work and community participation in the Australian setting, and provide the opportunity to bring participants together for group learning. The early workshops focus on preparing participants for practical experience in the workplace, while the workshops in the second half of the course maximise the value of the placement by allowing participants to share their experiences in a group learning environment.

The course is structured around the following three modules:

- **Unit 1: Working in your community** – Each refugee receives tuition and guidance on working or participating in community life and on Australian work expectations. They are given instruction on how best to make life shifts so that further personal outcomes in employment, education and community leadership can be achieved. It includes mentoring and matching participants with community and business leaders.

Participants develop an individual employment and personal career pathway map. The purpose of this map is to guide

participants on the key competencies that they wish to contribute to the workplace or that they wish to acquire to maximise their participation in the workplace.

- **Unit 2: Community enhancement pathways and partnerships** – This unit focuses on career/life change pathway development. It includes intensive assistance using sessions and community participation workshops to engage refugees in community life.

Unit two is aimed at participants who recognise that they require a supportive community and appropriate employment opportunities if they are to take an active role in the community. Each participant is linked to a business or mentor in their local community to obtain advice on their life, work experience and employment or career pathways.

- **Unit 3: Life skills for community participation** – This unit focuses on the development of life skills to broaden participation in the community and develop a stronger sense of self.

Mentors help participants who identify they require support in areas such as building self-confidence, self-esteem, motivation and leadership training to develop an awareness of what personal competencies they need to develop in order to participate in community life.

Electives

The course also includes the following electives:

- coaching and tutoring, such as assistance with job applications and returning to study
- half-day skills workshops with the coordinator, social worker and guest speakers on subjects such as leadership and advocacy skills, or applying for a scholarship
- refugee community development to encourage participants to become mentors and pass on their skills
- settlement casework services for individual refugees, such as counselling or housing advice or advice on access to childcare
- a photographic display of the project, used for public information, advocacy and confidence-building.



Profile > Saba

Jed Macartney is Commercial Director of Avteq, a locomotive engineering and maintenance business in North Sunshine, Melbourne.

Jed completed the *Given the Chance* mentor training in January 2006 and was matched with Saba, a refugee from Eritrea who had been in Australia for about nine years. **Saba** completed her medical engineering degree in Brisbane at the University of Queensland and attended the *Given the Chance* job skills training workshops.

Saba is married to Moses and has two children. She had little work experience and was looking for her first real job.

Jed has converted her to mechanical engineering and from designing small, delicate medical instruments to big, heavy rail equipment. Saba is going well and is in charge of Avteq's locomotive test program, including gaining certification from the regulators. Jed said of Saba:

We were so impressed with Saba's enthusiasm and dedication that we offered her a full-time position and she became our third full-time employee.

My mentoring is now more of a professional development nature, although I think we have a good relationship where Saba feels she can approach me with any issue and we are continuing to develop our friendship.

photo > Saba and Jed Macartney, Commercial Director of Avteq, looking over some designs

Supported work experience

A major barrier to employment for members of new and emerging communities is the lack of valid Australian work experience, and the consequent inability to offer Australian employers as referees.

Given the Chance incorporates supported work experience, which may be through traineeships or other work experience options established with its business partners. An ideal outcome of the work experience is ongoing employment. However, this is secondary to obtaining work experience and providing the opportunity to apply work skills learnt earlier in the program. These skills include introducing themselves, speaking about their skills, offering assistance, making small talk and asking questions.

Program seminars preparing the refugees for the work experience placement cover issues such as:

- identifying one's skills and resources and their relation to work fields and study paths
- the concept of mentoring
- preparatory visits to workplaces
- employers' expectations
- legal and occupational health and safety issues
- networking
- diversity issues (for example, wearing the hijab and praying in work time)
- keeping a workplace journal.

The refugees discuss this information in pairs or small groups, and then practise applying their learning through role-playing.

Career action plans

Individualised career action plans are developed for each participant, which include continued engagement with their mentor and case manager, and developing computer skills. The aim is that participants undertake vocational study where appropriate and with a specific career pathway in mind. Visits to TAFE Access departments are organised for the participants to meet staff. They are then briefed and coached in applying and being interviewed for course entry.

Evaluating the program

The Brotherhood's Research and Policy Unit is undertaking a formal evaluation of *Given the Chance*, as part of the three-year demonstration project (2004–07). The report will be available shortly.

Ongoing monitoring of the program includes monthly meetings and training workshops with refugees, mentors and workplaces, Post Work Experience Surveys and regular evaluation of the intensive training course and mentoring.

Achievements

Outcomes to date (November 2007) show very high levels of retention in the 12-week intensive work preparation course with 96.67 per cent of participants completing the course, and 82 per cent of participants gaining employment, mostly after a period of work experience.

Of more than 100 trained mentors, 75 per cent continue mentoring for at least 12 months. Some mentors go on to mentor more than one refugee. Some refugee participants become mentors themselves.

Staff proactively seek employment opportunities for the refugees as part of the project. They provide refugees with the support and networks they need to gain access to potential employment.

Project staff have built strong relationships with employers including Coles, ANZ Bank, St Vincent's and Mercy Private Hospitals, SJB Management and many more.

A training program called *Building Bridges* has been developed to prepare managers and supervisors of refugees in the workplace with appropriate skills in managing the consequences of refugee experiences and cultural difference, and their implications for the ongoing integration of refugees in the workplace.

An annual Refugee Week Business Breakfast has successfully promoted refugees in the workplace and shown how business can support first-time refugee workers.

Challenges

Working with refugees requires ongoing assessment and case management of the welfare and counselling needs of vulnerable people, many of whom may be recovering from human rights abuses and decades spent in very poor conditions. A multi-disciplinary team, including social workers, is involved in case management and training courses for both refugees and mentors.

Negative media portrayals of refugee communities have been combated with a self-advocacy strand in the program as a forum for refugees to tell their stories of resilience.



The project has succeeded in attracting positive media attention, with several recent stories in *The Age*, *The Herald Sun*, and on SBS Radio and ABC Television.

Key factors in the program's success

The *Given the Chance* program's strengths lie in:

- case management that is individualised, takes a long-term approach to working with very vulnerable people, and develops a deep understanding of their needs
- the unique combination of program components, including workplace experience, skills development training and mentoring
- the committed relationships it brokers between businesses, government and the community that help build bridges between disadvantaged jobseekers and the mainstream workforce
- the key role volunteers play as mentors.

Key messages and advice for setting up a similar project

Those wishing to copy or adapt the project should:

- ensure that case workers have a deep understanding of the refugee experience and the settlement needs of refugees
- take an individualised and long-term approach to case management
- build strong relationships with refugee communities
- develop a strong training program around specific employment and education needs of refugees
- recognise that for many refugees the road to sustained employment will require specialised support services, including counselling
- ensure that mentors are committed for at least one year, so that refugees receive consistent support
- ensure that mentors understand the need to show commitment and persistence because, in many cases, this process is new for refugees and the information they provide needs to be broken down into small components so as not to overwhelm their mentee

- develop good relationships with the business sector so that employers feel confident in taking on refugees.

Funding

The Victorian Department of Planning and Community Development, under its Community Support Fund, together with the Invergowrie Foundation funded the three-year (2005–07) demonstration project. While the program has been run successfully since 2002, it still requires ongoing funding.

Contact details

Ecumenical Migration Centre
Brotherhood of St Laurence
95–97 Brunswick St
Fitzroy Victoria 3065
Phone: 03 9416 0044
Fax: 03 9416 1827
Email: emc@bsl.org.au
Website: www.bsl.org.au

Profile > Fatima

Fatima (not her real name) is 46 years of age. She arrived in Australia from the Middle East about a decade ago. She was a physician in her homeland, but has had great difficulty getting her qualifications recognised in Australia.

Fatima initially made many mistakes in her preparations for the Australian medical exams because she was unsure exactly what the exams would be like. She heard about *Given the Chance* approximately half way through completing all the certification requirements, and decided it fitted her needs. She explained:

At each step of the exams, I needed a lot of support and mental tutoring.

Fatima was matched to Jane (not her real name) in 2005. Jane, who is 53, has acted as a mentor for a number of refugees. She sees it as her main task to help refugees get into paid employment that as much as possible utilises the skills that they brought to the country. However, she tailors her support to the particular needs of each mentee.

Fatima's first goal was to gain her Australian medical licence. Jane is on the medical practitioners' board and was able to offer Fatima much assistance in navigating the maze of the medical system. She set up a mock exam for Fatima that proved crucial in helping Fatima pass her exams.

Fatima's relationship with Jane was focused on help with her employment problems.

Jane advises me how to speak to the employer when looking for a job. She explains how to prepare the cover letter and my résumé and how to prepare for an interview. I'm always phoning her about these things but slowly, I'm gaining confidence that I can do this myself.

The frequency of contact was based on need. Weeks could go by with little contact but when Fatima was applying for employment, they would speak on the phone everyday. Fatima recounts:

After ... I passed my exam, she encouraged me a lot and she helped me with applications and the Australian system and all these courses and speaking with people.

With Jane's assistance, Fatima gained employment as a physician in a hospital. Unfortunately it was only a three-month contract and Fatima is now once again applying for jobs.

Jane and Fatima's relationship has extended beyond the suggested minimum 12 months. They speak on the telephone regularly, and Fatima visits Jane's home. Jane said:

I'm still in contact and I imagine I always will be. It's like a lifetime friendship.

And Fatima says of Jane:

Yes, she's very kind and very keen to help me, so I believe in her and that's why I discuss my problems with her.