



## Homework Clubs program

Australian Refugee Association, Adelaide, South Australia

*This project also relates to:*

### ➤ Youth

The *Homework Clubs* program is a community initiative aimed at assisting high school students from refugee backgrounds with their studies and overall schooling experience. The program commenced in July 2006 and is funded until May 2008 by the North Western Innovative Community Action Network as part of the Social Inclusion Initiative, administered through the South Australian Department of the Premier and Cabinet.

Refugee students are a particularly vulnerable group. Most have had limited formal education and many have spent much of their lives in refugee camps. Their low levels of exposure to systems of formal education make it exceedingly challenging for refugee students to succeed in the Australian education system.

Some students have witnessed torture and trauma or have lost family members to violence in their home countries. These emotional hurdles, along with the challenges of adjusting to life in a new country, can also hinder students in their efforts to excel in the school environment.

The *Homework Clubs* offer young people a venue in which they can develop their academic abilities and feel personally supported in a time of transition. For refugee youth who face a constant uphill battle for school integration, *Homework Clubs* provide much needed academic and social support structures.

The Australian Refugee Association hopes that through participating in *Homework Clubs*, refugee youths will:

- develop higher order numeracy and literacy skills
- develop a deeper understanding of main stream school culture
- develop the self-esteem needed to navigate the school environment
- build friendships with their peers

- gain a friend and ally in their mentor who will provide them with support to assist them in their attempt to assimilate in the school system.

Three service providers, Lutheran Community Care, the City of Charles Sturt and the Australian Refugee Association, worked together to secure funding to run three *Homework Clubs* in Adelaide's northwestern suburbs.

The Australian Refugee Association then took the lead in designing and running the *Homework Clubs*. Funding covers the cost of employing a project officer as well as transport, food and operational costs. Other project partners are the City of Charles Sturt Council, City of Port Adelaide Enfield Council, City of West Torrens Council, the Western Area Multicultural Youth Service, and the Adelaide Secondary School of English.

### Identifying a need through community feedback

Settlement workers attending monthly African Workers' Network meetings in Adelaide saw an urgent need for additional school support for refugee students due to their vulnerable backgrounds and high needs.

Through consultations with community members, youth, school officials and other agencies, it became clear that refugee youth faced significant challenges in adjusting to school life and many were not thriving in the school environment. Many young people of refugee backgrounds were facing such huge challenges that they were dropping out of school.

It was decided that *Homework Clubs* would help students make the transition to the Australian school system.

Discussions were held with local councils in the northwestern suburbs to find suitable locations to run the program. It was decided that hosting the *Homework Clubs* at libraries and community centres would allow all students to participate, regardless of which school they attended.

## Promoting the program through community leaders

The Australian Refugee Association contacted leaders from all refugee communities living in Adelaide to inform them that the program was available for their young people. The leaders told their communities about the *Homework Clubs* and the information spread through word-of-mouth. Community leaders from the Sudanese Community Association of South Australia particularly supported the establishment of the program.

## The program

Members of the refugee community had been consulted from the beginning and students already knew of the intention to start the *Homework Clubs*. By the fourth week of the program, more than 50 students were regular participants each week. In the first 18 months of the program, over 120 students came to the program, with over 60 students attending regularly each week.

Various schools and the African Workers' Network refer students to the program. The Adelaide Secondary School of English helps with referrals, identifying students who are leaving the New Arrivals Program and moving into mainstream schools who will need extra support. Some students attending the program are still attending the Adelaide Secondary School of English, but most are in mainstream schools. Students from 25 schools are presently engaged in the program.

Students can attend one of three different locations provided for the *Homework Clubs* – the Greenacres Library, Youth Central in Woodville and the Findon Library in Adelaide's northwestern suburbs. Students are dropped off at home by bus after each session.

Volunteers are recruited from a wide range of sources and include teachers, university students, professionals, and members of the broader community. They receive thorough training in mentoring, cross-cultural communication, the refugee experience, and strategies for building literacy and numeracy.

The majority of volunteer tutors are adults but the Australian Refugee Association is promoting the recruitment of high school

student volunteers. Fifteen high school students from three different schools are now acting as volunteer peer mentors. Australian Refugee Association project officer, Natalie Matulick, said:

I was really keen to get this happening because of cross-cultural learning opportunities and connections.

Tutors generally work one-to-one with students and are asked to commit for a minimum of 10 weeks (the length of a school term). However, most tutors engage in the program for longer. They spend two hours a week after school helping students with English language learning and school homework, and they mentor students to help them adjust to the Australian education system and school culture. Approximately 30 individuals were initially recruited as tutors and this number has now grown to around 50.

A regular project coordinator (or adult volunteer) who acts as a regular mentor for students attends at each venue. This stability is vital in developing a supportive framework. The coordinator knows and cares about what is going on in the students' lives and at school and sometimes needs to refer students to other services or act as an advocate for the student at their school. He or she coordinates tutor/student partnerships and provides a list of students and addresses for the bus driver.

## Achievements

Twenty-five schools are now participating in the *Homework Clubs*. They have proven to be an enormous success for both students and tutors. The intention was to create a study environment that was welcoming and safe, and that also had a social element. This has been achieved.

Some of the students found the environment so special they continued to visit their Homework Club to see the tutors even when they had finished high school. Some students do not feel they receive enough support at school. Knowing they can come to a safe place and be assisted is very reassuring. Project officer, Natalie Matulick, said:

The emotional support has made a huge difference to them. The academic side is very important as well and during holiday time the students want the *Homework Clubs* to continue.



## Profile > Dit and Essa

**Dit** came to Australia in late 2005 with his older brother. Dit was in Year 12 in 2006 when he first visited the *Homework Clubs* to get help with his assignments, meet different people and practise his English. According to Dit:

Year 12 was really hard as it was just me and my brother in Australia. Sometimes I was working a lot and looking after my brother.

**Essa** heard about the *Homework Clubs* through his friend. Arriving from Afghanistan just over two years ago, Essa finds the *Homework Clubs* extremely useful, particularly in helping with his Maths studies, which he finds the most difficult.

photo > Bol, Essa, Mike Oliver (tutor), Pager and Dit studying together

Ashleigh Davis, one of the volunteer tutors, said the majority of students she had tutored were incredibly grateful and appreciative of the services the *Homework Clubs* were providing.

## Challenges

For the most part schools are very supportive of the program and grateful that such a service is provided. They are eager for their students to engage in the program. Regrettably, there have been some schools which have not actively promoted the project to their students, but these have been in the minority.

The project organisers hoped that the same tutors could work with the same students every week so they could form a mentor relationship. However, students often arrived with different homework every week and so this was not always possible. Although some tutors could provide help across a range of school subjects, it was necessary to build a team environment between tutors to provide expertise in different subjects.

## Key factors in the project's success

The funding of transport to take the students home has contributed enormously to the project's success.

An efficient referral pathway has been set up so that any children brought to the attention of the African Workers' Network can be followed up and are not overlooked or ignored.

The project has needed strong coordination to ensure students are matched with an appropriate tutor who has the skills to tutor them in the subject areas they need. The year and subject areas have ranged from Year 8 English and Geography to Year 12 Physics and Maths.

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

It is crucial, before establishing *Homework Clubs*, to consult community groups both to assess their needs and to gain their support.

Once the project has started it is important to stimulate students' interest in coming to the *Homework Clubs* by talking to them face-to-face at schools. In this way they establish a personal connection with someone who is going to be at the Homework Club and feel it is safe to attend a new program for the first time.

A regular project coordinator is vital to developing a supportive framework.

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