RESEARCH & POLICY CENTRE

Brotherhood of St Laurence
Working for an Australia free of poverty

REPORT

Giving asylum seekers a chance

Insights from a pilot employment program

John van Kooy | Agathe Randrianarisoa

The Brotherhood of St Laurence is a non-government, community-based organisation concerned with social justice. Based in Melbourne, but with programs and services throughout Australia, the Brotherhood is working for a better deal for disadvantaged people. It undertakes research, service development and delivery, and advocacy, with the objective of addressing unmet needs and translating learning into new policies, programs and practices for implementation by government and others. For more information visit www.bsl.org.au.

John van Kooy and Agathe Randrianarisoa are Research Fellows in the Work and Economic Security team in the Brotherhood's Research and Policy Centre.

Note: Pseudonyms are used for individuals quoted in this report

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67 Brunswick Street
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Australia

ABN 24 603 467 024

T (03) 9483 1183
www.bsl.org.au

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SUMMARY

Given the Chance for Asylum Seekers is a Brotherhood of St Laurence employment program for asylum seekers with bridging visas living in Melbourne. Supported by a private philanthropist, the program aims to assist asylum seekers to get into (and stay in) the workforce. The program also works with employers to procure jobs and training opportunities, while advocating for changes to government policies.

This paper summarises research and evaluation findings from the program's first phase (FY2013–16), including the main features of the program model, and an assessment of the particular employment issues and challenges facing asylum seekers in Australia.

While Given the Chance facilitates labour market entry, institutional barriers to economic security remain. The program has assisted hundreds of asylum seekers to find their first jobs in Australia. However, advocacy efforts need to address the immigration policies and employer practices that prevent the wider population of bridging and temporary visa holders from achieving sustainable employment and economic security.

Key points

- **Asylum seekers' workforce participation is constrained by visa conditions and service access.** They face complicated and uncertain visa application processes, combined with frequently changing eligibility for services, and work and study permissions. These factors create uncertainty in asylum seekers' lives, and harm their chances in the open labour market.
- **Participants lack resources to fully participate in employment.** Asylum seekers are typically poorer, have less access to social security and have fewer social networks than other migrant groups, and may be dealing with trauma related to forced migration experiences.
- **Given the Chance builds jobseeking 'know-how' and connections with employers.** The program provides tailored assistance not normally available to asylum seekers, including help with job applications, access to training, interview preparation and understanding Australian workplaces. By building relationships with employers, the program also attempts to reduce demand-side barriers and create new jobs and training opportunities.
- **Program outcomes in 2015–16 compare favourably with mainstream employment services.** In 2015–16, more than half (56%) of all Given the Chance participants found a job after joining the program. In comparison, 48% of jobseekers accessing federally funded *jobactive* services across all streams had been placed in work[1], while clients categorised as 'culturally and linguistically diverse' (CALD) and accessing 'Stream B' services had a placement rate of 31%.[2] After six months of paid work, more than two-thirds (68%) of Given the Chance participants remained in a job, compared to 33% of all *jobactive* placements leading to a 26-week outcome.
- **Survival jobs have real benefits for asylum seekers, but do not guarantee economic security.** More than half of all Given the Chance jobs were labouring and sales worker jobs, classified at the lowest skill levels. They also tended to be casual or short-term part-time jobs. These 'survival jobs' have non-economic benefits and asylum seekers place a high value on opportunities to develop the experience, language skills, and social connections which are vital to their long-term settlement prospects.

1 For all jobseekers who participated in employment services in the 12 months to June 2016, with outcomes measured around three months later (DOE 2017).

2 For CALD jobseekers who participated in employment services in the 12 months to June 2016, with outcomes measured around three months later (DOE 2017).

CONTEXT

The contemporary Australian labour market is characterised by significant change. More and more people are working part-time, shift and overtime work; are employed on short-term contracts; and hold multiple jobs (ABS 2017; Productivity Commission 2015). Employment growth is concentrated in service industries such as health care and professional services, rather than historically strong sectors such as manufacturing (DOE 2016a). As Australian jobseekers become more qualified, there is increased competition for available jobs at all levels (Neville 2014; Wilkins & Wooden 2014).

In these tight labour market conditions, employers may 'screen out' candidates that they consider do not meet their needs or expectations for any reason. In this context, migrants face barriers to employment including:

- unrecognised or undervalued foreign skills, qualifications or experience (ECCV 2014)
- perceptions of cultural dissimilarity or that migrants cannot 'fit' in existing workforces (Colic-Peisker 2011)
- negative stigma, stereotyping, discrimination or racism based on 'visible difference' such as skin colour (Hebbani & McNamara 2010); and
- lack of familiarity with Australian recruitment practices such as behavioural interview questions (Abdelkerim & Grace 2012) or knowledge of federal workplace laws, rights and entitlements (Hemingway 2016).

English language proficiency is a significant predictor of employment success for migrants (Guven & Islam 2015; Fleay, Hartley & Kenny 2013; Abdelkerim & Grace 2012). Employers also demonstrate a preference for candidates with experience, even for lower-skilled vacancies (DOE 2014). Recently arrived migrants are unlikely to have either local experience or local employer references to verify intangible attributes such as 'initiative', 'problem-solving', 'teamwork', 'loyalty', 'commitment', 'honesty' or 'reliability' (DOE 2016a). As a result, many migrants are compelled to take on lower skilled jobs that do not fully utilise their skills or experience (Thomson 2014).

Well-informed jobseeking strategies, based on market 'know-how' acquired and exchanged through formal and informal networks (McArdle et al. 2007), are required for jobseekers to compete. However, as they are not part of established local communities, recent migrants depend on other migrant, ethnic or diaspora networks (Jacobsen 2006). These networks typically have weak ties to mainstream society and institutions (Williams 2006), which has a detrimental effect on access to work (Cheung & Phillimore 2014).

Asylum seekers face many of the same labour market barriers as other migrants, with additional constraints. Asylum seekers arrive in Australia with limited access to government income support that can reduce the negative impacts of unemployment. Those who have had difficult forced migration experiences may suffer from trauma and psychosocial issues (Schweitzer et al. 2006).

Asylum seekers have limited access to social infrastructure such as affordable housing and transport, which can directly influence their capacity for sustained participation in employment, education or training (Bowman & van Kooy 2016). Access to education and training options that could help them improve their labour market status differs by state and region. While asylum seekers in Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory, for example, are exempt from eligibility criteria for vocational education and training, this is not the case in all states (State Government of Victoria 2017; ACT Government 2017).

Asylum status resolution processes in Australia interfere with applicants' full social and economic participation. Conditional visas, temporary work rights, and uncertain application processes drawn out over several years lead to experiences of insecurity (Australian Red Cross 2013; Fleay, Hartley & Kenny 2013; Hartley & Fleay 2014). Recent changes as part of the *Migration and Maritime Powers Legislation Amendment Act 2014* included the reintroduction of temporary protection visas in place of pathways to permanent citizenship, the defunding of legal support for onshore applicants to make asylum claims, the introduction of a 'code of behaviour' monitored by the immigration department against which breaches could lead to detention or deportation, and extended processing times for existing asylum claims (RCOA 2017).

Work permissions for asylum seekers on bridging visas may be lacking, conditional or time-limited. Around 22,800 asylum seekers in the community were granted work permissions after the 2014 legislative changes, representing a significant majority who had been unable to legally work in Australia for long periods (Toscano 2015). As with any demographic group, extended periods out of the labour market have a detrimental effect on future work prospects (Fleay, Lumbus & Hartley 2016; Liebig 2007).

Several recent studies published by community sector organisations in Australia have detailed asylum seekers' experiences of poverty, destitution, insecure accommodation and homelessness, and significant health issues arising from their lack of access to necessary social supports (ASRC 2010; Australian Red Cross 2013; RCOA 2017).

THE PROGRAM

The Brotherhood launched the Given the Chance for Asylum Seekers program as a pilot initiative in 2013 in response to their high rates of unemployment and limited access to employment assistance. The pilot was designed to 'fast track' people seeking asylum into their first jobs in Australia by assessing their job readiness, providing pre-employment advice and guidance, and supporting them during the application and recruitment process. To be eligible for the program, applicants generally needed to hold a bridging visa with work permissions, and to have a minimum, case worker-assessed level of English. The practice model has since been enhanced with an 'employer engagement' component, involving the procurement of jobs and training opportunities by building and maintaining relationships with local employers.

Employment that is secure and delivers a fair income, and that supports personal and professional development is important for all workers (ILO 2004). Such employment has additional material and social value for migrants, as it can enable interaction with the host community and give people a chance to contribute to their new country (Webb 2010).

In a fragmented service environment, organisations that can help to build asylum seekers' labour market 'know-how' can become critical bridges into mainstream, formal employment. Like 'matchmaking' models of labour market assistance (Autor 2008; Benner 2003; Bessy & Chauvin 2013; Bonet, Cappelli & Hamori 2013; van Kooy, Bowman & Bodsworth 2014), Given the Chance puts individual jobseekers in contact with employers, increases their labour market information and work 'readiness', and facilitates rapid placements which meet the immediate recruitment needs of employers.

Given the Chance provides employment assistance not normally available to asylum seekers, including accredited and non-accredited training, the development and submission of job applications, preparation for job interviews and other selection processes, and facilitation of workplace inductions with employers.

By building relationships with employers, the program can reduce some demand-side barriers. The employer engagement manager's network of relationships with employers is constantly being refreshed, maintained and extended. This is considered by Brotherhood staff to be particularly important for gaining access to the 'hidden job market', which refers to vacancies never formally advertised. Department of Employment (2015) research suggests this represents up to one-third of all vacancies.

> "... organisations that can help to build asylum seekers' labour market 'know-how' can become critical bridges into mainstream, formal employment.

THE RESEARCH

The Brotherhood's Research and Policy Centre was engaged to conduct research and an evaluation for the program. The primary research questions were:

- What skills, attributes and expertise do asylum seekers have?
- What are the salient features of the Given the Chance program model?
- Are the program aims being achieved (how, in what ways)?

The research team adopted a formative evaluation approach to observe and document the model as it evolved, using findings to contribute to service development, and to strengthen and improve the program as it was being implemented (Nan 2003).

The research and evaluation had five main components:

- To understand the particular employment issues for asylum seekers, we conducted semi-structured **interviews with asylum seekers**. From December 2014 to March 2015 we interviewed 20 Given the Chance participants, with our sample reflecting a mix of age groups, gender and education levels. Nine participants were re-interviewed after 18 months to understand changes in their lived experiences over time.
- To document the program approach and map the service environment, in April–May 2016 the research team conducted **stakeholder interviews** with five Brotherhood staff, representatives of five external service providers, and five employers who had given jobs to participants.
- To understand employer drivers and experiences, in May 2016 we conducted an **employer survey** with representatives of 17 organisations that had employed Given the Chance participants.
- To examine the employment outcomes of Given the Chance, in 2016–2017 the research team conducted a **program database review**, examining the demographics and recorded job details of approximately 1,000 registered clients.
- We supplemented our analysis with a **literature review** of Australian and international publications on forced migration, employment and migration policy.

Participant profile

As at 30 June 2016, 1,034 participants were registered in the Given the Chance client database. However, the detail of client records varied, with more detailed data collected following a major redevelopment of the database in 2015. For example, there were 1,017 participants for whom data on age and country of origin could be analysed, but only 719 entries included data on highest level of education gained overseas. In our analysis below, we provide sample sizes for all demographic statistics.

As Figures 1 and 2 show, the majority of program participants were male, 'prime age' workers. In addition, participants had relatively high levels of education. Of all participants for whom data was available, 61% had at least a diploma-level qualification from their home country. This is comparable to figures from the ABS Multipurpose Household Survey which show that in 2015, 60% of all migrants in Australia (who were 15 years of age or older when they arrived) had obtained at least a diploma before or after arrival (ABS 2016). In addition, 33% of Given the Chance participants had obtained a Certificate III or IV qualification since arriving in Australia—much higher than the figure for the overall migrant population, which in 2015 was 10% (ABS 2016).

Some 44% (n=441) of all participants came from the Middle East and North Africa region, 33% (n=332) from Southern and Central Asia. These proportions are rather different from overall asylum seeker statistics for Victoria, which show that in June 2016, 38% of boat arrivals on bridging visas were from the Middle East and North Africa, and 48% from Southern and Central Asia (Australian Border Force 2016). This difference may be partly explained by the sources of intake to the program: out of 1,029 participants with data, a large group (27%) was 'walk-ins', or asylum seekers who voluntarily registered for Given the Chance without a formal referral from another service. Walk-ins may have learned of the program through word of mouth and cultural or ethnic networks. The location of the program office in Fitzroy does not appear to be a major factor, given that most bridging visa holders resided in outer suburbs of Melbourne (Australian Border Force 2016).

Figure 1

Men outnumber women

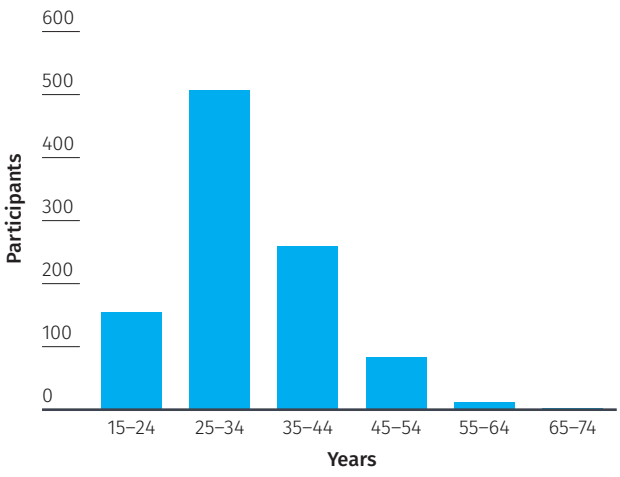
(n=1,034)

Male	**80%**
Female	**20%**

Figure 2

Most participants are 'prime age'

(n=1,017)



RESEARCH FINDINGS

Participants lack resources to fully participate in education or employment

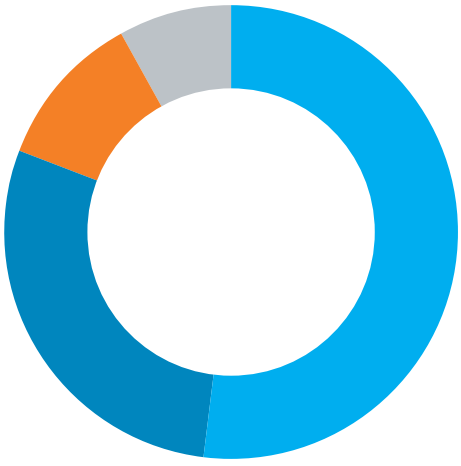
Of the clients who provided information about their sources of income upon joining the Given the Chance program, 52% said they were relying on income support payments, 29% said they were relying on salary or wages, and 11% said they had no income (see Figure 3).

Asylum seekers with no income from employment are likely to be living well below the poverty line. Under the Status Resolution Support Service (SRSS), asylum seekers living in the community are eligible for a payment of 89% of the lowest Centrelink rate, with rent assistance (JSS 2015)—or a maximum of approximately $293 per week for a single person with no children at 30 June 2016 (DHS 2016a). In comparison, in June 2016 the estimated income poverty line for a single person in the workforce, with no children and including housing costs, was $526.77 per week (Melbourne Institute 2017). The full-time weekly minimum wage in Australia at the same time was $672.70 (Fair Work Commission 2016)—more than double the income support entitlement of asylum seekers.

Figure 3

Over half of new participants relied on income support

(n=608)



Income support only	**52%**
Salary/wages only	**29%**
No income	**11%**
Other, including unspecified	**8%**

Several participants in our study described experiences of homelessness and poverty before joining the program. For example, Ebo, a man in his mid-30s from Sub-Saharan Africa, described these experiences when he first arrived in Australia:

> ***I had no money so I had to go to [my] case worker … but that time I was homeless. I went from slavery to slavery … They used to give us food … then [I] have food but nowhere to cook the food and nowhere to stay.***

Several other participants described the social isolation they experienced in Australia, as many arrived without friends or relatives, and spent months not knowing where they could obtain support. Not having stable housing, adequate income or transport while being dependent on modest income support payments is a common experience for asylum seekers. This lack of resources constrains their capacity to cope with extended unemployment, and to participate fully in employment, or education and training.

Workforce participation is constrained by visa conditions and service access

Nearly two-thirds of Given the Chance participants were boat arrivals, and this proportion has increased each year of the program (reaching 88% in the first half of 2016). As federal border security policies since 2013 have explicitly aimed to stop new boat arrivals altogether (Phillips 2017), the increasing proportion of boat arrivals in the program suggests that these asylum seekers had been living in Australia, with or without work rights, for several years before they joined the program.

The conditional and uncertain nature of bridging visas was consistently the most significant issue raised by asylum seekers during interviews. Bridging visas for people seeking asylum now typically include the legal permission to work. However, many asylum seekers in this study held the view that the temporary nature of a bridging visa, which may be cancelled or revoked, presents risks for employers. As Mune, a man from Sub-Saharan Africa who had six different short-term jobs since arriving in Australia, explained:

> ***It gives us the right to work and study, yet … employers … think that people are not stable with such a visa.***

The uncertainty of the bridging visa was seen as a disadvantage in mainstream recruitment processes. For example, Adia, a young woman from northern Africa, recounted how after a job interview with a health services employer, the recruiter told her that she was 'not happy' with the bridging visa, and that she could be offered the job but would 'have to get' permanent residence.

Asylum seekers have limited and inconsistent access to employment support, further constraining their workforce participation. Bridging and temporary visa holders are eligible only for voluntary 'Stream A' support from federally funded *jobactive* providers, which is designed for 'the most competitive jobseekers who require minimal assistance to find work' (DOE 2016b, p. 3). Apart from the 'Living Allowance' disbursed by SRSS providers, asylum seekers are not eligible for other Centrelink payments or services (DHS 2016b).

Other forms of employment assistance to asylum seekers vary greatly from place to place. The Victorian Government's Jobs Victoria Employment Network recently contracted specialist providers to serve asylum seekers in the community; however, such programs do not exist in many other states. The quality and availability of employment support to asylum seekers offered through community sector organisations also depends on private resources.

Given the Chance builds jobseeking 'know-how' and connections with employers

Given the Chance introduces asylum seekers to employers, provides local labour market information, and develops participants' work 'readiness' through training and support with recruitment processes.

Data on training outcomes was recorded for 267 participants. Of the training outcomes, 91% were non-accredited, with training provided by staff and volunteers in the Brotherhood's Work and Learning Centre. Non-accredited training included English language classes, mentoring and computer skills training.

Program participants recognised the importance of learning about recruitment practices, getting advice on application strategies for specific vacancies, and being prepared for the culture of Australian workplaces. As Tuan, a man in his mid-20s from Central Asia, told us:

> ***When you don't know how to apply for the jobs, you will not be having any job … It's the process that matters, the awareness that really matters.***

In asking asylum seekers about the assistance that they received from Given the Chance, it became clear that they felt the program added legitimacy to their job applications through the association with, pre-screening and endorsement by, the Brotherhood of St Laurence. To some extent this may mitigate the uncertainty associated with the bridging visa. As interviewee Adia explained:

> ***For asylum seekers, still when you go straight away to ask for a job, it's not easy. They don't trust us I think, we don't have permanent residence, they don't know us very well. On behalf of us, if the Brotherhood search a job for us and talk with employers it's good for us.***

While asylum seekers in our study held a perception that bridging visas put them at a disadvantage in applying for jobs, only one of the five employer representatives we interviewed mentioned visa restrictions. The respondent, a human resources manager of a hospitality company, said that people on restricted visas could be accommodated because the business already maintained a high number of casual, short-term and seasonal workers.

Consistent with our previous study of employer engagement programs for disadvantaged jobseekers (van Kooy, Bowman & Bodsworth 2014), the drivers for employers to source workers through Given the Chance were a combination of the need to recruit entry-level employees, and personal or organisational interests in contributing to a social cause. Eight of the 16 respondents to the employer survey had engaged with the program to fulfil company values or corporate social responsibility policies; seven engaged for commercial reasons or to fill a vacant position; and one stated 'to give the candidate a job'. The mix of drivers was illustrated by another employer, the owner of a catering company, who said:

> ***I've always been concerned about the plight of asylum seekers, and I get very concerned about people being let into the country and then not being able to find employment … And without a regular week's pay cheque, I don't understand how anybody can actually find their feet in Australia. They're certainly not going to do that on government subsidies. I think I have a lot of jobs here available that are highly suitable to asylum seekers.***

Research findings continued

Employers described the usefulness of the Given the Chance program in putting forward candidates that would suit the vacancies advertised, thereby reducing recruitment costs. A branch manager of a food services company told us that 'finding the right person' was 'all done for you' (by the Brotherhood):

> ***I'm presented with two, three, four résumés and that's ample for me. That hasn't cost me anything … And I can just walk into an interview at 10 o'clock on a Monday morning and sit down for 10 or 15 minutes with the person. I can get an idea straight away.***

Out of six options on the employer survey, 'taking the time to fully understand employer requirements' was rated as the most useful aspect of support received. In terms of non-financial benefits, six out of 17 employer respondents indicated that taking on asylum seekers gave the company 'a sense of giving back to the community', while four chose the option 'changed workplace culture and staff attitudes'.

Program outcomes in 2015–16 compare favourably with mainstream employment services

We analysed data on employment outcomes recorded in the Given the Chance database and compared the results with data obtained from the federal Department of Employment on outcomes from the *jobactive* employment service. Our analysis shows that placement, employment and retention rates for Given the Chance compare favourably with mainstream employment services.

For the fiscal year 2015–16, 56% of all Given the Chance participants found a job after joining the program.[3] This employment rate is higher than the placement rate (48%) for the active caseload of *jobactive* providers across all streams.[4] It is also significantly higher than the placement rate of 31% for *jobactive* clients categorised as 'culturally and linguistically diverse' (CALD) and accessing 'Stream B' support.[5]

Over the three years of Given the Chance, 68% of the participants placed were still in employment six months later. This compares favourably with jobactive, in which 33% of all placements led to a 26-week outcome in 2015–16.

Survival jobs have real benefits, but do not guarantee economic security

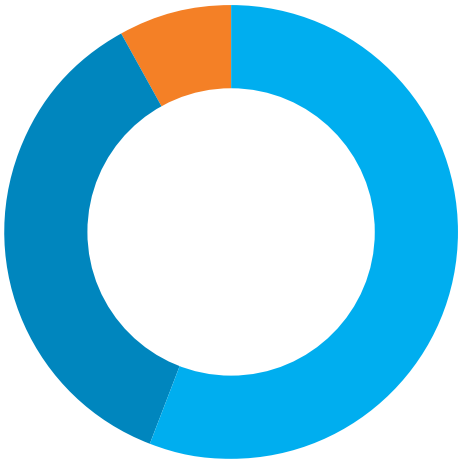
Our analysis looked at the job conditions for all asylum seekers who had found a job through the program from 2013 to 2016. Of the 331 participants who found a job over the first three years of the program, 45% (n=148) had held more than one job (one participant had held seven different jobs). The total number of jobs for all participants recorded was 560.

Further analysis of job conditions data showed that about 56% (n=294) of jobs were casual or seasonal, while almost three-quarters of jobs involved less than full-time weekly hours (see Figures 4 and 5).

Figure 4

Jobs were typically casual, seasonal or contract-based

(n=522)



Casual/seasonal/temporary	**56%**
Contract	**36%**
Permanent	**8%**

3 'Joining the program' refers to asylum seekers that went through an 'intake' process and were assigned to a Brotherhood employment consultant, and does not include those who had registered their contact details with the program but had not yet received any support.

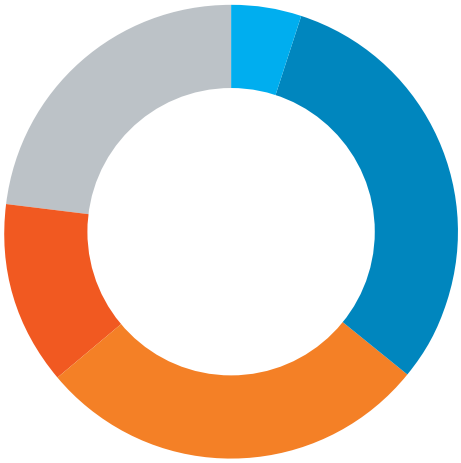
4 For all jobseekers who participated in employment services in the 12 months to June 2016, with outcomes measured around three months later (DOE 2017).

5 For CALD and Stream B jobseekers who participated in employment services in the 12 months to June 2016, with outcomes measured around three months later (DOE 2017).

Figure 5

Participants worked less than full-time weekly hours

(n=330)



1–9 hours	**5%**
10–19 hours	**31%**
20–29 hours	**28%**
30–34 hours	**13%**
Over 35 hours	**23%**

Table 1

Reasons for employment ceasing

Reasons	Number
Voluntary	
To obtain better job or conditions	27
Unsatisfactory work conditions	15
Family reasons	3
Holiday job, returned to studies	2
Involuntary	
Temporary or seasonal job	113
Retrenched, employer went out of business	20
Other	14
Own ill health or injury	4
Total	**198**

As a point of comparison, through mainstream employment services, the proportion of 'Stream B' jobseekers placed in casual, temporary or seasonal work in 2015–16 was 58%, which is close to the proportions in GtCAS represented in Figure 4 above. The major difference lies in the placement in permanent jobs, with nearly 32% of *jobactive* 'Stream B' jobseekers placed in permanent jobs compared with 8% of GtCAS jobseekers. The uncertainty linked to asylum seekers' work and residence rights, and their lack of professional networks, could account for this discrepancy.

The program database includes 198 records of reasons provided by a participant for a job ceasing. We analysed and reclassified these reasons according to ABS (2015) categories. Some 76% (n=151) were classified as involuntary, including temporary or seasonal contracts (57%), and retrenchment or employer going out of business (10%) (see Table 1).

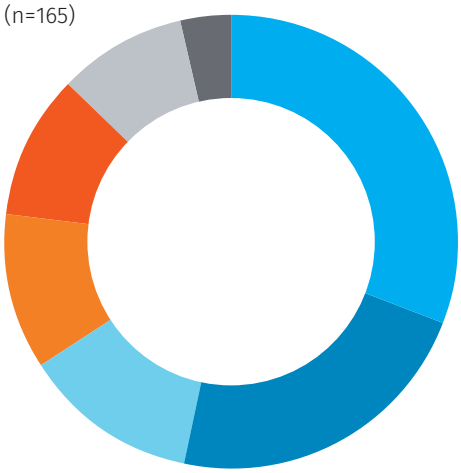
Most jobs were lower-skilled roles. We reclassified available participant job title data using ABS (2013) standard occupational groups and then skill levels. Labourers (such as cleaners, construction workers, factory process workers and kitchenhands) and sales workers (including customer service and retail assistant jobs) represented about 53% (n=165) of all jobs held by participants. The same proportion were classified as 'Skill Level 5', which is the lowest level of certification under the Australian Qualifications Framework, equivalent to a Certificate I, compulsory secondary education or no formal qualification (see Figures 6 and 7).

Research findings continued

Figure 6

Labourers and sales workers outnumber other occupations

(n=165)

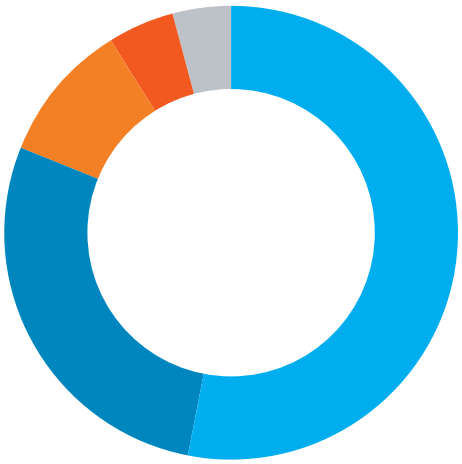


Labourers	**31%**
Sales workers	**22%**
Clerical and administrative workers	**13%**
Technicians and trades workers	**11%**
Community and personal service workers	**10%**
Machinery operators and drivers	**9%**
Professionals	**4%**

Figure 7

Most jobs required low skill levels

(n=150)



5 – Cert I/Secondary education	**53%**
4 – Cert II-III/1 year experience	**28%**
3 – Cert III-IV/3 years' experience	**10%**
2 – Diploma/3 years' experience	**5%**
1 – Bachelor degree/5 years' experience	**4%**

Asylum seekers in our study placed a high value on employment for diverse reasons. Few respondents focused on earnings alone. Other benefits included developing work experience and language skills, understanding Australian workplaces, settling in the local community and building social and labour market connections.

Jobs that helped asylum seekers to build their communication skills were especially valued. Mahmoud, a man in his mid-30s from the Middle East, told us that before joining the program he left his first job in a carwash because he could not satisfactorily improve his English language skills working alongside international students. He valued the opportunity to work with native English speakers in a warehousing job found through the program. Similarly, Ebo described the limitations of working as a kitchen hand, saying that he prioritised 'learning different things':

> ***[N]ot just putting just on dishwashing. Dishwashing—you can't communicate, you just communicate with dishes [...] They think of money but I need networking.***

Other asylum seekers described the importance of meeting and interacting with people from different backgrounds to help them settle in Australia. Titus, a man in his mid-40s from the Middle East, described the 'psychological boost', self-esteem and confidence that having a job as an office assistant had given him.

Given the risks of migrant workers being trapped in low-skilled and low-paid work (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury 2006), asylum seekers need opportunities to acquire skills, experience and connections that can help them settle (even temporarily) in Australia, and improve their labour market position and social participation over time.

CONCLUSION

Given the Chance has had success in getting many individual asylum seekers into their first jobs in Australia. Since the program was launched, 331 participants have found a job through the program. Outcomes in 2015–16 look promising, with an overall placement rate of 56%, and a retention rate of 68% of these after six months of employment. An unpublished, preliminary cost-benefit analysis of the program conducted by the Australia New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG) has also indicated that for every $1 of investment in the program, society receives a return of $1.52 in consumption, taxes paid and reduced welfare expenditure. Participants value gaining awareness of the market and of Australian workplaces, connections with employers and opportunities to build skills and experience.

However, Given the Chance stands out as an exception in a landscape of constrained service access and restrictive visa conditions for asylum seekers. Without such programs to act as a 'bridge', asylum seekers are at a disadvantage when competing in the mainstream job market. Employment assistance to most bridging and temporary visa holders is limited within the government-funded system, with not-for-profit services having to fill the gaps if resources are available. Immigration policies limit asylum seekers' workforce participation and potentially distort employer perceptions during recruitment.

Many migrants are employed in lower-skilled jobs after arrival in Australia, and may not have their skills and qualifications recognised. In the interviews we conducted, asylum seekers expressed frustration at their inability to find work or be seriously considered by employers without support. They recognised that the spaces for their economic contribution to Australia were 'narrow', and many could not fully utilise the skills and experience they had acquired overseas.

Under the constrained circumstances in Australia, the Given the Chance program has facilitated significant outcomes for many individual asylum seekers. However, advocacy efforts should continue to address the government policies and employer practices that prevent others from achieving sustainable employment outcomes and economic security, so that their potential to contribute to Australia's economy and society is not wasted.

> “
> Given the Chance stands out as an exception in a landscape of constrained service access and restrictive visa conditions for asylum seekers.

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Contact us

Research & Policy Centre
Brotherhood of St Laurence

67 Brunswick Street
Fitzroy, Victoria 3065
Australia

T (03) 9483 1183
E research@bsl.org.au

bsl.org.au/knowledge

RESEARCH & POLICY CENTRE

Brotherhood of St Laurence
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