



Brotherhood
of St Laurence

Working for an Australia free of poverty

Given the Chance

An evaluation of an employment and education pathways program for refugees

Summary

This summary outlines the findings of an evaluation of the Given the Chance (GtC) program, an employment and education pathways program for refugees piloted and developed by the Ecumenical Migration Centre (EMC) of the Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL). The evaluation was undertaken by BSL Research and Policy Centre staff from January 2005 until December 2007.

GtC develops social, educational and employment pathways for refugees. The literature shows that refugees are a particularly marginalised group in society, who face general as well as specific barriers to employment and social inclusion. In addition to barriers that other disadvantaged groups face, such as lack of appropriate skills, refugees also need to overcome particular barriers such as coping with trauma and having limited social networks. Consistent with recent refugee arrivals in Victoria, the largest group of participants in GtC have fled war-torn Sudan, and less than half of participants have completed 12 years of schooling, although others have qualifications which are not recognised in Australia. Hence, specialised services are required that are designed to assist refugees to overcome specific barriers.

The evaluation

The evaluation assesses the extent to which the program led to positive employment outcomes and strengthened communities. Specifically, it is guided by two questions:

- Does the GtC model lead to improved employment and settlement outcomes for refugees?
- How do these outcomes contribute to stronger communities?

There were two main data collection methods: a survey and interviews. Seventy participants were surveyed as they entered the program and then 30 people were able to be resurveyed to identify whether the program had affected their life. Twenty-four interviews with refugees, the same number with mentors and 15 interviews with employers were conducted. Interviews focused on whether participants believed the program had successful outcomes.

Program components

From 2005 to 2007, 220 refugees enrolled in GtC, exceeding the target of 150 participants. Upon enrolment, GtC applies a case management approach, guiding refugees into the following integrated and specialised support services:

Mentoring

There were 115 refugees who were matched with mentors from the wider community. Mentors volunteered to meet with a refugee at least fortnightly for 12 months, to provide them with personal support, often related to employment. For many refugees mentoring was the most beneficial aspect of the program: they particularly emphasised its contribution to expanding social networks.

Employment training

Some 76 refugees attended GtC training, which focused on employment skills like job search techniques, resume writing and interview behaviour. Refugees said that their employment-related skills were enhanced, helping them overcome vocational barriers which resulted in improved employment outcomes.

Work placements

Some 60 refugees undertook a work placement, to promote their understanding of the Australian labour market and work culture, build networks and gain experience. Furthermore, 24 work placements directly resulted in ongoing employment.

Employment and education outcomes

The high percentage of GtC participants achieved successful employment and/or education outcomes (66%) compared well with CALD participants (not only refugees) in the Job Network receiving 'Intensive Support customised assistance (58%) (DEWR 2007, p.7). The majority of refugee participants aimed to find employment, and 121 participants did so within the period of the study. This is a 55% success rate, comparing favourably with the same Job Network demographic as above, who had a 41% employment rate¹ (DEWR 2007, p.7). Furthermore, CALD participants as a group are much less disadvantaged than refugees in particular, as they do not necessarily face barriers such as surviving trauma that refugees face. The aim of some participants was to commence and complete education or training, either exclusively or in addition to working. GtC was able to assist refugees to achieve this, with 48 (22%) of refugees commencing study. Altogether 147 refugees commenced employment or study. Table S1 summarises key outcomes.

Table S1 Employment and education outcomes for GtC participants 2005 to 2007

Outcome	Number	Percentage
Found employment	121	55%
Found skilled employment	64	53%
Found unskilled employment	57	47%
Commenced study	48	22%
Found employment or commenced study	147	66%

n=220

Community strengthening

GtC contributed to strengthening refugee and wider communities in two ways: by helping refugees become more involved in the wider community and by encouraging the wider community to be more inclusive of refugees. Mentoring, work placements, training and employment expanded social networks, and created new and constructive interactions between refugees and others. However, community strengthening is necessarily limited by GtC's small scale. Nonetheless, by improving settlement outcomes of individuals, GtC contributes to strengthening refugee and non-refugee communities.

¹ The Job Network employment outcome is taken 3 months after participant leaves assistance, whereas the GtC figure is an immediate exit outcome.

The case study below illustrates the important support provided by mentors, and the increasing community engagement of refugee participants in Given the Chance.

Case study

Shambu² came to Australia to do his masters in horticulture. During his studies, he applied for asylum due to persecution in his country of origin. He struggled to adjust to Australian culture. After completing study he faced unemployment and lacked social networks.

Shambu was matched with a mentor named John³, who is a landscape gardener. John wanted to better understand the issues that refugees face by ‘getting involved in a one on one situation... and do something productive’ to help refugees.

Shambu’s highest priority was finding employment. He said John was very helpful in developing skills related to obtaining work. For example, together they did numerous mock interviews.

Shambu became close to his mentor. They regularly spoke on the phone and met up purely to socialise, often having meals at each other’s homes or at restaurants. Shambu said that from the beginning, John ‘made me feel very comfortable’ and he felt welcome to make as much contact as was necessary.

In 2005, Shambu commenced a work placement with a community organisation in his professional field, organised by the staff at GtC. He reported:

They rang here a lot and came to see me when I was working, almost every week to ensure I was managing well.

His employers were so impressed with Shambu’s performance that they offered him a further contract to fill the position of a staff member on leave, and later an ongoing position. Shambu now has the ambition to be a tertiary teacher. He says:

I’m very confident because ... volunteering and working has given me hands-on experience so I’m confident that I have very practical experience. So now it looks I’m on the track to be a teacher which is what I want to do, and I think volunteering really helped.

As a mentor, John also feels optimistic:

Every time I see him, I’m reminded that he’s ten jumps ahead of me intellectually and professionally. He’s on his way and just having trouble adapting to Australian culture.

Thanks to his participation in GtC, Shambu’s social networks have expanded. He says, ‘I got to meet a lot of people and I didn’t think I was alone anymore’. Furthermore, he is involved in the parents’ committee at his daughter’s primary school. He proudly reports that he applied his horticulture skills to improving the garden at the school, impressing many other parents.

John is glad to count Shambu as a friend, and reports with pleasure that Shambu has

... this great capacity to do really well because of his drive and determination. Like right now I see him running slowly, but once he starts moving quickly, there’s no slowing him down.

² Not his real name.

³ Not his real name.

Recommendations

Eight recommendations arose from the evaluation. It should be acknowledged that the implementation of some depends on the level of resources available.

Improving project implementation:

- Enhance knowledge management through more formal record-keeping and tracking refugees after completing or withdrawing from the program.
- Better manage refugee expectations.

Enhancing mentoring:

- Further take into account geographical considerations in matching refugees with mentors.
- Recruit an appropriate mix of mentors through proactive processes, such as direct approaches to professional and trade associations, to enable individualised matching of mentors with participants.

Further developing refugee training:

- Consider implementing grades of training to meet needs of refugees at different base levels, such as to suit refugees with different degrees of language proficiency.
- Expanding specific skill training (like IT skills) and fully incorporating it into the program.

Further research:

- Identify and evaluate other Australian practice models and compare with GtC.
- Measure medium and long term employment outcomes of participants.

Conclusion

The evaluation reveals that GtC improved refugee employment and settlement outcomes for most refugee participants. The program generated tangible benefits (employment and educational opportunities) as well as less tangible benefits (improved cultural understanding) to refugees and the community. Positive outcomes were achieved through case managing refugees, guiding them into a combination of closely integrated components (mentoring, training and work placements), each one essential to refugee social inclusion. For some of the most marginalised people in our community this program has been the difference between social exclusion and successful settlement.

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A copy of the full report can be downloaded from the Brotherhood's website <www.bsl.org.au>.