

# ***PATHWAYS TO PARTICIPATION***

## ***A PRACTICE GUIDE FOR AGENCIES SUPPORTING ASYLUM SEEKERS IN TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT***

**August 2012**



**Department of Education and  
Early Childhood Development**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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In 2011, the ASRC received funding from the Victorian State Government in the form of a grant from Skills Victoria' Access and Equity program.

The aim of this funding was to develop models of practice to support access to training and employment for hard-to-reach learners. The ASRC, in partnership with NMIT, was selected to develop a project for asylum seekers and refugees: *Pathways to Participation*. The project started in October 2011, and finished in August 2012.

## PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The project's objectives were to:

- Develop a holistic model of service delivery that will engage asylum seekers and refugees in training through to employment.
- Engage learners in training that meets skill shortage areas and optimises employment opportunities so that they can continue learning through industry experience.
- Engage hard-to-reach learners into training that they are interested in.
- Leverage partnership approaches to determine the best way that social support organisations can effectively support learners, education providers and employers to be effective in engaging asylum seekers and refugees at all stages.
- Create a skilled, flexible, adaptive and resilient community of asylum seekers and refugees that can contribute to filling key skill shortage areas in Australia.

## PROJECT PARTICIPANTS

The P2P program engaged 15 asylum seekers into various education and training courses at NMIT during the first half of 2012. These 15 ASRC 'clients' formed the cohort from which to develop and document the holistic approach of the project.

The group consisted of five women and ten men from eleven countries. Following intensive career counselling, participants chose the following courses: Health

Services Assistance (4 participants), Aged Care & Home and Community Care (3), Pathology (2), Justice (1), ESL/Teacher Aide (1), ESL for Professionals (1), Hospitality (1), Bookkeeping (1), and Tourism (1).

The project experienced a high retention and success rate: eight of the participants had completed their courses by the end of the project, six were continuing (courses are longer than the duration of the project) and one failed.

## ***THE PATHWAYS TO PARTICIPATION MODEL***

In order to develop an effective model of practice working with asylum seekers and refugees, the P2P Project asked the following questions:

- What are the barriers and enablers for asylum seekers and refugees seeking employment and education?
- How can clients' individual circumstances/abilities be assessed to encourage self sufficiency and reduce service resources?
- What support should be provided at each stage of the client's journey through education and employment to combat risk of disengagement?
- The logistics of multi-disciplinary service provision – how can services work collaboratively?

In response to these questions, the ASRC has developed a wrap-around model of support, which takes into account different areas of the client's life, and their changing circumstances.

It is the ASRC's belief that every asylum seeker and refugee need to be seen as 'a whole person' when supported through education, training and employment. Focusing solely on the area of employment or education for an individual comports enormous risk of failure. Asylum seekers and refugees, like most disadvantaged groups, have complex needs of a constantly changing nature. There are many points of risk in their lives which, if not supported, meant their alienation from systems and much-reduced capacities to learn and work.

The wrap-around model documented by this Practice Guide rested on four principles:

- seeing the client as a whole person
- early intervention
- empowerment
- flexibility

These principles were shared by ASRC and the main partner, NMIT. The partnership with NMIT, which has a long history of working with disadvantaged groups and with new arrivals, enriched the reflection on good practice that permeated the project.

The ASRC model relies on strong partnerships between ASRC services, with external support agencies, education providers and, when possible, employers.

## **PROJECT ACHIEVEMENTS**

A key achievement of the project has been the high retention and completion rate, with only one of the participants dropping out. This high retention has been achieved despite several of the participants experiencing rejections by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, the loss of a loved one, destitution, depression and anxiety, suicidal ideation and voluntary admission in a psychiatric facility.

The project used a range of strategies to support participants, including:

- intensive initial career counselling, with no time limitation
- on-going support through the course
- on-going liaison with NMIT course staff
- discussion and facilitation of employment pathways, and advocacy with employers if required.

Built into the project was a monitoring and evaluation component, with pre- and post-study surveys with participants, a Steering Committee and interviews with ASRC staff to reflect on the model.

The project was the opportunity to develop tools to support the model: for participants, this took the form of Individual Learning Plans (accessed electronically), now used across the ASRC Education program; for external stakeholders, a website was developed, providing information about access to employment and education for asylum seekers; and a training module has been designed to increase education

provider and employers' understanding of the issues affecting asylum seekers who are studying or working.

## **REFLECTION ON GOOD PRACTICE**

Through the *Pathways to Participation* participants and the partnership with NMIT, elements of good practice were identified for agencies supporting asylum seekers and refugees who want to study and work, and for Registered Training Organisations offering them the opportunity to do so.

Community agencies and RTOs share a common interest: asylum seekers and refugees who are working are more resilient, less dependent on welfare agencies, and contribute to filling areas of skills shortages. In turn, this 'wrap-around' approach triggers the involvement of a range of agencies, who need to communicate effectively about their clients' support needs.

Support agencies, particularly those involved in settlement, must develop their knowledge of training and employment pathways. For many asylum seekers and refugees, they will be the first source of information about many issues, including education and work.

One of the key learnings of this project has been that if not accompanied by practical experience and connection with employment pathways, the sole provision of tuition is meaningless in the vocational education and training sector. It creates a 'glut' of disadvantaged learners, all holding similar qualifications with no practical experience to support it, and with the unfair expectation that they will build their own bridges between training and work.

There is a need to better publicise information about RTOs on a range of criteria, including employment outcomes. This information then must be made accessible to 'hard-to-reach' learners who may not be able to rely on networks to inform their choices, and to community agencies who can support said choices.

**SUPPORTING EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES FOR ASYLUM SEEKERS AND REFUGEES – WHAT CONSTITUTES GOOD PRACTICE**

***For Community Agencies***

- Community agencies need to develop their knowledge of training and employment pathways in order to be able to advise asylum seeker and refugee clients. This information is an integral part of settlement support.
- Unlimited and intensive initial career counselling, giving clients time and means to explore different options before making a decision.
- On-going support during course/training, to discuss concerns, advocate with course providers, or refer to other services if issues arise that impact on the person's ability to study and work.
- A range of services, including employment, located in the one 'hub', to facilitate communication; and
- Common policies across collaborating services around confidentiality and information-sharing, clients' rights and responsibilities, and client support.

***For Registered Training Organisations***

- Industry placements must be offered as part of a course. The more extended and comprehensive placements are, the more students have a chance to learn and develop their skills, the more employable they become.
- RTOs have an essential role in providing pathways to employment for students. Asylum seekers and refugees will have limited networks and access to credible information, and will rely on RTOs to provide up-to-date information about employment outcomes and to connect them with industry.
- To this end, RTOs must have relationships with employers, in order to keep abreast of industry requirements and prepare their students accordingly.
- The promotion at the state level of information about how RTOs fare on a range of minimum standards, to help asylum seekers and refugees make informed choices around selection of courses and course providers.

## **GLOSSARY**

ASRC: Asylum Seeker Resource Centre

ASSET: Asylum Seeker Service for Employment and Training, the ASRC Employment and Education Program

DIAC: Department of Immigration and Citizenship

NMIT: Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE

P2P: *Pathways to Participation* (otherwise known as 'The Project')

RTO: Registered Training Organisation (including TAFE)

VET: Vocational Education and Training

## THE PROJECT

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### PROJECT PURPOSE

The overall purpose of the project was to provide asylum seekers and refugees with training and employment support that takes into account their changing circumstances, in order to maximise their chances of finding sustainable training and work.

The model of the *Pathways to Participation* (P2P) was developed by the ASSET in partnership with NMIT, who has a strong history of providing responsive education and training to asylum seekers and refugees.

### PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The project's objectives were to:

- Develop a holistic model of service delivery that will engage asylum seekers and refugees in training through to employment.
- Engage learners in training that meets skill shortage areas and optimises employment opportunities so that they can continue learning through industry experience.
- Engage hard-to-reach learners into training that they are interested in.
- Leverage partnership approaches to determine the best way that social support organisations can effectively support learners, education providers and employers to be effective in engaging asylum seekers and refugees at all stages.
- Create a skilled, flexible, adaptive and resilient community of asylum seekers and refugees that can contribute to filling key skill shortage areas in Australia.

## CLIENT GROUP

This project aims to develop a model of support for asylum seekers and refugees.

An asylum seeker is a person who:

- Has had to leave their country because it is too dangerous to stay there; and
- Who is in danger in their country because they are being seriously harmed or at risk of serious harm because of either their political opinion, religion, race, nationality or social group; and
- Their government cannot, or will not protect them from that serious harm.

Asylum seekers are not refugees: in Australia, the term 'refugee' applies to those who have been granted protection and permanent residency, and have access to Centrelink services and support (as do other permanent residents). Asylum seekers are applying for this status and are awaiting the outcome of their application.

The ASRC works mainly with asylum seekers – when people obtain a permanent visa, and therefore become 'refugees', they are transitioned into mainstream services. It is felt however that there are many commonalities between the two groups, and that what we learnt from this project is relevant to agencies working with refugees.

Asylum seekers and refugees who are working do not depend on welfare, contribute (financially and humanly) to the community they live in and have better mental health. Furthermore, a skilled, flexible, adaptive and resilient community of asylum seekers and refugees can contribute to filling key skill shortage areas in Australia. It is of benefit to the community as a whole that community members, regardless of their cultural background or mode of arrival in Australia, are working.

## KEY RELATIONSHIPS

### *The two partners: ASRC and NMIT*

ASRC was the P2P Project Host. Established in 2001, the ASRC is Australia's leading provider of aid, advocacy, health and welfare services to asylum seekers. The ASRC offers the only education and training service of its kind in Australia, including the only employment service that caters for asylum seekers in Victoria (ASSET).

NMIT was the project's major partner. NMIT is a highly-regarded leader amongst VET providers in engaging refugees and asylum seekers and developing innovative

programs and projects to meet their specific needs as learners and future employees.

In 2011, the partnership was successful in securing funds through the Access and Equity Grants Scheme to progress their work together. The partners' pursuit of this funding came from a common ground, where each wanted to learn more through partnership. The funding allowed them to secure the time and resources to look and improve their practice. The ASRC provide the employment and education counselling to those in the program while NMIT provided the formal training and educational opportunities to enhance this. A MOU was signed in 2011 to cement this relationship.

### *Employers*

Partnerships with employers were developed through NMIT's strong networks and work placements opportunities. Support was provided to employers by the ASRC and NMIT on request, mainly around visa conditions and rights.

The ASRC Employment Program also has its own relationships with employers. This includes aged care providers, hospitals, manufacturers, state government departments, labour hire agencies, etc. These relationships informed the development of information and training tools developed by this project.

### *Asylum Seeker Support Services*

The ASRC is in a unique position in Victoria in that it offers most services required by asylum seekers from a single location. ASRC members who receive education and employment support also have access to a five day/week health clinic, counselling services, casework, social and recreational opportunities, mentoring, English classes, a food bank... All together, the ASRC offers 23 programs to its clients, all located in its West Melbourne building.

The ASRC also 'shares' clients with other asylum seeker agencies such as Hotham Mission, the Australian Red Cross and the Brigidines Sisters.

## THE MODEL

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In order to develop an effective model of practice working with asylum seekers and refugees, the P2P Project asked the following questions:

- What are the barriers and enablers for asylum seekers and refugees seeking employment and education?
- How can clients' individual circumstances/abilities be assessed to encourage self sufficiency and reduce service resources?
- What support should be provided at each stage of the client's journey through education and employment to combat risk of disengagement?
- The logistics of multi-disciplinary service provision – how can services work collaboratively?

### **BARRIERS AND ENABLERS FOR ASYLUM-SEEKERS SEEKING EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION**

*Settlement Outcomes of New Arrivals*, a study conducted by the Australian Survey Research Group for the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (2011), states that 'of the migration streams represented in this survey, Humanitarian entrants<sup>1</sup> are most likely to be unemployed, even after five years of settlement. Conversely, Humanitarian entrants display a higher involvement in further education activities. Most Humanitarian entrants are strongly focused on creating a new life and studying for a qualification in Australia is an important step in this journey.'

In our experience, asylum seekers and refugees presents with a combination of high level of motivation to work, low level of knowledge of the Australian employment market, and increased vulnerabilities due to their experience of persecution in their home country, the refugee application process in Australia, including detention (sometimes prolonged) and ensuing mental health issues. Supporting them in their

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<sup>1</sup> Humanitarian entrants include refugees and people of refugee background who are sponsored to Australia

pursuit of training and employment requires a tailored approach, in conjunction with ASRC welfare services.

### *Legal Status*

Asylum seekers are typically on a Bridging Visa – a visa that creates a ‘bridge’ between the visa they arrived into the country with, and the one they are applying for.

Many asylum seekers will hold a Bridging Visa A or E, which provide full work rights and study rights. They have access to Medicare but do not receive any support from Centrelink and do not have access to public housing.

Since October 2010, asylum seekers have been able to access VET-funding through an agreement with the Victorian Government, offering them study options at TAFE and private Registered Training Organisations (RTOs). The ASRC is the sole agency able to access this funding, and all asylum seekers wishing to study need to be assessed by the ASRC Education Program. Asylum seekers do not have access to university courses.

Asylum seekers are in a precarious situation, without any certainty about the duration of their stay in Australia, as it relies on a positive immigration outcome that is out of their control. This complicates decisions they need to make about training and employment options.

### *Absence of a ‘safety net’*

Asylum seekers, who are temporary residents until their application has been approved, have no welfare ‘safety net’ as they do not receive Centrelink benefits. They rely on charities to respond to their basic needs.

Asylum seekers are more likely to be homeless and unemployed than the average Australian. Asylum seekers face significant barriers in accessing training. These include language barriers and the burden of mental health issues.

Refugees, who are permanent residents, also face great barriers to finding employment, and may remain unemployed for several years after arrival in Australia.

Both groups typically suffer mental health issues due to trauma. Difficulties in finding meaningful training or employment compound this, causing depression and anxiety.

## *Lives in crisis*

We know, based on our experience, that asylum seekers live in a state of crisis. The risk areas can take the form of: losing housing (which can be as a result of losing their legal case); losing legal case (which can result in loss of work rights or study rights); losing a job; losing health; change to family situation in home country; mental health (affected by all other factors, as well as events prior to arrival in Australia).

Interviews with ASRC Casework staff identified legal milestones as the main barrier to continuous engagement for asylum seekers. This included: preparing their statement for the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC), which entails revisiting painful, and often traumatic, experiences; DIAC and Refugee Review Tribunal interviews; and rejections at either of these stages. The waiting time for a response on their application can last for months – even several years sometimes – which causes great stress and anxiety. Some asylum seekers experience suicidal ideation and need hospitalisation.

Losing their protection application at a certain stage can lead to loss of work rights and study rights. This also causes great anxiety for clients engaged in employment and education, who will then have to leave their job or course and rely on charities and welfare agencies for day-to-day support.

### **CASE STUDY – CHANGING CIRCUMSTANCES**

Ali arrives at the ASRC and an intake is undertaken by a Caseworker. Ali suffers from mental health issues relating to his experiences of torture. He is deemed as too vulnerable to work by the Department of Immigration (DIAC). He is therefore able to receive Red Cross income support (89% of Newstart allowance). Ali's Red Cross payment goes mainly to his rent in shared accommodation.

At this point Ali's priority is to gain an education so that he has something to engage his mind and some hope for the future. He receives education counselling by ASRC's ASSET and subsequently enrolls in a Hospitality Course. ASSET supports Ali by loaning him money for books through an interest-free microcredit scheme. ASRC also assists Ali through its Food bank, Counselling, Health and Legal departments.

Three months after his intake, ASRC Casework is notified by ASRC Legal that Ali has failed at the review stage of the refugee determination process. As a result he loses his Red Cross payments. As Ali has no access to public housing, he is now pending homelessness. Ali's case is brought up in the multidisciplinary team meeting as a 'high risk' client, as over the past two months he has become steadily more depressed.

Ali has been moved through a number of housing situations. He is in \$5000 debt to friends, which he cannot repay. His family in Pakistan is under threat and requires money to assist them. He has dropped out of his Hospitality course because he was finding study too difficult.

It is decided that Ali should now seek employment so he can earn money to support himself. Referral to the ASRC Employment Program is made.

## WHY A WRAP-AROUND MODEL

In its Strategic Review of Effective Re-Engagement Models for Disengaged Learners, the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) notes that *'because of their marginalized education and employment status, disengaged learners will often need approaches that include a range of human services such as health, housing, education, training, employment and community development'*.

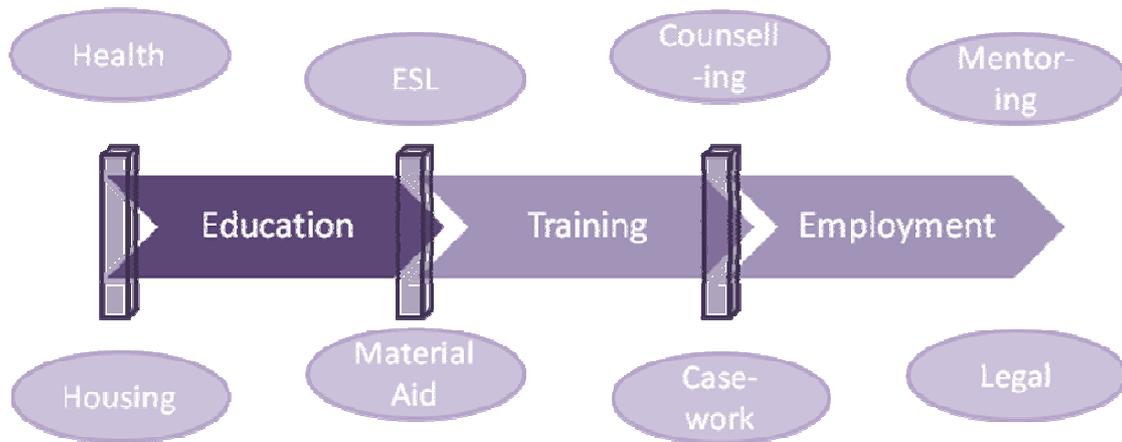
The Department's suggestion is to recognize the importance of a service delivery that includes *'partnering between education and training providers and agencies involved in housing, employment, mental health and primary care.'*

It is the ASRC's belief that we need to see the whole person when supporting asylum seekers and refugees through education, training and employment. Focusing solely on the area of employment or education for an individual comports enormous risk of failure. Asylum seekers and refugees, like most disadvantaged groups, have complex needs of a constantly changing nature.

The needs of asylum seekers and refugees are interdependent, and must be addressed to enable the person to maintain employment or education commitments. There are many points of risk in their lives which, if not supported, meant their alienation from systems and much-reduced capacities to learn and work.

In the case of the ASRC, this means engaging in discussions with Casework, Legal, Counselling, Social & Community Development and Health to provide wrap-around services to clients. Increasingly, the ASRC endeavours to refer its clients to external services when possible. For instance, this can be a community GP, for clients who have Medicare. The ASRC also 'shares' clients with other asylum seeker agencies such as Hotham Mission, the Australian Red Cross and the Brigidines Sisters, who provide casework and housing.

The graph below outlines the different services that support ASSET clients on their journey to employment.



#### CASE STUDY – REFERRAL TO EDUCATION

**Nadia** - ASRC volunteer GP Dr Joseph approaches the P2P Project Officer to raise his concern about one of his female patients, Nadia. Nadia is depressed and idle, and being prescribed sleeping pills and anti-depressant on a regular basis. Dr Joseph feels that what she really needs are goals and an occupation that creates pathways for her. He recommends studying, saying it would help Nadia ‘much better than any pill I can prescribe’.

A request is then made to Nadia’s Caseworker to assess her for education and, if appropriate, make a referral. Her housing situation needs to be stabilized first as she is likely to move soon, which will influence where she can study. Once she has moved to more stable accommodation, the referral is made to the P2P Project Officer and Nadia enrolls in a Health Services Assistance course at NMIT.

#### CASE STUDY – ACCESS

**Amran** - An error made by Amran’s private migration agent lead to Amran not being granted work rights with his Bridging Visa. This information was included in the referral made by ASRC Casework, and limited Amran’s education and training options. With Amran’s consent, the P2P Project Officer requested advice from the ASRC Legal Program on the probability of Amran being granted the right to work in the near future. Indication that this was likely to happen helped determine what course was most appropriate for Amran at this point. He enrolled in a six-month Bookkeeping Certificate.

## **PRINCIPLES SUPPORTING THE MODEL**

Our development of this wrap-around model of support to employment and education clients was guided by the following principles.

### *Seeing the client as a whole person*

Clients' aspirations and abilities, regardless of whether they are asylum seekers, refugees or from hard-to-reach groups, need to be seen in the context of their current circumstances. This includes employment and education, but also social and community connections, housing, health and well-being, and, in the case of asylum seekers, immigration status. This principle creates a need for partnership between relevant services.

### *Early intervention*

The multi-disciplinary approach is by essence an early intervention model. The model looks at the clients' journey, from first contact with the ASRC (through Casework) to full employment. This enables services to identify in advance the known points of vulnerability. When one of these issues arises in the life of a client, the risk that this will impact negatively on their work or training is high. While they cannot be prevented, they can be foreseen, and support can be put in place to try to minimise their impact on the client. Being alerted of this risk by the relevant program enables Employment or Education workers to discuss with the client what their support needs will be.

### *Empowerment*

The ASRC aims to minimise asylum seekers' reliance on welfare and charity. Accessing education and employment is a crucial pathway to self-sufficiency.

For ASRC members, empowerment also comes from informed decision-making, and nowhere is this more relevant than in their educational choices. Making informed decisions involves an understanding of the choices and limitations that asylum seekers face when trying to identify employment pathways. While our approach is client-centred, the realities of the Australian employment market need to be negotiated. The one-on-one, intensive career counselling provided through the P2P project facilitated discussions with clients about short-term and long-term outcomes, about their current circumstances and subsequent needs, versus their long-term aspirations. In its implementation, the program's high retention rate demonstrated the strengths of this approach.

## *Flexibility*

A successful model for engaging hard-to-reach learners must have integral to it procedures and systems that cater dynamically to changes in other areas of the client's life and can adapt to these changing circumstances. Programs are connected, and referrals can be made between Employment/Education Support, Caseworker, Health, Counselling, etc... Communication between programs/services is on-going. In the case of the ASRC, it also takes place through weekly multidisciplinary team meetings ('Welfare and Advocacy') where new clients and clients 'at risk' are discussed.

### **CASE STUDY – THE WRAP-AROUND MODEL IN ACTION**

Thomas has had a rough year, suffering depression and panic attacks. His Immigration hearings have created a lot of stress, and on several occasions his mental health was enough of a concern to require the intervention of the CAT Team.

Thomas has worked as a pastor in his home country, and was keen to work in Community Services. The ASSET helped him enrol in a Certificate IV at his local TAFE.

Throughout the course, Thomas became unable to attend classes due to depression. What started as a week-long absence became two weeks, then a month. During this time, Thomas was supported by several ASRC services, a holistic approach that involved close cooperation between Casework, Counselling, Health and the Education program. This included discussing Thomas' ability to study to ensure that we all provided a consistent response. Thomas felt ashamed about not being able to attend the course, and felt he was letting his ASRC support down. It was important that Thomas be reassured that this was not the case.

By the time Thomas was well enough to return to class, he had missed too much and had been withdrawn. The TAFE course staff member was very supportive and understanding, and requested a meeting with ASRC to discuss Thomas's circumstances. They were shocked to realise he was going through a Protection application and expressed regret that he had not disclosed his status, as this would have allowed the Course Coordinator to respond differently to his absences.

Another issue that emerged during this meeting was the inappropriateness of studying Community Services at this level for someone in Thomas' situation. While in crisis himself, he was, in his course, learning how to identify mental health issues, when to call the CAT Team, how to respond to someone expressing thoughts of suicide... Issues that he was also experiencing himself.

Thomas was still keen to study, wanting to find a less demanding course that would still meet his skills and previous experience. After discussing his options with the P2P Project Officer, he selected a Certificate III in Aged Care at NMIT. Thomas was referred to the course for more information and assessment, and was offered a place. As the course was about to start, he received the news that his application for a Permanent Visa had been approved. He decided to go ahead with the Aged Care course, which he felt was still the best option for him in the short and long term.

## **PARTNERSHIPS REQUIRED**

### *With Supporting Services*

In order to work, the P2P model requires strong collaboration between the agencies and services involved with a client.

In the case of the ASRC, many of these services are provided internally. The model presents particular challenges for agencies that provide a single specialist service – this will be addressed in the last section of this guide.

### *With Education Providers*

Essential to the model is a close partnership with education providers, whereby issues arising in a course are fed back to the supporting agency. Several steps are required in order to achieve this:

- Education providers need to be informed about the circumstances of asylum seekers and to be aware of supporting agencies and services. This can be done through the provision of training or one-on-one discussion with Course Coordinators and Student Services.
- Confidentiality needs to be addressed: when referring a client to a TAFE or a private RTO, the ASSET requests the client to sign a release form, allowing ASSET and RTO to discuss the client's needs.
- Private RTOs and TAFE need to provide individual support to their students and provide avenues for students to share their concerns.

### *With Employers*

Many ASSET clients find work on the open employment market, and it is not always possible to establish partnerships with employers. The ASSET is also constantly

developing relationships with employers: aged care providers, hospitals, manufacturers, labour hire agencies, etc.

Those employers who work with the ASSET are open to employing this particular group, but also need to meet their business needs. The partnership is established on a basis of trust: the employer trusts that the ASRC will provide strong candidates for jobs, and the ASSET trusts that the employer will provide a safe and supportive workplace.

As with education providers, the partnership can involve training, one-on-one discussions about particular clients and post-placement support.

### **CASE STUDY - WHAT EMPLOYERS SAY ABOUT EMPLOYING ASYLUM SEEKERS**

In 2011, the ASSET conducted a survey with fifteen employers who had recently employed, or were currently employing, asylum seekers. Employers saw little difference between their asylum seeker staff and other staff. They provided the same amount of training, and found that people left for the same reasons. Lack of the right technical skills was more an issue for asylum seekers, but they were more likely to be punctual and be at work than other staff. Two thirds of the employers surveyed were equally satisfied with their asylum seeker staff as with other staff. Three quarters stated they would be likely to employ asylum seekers sent by the ASRC again.

The greatest challenges for employers were around interpersonal communication, language skills and expectations of the role. More than three quarters of employers felt their general staff would benefit from cross cultural training.

Feedback was also collected from a Victorian State Department, where eight members of the ASRC undertook sixteen-week long work placements in the winter of 2011. The project also included initial training by the ASRC to managing and supervising staff and to participants, and on-going support to both. The training provided information on asylum seekers' circumstances in Australia, and how persecution and trauma affects people in a workplace environment, as well as discussion of communication and management strategies.

In a post-project survey, every one of the managers and colleagues interviewed stated that they had found the program *'very valuable'*. One explained: *'I really believe having been part of the program has improved me as a person and hopefully has improved (the Department) as a place to work'*. And another: *'Candidates were highly skilled and job ready, which makes things much easier from a management perspective'*.

The host team also valued the relationship with the ASSET established prior to the placements: *'The session with the ASRC was really important, it reminds you that these are just people looking for a break and they will be just as nervous as any other new starter in the workplace. It was also helpful to understand the work the ASRC had done in selecting each applicant with the position in mind.'*

### ***With State Government***

The support of the State Government, through the granting of government-subsidised places for asylum seekers in the VET system, was essential to the success of this project.

In October 2010, the Victorian Training Guarantee (VTG) was expanded to include eligible asylum seekers, in a bid to boost their skills and employability. This is documented through the Service Agreement Notification *Arrangements for asylum seekers and Victims of Human Trafficking*. This agreement was renewed in 2012. Practically, it means that asylum seekers have access to VET courses under the VTG under the same conditions as permanent residents with a Health Care Card.

Without this arrangement, it would not have been possible to enrol the project participants in the course.

## **IMPLEMENTATION**

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### **PARTICIPATION**

#### ***Project Participants***

The P2P program engaged 15 asylum seekers into various education and training courses at NMIT during the first half of 2012. These 15 ASRC 'clients' formed the cohort from which to develop and document the holistic approach of the project.

The group consisted of five women and ten men. The youngest was 17 years old and the oldest 42, with most participants aged in their 30's.

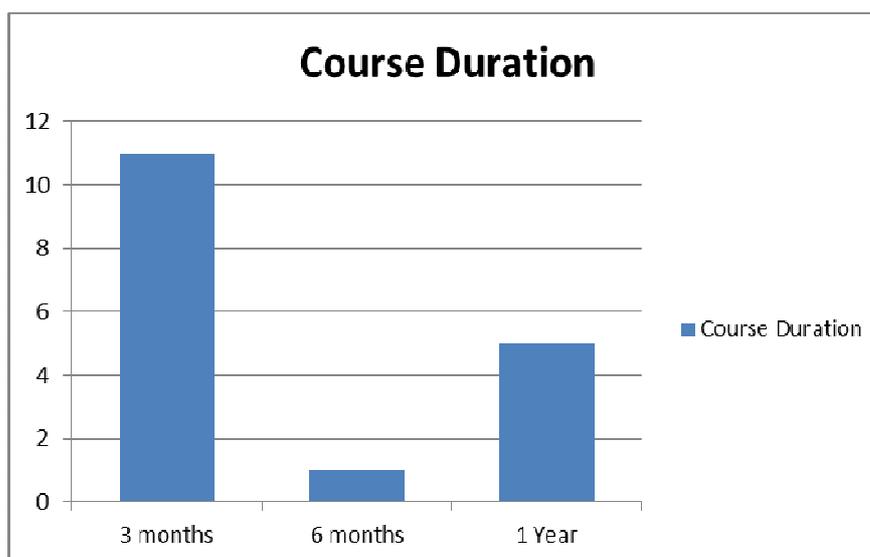
Below is a description of the client group (age, gender, country of origin).

Age	Gender	Country of Origin
30	M	Uganda
34	M	Djibouti
23	M	Nigeria
33	M	Pakistan
29	F	Nigeria
26	M	Nigeria
42	F	Fiji
42	M	Libya
36	M	Nigeria
26	M	Iraq
17	M	Zimbabwe
39	F	Afghanistan
32	F	Malaysia
27	F	Ethiopia
31	M	Nigeria

Participants were recruited through the ASRC Education Program, which offers access to VET-funded places at concession rates through a grant from the State Government.

### *Courses and pathways*

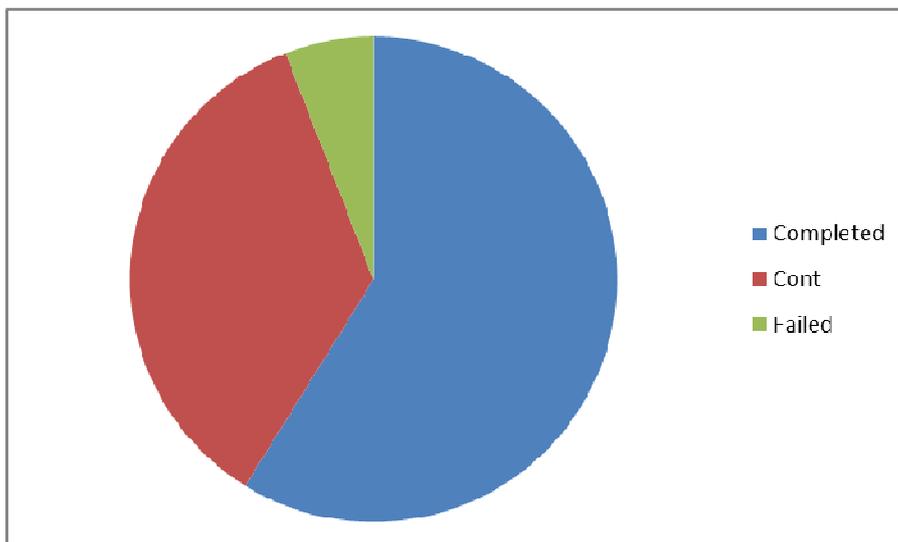
Students were enrolled in courses varying in duration from 3 months to 18 months. Short courses were favoured as many participants were eager to find work and focused on short-term employment outcomes.



Courses included:

- Certificate III in Health Services Assistance (4 participants)
- Certificate III in Aged Care & Home and Community Care (3)
- Certificate III in Pathology (2)
- Certificate III ESL/Teacher Aide (1)
- Certificate IV ESL Employment/Professional (1)
- Certificate IV in Hospitality (1)
- Certificate IV in Bookkeeping (1)
- Certificate IV in Tourism (1)
- Advanced Diploma in Justice (1)

Out of the 15 participants, eight completed their courses by the end of the project, six were continuing (courses are longer than the duration of the project) and one dropped out.



## STRATEGIES

Each of the dimensions of the implementation was considered crucial to the success of the program. The pre-course counselling conducted by the P2P Project Officer was essential and facilitated the link to NMIT. This helped to establish short- and long-term goals for learners. It also ensured short-term plans were realistic and would lead to employment. This approach generated a shorter term and longer term vision with learners and established relationships between them. These dimensions, in total, contributed to the motivation and retention of the learners.

### *Engagement Strategy*

Asylum seekers who are members of the ASRC and wish to study are assessed by their ASRC Caseworker and, if appropriate, referred to the Education program. The option of accessing education is mentioned during the initial intake by ASRC Casework – a mandatory step to becoming a member of the ASRC and accessing its services. Only asylum seekers who are members of the ASRC are entitled to government-supported Vocational Education and Training (VET).

In the case of the P2P Project, only asylum seekers interested in studying at NMIT could be involved as NMIT was the sole education partner. This created a challenge for the project, as asylum seekers' places of residence are not concentrated in a specific location; they may also move regularly depending on the stability of their accommodation. Reflecting changes in housing affordability, the majority of ASRC members currently live in the West and Outer West (Sunshine to Point Cook), or in the outer South East (Greater Dandenong area). The rise in rental prices in the northern suburbs of Melbourne (where NMIT is located) has pushed this disadvantaged group out of the area.

To address this, the P2P project developed a recruitment strategy that included:

- An information session for asylum seekers wishing to study at NMIT
- Flyers and posters distributed around the ASRC and individually to members
- Presentation to various ASRC programs to promote the project and encourage them to identify potential participants
- Email promotion to ASRC clients and volunteers, particularly those working off-site such as Home Tutors
- Identification through the ASRC Education database of all clients living in the inner and outer north

## *Intensive Career Counselling*

The initial career counselling was crucial to the project. Its objectives were to:

- Establish a relationship between the student and P2P Project Officer;
- Inform the student of the 'ground rules' of studying in Victoria, including the VTG 'up-skilling' requirement;
- Assess student circumstances, ability to study and support needs;
- Discuss the need for short-term, as well as long-term, options;
- Explain the P2P project and of its objectives, and obtain consent for the writing of case studies.

Previous qualifications and experience were discussed, alongside existing options in the Victorian education and training system, and realistic employment options.

The assessment of the student's support needs was an important part of the career counselling discussion. In several cases, these discussions took place over several weeks. They included investigation of social and community connections, access to transport, financial means, housing (and ability to study at home), as well as reflection on the student's priorities. Did the student want to access employment as soon as possible? Were they looking for a course that created a pathway to further studies? How could they build on their previous experience?

### **CASE STUDY – CHOOSING A NEW PATH**

John comes to the ASSET wanting to study a relatively short course with good employment outcomes. He does not have long term plans, and does not need a course that is a step towards longer studies, just one that will enable him to earn an income. He admits he is not ready to work now, is feeling fragile and that a three-month course would give him time to 'get back on his feet'.

John's overseas experience is varied: youth work, security, working with people with disabilities. Over several hours and five appointments, we discuss Hospitality, Security and Aged Care. He then investigates these options, including attending several information sessions ('Super Thursdays') at NMIT.

Having rejected other options for reasons such as extra costs (Hospitality) and psychological demands of the nature of the work (Security), John settles on Aged Care. Over the next few appointments we continued exploring the pros and cons of this course; John discusses it with friends who tell him that this can be difficult work for an African man, as racism from elderly people is not uncommon. We watch the

NMIT course video, and John goes to an NMIT information session to meet teachers and ask questions. He then comes back confident that this will be an appropriate path for him in his current circumstances.

At the end of the course, John admits that some aspects of the work have been challenging (such as cleaning human waste); he also discovered that he is *'good at it, caring and with good relationships with people'*. The course held no surprise as he was *'well prepared'*. What he wasn't prepared for was for teachers *'being nice and wanting you to succeed'* – a different experience from his schooling in East Africa.

As much as possible, the program endeavoured to enrol asylum seekers in courses of their choice. Students were provided with information and options in order to maximise their ownership of the decision they eventually made about their course.

This client-centred approach needed to be balanced with the 'up-skilling' requirement of the VET system, as course decisions made now will have a long term impact on the VET options available to participants who obtain a permanent visa and may want to consider a different career<sup>2</sup>.

A challenging aspect of this decision-making for participants was balancing their long-term aspirations with their current predicaments. This was complicated by the fact that many found themselves in circumstances vastly different from that in their country of origin. Many of the participants were educated professionals, who had enjoyed social status and a good income, and whose long-term aspirations were of university studies and white-collar employment. Reconciling this with the limitations of their current status could be a frustrating process.

### **CASE STUDY - COMBINING SHORT AND LONG TERM OUTCOMES**

Several P2P participants approached their study choices with a dual goal: to find a short course with good employment outcomes and that represented a step towards further studies and a career. This would allow them to meet their current need for income and keeps the door open for broader ambitions, should they be granted a refugee visa.

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<sup>2</sup> The Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development stipulates that to be eligible for a government-subsidised course under the Victorian Training Guarantee, Asylum seekers who are 20 years and older (like Australian permanent residents) need to be "upskilling" by undertaking a course at a higher level than (their) existing qualification'.

The Nursing profession is seen as an enviable career goal for many asylum seekers, male and female; it is a profession they are familiar with from their experience in their home country, and an ambition that seems achievable. Several approached the P2P Project Officer with aspirations to become nurses. The career counselling involved information about the selection process for course entry and the hurdles to registration as a nurse for people who speak English as a Second Language, with a high level of professional English required. This did not deter candidates, who have great faith in their ability to conquer odds (a characteristic of many asylum seekers and refugees).

Health Services Assistance (HSA) and Aged Care were identified as courses that provide a pathway towards Nursing studies. Some chose HSA for its hospital-based experience, other Aged Care as they had heard of the strong employment outcomes. Thanks to NMIT's strong connections with industry and to the month-long work placement offered through the courses, most found work at the end of their studies. Some have since decided to focus on employment and earning an income; others, as well as working, are still determined to be admitted in a Nursing and applied to several course providers on completion of their HSA and Aged Care studies.

### *On-going Support*

Learners were contacted monthly – at a minimum – for a face-to-face discussion on their progress in the course. While some students were progressing well and in need of little support, others needed assistance with issues such as:

- Advocacy with their Course Coordinators to explain absences, or coaching on how to discuss these issues themselves
- Assistance with purchasing books or uniforms, in the form of micro-credit loans from the ASSET
- Advice on future study options
- Advice on selecting work placements.

In several instances, when participants had doubts about the chosen pathway, this on-going support was the opportunity to discuss their concerns and reassure them. This played a strong part in helping students stay in their course.

When well-being issues arose during the course, such as mental or physical health or housing, students were advised to discuss them with their ASRC Caseworker so as to obtain a referral to the appropriate service.

## *Facilitating Employment Pathways*

Participants who had completed a course met with the P2P Project Officer to discuss employment and further study options, and were supported to apply for work or for further courses depending on their preference. The P2P Project Officer developed individual resumes and referred students to the ASRC Employment Program for further help. The ASSET offers a range of non-accredited internal training: English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, including a very popular weekly class on Workplace ESL; Interview Skills; Job Search training.

As well as work placements, NMIT provided employment advice and organised group and one-one-one interviews with recruitment agencies. Course Coordinators were always willing to contact recruiters or employers themselves and provide references for students.

### **CASE STUDY – SUPPORT WITH EMPLOYMENT CHOICES**

Clara's long term dream is to become a nurse. She applied and was accepted in the Health Services Assistance course at NMIT.

The course went well and Clara was a good student. When the time came to choose a work placement, she chose a placement at a private clinic as there was talk of expansion and she was hoping she would get work there.

The placement experience was disappointing: most of the work was cleaning and kitchen work, which fell short of Clara's aspirations. She felt she had chosen the wrong placement, and approached the P2P Project Officer to share her hesitations. The Project Officer contacted the NMIT Course Coordinator to obtain their advice. This conversation was then relayed to Clara, reassuring her that her choice had been a good one.

At the end of her course, Clara requested support with applying for work. The P2P Officer and Clara agreed that should she be offered work following her placement, she would accept it and look for more interesting work elsewhere at the same time. The P2P Project Officer developed her resume, and discussed sending it to recruitment agencies recommended by NMIT.

On NMIT's advice, Clara applied for work at a major hospital, which was where she most wanted to work. This was her first job application and she put a lot of pressure on herself to do well. After initially offering her an interview, the hospital retracted their offer when they realised she was not an Australian citizen. Clara was very upset at this set back, as she felt her visa would prevent her from finding work.

The P2P Project Officer, with Clara's permission, contacted the hospital to discuss the situation. The hospital's contact person admitted that they were unfamiliar with Clara's Bridging Visa, and were unsure whether the hospital HR Department would accept it. They were provided with information about the visa's work rights component and indefinite duration. The P2P Officer then contacted the NMIT Course Coordinator to relay this discussion. The Course Coordinator also contacted the hospital to clarify the situation.

Following these conversations, Clara received a call from the hospital explaining the confusion and offering her another interview.

## *Continuous improvement*

### **Steering Committee**

Means of continuous improvement built into the project included consultation with ASRC Services and other agencies with employment expertise via a Steering Committee. Meeting every two months, the group's role was to review project progress against the Work Plan and to provide guidance at the different stages of the project. Advice was particularly sought on developing relationships with employers and the nature of information and support needed by employers and course providers. Members of the Steering Committee included representatives from the Brotherhood of St Laurence, Jobs Australia, the Moonee Valley City Council, NMIT and Skills Victoria.

### **Pre- and post- course surveys**

Participants in the project contributed to continuous improvement through one-on-one interviews pre- and post-course completion. Once a course had been selected and before it started, participants were asked to undertake a pre-study interview, to measure their knowledge of education and employment options and clarify their expectations of the course, support needed and expected employment outcomes.

On completion of the course (or, for those whose course was not finished, at the mid-way point), participants were asked to take part in a post-study interview to investigate their experience, measure whether their expectations of the course and of support had been met, and how their perception of education and employment options had evolved through the course.

## CASE STUDY – SURVEY FINDINGS

Pre-study surveys revealed that course selection was motivated by a range of factors: finding work, building on previous experience, and study as an opportunity to begin a new career according to one's real aspirations (a choice that may not have been available in the country of origin). A third of participants hoped the course would be a pathway to their chosen career (Nursing, for all of them), while the rest of the group hoped to gain employment as a result of their studies. Two thirds wanted to work full-time, or as much as possible.

Participants did not foresee any barrier to their completion of the course, nor did they have major concerns. Only two mentioned concern about possible hidden financial costs and a previous bad experience with an RTO.

Asked about who could help them find work, participants identified both ASRC and NMIT as support. Many hoped that NMIT work placements would lead to job opportunities.

Interestingly, 13 out of the 15 students said they would continue with the chosen course if they received Permanent Residency while studying, as they saw this course as part of a chosen pathway. As one stated, *'I would not stop studying as this is a personal dream'*.

On completion of the course, students felt overwhelmingly positive about their experience. The course had been the right choice for them, and they praised NMIT teachers for their support: *'(Teachers) put themselves in the shoes of the students to make sure they understand'*. They had been surprised by the course requirements, with more assignments, more homework, but also more varied teaching methods (videos, group discussions...) and more support than in their home country.

All participants surveyed reported increased well-being through their participation in education.

*'I am very busy with this course, so I don't have time to worry like I did when I was at home and bored... I just worried about my family and my situation.'*

*'I am busy so I am happy.'*

*'This course changed my life, before I felt there was nothing I could do. It has been good for my self-esteem.'*

Not surprisingly, participants were less reliant on the ASRC for their basic needs and their socialisation. They had made friends in class, and had less time to come to the Centre. As a result, they had reduced their visits from daily occurrences for some, to

weekly, or fortnightly. They also tended to group their appointments, making them all over one day rather than spread throughout the week. This is useful information for the ASRC as the Centre is trying to manage increasing numbers of referrals to its services.

### **Internal consultations**

Communication between programs is core to the success of the wrap-around model. The implementation of the P2P Project required a level of analysis of existing communication mechanisms and reflection on possible improvements. Key means of communication about clients at the ASRC include:

- The centralised database: programs record client information on a common database, which provides a 'picture' of the current circumstances of ASRC clients. Some information such as health and counselling notes, are password-protected and only accessible to these two programs, while other information such as Casework and Employment/Education is accessible by all.
- Weekly multi-disciplinary team meetings, where clients deemed most 'high risk' are discussed and actions put in place to support them across programs.
- Direct, informal communication between workers

This is supported by a range of policies around privacy, casenote-taking and the client welfare. Asylum seekers joining the ASRC are required to agree to charter of Rights and Responsibilities and sign a release of confidentiality, allowing ASRC workers to discuss their situation between programs.

Interviews were conducted with staff to test some of the ideas of the project against the needs of other programs. This will be further explored in the '*Knowledge Acquired*' section.

## **OPERATIONAL TOOLS**

Through the P2P project, the ASSET developed a range of tools to support its approach.

### ***Tool for clients: Individual Learning Plan***

P2P career counselling sessions were used to develop an Individual Learning Plan template, which is now the standard for all asylum seekers in the ASRC Education Program.

The Individual Learning Plan assesses the following:

- Past employment and education
- Future ambitions and assessment against realities
- Information already held by clients about opportunities and services, and what information is needed
- Current social and community connections
- Accessibility of courses: English level, access to transport, time available to study
- Questions about barriers to education, which touch on the asylum seeker experience and how it affects their interaction with service provision and their ability to study and gain sustainable employment
- Health and wellbeing issues, if relevant.

Client goals, and Individual Learning Plans, are always works in progress. They need to strike a balance between being developed enough to give the client direction and incentive, but also dynamic enough to meet their changing life situation and ambitions. To address this, the Individual Learning Plan has been designed in a 'Survey Monkey' form, as an electronic document that the client and ASSET worker can access and update when needed.

Clients are asked to complete the Individual Learning Plan independently prior to their first career counselling appointment. The draft Plan is then reviewed with their Education Program Adviser, and agreed to by both. The aim of this process is to encourage ownership by clients of the decision-making process.

### *Tools for external stakeholders: website*

The initial intention of the project was to engage employers through NMIT, by 'supporting NMIT to facilitate employer specific pre-work placement training'. However, this was based on the assumption that students would have limited English, and that employers would need assistance supporting them in the workplace and maximising their other skills.

As it happened, P2P participants spoke good to excellent English, which made this particular support redundant. Ten of the fifteen participants undertook work placements as part of their course, and English language proficiency was not an issue. This is not an anomaly, as a conversational English level is a condition of support by the ASSET – clients who are deemed not to speak English well enough for study or work are referred to ESL classes.

In lieu of this employer support, and as a result of this project, a website is being developed to provide information to employers, course providers and welfare agencies about asylum seekers' access to education and employment, including information on asylum seekers' eligibility and support needs. To our knowledge, this will be a first in Australia (and in refugee-receiving countries), as our research did not reveal any resources available electronically about these issues.

The website will include a professional mentoring tool, in the form of a forum and discussion space for asylum seekers of professional backgrounds (medical doctors, engineers, accountants) and Australian professionals. This part of the website will only be accessible to ASRC volunteers and clients, while the rest of the website will be open to all.

### *Tool for employers and course providers: training*

To complement the website, the ASRC has developed a training module: 'Understanding asylum seekers'. This training includes a section developed by ASSET for employers and course providers, focusing on workplace-related communication and management strategies.

This training addresses questions such as:

- How different is this group of hard-to-reach learners/job seekers from other disadvantaged groups?
- What information do stakeholders need to have about this group?
- What are the key issues that may happen in an asylum seeker application process, and when are they likely to happen (if predictable)?
- What support do stakeholders need to receive in order to increase the retention rate of asylum seekers in education and in work?
- How can we raise issues with employers and course providers?
- Who do you call if you have questions or concern?
- What support can ASSET provide?

## KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERTISE ACQUIRED

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The ASSET's holistic approach to providing employment and education support to asylum seekers is not new: looking at the client 'as a whole person' has been its guiding principle since its inception in 2004. By working closely with a client's Caseworker, Counsellor, Legal, Social & Community Development and Health professionals, ASSET has been able to greatly improve employment and education outcomes for asylum seekers and refugees.

While ASSET's work in this area is producing strong results, there is still some way to go. The ASRC is a grassroots organisation that has grown rapidly in the past ten years. Most of the multidisciplinary interaction is still informal and *ad hoc*. Interaction frequently happens through conversation and meetings which are human resource heavy (in a very under resourced area of work). As a result, most interventions are not occurring until the client is deemed to be 'at risk'.

Formalised more efficient and effective structures are required to increase early intervention capabilities of agencies and services. The *Pathways to Participation* Project was the opportunity for the ASRC to look more closely at the points of articulation between different programs and partners, including education providers and employers.

## STRENGTHS OF THE PROJECT

### *The intensity of initial counselling and on-going support*

A success of the project has been the high retention rate, with only one of the participants failing and dropping out of his course. Intensive support, as well as the ability of a wrap-around model to 'catch people before they fall', are in part to be credited for this. Credit must also go to the resilience of this client group, and their determination to stay in courses despite the huge upheavals in their lives.

This high retention has been achieved despite several of the participants experiencing rejections by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, the loss of a loved one, destitution, depression and anxiety (see 'Challenges Encountered').

The role of the intense and thorough career counselling cannot be underestimated. As illustrated by the post-study surveys conducted with participants, students went

into their course feeling well informed; they felt they had a chance to investigate options and to make an informed decision about what was most suitable to their aspirations and circumstances. The option of attending 'Super Thursdays' at NMIT prior to enrolling in a course, giving them the opportunity to meet teachers and ask questions, also contributed to this.

This initial support goes beyond career counselling: in the case of asylum seekers and refugees it is also a form of settlement information. It provides the necessary context to undertaking studies: the structure of the training sector, and flexibility within it (articulation, credit transfer, etc); introduction to the Australian labour market; understanding of how to interact with the system, etc.

When this information and support are not provided, or not provided well, people may flounder for years due to the lack of this essential piece of the jigsaw.

Career counselling of this intensity takes time (several hours over several weeks for some). It is however time well spent, if it increases the chance of students completing their course and looking for employment in their chosen area. Many agencies will not have the staff and financial resources to provide unlimited support of this kind. However, it is worth noting that ASSET achieves this on a minimal budget, with few paid staff, as most of this work is done by volunteers. Financial limitations should not always be a reason for the limitation of services.

On-going support to the participants throughout their studies are also been a key element of the success of this project. When participants had doubts about the course they had chosen, or about their ability to complete it, the P2P Project Officer was available to discuss their concerns, provide reassurance or clarification, or liaise with the Course Coordinator if necessary. In several cases, participants would have dropped out if they had been left to go through these periods of doubt on their own. This support was essential when they experienced crisis in their private life and found studying unmanageable for a period of time.

NMIT staff also proved available and willing to support students through their questioning and crisis, demonstrating the practical application of their policy towards disadvantaged groups, and their own holistic approach to education.

### *Partnership with NMIT*

A highlight of the project has been the strong relationship with NMIT.

The P2P Project built on the shared history of work collaboration between the ASRC and NMIT. It drew on their shared values: both partners know that asylum seekers have no welfare 'safety net', which strongly impacts their education and employment choices; both agree that asylum seekers and refugees who are working do not depend on charity, that they contribute to the community and have better mental health. Both ASRC and NMIT are committed to addressing the barriers met by asylum seekers and refugees in their pursuit of a place of belonging and employment in Australia.

A strong partnership between ASRC and NMIT included regular discussions, responsiveness, and flexibility.

#### **CASE STUDY – THE BENEFITS OF INTERNAL POLICIES ON ASYLUM SEEKER STUDENTS**

For many years, NMIT has had a policy of supporting asylum seekers by waiving material and amenities fees and, if someone is not eligible for VET funding, by waiving the tuition fee entirely.

This policy is accessible to staff through information prominently displayed on the NMIT Staff Portal (intranet). The Fee Waiver procedure, including the need for a referral from the ASRC or Red Cross, is clearly explained. There is a hyperlink to a QA document which outlines in detail the required actions, including who holds responsibility for each action, which will lead to a successful enrolment. If NMIT Course Coordinators or Administration Officers are unaware of its existence, it is easy for the ASRC to refer them to the policy itself or to Student Services, who are familiar with the process. Most importantly, there is good will on the part of NMIT staff to accept that a process is in place, a willingness to make themselves familiar with it, and a positive attitude towards facilitating study at NMIT by asylum seeker and refugee students.

Having an institute policy and a high level of staff awareness brings benefits to ASSET workers, as the application and enrolment process is swift and straightforward ; to students, who feel welcome and do not have to explain their circumstances; and ensures that NMIT staff can quickly access the information and support they need to assist students to successfully enrol.

In contrast, asylum seekers at other RTOs have been presented with invoices for thousands of dollars as, despite the information provided by the ASSET, they were billed as international students. Considerable time was then spent trying to correct the error - not to mention to calming students' anxiety about owing such a large amount of money.

NMIT's positive attitude extends to the personal relationships between students and teachers. Students in the Health Services Assistance and Aged Care course testified of the supportive attitude of their teachers, who, when contacted by P2P, highly praised their asylum seeker students for their commitment to learning. A Course Coordinator contacted ASRC directly when a student presented in a vulnerable state. Another student commented on his teachers' involvement in his success in his course, and how much they wanted him to do well. This personal support is essential to people who are otherwise heavily stigmatised in public opinion and current political discourse.

### *Built-in evaluation*

Monitoring and review sits at the core of this project. The project is about reviewing an existing approach in order to develop an effective model of service delivery. The evaluative work consolidates the learning from working with the participants and embeds it into organisational practices.

This has occurred across the partnership through on-going discussions and within the partners themselves, particularly in the project host, the ASRC.

Reflection and evaluation has percolated throughout the partnership between ASRC and NMIT, with both partners willing to learn from the project. The outcome sought for participants was to strengthen their employment prospects so that they may gain employment and financial independence. Within the partnership, the work on monitoring and disposition of flexibility allowed the program to respond in ways that were appropriate. An example of flexibility is how the recruitment of participants has evolved from the original idea of a small group of asylum seekers studying a dual delivery course of Aged Care and ESL, to the reality of a diverse group studying Aged Care, Hospitality, Health Services Assistance, Justice, Accounting, and Teacher Aide. The project has broadened its reach to respond to this, and a positive outcome has been the dissemination of knowledge across many departments within NMIT rather than solely within the Aged Care course.

## CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED

### *Supporting participants through changing circumstances*

#### **CASE STUDY - BARRIERS ENCOUNTERED BY PROJECT PARTICIPANTS WHILE STUDYING**

In the first six months of 2012, the 15 participants of the *Pathways to Participation* project encountered a range of difficulties that required support from the Project Officer and ASRC services.

Two participants required hospitalisation in a psychiatric facility as they were identified at high risk of self-harm. Several had episodes of depression and anxiety that required intervention by ASRC services.

Three participants lost a close family member.

One stopped attending class due to the worsening of his physical disability.

One lost his work rights.

A key issue for asylum seekers, even more than refugees, is finances, including the cost of public transport and purchases necessary for studies, such as books or uniforms. Asylum seekers do not receive Centrelink benefits. Some have access to financial support through the Red Cross asylum Seeker Assistance Scheme (ASAS), a payment which represents about 89% of the Newstart allowance. However, eligibility to receive this income is dependent on the success of their case and can be terminated immediately if their appeal fails.

In the project cohort, eight of the fifteen participants were receiving income support from Red Cross at the beginning of the project. Two accessed this support after their course had started. Two were relying financially on a member of their family who was working. Three had no income.

NMIT systematically waives materials and amenities fees for asylum seeker students, which is of great help. The cost of books and uniforms is kept low, and when possible, courses will provide as much as they can, for instance providing NMIT T-shirts to students undertaking work placement in a hospital.

For other costs, participants were able to borrow up to \$300 from the ASRC micro-credit scheme.

P2P participants were also provided with public transport cards for the duration of their course. This is a necessary tool to allow them to attend classes. It also ensured

that they would meet with the P2P Project Officer monthly to obtain their Metcard – creating the opportunity for a face-to-face discussion and update.

### **CASE STUDY – LOSS OF WORK RIGHTS**

Ahmed is a doctor from the Middle-East, with more than a decade of experience as a physician working in infectious diseases. He is in Australia with his wife (also a doctor) and children. Having come to Australia on a student scholarship, he found himself unable to return to his home country when the situation there suddenly deteriorated.

Options are limited for overseas-trained doctors. After looking at different health and community services-related courses, Ahmed settled on a Certificate III in Pathology. His medical experience and his Arabic-language skills make him well placed to find work at the end of the course.

Ahmed's plan was to look for work in social and medical research with the support of ASSET Employment Services while studying.

However a week after he finished his course, Ahmed was informed by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship that his visa would not be renewed, and that he was losing his work rights. He now finds himself, as a qualified and experienced doctor, without any means of subsistence. He is considering taking the risk of returning to his home country.

## ***Confidentiality and information-sharing***

### **Sharing information internally**

During their initial assessment and intake with the ASRC, clients sign a confidentiality agreement that allows ASRC services to share information internally about different aspects of the client's welfare. This is done through the database, the multi-disciplinary team meetings, and face-to-face discussion between workers.

In a context that is partly informal and where clients sign a release form on intake, the question arises: what are the limits of information sharing? In regards to education and employment outcomes particularly, how much information helps the ASSET work with a client in their best interest? And what do clients see as their best interest?

Each client will have a different interpretation of how much information they need to provide and what services should have access to it.

Similarly, services will have their own understanding of what information they need, and what information they can share, in the best interest of a client.

Answering these questions remains a work-in-progress. For instance, one of the challenges for the ASSET is to use the ASRC centralised database in a way that supports the effective sharing of relevant information between programs, while respecting client confidentiality.

Another challenge is to reach a common definition of what is in the 'best interest of the client' between services that have fundamentally different approaches to client work, from a welfare approach to one that is more strength-based and relies on clients' agency.

### **Sharing information externally**

Confidentiality is not just an internal issue. The issue of how much information to release to education providers and external services about clients is one that has been acute in the P2P project, where participants have experienced personal crisis and changes of circumstances in the course of their study.

In other words, what specific information do external stakeholders require to provide the best possible support to clients?

One aspect of this for asylum seekers is whether they should reveal their status outside the ASRC. In the P2P post-study surveys, most project participants admitted that they had chosen not to disclose their asylum seeker status to their classmates. They enjoyed the anonymity of the classroom and mixing with people of all backgrounds. Some had chosen to disclose to their Course Coordinator or teachers. One participant found himself involved in a class discussion about discrimination that focused on public perception of asylum seekers, and still managed not to reveal his own status.

ASSET's position is to discuss with clients the benefits of disclosing their status, and the downfalls, and to leave it to them to make the decision. This is complemented by efforts to support course providers, encouraging them to increase their awareness of issues affecting asylum seekers and to assume that some of their students may be in this situation. This is one of the aims of the website and training developed by the P2P.

More complex is what information needs to be shared with external partners when an incident occurs that makes it impossible for a client to make this decision

themselves. An example of this would be when a client needs to be hospitalised for physical or mental health concerns and subsequently misses class or work. As workers, we need to alert the course provider of the client's absence. How much information needs to be communicated to meet the requirement of the RTO and respect the client's confidentiality?

In an attempt to address this challenge, the P2P suggests a focus on impact and response rather than cause. The aim is to alert services and other stakeholders of a change to the person's ability to engage, without revealing the exact cause of disengagement, nor the gravity and nature of the incident. Rather than notifying the service provider of the details of the incident, it notifies them of the probable impact on their service and leaves the decision to disclose the details in the hand of the clients, when they are able to do so.

It may be possible to develop an agreement between agencies and services on how to achieve this, for instance in the form of a 'flagging system'.

## **WHAT WE LEARNT ABOUT GOOD PRACTICE**

As explained through this document, the ASRC strongly believes that every asylum seeker and refugee need to be seen as 'a whole person' when supported through education, training and employment. Focusing solely on the area of employment or education for an individual comports enormous risk of failure. Asylum seekers and refugees, like most disadvantaged groups, have complex needs of a constantly changing nature. There are many points of risk in their lives which, if not supported, meant their alienation from systems and much-reduced capacities to learn and work.

Any effort to support asylum seekers and refugees through employment must rest on four principles:

- seeing the client as a whole person
- early intervention
- empowerment
- flexibility

These principles in turn inform good practice approaches for community agencies and the training sector.

## *Good practice for community agencies*

Community agencies' role and expertise is to support clients through their training and employment journeys in the areas of their lives that impact their ability to engage in education and work. This can be housing, physical and mental health, social and recreational activities, and personal wellbeing.

As they are often the main (sometimes the only) point of contact for newly-arrived asylum seekers and refugees, their role extends to the provision of settlement information about the Australian labour market and education system. Therefore, community agencies need to keep informed of employment outcomes in skills areas and what constitutes quality training (for instance the importance of industry placements) in order to advise their clients.

The *Pathways to Participation* project brought to light key elements of good practice for community agencies to provide wrap-around services to asylum seekers and refugees seeking education and employment.

These include:

- All essential services to be located in the one building/hub. Clients can use it as a 'one-stop-shop', and communication between services is facilitated
- Agencies to be funded to provide more than one specialised service
- Employment services to be located within a hub
- Collaborating agencies and services to develop a policy on confidentiality/information-sharing
- Collaborating agencies and services to develop a common database/information collection tool
- Collaborating agencies and services to adopt a common client charter, to ensure consistency and continuing reinforcement of rights and responsibilities for clients
- Collaborating agencies and services to have regular inter-agency meetings to discuss clients at risk and strategies.

For agencies referring clients to RTOs and to employment, we also identified the need to:

- Provide intensive, well-informed career counselling, that draws on all areas of the client's life, with no time limitation
- Establish clear confidentiality and information-sharing rules, agreed to by the stakeholders
- Prepare clients for education and employment by providing training on their rights and responsibilities in courses and workplaces

- Provide on-going support to employers and course providers.

The financial and staff limitations that may curtail the ability to provide intensive and unlimited career counselling can be addressed by relying on a trained and well supported volunteer workforce.

Community agencies can also help potential students build confidence and skills for self-advocacy with RTOs.

### *Good practice for Registered Training Organisations*

RTOs are concerned with skills development, including preparation for the workplace. As demonstrated by NMIT through the experience of the P2P Project, RTOs have a role to play in ensuring their students have the best possible employment outcomes after their course. This is particularly important in the case of learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, who lack networks and reliable sources of information about training and employment.

This can be achieved through the following:

- Meaningful work placements
- The provision of student support services
- Connection with employers and industry

### **Comprehensive Industry placements**

Based on the project's experience with NMIT, it is clear to us that an extended and comprehensive work placement is key to good employment outcomes.

A work placement achieves several objectives:

- It gives the student a realistic experience of the work
- It exposes the student to Australian workplace culture within a framework (their training course) where they can discuss cultural differences and get guidance and advice from a trusted source (their teacher) on navigating the new culture
- It gives the employer the opportunity to observe students, provide feedback to the student and the RTO
- It gives student and employer a chance to decide whether they are a good match

- It adds credibility to the student's resume, as substantial work placements are preferred by employers and recruitment agencies.

The longer and more varied the work placement, the more the above objectives are likely to be met.

### **Teaching the whole person**

Quality education is about the provision of tailored support to maximise the chance of students acquiring skills and knowledge through their course, which then leads to an ability to find and retain employment. In order to do this, RTOs need to take into account issues impacting their students, and provide support or referral to appropriate internal or external services. Access to internal services such as Students Services, Recreation and Housing Officers, or Counsellors, must be an integral part of the education and training experience of disadvantaged groups such as asylum seekers and refugees.

The relationship between ASRC and NMIT also highlighted how RTOs and community agencies can work together to support students, for instance by:

- Community agencies contacting RTOs to obtain information about courses on behalf of a client.
- Community agencies offering training to RTOs to increase their awareness of the needs of asylum seekers and refugees.
- The provision to RTOs of a clear point of contact to discuss student welfare if an issue arises.

### **Relationships with employers**

RTOs have a responsibility to provide accurate and up-to-date information about employment pathways and outcomes, and to ensure that their students are prepared for the workplace and the challenges of the labour market.

To this end, RTOs must have relationships with employers, in order to keep abreast of industry requirements and prepare their students accordingly. In the Aged Care sector for instance, this may take the form of employers letting RTOs and students know what industry experience they see as valuable, and how long they expect an effective work placement to be.

It is also good practice for RTOs to organise meetings between their students and employers or recruitment agencies and provide support to students to apply for jobs, through assistance with resumes, and recommendations for job interviews.

If not accompanied by practical experience and connection with employment pathways, the sole provision of tuition is meaningless in the vocational education sector. It creates a 'glut' of disadvantaged learners, all holding similar qualifications with no practical experience to support it, and with the unfair expectations that they will build their own bridges between training and work.

### **CASE STUDY – WHAT NMIT HAS LEARNT ABOUT GOOD PRACTICE WITH ASYLUM**

#### **SEEKERS**

A large training organisation will encounter prospective students from a variety of backgrounds, including those categorised as 'hard to reach', 'disengaged' or 'marginalised'. Whilst the focus of the P2P project has been strategies to successfully engage with and support asylum seekers, an organisation like NMIT needs to be flexible and responsive enough to engage with and support any student regardless of background.

A key element is the existence of an institute policy which explicitly articulates the commitment to supporting diverse learner groups, complemented by processes and procedures which ensure the policy is enacted. These need to be known by staff and easily accessible; this supports the translation of the policy into everyday actions.

NMIT uses its Staff Portal to ensure that policies and procedures regarding asylum seekers and other disadvantaged student cohorts are accessible; this strategy is backed by individual support and advice from Student Services staff.

If we consider the P2P Project and the asylum seeker cohort as a 'test' of NMIT policies and procedures, then it has been a positive one. There have been many points of interaction with the project participants and with the ASSET program from NMIT staff, from administrative and enrolment officers to course coordinator and management. This has contributed to supporting the 'wrap around model' of the ASRC which is also embraced by NMIT, and has ensured that students were supported to the point of course completion.

### ***Promoting Good Practice***

A research report published by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship in 2011 about the *Economic, Social and Civic Contributions of First and Second*

*Generation Humanitarian Entrants*<sup>3</sup> states that ‘the ability of migrants to engage in the workforce is an important determinant of their ability to earn an income, purchase services and engage in other dimensions of society’.

While this is undeniable, workforce engagement can be an arduous path. For asylum seekers and refugees, who are new to the country, come from different workplace cultures and face increased barrier to employment, there is a need for realistic information about employment outcomes and what constitutes quality training. They do not have the networks that provide informed and reliable feedback, and are often relying on friends who suffer from the same lack of knowledge. While this is an issue across all disadvantaged groups, it is particularly acute for new arrivals.

Choice means little without the information to support the decision-making process.

There is a need to better publicise information about RTOs on a range of criteria, including employment outcomes (for those providing English-Language training this may not be as relevant, and the quality of teaching and relevance to future employment may be a more appropriate criteria). This information then needs to be made accessible to ‘hard-to-reach’ learners who may not be able to rely on networks to inform their choices, and to community agencies who can inform said choices.

The publication of minimum standards and of RTOs’ performance against these standards will enable asylum seekers and refugees to select courses that build real pathways toward their employment and community participation.

## **FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

Out of the eight participants who completed their course during the project duration, seven have since found work, mainly casual work through recruitment agencies – a reflection of the Australian labour market.

For the 15 participants in the project, their association with the ASRC will continue until they obtain a Permanent Visa. They will then go through a transition period, which will enable them to be linked into mainstream services, such as Centrelink. As shown in the students surveys, obtaining a visa may mean the end of their association with the ASRC, but not the end of their studies, as most participants

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<sup>3</sup> Department of Immigration and Citizenship (2011), *A Significant Contribution, Economic, social and civic contributions of first and second generation humanitarian entrants*, National Centre for Social Applications of Geographical Information Systems, University of Adelaide

intend to continue with their course before moving on to further studies at university.

The post-study surveys confirmed that, as we suspected, asylum seekers who are studying and working rely less on the services of the ASRC and other charities. From daily visits prior to their studies, P2P participants used the ASRC once a week during their course, either to see their Counsellor and Caseworker, to use the Foodbank, to attend ESL for the Workplace or see their ASSET worker. As their time was more limited, they were also more strategic about their use of services, and tried to 'group' their appointments in one visit.

For the ASRC, this is a useful learning: with constantly increasing client numbers, it could allow the centre to assign specific days for members to use its services, thereby spreading the number of members using of the Centre throughout the week.

The Pathways to Participation project has been the opportunity for the ASRC Employment and Education Program to reflect on its practice and its place within ASRC services, as well as exploring what constitutes good practice in the Vocational Education and Training system when working with asylum seekers. NMIT's work with this client group sets a benchmark for what informed, non-judgemental support and quality education RTOs can provide to disadvantaged, hard-to-reach groups.

The ASRC will continue to refine its management of client information and confidentiality, internally and externally. As the Centre endeavours to increasingly link its clients into mainstream services, the management of private information is increasingly important to our practice.