Where will the next meal come from?
The bread and butter issues of engagements of culturally diverse people

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In this paper I intend to identify barriers to employment faced by migrants and refugees, particularly those from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, and the impact of long-term unemployment on this group. In addition, I will outline how the Multicultural Development Association (MDA) addresses unemployment issues relating to migrants and refugees and how I consider that their situation could be improved.

MDA is a community-based service provider and is not a research organisation. Therefore much of the information in this paper is based on my practical experience of working with migrants and refugees from CALD backgrounds over ten years and the anecdotal evidence provided to me by MDA clients.

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (The UN Refugee Agency) defines a refugee as: a person who is outside his/her country of nationality or habitual residence; has a well-founded fear of persecution because of his/her race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion; and is unable or unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country, or to return there, for fear of persecution. Refugees are forced to escape from their country of origin to seek protection in another country for their own safety caused by war, politics and drought.

Jones and McAllister (1991) argue that unemployment is the major economic disadvantage facing immigrants entering a new society. All immigrants to Australia face the problem of securing employment as a major issue in settling into their new country.

However, the enormous impact of unemployment on people from CALD backgrounds is becoming more and more evident to us through our work with migrants and refugees.

According to the Queensland Government's publication *Labour Market Research*, the unemployment rate for people of non-English speaking backgrounds over the 12 months to November 2002 was 11.1 per cent. This is much higher than the rates for Australian-born

persons, which is 7.3 per cent, and those born in other English speaking countries, which is 6.5 per cent.

Migrants and refugees face significant barriers in accessing employment opportunities. Some of these barriers include:

- inadequate English language proficiency
- not having Australian local work experience
- non-recognition of educational qualifications
- being over-qualified
- knowing where and how to obtain information about employment opportunities and accessing vacancies.

Refugees who arrive in Australia, have often spent many years in refugee camps and therefore they do not possess documents relating to their education, employment and identification. Refugees are further disadvantaged in finding work.

Due to their lack of possessions and community networks and sometimes the experience of torture and trauma, refugees' needs can be greater than those of non-refugee immigrants. Family reunion issues, discrimination in the labour market, child care issues, lack of relevant skills or unrecognised qualifications, lack of transport and low self-confidence contribute to barriers to employment (Kyle et al. 2004, pp. ii).

Migrants and refugees often resort to taking jobs that are not in their field of expertise. For example, tertiary qualified professionals obtain positions as factory hands, process workers, taxi drivers and cleaners. This results in dissatisfaction at having to accept survival jobs to meet their financial obligations. These individuals need employment support and career guidance to shorten this transition period to avoid disadvantaging the person in getting employment in his or her own profession.

At MDA we try to take a micro and macro approach to the employment problems of migrants and refugees.

At an individual (micro) level we undertake case management and develop the skills, knowledge and capacity of individuals. For example, we assist people with writing job applications, addressing selection criteria, writing curriculum vitae, assisting with job search activities and providing information on a range of issues including settlement, health, education and housing.

Theodore Schultz and Gary Becker in the 1960s coined the phrase Human Capital Theory (McIntyre n.d., p. 2). Human capital is a way of defining and categorising peoples' skills and

abilities as used in employment and otherwise contributes to the economy <http://www.onelook.com>. According to the human capital theory, people invest in their education and training. However, this investment is set back when people migrate to other countries and a loss of human capital occurs. The loss is greater if the country of migration is very different in terms of education and labour market systems than the country of origin.

The loss of human capital can be made up in the country of arrival through investment in human resources. This includes further education, training, professional development, language learning and career development activities. However, in the initial settlement stages for newly arrived migrants and refugees this is not possible, as the focus is on the more immediate elements of life such as housing and orientation. Newly arrived immigrants encounter many obstacles during their initial settlement, which is extremely stressful. Some of the issues facing migrants and refugees include sense of loss of people and country, home sickness, social isolation, separation from family and friends, loss of social and economic status, depression, emotional and mental wellbeing to name a few.

Refugees may have experienced torture and trauma, which prevents them from concentrating and focussing. Furthermore there are many barriers to the development of skills such as language, literacy and numeracy, different learning and teaching styles, differences in workplace culture and financial costs.

The systemic (macro) issues which refugees and migrants face are:

- non-recognition of overseas qualifications, sometimes due to protectionism of professional bodies
- overall economic conditions and unemployment levels in Australia generally
- discrimination by employers
- barriers to further training and education including inaccessible systems of education and training due to financial hardship and lack of knowledge about pathways
- fragmentation and the complex nature of employment, training and labour market systems
- lack of support programs to facilitate access to training, education and employment
- access to childcare due to long waiting lists in some areas.

Some of the other issues we face when assisting migrants and refugees to gain employment include:

- **Gender relations** can be challenged if the wife gains employment prior to her husband. This can cause marital problems due to change of traditional roles within the family. In many cultures the male is considered to be the head of the household and the breadwinner. Problems arise when they are expected to do the household chores and look after young children when the wife is working.

- **Intergenerational conflict** can arise due to children not following the career path picked by their parents, as they would have done in their country of origin
- **Childcare** In their country of origin the wife or their extended family would have looked after the children. Here, mothers have to choose whether to stay at home or to work and put their children in culturally inappropriate childcare settings.
- **Loss of pride and status** resulting from being unemployed or having to settle for positions well below their expertise. This particularly affects men.
- **Discrimination** faced by migrants and refugees when looking for work. Some of these include accent, religion, race, country of origin and attire.

Some of the impacts on people who are long-term unemployed (12 months and over) include:

- **Boredom** through inactivity and not having anything worthwhile to occupy their time. Due to this idleness they feel inadequate and sometimes feel useless. These feelings can cause depression.
- **Depression** can also be caused by being a financial burden on others. If it persists this could cause further mental health issues which, if not addressed, could lead to more serious consequences.
- **Poverty —** Many migrants and refugees feel embarrassed about having to depend on government benefits in order to survive and meet their immediate financial needs. Many arrive from countries where there are no such benefits but they were financially able to provide for themselves.
- **Unemployment across generations** from parents to children leads to the absence of working role models for the children
- **Frustration and conflict within families —** This includes tension between partners, and tension between parents and children. Anger between parents and children leads to internal conflict which places families at risk of breakdown.
- **Dissatisfaction** among children wanting things that parents are not able to afford, e.g. school outings/trips.

Additional impacts I have observed amongst migrant and refugee clients include:

- **Shame** — people feeling embarrassed and shamed because they do not have a job
- **Loss of respect** — this includes self-respect, self-esteem and being respected by their family members
- **Social isolation** — This is caused by settling into a new environment where they are apart from their social networks, family and friends. It takes time to build these relationships in their personal and professional lives. Refugees are even further at a disadvantage if they have experienced torture and/or long periods spent in refugee camps where they did not have the opportunity to maintain or acquire legitimate transferable skills.

- **Lack of self-reliance** — migrants and refugees are unaware of facilities and resources that can assist them which, in turn, impacts on the whole family as all problems remain inside the family. This leads to high levels of stress and dependency on children who adapt and settle more quickly.
- **Culture shock** — it is natural for people to experience culture shock, which can create conflict between individuals and their families. Individuals are experiencing discrimination based on their way of life, attire, race, accent and language proficiency. Some employers and local people are not sympathetic to the cultural differences and therefore the adjustment process for the immigrants is further hindered.

Since March 2002, MDA has assisted more than 500 migrant and refugee jobseekers. The clients we have assisted into employment and training have come from countries as diverse as Iran, Iraq, the Philippines, Korea, Sweden, Germany, Afghanistan, Bosnia, Croatia, Serbia, Russia, Horn of Africa countries, the Pacific Islands, South East Asia, Central America and South America. All of these clients face difficult and complex challenges depending on their educational, religious and cultural background. The employment and training programs provided at MDA are predominantly funded through the Queensland Government's Breaking the Unemployment Cycle initiative.

Many of those we assist are from professional backgrounds with experience, knowledge, skills and expertise acquired in their country of origin. Since our employment program began we have assisted doctors, engineers, teachers, lecturers, psychologists, IT professionals, agronomists and community development workers.

Australia is currently experiencing a skills shortage and there is a real demand for skilled migrants. However, our experience indicates that, in some professions, the skills required are already in Australia but are simply not recognised and used.

Our services are of a specialist nature and target clients from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB). The programs we offer include employment assistance, work placement and employment workshops.

MDA's employment and training programs offer migrants and refugees case management services which involve working one-on-one with individuals to make them job ready. We also provide paid work experience opportunities where participants are able to obtain on-the-job work experience with community organisations and tertiary institutions. Along with this, the participants attend one day a week of in-house training where they are able to improve their job search and interview skills, occupational health and safety, Australian workplace culture, social and work environment and office administration skills. This has proven to be a great success where host organisations provided a supportive environment for the participants in

gaining local work experience, local referees and network opportunities. For example, MDA's Multicultural Community Jobs Plan — Work Placement, 2004, provided opportunities in office administration to 17 migrants and refugees with a 90 per cent employment outcome after the completion of the program. In addition to office administration, similar models that target other professions can be beneficial to many migrants and refugees in overcoming employment barriers.

Kyle et al. (2004) argue that our responsibility to provide refugees with appropriate employment assistance stems from our responsibility to support their effective resettlement in Australia. Yet, at present, the provision of settlement services and employment assistance is not integrated and there is little evidence of explicit recognition of the needs of refugees in the framework for employment assistance.

More flexible specialist employment and training programs can be beneficial in assisting migrants and refugees. Currently, community organisations, recruitment agencies, local governments and the Queensland Government are engaged in dialogues to address the employment and training needs of migrants and refugees from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. These are inconclusive at this stage.

Some of the current programs include:

Migrant Work Experience Program

This Queensland Government program is designed to give recently arrived migrants an opportunity to gain vital Australian work experience through training and unpaid work experience with a sponsoring state government department. It is a ten week program — four weeks training in office skills at a TAFE college and six weeks practical on-the-job work experience with a Queensland Government department. There are two intakes per year with 18 participants receiving on-the-job training. The program has proved to be a great success. Although there is no guarantee of ongoing paid employment, past participants from the program have managed to obtain a traineeship or entry level administrative positions within the state public service or in private enterprise. Similar models can be used for other professions such as accounting, information technology and engineering. Migrants and refugees will get the opportunity to work with professionals in an Australian work environment.

Community Jobs Plan — Work Placement Programs

Community organisations and local governments run Community Jobs Plan — Work Placement programs. The participants gain on-the-job training in office administration, landscaping and community development. The duration of the program can be from 13 to 26 weeks. There is also a program targeting professionals from culturally and linguistically

diverse backgrounds in gaining experience in their own professions such as accountants, dentists and engineers.

Public Service Traineeships

This is a one-year program designed for NESB jobseekers to gain on-the-job training as well as attending one day a week of formal training at TAFE colleges. There are only a limited number of intakes per year. Some migrant and refugee professionals are unable to obtain traineeship positions because of having tertiary qualifications in their country of origin. Under the current arrangements, there are exemptions to this depending on each individual's prior qualifications. If the prospective trainee intends to obtain experience and qualifications that is different to current qualification they may be able to do their traineeship in the new area. Even though the trainee is eligible to participate in the traineeship program, the employer is not eligible for federal incentives. This leads to employers not recruiting migrants and refugees with qualifications. Therefore it further disadvantages migrants and refugees in gaining experience and knowledge in the Australian work environment. The Australian Government should address this issue immediately by being more flexible and give more opportunities to migrants and refugees in gaining access to traineeship positions.

In our experience, employment and training is one of the key elements of successful adjustment in society. Our clients who find employment immediately after securing accommodation benefit in economic and non-economic terms and are far more satisfied with their new life than those who remain unemployed. From our experience and knowledge working within these communities, these successful immigrants are in the minority. We receive many enquiries every day from migrants and refugees requiring immediate assistance with their employment needs.

More innovative and flexible systems need to be developed to engage migrants and refugees in their settlement process with the major focus on employment and training. These can include the evaluation of existing programs in order to determine the effectiveness of the programs.

Mapping projects may assist with information dissemination for migrants and refugees who are unable to access all the available services because of limited knowledge about how and where to obtain information about employment and training programs available.

Mentoring can be a powerful tool to assist migrants and refugees with their employment and training opportunities. The Refugee Council of Australia (May 2005) defined mentoring as a mutually beneficial relationship that involves a more experienced person (or 'mentor') helping a less experienced person (or 'mentee') achieve their goals. Some of the benefits of having a mentor are:

- increased knowledge about how to apply for jobs in Australia
- increased knowledge of job search and interview techniques
- assistance with resumés, selection criteria and cover letters
- increased knowledge about how to do the job
- expanding professional networks and more job opportunities
- support and guidance where necessary.

For those who are employed, mentoring can play a very import role in their adjustment into the Australian work environment.

Cross Cultural Awareness Training is necessary for improved service delivery to migrants and refugees in their employment endeavours. Both employers and Job Network providers can benefit from such training.

Collaboration between all levels of government — federal, state and local — and service providers is a corner stone of effective engagement and service delivery to a highly marginalised target group.

Employment is a major priority for migrants and refugees settling in Australia because it gives them not only economic security but also self-respect and dignity. Surely these are the rights of every human being.

This paper has suggested that the impact of unemployment and underemployment are significant and it affects every element of life and well being including physical, psychological and spiritual.

In conclusion, the effects of unemployment on communities from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are significant and disproportionate to Australian born Queenslanders. This is based on our experience and knowledge gained through working with migrant and refugee jobseekers.

A person's capacity to engage effectively with the social institutions around them is greatly determined by their financial capacity (work) and opportunity for skills development. It is the contention of this paper that ethnic communities are doubly disadvantaged in terms of engagement and if engagement is to be successful then more innovative and flexible systems need to be developed.

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