

Creating learning spaces for refugees:
The role of multicultural organisations in Australia

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To find other material of interest, search VOCED (the UNESCO/NCVER international database <<http://www.voced.edu.au>>) using the following keywords: *community organisation, employability, language, literacy, lifelong learning, multiculturalism, refugee*.



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About the research



Creating learning spaces for refugees: The role of multicultural organisations in Australia by Beatriz Miralles-Lombardo, Judith Miralles and Barry Golding

Upon arrival in Australia, refugees are directed to various organisations, including multicultural community organisations. Multicultural community organisations are well recognised for helping refugees become self-reliant; what is not fully recognised, however, is the contribution these organisations make to the development of refugees' learning. This study sought to examine the extent to which literacy and numeracy provision occurs in multicultural community organisations serving three particular refugee groups: those from Iraq, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Sudan.

Given their diverse experiences, backgrounds and reasons for fleeing their homelands, refugees in Australia clearly have a range of different needs. The authors highlight that multicultural community organisations work to meet these needs by creating networks and relationships with refugees. The nature of these organisations, and the informal learning environment they provide, can help refugees to learn skills needed for life in Australia as well as build networks with other non-government and government organisations.

Key messages

- Trust is the foremost factor to be established between multicultural community organisations and the refugees they seek to serve. Bilingual workers are integral to building trust and establishing networks with other groups beyond these community organisations.
- Successful learning programs grow out of refugees' needs and incorporate the outcomes necessary for successful settlement—improved English language proficiency, cultural competence and enhanced employability skills.
- By providing informal learning spaces where cultures and languages are respected, multicultural community organisations play a central role during the resettlement process in the creation of social cohesion between refugees and their families and the wider community.

This report will be of interest to those providing services to refugees and migrants, such as multicultural community organisations, and to policy makers dealing with refugees. It will also be relevant to providers of Adult Migrant English Programs and others involved in teaching English, literacy and numeracy or offering vocational education and training to refugees and migrants.

Readers interested in teaching and learning for refugee or migrant learners may also want to review:

- *Classroom management strategies to address the needs of Sudanese refugee learners*, by U Burgoyne and O Hull (NCVER, Adelaide, 2007).

Tom Karmel
Managing Director, NCVER

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Many doors were opened to us during the project. Many people found the time to recount personal stories of overwhelming distress and dislocation, but also of awe-inspiring hope and achievement.

Executive summary

The research set out to identify the role of multicultural community organisations as surrogate English language and work skills learning organisations. Through the experiences of refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina, Iraq and Sudan, the study explored the role played by multicultural community organisations in creating informal networks and learning spaces which connected people from refugee backgrounds to the wider Australian community. Three refugee groups were selected to reflect their differing characteristics, including age profile and levels of education and workforce participation in their countries of birth, as well as in Australia. Consequently, the research methodology incorporated ways to identify the diversity within and between the three refugee groups.

The research explicitly moved away from the tendency to position all people from a language other than English background, regardless of cultural, religious, educational and migration history, as a homogenous group with common experiences and needs and to subsequently fashion generic solutions. The research methodology consequently built ways to identify the diversity within and between the three refugee groups.

The research examined the factors and mechanisms which can promote or inhibit opportunities for developing English language, literacy and employability skills for each of these groups. It identified the specific practices adopted by multicultural community organisations to support informal skills transfer and examined how these might be applicable to the wider vocational and adult education sectors.

In all, 175 people participated in the research across regional and metropolitan Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. Staff and members of management committees of multicultural community organisations participated in in-depth interviews. These were followed by ‘in-language’ focus group discussions with refugees from Bosnia, Iraq and Sudan. Each discussion led to the creation of a ‘network’ diagram that summarised the perceived links between the organisations and the particular refugee community.

It was found that refugees prefer to work through community-based multicultural organisations for the following reasons:

- ✧ Partly independent of government, these organisations are more likely to be trusted.
- ✧ Typically located in a public or community space, they are able to create a professional but culturally inclusive, small-scale environment transcending the family and personal.
- ✧ They provide the specific service, information and advice at the time it is required rather than via the disconnected, generic, fine print of an on-arrival information booklet.
- ✧ They usually provide critically important public and community access to informal learning as well as practical experience of most forms of information and computer technologies taken for granted by many other Australians, including telephone, the internet, email, word processing, and data bases.
- ✧ They tend to be staffed by multi-skilled, culturally aware and empathetic people who are either bilingual or have access to others who are bilingual.

- ✧ They provide opportunities for refugees who have used a service to reciprocate – particularly to mentor, advise and give back to other refugees as well as to the wider Australian community.
- ✧ They provide initial sites for essential, informal learning and particularly for referral to other formal learning sites, tutors, institutions and interpreters to develop necessary Australian vocational experience and English language expertise.

Our deliberate use and exploration of network relationships, in both our interviews and focus groups, was based on an assumption that different forms of civic or community engagement (ethnic, religious, cultural, sporting) would contribute to the refugees' informal learning. It was assumed that such engagement in both first and English languages could lead refugees to become more trusting of and networked into both their ethnic or cultural community and the wider Australian community. It was believed that this would have flow-on benefits for language acquisition as well as for employment.

The in-depth interviews and focus group data supported these hypotheses and assumptions. The network diagrams demonstrate the centrality of linkages to community-based multicultural organisations for facilitating trust and the early creation of informal learning opportunities for refugees. These early links assist the subsequent links to employment and to formal learning organisations: schools, adult and community education (ACE), technical and further education (TAFE) and higher education.

Our finding that multicultural community organisations are diverse and multifunctional is not surprising. On arrival, the majority of refugees speak a language other than English at home and they have little idea of whom to contact for advice, services or assistance; they also have particular problems addressing and communicating their needs in English. Direct approaches to governments, service providers and the private sector are rendered more difficult because of language. Migrants generally, and refugees in particular, depend heavily on a small number of trusted and informed intermediary people or organisations acting as 'clearing houses' for information and as a conduit to other service providers. First and foremost, refugees need to access services; it is also important for them to make contact and communicate with and learn from other similarly displaced refugees.

Although beyond the scope of our original research questions, the research provides evidence of how these multicultural community organisations enhance the effectiveness and reach of the services provided by the government. The linkages we describe lead not only to education but also to housing, health, welfare and work. Our research demonstrates the value of multicultural community organisations working collaboratively and reciprocally with government agencies. Our data confirm the importance of bicultural and bilingual facilitators in developing trusting and collaborative reciprocal relationships within, between and beyond these organisations.

In the context of social capital acting as an overarching community framework (OECD 2001; Cavaye 2005; Bjornskov & Svendsen 2005), the network data and analysis demonstrate the importance of trust, networks, shared norms and reciprocity at both individual and family levels. This social capital unites and creates bonds between refugee households and communities, and builds bridges to the wider Australian community. We also provide evidence that, at the community and institutional level, the functioning of government agencies and institutions is enhanced by active and voluntary community involvement in community-based organisations. In relation to this project, we demonstrate both the bonding and bridging roles of these organisations in building trust and providing opportunities for refugees to learn.

In the context of the contemporary debates about refugee engagement in the wider Australian community, this study shows that neither *bonding* (within like cultures, religions or communities) nor *bridging* (across cultures, religions or communities) alone is beneficial to individuals,

households and communities. *Both* are important to the Australian community, as well as to refugees, and are improved by refugee involvement in community-based refugee/ethnic organisations. The bonding function is particularly important to ensure that refugees, typically with a long history of broken trust and bonds, connect quickly and positively to one another and to essential services in Australia. Paraphrasing Field's (2005) arguments about social capital and its enhancement of lifelong learning, it is imperative not only to prevent refugee disengagement from or indifference to the wider Australian community and cultures, but also to avoid active resistance to it.

Our interview data confirm that the development of trusting and reciprocal network relationships between individuals and families and community-based multicultural organisations is generally and positively associated with engagement in learning in all its forms. We recognise that, for refugees, this learning and the contexts in which it occurs may be informal as well as formal. Learning sometimes occurs in their own language(s) as well as in English; it involves oral as well as formal literacies (including the use of communication technology); and may result in pathways to unpaid voluntary work, as well as to paid work.

One of our conclusions is that, in attempting to prescribe the most effective path (that is, formal or informal learning; English or not English; formal or informal literacy; formal paid or informal unpaid work), it is unhelpful to choose between these dipoles. All can be important at different points of the refugee resettlement cycle. As for any learner, refugees gain from learning that takes place in authentic and familiar cultural, community and linguistic contexts (Lave & Wenger 1991). Accredited formal and vocational learning in English can be 'too soon and too fast', unless it is also situated and practised in real work contexts.

Our findings for refugees are consistent with research in Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia, summarised in Faris (2005, p.30):

Non-formal learning is fostered in a wide array of voluntary organisations that exist in our communities. Learning acquired through volunteer work is a major motivation for many volunteers who wish to gain new skills ... [I]t is in the communities—the families, workplaces, voluntary associations and educational institutions therein—that most of the learning associated with building trust, networks and shared values occurs.

Organisations in the adult education sector have not widely embraced multicultural community organisations. Those that have are mainly registered training organisations delivering accredited vocational education and training (VET). Our research provides evidence of the crucial role of multicultural community organisations, regardless of their formal VET status, in creating learning opportunities for refugees at significant settlement transition points. These organisations provide the supportive environment and time required to regenerate and re-establish trust, redefine goals and begin the long process of becoming a productive citizen in a new land. These organisations are working daily with people whose trust, reciprocity, shared norms, networks and collaboration had been run down or exhausted in their own countries. Many have been 'warehoused'¹ and/or detained offshore in Australia, some for up to a decade in second or third countries.

The multicultural community organisations identified in this report rebuild social capital effectively and encourage widespread informal learning. In the process, they enhance English

¹ 'Refugee warehousing' describes the 'practice of isolating large populations of displaced refugees in camps or segregated settlements'. Undertaken in part as a deterrent to seeking asylum, it has the effect of keeping refugees 'in protracted situations of poverty, immobility and economic dependence, with neither freedom of movement nor access to basic state services' (Uniting Church in Australia 2006).

language acquisition and employability. They provide a trusting context in which refugees are able to communicate with staff in both English and their native language, enabling refugee communities to build social capital, which in turn can offer considerable benefits to other fellow Australians.

Further information relating to the research is provided in the accompanying support document available from NCVER's website at <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1964.html>>.

Research purpose

Our research seeks to identify the role of multicultural community organisations as surrogate English language, literacy and learning organisations for refugee groups in Australia, using refugees from three different countries. In particular it attempts to determine the role of such organisations in providing what are hypothesised to be important informal networks which connect refugees to the diverse and unfamiliar aspects of the Australian community and education and work in this country. The method we adopted for our study deliberately moves beyond assessing individual and group differences amongst refugees in terms of the rate of uptake of formal accredited training and work in formal contexts. It is based on the recognition that many of the skills, attitudes, networks and English literacies that refugees require to engage in the Australian workforce are acquired informally and include a knowledge and understanding of language and literacy in its specific context.

The study assumes that refugees already have varying levels of previous education and training and literacy in one or more languages other than English, as well as work experience in one or more countries other than Australia. While adult refugees' work (and sometimes professional) networks and skills may have been extensive in other languages, countries and contexts, their experiences and links to Australian work contexts and practices are typically limited. For this reason—as for other Australians—formal English literacies and skills, while necessary, are not sufficient for providing the knowledge or networks leading to paid work.

Our research therefore relies heavily on systematic analysis of the networks that connect refugees to community-based organisations and connect refugee organisations to other service providers. In doing so we look at what Castles et al. (2002, p.138) describe as the 'social networks, cross cutting ties and sources of multiple identification which might form the stuff of new associational activity and civil regeneration'. For refugees not in the workforce, as well as for their families, their connections to multicultural community-based support agencies are often the *only* links.

Our research aims to provide a clearer understanding of how community organisations support successful learning and employment outcomes for refugee individuals and groups. We anticipate that this understanding will be valuable to policy-makers, planners and registered training organisations. Finally, we seek to identify differences in the settlement experiences of learning and education and training within and between refugee groups and thus develop a more nuanced understanding of network relationships.

Network and social capital theory

In theoretical terms, the networks we are examining and the qualities associated with these networks (trust, reciprocity, shared norms, and collaboration) are usually and collectively referred to as social capital. We recognise network relationships as one of many possible indicators of

social capital (OECD 2001) and anticipate that measurement of social capital involves ‘using often imperfect indicators and developing the confidence to work with inherent imperfections and uncertainty’ (Cavaye 2005, p.45). We anticipate, like Balatti, Black and Falk (2006), that social capital outcomes generated as a by-product of education and training programs will have a positive impact on a number of aspects of students’ lives, including employability. We also agree that adult language and literacy theory ‘should be reframed to include viewing the student as a member of the various networks’ forming part of the learning experience (Balatti, Black & Falk 2006, p.39). These theoretical perspectives are incorporated into our study.

Our point of departure lies in our different research method—particularly the direction and contexts where we are looking at and for social capital. Rather than mapping social capital as an informal outcome of literacy programs for already enrolled English language students (Balatti, Black & Falk 2006), we map and explore the community networks forged earlier between multicultural community organisations and adult refugees. Our aim here is to identify opportunities for informally enhancing literacy and language acquisition through existing networks and, in turn, employability, for all adult refugees and their families.

We will not duplicate literature reviews of social capital and its implications for adult literacy and learning found recently within Balatti, Black and Falk (2006) and Allison, Gorringer and Lacey (2006). However, we do draw brief attention from the outset to the important and distinctive difference in the literature between *bonding* social capital and *bridging* social capital. The former in a refugee context tends to be ethnocentric and links like groups (including families and distinctive ethnic, religious, language and cultural subgroups) through shared language, norms and culture. The latter tends to link unlike groups and be more multi- and cross-cultural. This distinction leads to a conclusion, not often countenanced, that ‘building social capital’ is not always desirable in cultural or multicultural contexts if it involves only bonding. It also highlights the potential for the refugee host nation (as well as ethnic groups and subgroups) to create and exacerbate tensions within and between communities by bonding without bridging. For all of these reasons, networks that increase interactions, understanding and ‘give and take’ (reciprocity) between unlike groups and organisations will tend to create most trust between refugee and other communities in the host nation.

Our study in essence looks for ways in which improved bridging networks might lead to more literacy and language acquisition and refugee employability. We hypothesise that multicultural community organisations work to create the bridging networks, facilitating civic cohesion, improving literacy by ‘translating the sign posts’, and building individuals’ capacities to negotiate unfamiliar cultural contexts. Our research design therefore incorporates ways of examining how multicultural community organisations create supportive pathways into the wider community, linking refugees with an extensive network of other sectors, services and agencies.

The refugee groups

The three recently arrived refugee groups who form the focus of our study—from the Horn of Africa (Sudan), the former Yugoslavia (Bosnia-Herzegovina) and the Middle East (Iraq)—differ significantly in several important respects. These include the contexts they are fleeing, their experiences while waiting for resettlement in a refugee host country or in detention, and their education, training and employment profile, both in their home countries and in Australia. Customised data from the 2004 National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) VET Provider Collection indicate lower patterns of engagement in vocational education and

training (VET) beyond mixed-field programs² amongst the three groups by comparison with Australia-born students: 73.6% of students from Bosnia-Herzegovina, 62.3% from Iraq and 51.9% from Sudan were undertaking study in fields of education other than mixed-field programs, compared with 87.2% of Australia-born students. The 2001 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census of Population and Housing data showed that the age profile of the communities also varied. The median age of the Sudan-born was 30.8 years compared with 35.6 years for the total Australian population. The Bosnia-born median age (37.6 years) was older than the total Australian population.

In relation to educational qualifications, the 2001 census showed that 46.2% of all Australians held some form of educational or occupational qualification. For the groups forming part of this study, the corresponding figures were: Bosnia-born 50.3%, Iraq-born 37.5% and Sudan-born 45.7%. Despite the fact that the Bosnian and Sudanese communities held comparable levels of educational or occupational qualifications, the participation rates in the labour force were not comparable. Among Bosnia-born people aged 15 years and over, the participation rate in the labour force was 47.8% and the unemployment rate was 16.8%. For Sudan-born people aged 15 years and over, the participation rate in the labour force was 43.0% and the unemployment rate was 27.6%. Among Iraq-born 15 years or over, 45.8% were employed, while 34.2% were unemployed. The corresponding rates in the total Australian population aged 15 years or over were 63.0% and 7.4%, respectively.

Research questions

The research explores the following questions.

- ✧ What role do community-based multicultural organisations play in English language, literacy and employability skills acquisition?
- ✧ What are the similarities and differences in experiences of VET and problems in accessing education, training and work within and between three recently arrived refugee groups?
- ✧ What approaches lead to the most positive transfer of English language, literacy and employability skills and community engagement for these groups?
- ✧ How might English language and literacy acquisition as well as employability for these refugee groups be further enhanced through greater emphasis on engagement in community contexts, including through VET?

Some definitions

Refugees

Under the 1951 United Nations Geneva Convention, a refugee is someone who has left his or her home country due to a well-founded fear of persecution. Refugees are in effect granted discretionary leave or humanitarian protection in a new country and are entitled to live and work in that country. This deceptively simple definition of 'refugee' has been found to be inadequate in describing the diversity of life chances and wellbeing actually experienced by different categories of refugees settling in host countries (Castles et al. 2002; Humpage 2004; Brotherhood of St Laurence 2002; Mansouri & Bagdas 2002; Abdelmalak & Akguner 2003; Marston 2003). The

² Mixed-field programs include settlement-related programs such as English as a second language (ESL) programs.

support document contains a summary of refugee categories recognised in Australia and some of the implications of those categories pertinent to the current research.

In the past 60 years, more than 660 000 refugees and displaced people have been resettled in Australia (IMMI 2008). In 2004–05, Australia, to accommodate regional priorities as recommended by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, prioritised the resettlement of people from Africa, the Middle East and South-West Asia. Visa grants by source regions were as follows:

- ✧ Africa: 70.2% of total offshore grants (a small decrease on the 2003–04 outcome)
- ✧ Middle East and South-West Asia: 26.2% of total offshore grants (an increase of 2% of the total offshore program by comparison with 2003–04)
- ✧ Europe: 0.2% of total offshore grants (a reduction of 3% of the total offshore program by comparison with 2003–04)
- ✧ Asia and America: 3.4% of total offshore grants.

Summary of the literature

It is widely acknowledged in the literature that the type of visa granted to a refugee impacts notably on the nature and quality of resettlement. Humpage (2004), commenting on the Australian context, argued that people holding restricted visa types such as temporary protection and bridging visas faced serious obstacles as a result of the temporary nature of their protection status and the manifold restrictions placed on resettlement assistance. Other Australian studies (Brotherhood of St Laurence 2002; Mansouri & Bagdas 2002; Abdelmalak & Akguner 2003; Marston 2003) have also followed the experiences of refugees and found a serious exacerbation of psychological and physical health issues for those who have been in detention, with more chaotic and less successful settlement experiences.

Castles et al. (2002), writing about the European context, come to similar conclusions about the difficulties created for particular sub-groups by government policies. Castles et al. identified five types of refugees in Europe: convention refugees (recognised on the basis of the Geneva Convention); mandate refugees (recognised by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, but not by the host government); humanitarian refugees (granted the right to stay on humanitarian grounds); de facto refugees (refugees in practice who have not sought such status); and refugees in orbit (moving between different countries in search of more permanent status). As Castles et al. noted, although these categories are legal constructs, to a great extent they:

determine the life chances of well-being of refugees settling in the EU states, because each category implies a different set of rights. These affect important aspects of refugee settlement that range from legality and duration of residence, access to assistance, services and the labour market, to possibilities for family reunification. (Castles et al. 2002, p.121)

VET and employment outcomes of people from a refugee background

Some Australian research on VET outcomes has focused on the experiences of people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Relative to other designated equity groups; for example, women, Indigenous Australians, people with a disability, and people in regional/rural areas, VET participation by people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds is slightly below the average, as are completion rates (Bowman 2004; Watson & Pope 2000; Watson et al. 2000). There is also a low uptake of apprenticeships and traineeships by people from culturally diverse backgrounds (NCVER 2001). Employment outcomes for this group also stand out as particularly poor (Golding & Volkoff 1998).

A growing number of researchers have recently begun to explore the very specific education, training and employment experiences of people from refugee backgrounds. This is significant, as past research has often glossed over the differences between migrants and refugees. There has been belated recognition that refugees may face specific needs. This is despite the fact that Australia, like many other countries, has long been a destination for refugees; for example, from Vietnam, Chile, El Salvador and Cambodia. These studies include a 2004 review of the New Apprenticeship system by Sim and Zinopoulos, which found low participation and poor outcomes for groups with relatively high numbers of refugees. A local study of refugee groups in Greater Dandenong within suburban Melbourne (Olliff 2004) identified some of the difficult 'pathways and pitfalls' that refugee young people currently negotiate in the education and VET systems. Iredale (2001) examined the policy implications of the different categories of the migration and humanitarian programs, and Hannah (1997, 2000) researched education and training for adult refugees in the United Kingdom and Australia. Volkoff and Golding (1998) and Stevens (1996) argued that refugees and humanitarian program entrants are particularly disadvantaged in the labour market and in their access to post-compulsory education and training. More recently, Kirk (2004), and Bloch (2002) in their survey-based research, identified similarly low employment outcomes, including underutilisation of existing professional skills.

Research over the last decade has shown that settlement outcomes for refugees appeared to have deteriorated. There were clear differences in employment outcomes between immigrants in relation to both English proficiency and visa category; recent refugees were likely to have experienced greater instability and disruption in their lives before migrating to Australia and were less likely to have worked in skilled occupations in their former country (Hannan 2004; Kyle et al. 2004; Waxman 1998; Richardson, Robertson & Ilsey 2001; Chiswick, Lee & Miller 2002). These findings have been supported by more recent research (Department of Parliamentary Services 2005) demonstrating that people arriving in Australia from either North Africa, the Middle East or from Vietnam have rates of unemployment much higher than other overseas-born people. The research suggested that factors contributing to the higher than average unemployment rates for people from these regions included low English language proficiency, as well as the high proportion arriving under the humanitarian and (to a lesser extent) family reunion categories. It should be noted that these regions are or were priority regions of refugee and humanitarian resettlement (and subsequently family reunion).

The findings from Schellekens (2001) and other research also from the United Kingdom and the European Union emphasised the role of language as a barrier to employment, education and training. Work skills and experience in a first language were found to be helpful but not usually sufficient for refugees to gain access to employment in commensurate fields in host countries where workplace proficiency in the local language was assumed. Employment, as Kyle et al. (2004), Silver lining (2004), Humpage (2004) and the former Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (2003, now the Department of Immigration and Citizenship) suggest, played a critical social function, resulting in a:

reduction in the provision of income support payments and reliance on community services, increased long-term earnings and expenditure, increased business development, improved community health and greater community capital. (Kyle et al. 2004, p.v)

It has also been recognised that poor employment outcomes have potential long-term negative implications for the broader community:

[T]he human resources of refugees and humanitarian entrants and their communities are generally under-utilised. Failure to make the most of the skills and experiences that people bring with them is not only a missed opportunity for developing individuals' and communities' self worth ... but may contribute to the opposite effect of continuing the undermining of people's capacity to act for themselves and others and therefore successful re-settlement outcomes.

(Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs 2003, p.14)

Notwithstanding the critical importance of language proficiency, researchers have also argued for the centrality of a culturally competent training environment and workplace (Committee of the Regions of the European Union 1999; Hannah 2000). In their studies of refugee youth, Apout (2004) and Coventry et al. (2002) found that successful training programs employed numerous strategies to engage different groups and sub-groups and focused in particular on the socioeconomic, cultural and family contexts. Miralles (2004) also found that the classroom environment and the cultural competence of teachers and fellow learners were major factors in learning outcomes. Coventry et al. (2002), as well as Schellekens (2001), also emphasised the importance of culturally competent frontline staff.

Hannan (2004), Preece and Walters (1999) and Miralles (2004) documented the equally significant role that employment played as a means of ‘reinventing oneself’ and re-assuming a role as a productive adult:

[Employment] provides a vehicle for rebuilding trust in society—a concrete way of moving into action and taking back control of their life again. This involves re-establishing oneself by rebuilding one’s identity, so that it is no longer associated solely with being a refugee and potentially a victim. (Hannan 2004, p.27)

If you are a professional you’ve lost everything that you worked for in your lifetime, fleeing from persecution—here is a second persecution, it is very frustrating ... it is outwardly downgrading, you are made to go backwards ... you can not have a real identity, you try to live someone else’s identity. Now I live as someone who is learning and still can’t find a job. (Preece & Walters 1999, p.3)

Due to the traumatic pre-arrival experience, a refugee may need extensive medical care and counselling before she or he is ready to seek employment or take up education and training. The settlement or orientation period is not linear and refugees may continue to suffer the after-effects of torture or trauma, with physical and psychological symptoms disrupting their ability to concentrate and study (Hannah 1997).

Consequently, a number of local and international researchers have written about the importance of timely support during the critical on-arrival period (Castles et al. 2002; Kyle et al. 2004; Humpage 2004; Andersson & Andersson 2005; Elmeroth 2003). Others have presented frameworks and typologies to address the social, financial and human capital factors that lead to successful settlement (Humpage 2004; Portes & Rumbaut 1990; Silver lining 2004; Nee & Sanders 2001; Kyle et al. 2004). Castles et al. (2002) propose an ‘integration matrix’ incorporating characteristics of each particular ethnic community, as well as the conditions of the receiving context. These models recognise the pre-refugee forms of capital, the way these are (or are not) built on in the process of formally being accepted as refugees. They identify the likely effects of subsequently engaging (or not engaging) through those stocks of capital in the new and closely related worlds of language and literacy acquisition, learning and work in the receiving country.

Role of multicultural and community-based organisations

International and local studies have highlighted some of the more common barriers—practical and emotional—to successful resettlement experienced by refugees (Williams & Westermayer 1986; Abbott 1989; Abdelmalak & Akguner 2003; Marston 2003; Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues 2003; Hannah 1997, 2000; Morrice 2005; Olliff 2004; Preece & Walters 1999; Waxman 1998). These include low awareness of available services and difficulty accessing them, breakdown of family structure and guilt associated with leaving others behind, accelerated modernisation, social isolation and sense of being an outsider, and a lack of community infrastructure.

The pivotal role of ethnic community organisations in the settlement of refugees is also recognised (Humpage 2004; Integration matters 2005; Gieff et al. 2002; Committee of the Regions of the European Union 1999; Stevens 1996; Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils of Australia 1996; Miralles 2004). A key success is the ability of these organisations to directly address the profound isolation experienced by people from a refugee background (Kyle et al. 2004; Bloch 2002; Apout 2004; Humpage 2004) or, as a Swedish report defined it, their lack of *belongingness* (Elmeroth 2003, p.441). Bilingual workers in such organisations have been found to be the conduits to language and literacy resources, linking newly arrived refugees with vital information on education, employment, health, recreation and legal services.

Miralles (2004), researching factors affecting retention and completion of VET, identified leading-edge practice in many ethnic organisations registered to deliver accredited training. Many ethnic-based training organisations have developed valuable methodologies to support adult refugees experiencing the aftermath of trauma and interrupted education. Ethnic organisations provide the opportunity, in a more informal setting, for refugees to become self-directed and, importantly, for them to exercise more control over their educational outcomes (Andersson & Andersson 2005), therefore potentially preventing the devaluing of both the previous life experiences and the existing skills that many from a refugee background reported facing (Condelli 2003; Preece & Walters 1999; Miralles 2004; Schellekens 2001). As a refugee cited in Elmeroth (2003) said:

You asked me what was the most difficult thing here ... I must tell you that the most difficult thing is the employment office ... they don't think we know anything ... they treat us like children. (Elmeroth 2003, p.441)

Finally, ethnic and other community organisations have been identified as critical partners in any strategy to overcome refugees' lack of awareness of VET and employment pathways. Research has argued for a formal recognition of the information brokerage role undertaken by ethnic organisations (Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils of Australia 1996; Miralles 2004; Kyle et al. 2004; Hannah 1997; Volkoff 2004; Shiferaw & Hagos 2001; Committee of the Regions of the European Union 1999; Stevens 1996).

Recent research by Golding found that engagement in community organisations, quite apart from enrolment in programs, played a vital role in enhancing vocational skills and pathways through VET for adults disengaged from traditional education. Golding's research with others (Golding & Rogers 2002; Golding, Harvey & Echter 2004; Hayes, Golding & Harvey 2004; Flamsteed & Golding 2005) has explored and identified the critical importance of learning and literacy acquisition through engagement in non-traditional VET contexts. This suite of research has demonstrated that involvement by Australia-born adults in community education and voluntary service organisations has provided numerous benefits, including pathways for particular groups with known low participation in formal VET (such as Indigenous Australians, people in rural and remote towns and older men).

The situation for the large and significantly different recent refugee groups in Australia is much less well researched and understood.

It is generally recognised that refugee engagement in community organisations plays a key role in their initial settlement in Australia: community organisations, such as migrant resource and information centres and ethno-specific organisations, are in the frontline of service and information delivery to refugees. Anecdotal evidence also points to the work these organisations do to help to fill the gaps that mainstream education providers leave unfilled as a consequence of the complexity of settlement and life issues faced by people from refugee backgrounds. The impact of such engagement in enhancing English language and literacy acquisition and longer-term employability is much less well known. While informal and community networks have been shown from the research to be important in refugee lives, no previous research has been

identified that specifically explores the likely connections between exposure to these organisations in the receiving country, and language, literacy and employability—for refugees generally, or for the three specific groups forming the focus of this study.

Network diagrams

This study employed a methodology known as network diagrams as a means of determining and mapping the strength and nature of relationships between multicultural and other service organisations, as perceived by refugee community members.

Networks have been referred to in some previous refugee research. Baker (1983) in an international overview of refugees (cited in Jones & Rutter 1998) constructed:

a 'relationship web', which is helpful in understanding the position of a refugee. A person is normally held in position in his or her culture by a 'web' of relationships and connections to other people and social structures. These provide status, affirmation and a sense of connection and belonging. In the process of being formally uprooted and becoming a refugee, a person is usually dramatically stripped of this web ... [representing] ... a massive threat and challenge to the individual's coping and adaptive capacities.

(Baker cited in Jones & Rutter 1998, p.109)

The 'relationship web' of Baker (1983), referred to in the current research as a 'network diagram', is, as Jones and Rutter (1998) point out, a model of some value in refugee contexts because it shows the extent of loss occurring from a fracturing of relationship networks. The fracturing and subsequent growth of other temporary network relationships can occur a number of times in a refugee's country of origin as well as in intermediate countries, or for some refugees, in detention. In all probability this process has included not only loss of country but also loss of links to language and culture; family, friends and acquaintances; neighbourhood; and professional roles and status. The current research seeks to identify the nature of the new network relationships re-created—typically after several episodes of fracturing and recent relationship-forming in Australia.

When people (or organisations) draw diagrams to show how they are connected, the sum totals of the links they draw are taken to be their 'networks'. In previous research by Golding (2004), network diagrams have been shown to be simple, quick and effective ways for people and organisations to visually represent their links (sometimes including blockages) to other people and organisations. The positive links on the diagram (of various strengths as shown in table 1) usually indicate a combination of trust, collaboration, reciprocity ('give and take') and shared norms (agreed ways of doing things, often cultural or religious). The positive links on these diagrams, as drawn by community members, can be taken as an approximate measure of the 'social capital': the positive social 'glue' holding communities together. The theory and practice behind the use of these diagrams in some previous research is presented in Golding (2004). Networks have been found by Golding to be particularly useful in situations where relationships are complex, fractured or ambiguous, as well as in very small towns and organisations—those situations where surveys and interviews become less effective.

Method

Our study began with a review of local and international reports. Consistent with the research rationale, our data-collection method focused deliberately and generally on the role played by multicultural and community organisations and the practices, including the network relationships supporting English language, literacy and employability skills acquisition, of the three recently arrived refugee groups. It also included focus group discussions to explore refugee perceptions and experiences of the practices and programs provided by multicultural and community organisations.

Network diagrams

Participants in the interviews and focus groups were asked to create network diagrams to represent the strength of their interactions with various agencies, institutions and individuals. For example, a thick black line was used to signify a very strong link, a thin line to describe a normal link, and a dotted line to describe a weak link. Specific symbols were also utilised to identify the existence of blockages and competition. If there were no linkages or connections between individuals and others, this was left blank on the diagram. Table 1 shows the key given to individuals to create their diagrams. A standard prompt checklist of organisations was developed based on previous research (Golding 2004) to assist informants to consider all network possibilities. Close reading and thematic analysis of the interview data, including the network diagrams, was carried out to identify emerging issues and possible differences between and within the three refugee groups. The detailed method, including research instruments, is contained in the support document.

Table 1 Key to network diagrams

Nature of link	Symbol
Strong link	
Normal link	
Weak link	
Blockage	
Competition	
Unconnected	

Telephone interviews with multicultural community organisations

Information about organisational practices, programs and interagency relationships was collected through in-depth telephone interviews with staff and management committee members working

in a range of multicultural and community-based organisations providing services to refugees. In-depth interviews were carried out in three Australian states (New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland). Participants were identified through expert sampling, a subset of purposive sampling, whereby people with specialist knowledge of the research topic are selected. A listing was compiled of potential interviewees derived from a database of multicultural organisations—ethno-specific community organisations and those working with a wide range of ethnic groups (for example, migrant resource centres)—and community organisations providing multicultural programs. Table 2 provides a summary of the phone interviews conducted. A full list of participating organisations and the in-depth interview guide are listed in the separate support document.

Table 2 Number of in-depth telephone interviews, state, client group

Location	Bosnia-Herzegovina	Iraq	Sudan	Non-specific	Totals
New South Wales	1	2	1	9	13
Queensland		2	3	8	13
Victoria	3	1	4	11	19
Totals	4	5	8	28	45

The final in-depth interview protocols were established after pilot telephone interviews with multicultural community organisations working with Sudanese refugees. Where possible, organisations were emailed in advance of the telephone interviews with a summary of the research brief and interview protocols. As well as exploring the range of programs and practices implemented to support refugees' English language, literacy and employability skills development, the in-depth telephone interviews collected information for the network diagrams, which outlined organisational relationships.

In-language focus group method

Miralles (2004) demonstrated that research in a multicultural context delivers richer data when the methodology includes face-to-face, in-language focus groups conducted by facilitators known and respected in the community and in a familiar physical environment. The in-depth telephone interviews were followed by a series of in-language focus group discussions conducted by bicultural/bilingual facilitators with members of each of the three refugee groups in capital cities and regional sites, as outlined in table 3.

Table 3 Location, focus group composition

Country	Locations & states	General	Men	Women	Youth (Age 18–24)	Totals
Bosnia-Herzegovina	Gold Coast, Qld	2				2
	Melbourne, Vic.	1			1	2
Iraq	Shepparton, Vic.		1	1		2
	Melbourne, Vic.			1	1	2
Sudan	Sydney, NSW	1			1	2
	Ballarat, Vic.	1				1
	Melbourne, Vic.			1		1
Totals		5	1	3	3	12

Tables 3 and 4 contain a summary of the characteristics of the participants in the in-language focus groups. The separation of some participants by age and gender accommodated cultural norms that may restrict open communication in mixed groups.

Table 4 Focus group participants by country of origin and gender

Country	Male	Female	Totals
Bosnia-Herzegovina	15	28	43
Iraq	16	26	42
Sudan	22	23	45
Totals	53	77	130

Table 5 summarises the current location of participants by country of origin.

Table 5 Focus group participants by country of origin and current location

Country	Capital city	Regional	Totals
Bosnia-Herzegovina	23	20	43
Iraq	20	22	42
Sudan	32	13	45
Totals	75	55	130

The recruitment of focus group participants involved community intermediaries, who nominated possible participants, as well as bilingual facilitators, who approached people in their networks. The sample was therefore essentially opportunistic. Nonetheless, the final selection of participants was made using a focus group profile matrix outlining key demographic characteristics to be reflected within the group, particularly gender, age and employment status. This process resulted in focus groups composed of men and women of different ages, with a range of life, educational, settlement and employment experiences. A somewhat higher number of women took part. The focus groups also reflected a diversity of cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds. In relation to the Iraq-born, we recruited two groups in Melbourne and two groups in Shepparton. Participants in Melbourne defined themselves as Assyrian-Chaldean and those in Shepparton as Iraqi. Participants from Bosnia-Herzegovina represented a diversity of faith and ethnic backgrounds and defined themselves as Bosnian. The Sudanese participants were from a number of tribes/clans in Southern Sudan and were linked by their Christian faith. They felt that the tendency for people to place undue importance on the differences within the Sudanese community to be less than constructive and exacerbated internal divisions. For this reason, the Sudanese consulted wanted to be defined as one group with the same needs—Southern Sudanese. Throughout the report, when referencing the focus group discussions, we use the terminology selected by the participants.

A focus group guide, developed after the analysis of the in-depth telephone interviews, was prepared to direct the discussion. Face-to-face briefing sessions were conducted with the bilingual and bicultural facilitators using a standardised briefing kit. Discussion, while guided, was free-ranging, and participants were encouraged to explore the issues presented. In order to share in-progress findings from the in-depth interviews with the bilingual facilitators, an interview summary report was prepared. (See support document for focus group guide.) The audiotapes from the focus group discussions were translated into English and summaries prepared. Quotes used throughout the report are as they appear in the facilitators' reports.

Reporting back

On completion of the research, the bicultural, bilingual facilitators organised reporting-back sessions to share the information with focus group participants. In many instances of research, refugee groups are widely consulted but are not informed of outcomes or of how their experiences have resulted in the formulation of recommendations for future policy and planning. The reporting-back process was built into the research plan and was consistent with approaches developed and applied by the researchers in previous work. It was a way of recognising and validating participants' input into the research. It also modelled the social capital (trust, reciprocity) being studied. Rather than being passive subjects, the refugees consulted became active participants in the research process.

Confidentiality and privacy issues

The detailed ethical protocols developed for the project are provided separately in the support document. In summary, during the recruitment phase for the focus groups, the bilingual facilitators verbally advised participants that the information collected would preserve their anonymity. At this stage also prospective participants were informed that focus group discussions would be audio-taped. This is important, as past experience has shown that some people, refugees in particular, may experience anxiety about recorded discussions. Anyone who felt uncomfortable about the prospect of having the discussion recorded had ample opportunity to decline to participate. Permission to use recording equipment was again explicitly sought at the beginning of the focus group session. Participants were advised that quotes would be attributed to the group rather than to any one individual.

Limitations

Our results need to be prefaced by a number of limitations, including the relatively small number of groups selected for study, in a small number of locations. While some of the findings may apply more broadly to other refugee groups and apply generally to the refugee groups we selected for study, the capacity of our findings to be generalised is also limited by intra-group diversity.

We recognise the possibility that network relationships of the multicultural and community organisation informants have only partially been disclosed, particularly in situations where criticism of funding, governments or services might damage existing networks and hard-won trusting relationships. Recently arrived refugees are by definition severely displaced people whose previous networks (including levels of trust) have typically been greatly diminished or lost, both by the circumstances that originally displaced them and their subsequent history of dislocation, including segregated settlement and systematic isolation by more than one government.³

³ The systematic isolation of refugees in segregated camps or settlements, including in offshore detention centres is referred to in the literature as 'refugee warehousing' (Uniting Church in Australia 2006).

Findings and discussion

Factors encouraging refugees to access services

Through the identification of common themes in the interview data, the following factors were found to encourage refugees to access multicultural community organisations.

1. Bilingual/bicultural workers

Bilingual/bicultural workers were highlighted as the most important aspect of service provision and the main reason why clients had chosen to forge links with certain multicultural community organisations rather than others. As a female focus group respondent said, '[The community organisation] provides a bicultural worker. Of course we would prefer to go there than to use the service of an interpreter' (Assyrian-Chaldean women's focus group).

It was found to be quite common for refugees in all communities to travel longer distances to access services from a bilingual/bicultural worker. As one participant in the Iraqi women's focus group said, 'I prefer to travel if it means I get to speak to a bilingual worker'.

As issues of trust were very important to refugees, they were initially apprehensive about going to a new service provider. The refugee groups we spoke to had all experienced internal conflict in their homelands. The issue of trust was thus of particular significance to them, consistently mentioned as a significant issue impacting on service use. Bilingual/bicultural workers were therefore essential to success in the work of organisations in settling refugee clients into mainstream Australian society. It was important that workers shared the cultural understandings and customs of their clients. Some examples of insensitive practices were documented, where workers 'from the opposite side back home' were assigned to work with refugees, thus effectively alienating refugees from the organisation and its services.

2. Cultural understanding of refugee backgrounds and refugee issues

Generally, bilingual/bicultural settlement workers had been migrants or refugees themselves. Focus group participants felt that these workers were better placed to offer guidance and support because they understood the hardships faced by newly arrived refugees. This tendency for refugees to trust someone who was seen to have the ability to empathise with their situation as well as their language and culture was common to all of the research participants and was a significant aspect of multicultural community organisations' service delivery.

We will continue to use these services as long as we feel we are trusted, respected and they [the community organisations] understand our culture and where we come from.
(Assyrian-Chaldean women's focus group)

While all participants emphasised the value of bilingual/bicultural workers, refugees from Sudan, the most newly arrived of the communities, seemed to experience the greatest difficulty in accessing bilingual/bicultural workers. A number of reasons were given for this, including the

lack of established bilingual/bicultural professionals working with the community, the existence of different clans and tribes settling in Australia and the fragmented locations where refugees are settled.

It is the best thing for our community to have our people to give help and advice. But a problem we have that other groups don't have is that there are maybe too many tribes in order for institutions to provide bilingual/bicultural workers for everyone. I think we have to overcome this. (Male respondent, Southern Sudanese focus group)

3. Recommendation by family member or friend

Many refugees were directed to multicultural community organisations by a family member or friend, who recommended the service based on established links with bilingual workers and previous experience.

The organisation was well respected and trusted by the first few Sudanese refugees to arrive here due to the service they received. Because of this, newer refugees were also encouraged by older members of the community, that had been here longer and already established contact with them to become involved ... People found out from word of mouth—word of mouth had to always be partnered by a positive experience and come from a trusted source. (Male respondent, Southern Sudanese focus group)

4. Welcoming/warm reception of staff

The warm, inclusive and welcoming atmosphere of multicultural community organisations was regarded highly by most focus group participants across the three communities and was cited as a factor in the ongoing connection of refugees to community organisations during the settlement experience. In particular, this was more common for older participants with lower levels of English language proficiency:

When they are friendly ... when they smile ... I feel I am welcomed among them and I am encouraged to continue using the service

(Older female respondent, Assyrian-Chaldean women's group).

Transition points

Analysis of the telephone interview and focus group data identified two stages where learning assumes particular significance for refugees during resettlement. One critical learning stage is during immediate resettlement. Here refugees are faced with the daunting task of re-establishing their lives as independent adults:

It was very hard when we first arrived, we were confused and isolated, we did not know much about settlement services in Australia or that there were organisations and people speaking our language, helping people. (Female respondent, Bosnian focus group)

The second stage involves learning for 'stepping out' into the wider community, work and further education. Each stage requires a somewhat different intervention.

Learning during immediate resettlement

In-depth interview and focus group data show that it is during this first stage that multicultural community organisations play a central role as information providers and as facilitators of informal learning.

I did not understand anything, did not speak any English, was afraid and felt lost, this was [sic] the hardest days of my life here. (Female respondent, Bosnian youth focus group)

We have identified the following important prerequisites to informal learning for refugees in this first stage of settlement. The prerequisites listed below are explained in more detail in the ‘Organisational practices’ section that follows.

- ✧ one-on-one support—assessing and addressing individual client needs
- ✧ opportunistic, flexible and responsive program delivery
- ✧ informal learning and classroom settings
- ✧ embedded learning where culture and language, although incidental, are nonetheless addressed
- ✧ creation of links into the broader community
- ✧ use of bilingual and bicultural workers
- ✧ programs, classes and activities held in a local context.

For most multicultural community organisations consulted, this first stage occupied the major part of their workload. Interestingly, many of the multicultural community organisations commented they were not in the ‘formal education’ business. However, when talking to people from refugee backgrounds, their stories pointed to a very strong informal learning role for multicultural organisations during these early stages.

I was new in this country and in this city and needed information and advice about everything, I went to DIMA [Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs] but I could not understand much, then the worker took me by the hand and brought me to the MFO office [My Future Options] ... they gave us the information we needed to learn about the way here. (Female respondent, Bosnian focus group)

In essence, the multicultural community organisations interviewed believed that refugees needed to be assisted to progressively develop bridging social capital and move away from relying solely on their own communities and settlement organisations to guide and inform them. It was felt that only when this was achieved would refugee clients have the confidence and capacity to move into further education and employment. This confidence to ‘bridge’ was almost always assisted by multicultural community organisations.

This [further education and employment] only comes after settlement ... If their basic needs for survival are not met they cannot be ready to merge into the broader Australian community. (Bosnian community worker)

Learning to step out into the wider community for work and further education

The second transition point occurred when the refugee had built the confidence and capacity to step out into the wider community, to engage in paid work and to undertake further education. For most adult migrants and refugees of working age, further training was a second-order issue, with employment and earning money almost always first on the list.

People are often eager to make money with education put on the backburner. They need encouragement, support, stability and time to settle before we expect them to move into education and training. (Bosnian community worker)

Many of our children are dropping out of school to earn money ... we are trying to push our children into furthering their education—when you have an education you can have the money. (Male respondent, Southern Sudanese focus group)

The situation was very difficult for us who are of middle age, we felt that we did not have time to study, we needed to get job and support our family.

(Male respondent, Bosnian focus group)

This finding comes as no surprise. Most adults obtain their sense of identity through their work; it provides a sense of purpose and creativity and maintains their role as providers. Perhaps it is even more important for people from a language background other than English, since low English language proficiency is sometimes equated with lower education and skill levels. Work, therefore, is a way of demonstrating competence and capabilities.

While our research showed that multicultural organisations were more heavily involved in the first stage of settlement, they were also involved informally in the second stage. Our research found that, with the right initial support, refugees were ready to move more easily into employment and further education.

Network diagrams, obtained from participants during the in-depth interviews and focus groups, demonstrate how multicultural community organisations assist refugees to learn about the Australian system of service provision (in effect, creating bridging social capital) through their linkages between government and non-government organisations.

Networks and links

Eight network diagrams have been selected to illustrate both the diversity and trends in all the diagrams (57 in all: 45 from the in-depth interviews; 12 from the focus groups). The selected diagrams include capital city-based organisations (figures 1–4 and figure 8), as well as regional organisations (figures 5–7). They range from large multicultural, capital city-based organisations such as the one illustrated in figure 2, to small and volunteer organisations such as the one illustrated in figure 4. Most of the diagrams are multicultural in their focus. (The exception is the ethno-specific community organisation illustrated in figure 3.) However, many organisations, by virtue of their location and proximity to particular refugee communities, tend to specialise in the provision of services to specific refugee groups.

The following diagrams are briefly introduced before discussion of findings based on the diagrams. As the network diagrams are introduced, it will become apparent that the number and nature of links between community-based multicultural organisations and other organisations on the network diagrams varied according to the size, scope and history of the organisations.

Large and well-established, multifunction ‘migrant access centre’-type organisations in capital cities such as the organisations at the centre of figures 1 and 2 provide a range of generic services across ethnically diverse groups in a wide area and tend to have a large number of links, many of them very strong. While both organisations at the centre of figures 1 and 2 have range of links, the organisation illustrated in figure 2 has around twice as many strong links.

Figure 1 Multicultural community organisation (metropolitan)

Key for network diagram:

- Strong link = 
- Normal link = 
- Weak link = 
- Blockage = 
- Competition = 
- Unconnected = 

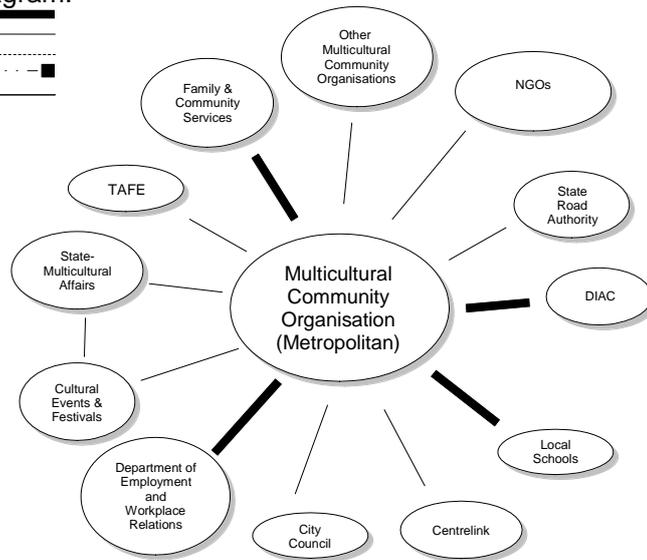
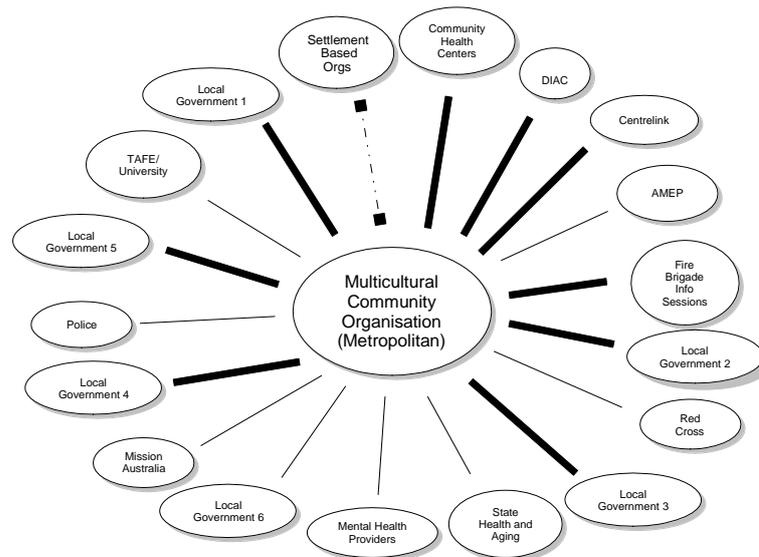


Figure 2 Multicultural community organisation (metropolitan)



As in figures 1 and 2, for capital city-based ethnic and refugee support organisations such as the ones illustrated in figures 3 and 4, many of the links are with other large service providers and funding bodies, including government agencies. Smaller organisations tend to have fewer links. For larger organisations such as the one at the centre of figure 3, the trust tends to reside with the organisation and its links, as well as in its reputation and its team of workers, rather than with particular individuals. The blockage to TAFE is possibly due to the perceived lack of trust sometimes associated with competition for programs, funding and students.

Figure 3 Ethnospecific community organisation (metropolitan)

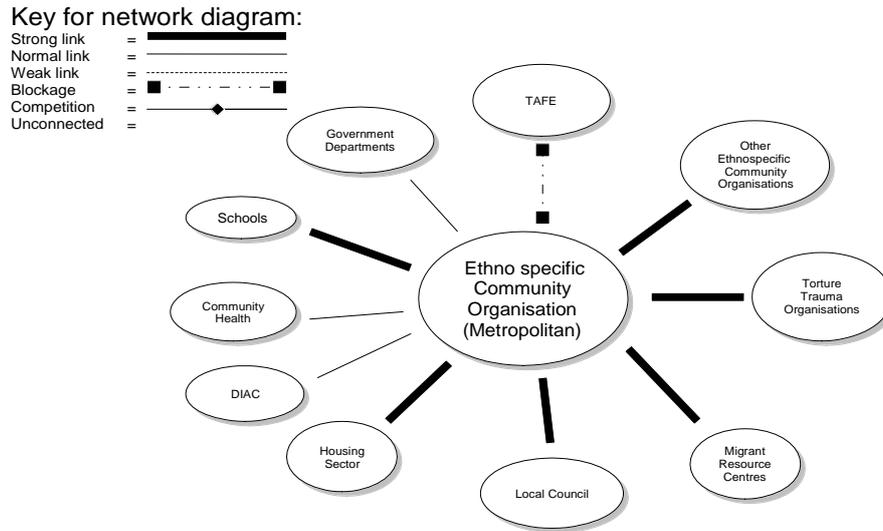
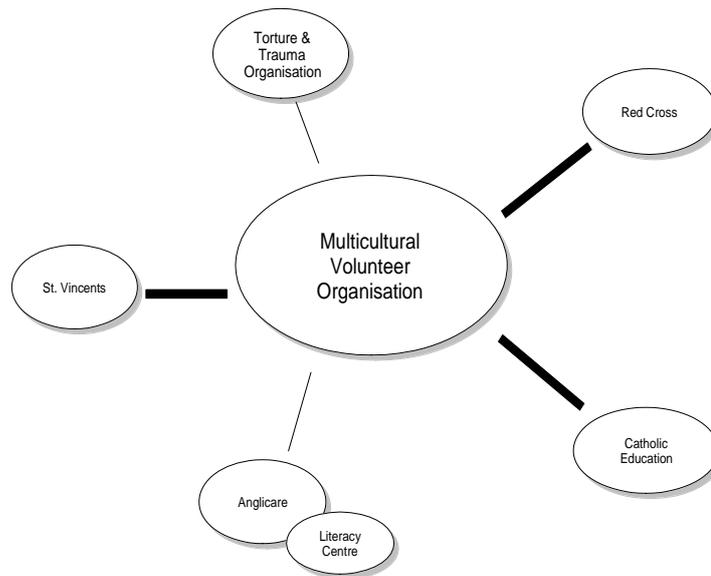


Figure 4 Multicultural community organisation (metropolitan)



Refugee support in regional cities is typically provided through a combination of support groups, resource centres and economic development units of regional city councils, such as those illustrated in figures 5, 6 and 7. These organisations vary in size, but are typically smaller than those in metropolitan areas, in large part because of the smaller communities they support. Their predominant links are with government organisations since, once again due to the smaller population, they may be the only multicultural organisation servicing the region. The services provided tend to be comprehensive and personalised, and strong links to particular individuals become more important. Figure 7 illustrates how services are often provided by a cluster of organisations (contained within the larger circle). Figures 7 and 8 both illustrate the importance of accounting for lateral links between partner organisations.

Figure 5 Multicultural community organisation (regional)

Key for network diagram:

- Strong link = 
- Normal link = 
- Weak link = 
- Blockage = 
- Competition = 
- Unconnected = 

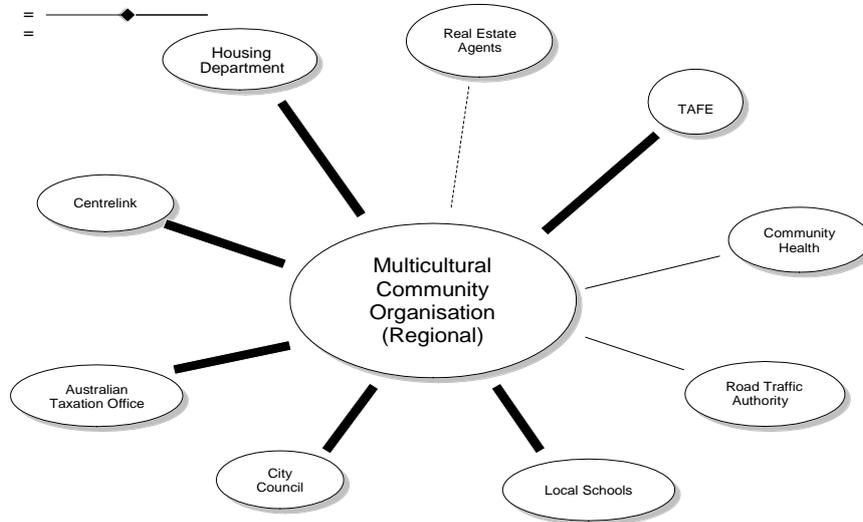


Figure 6 Multicultural community organisation (regional)

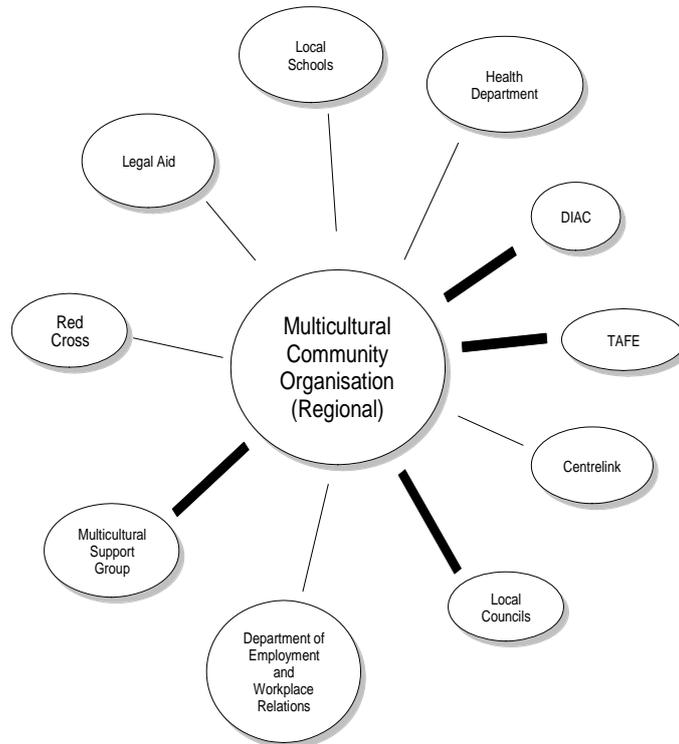


Figure 7 Multicultural community organisation (regional)

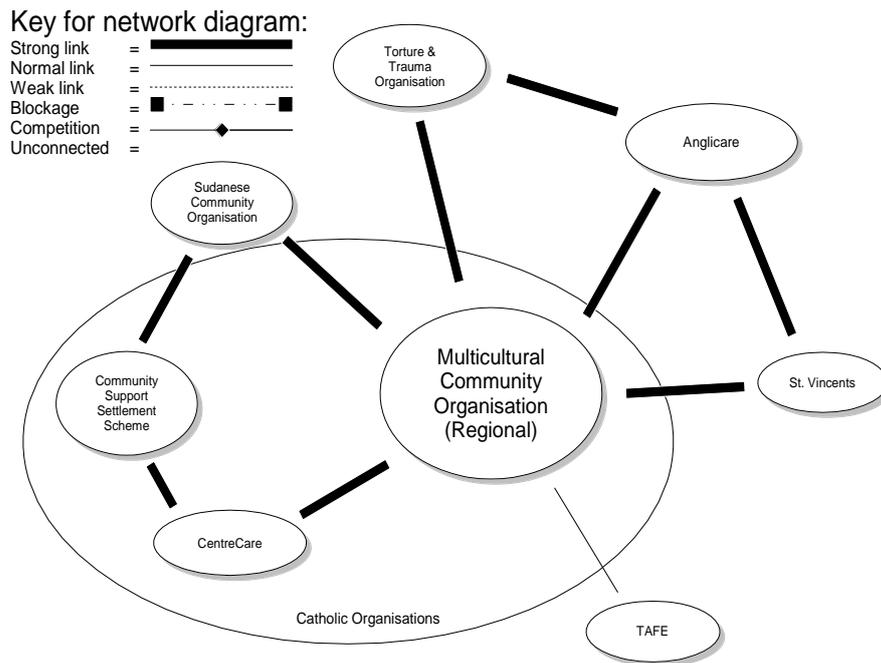
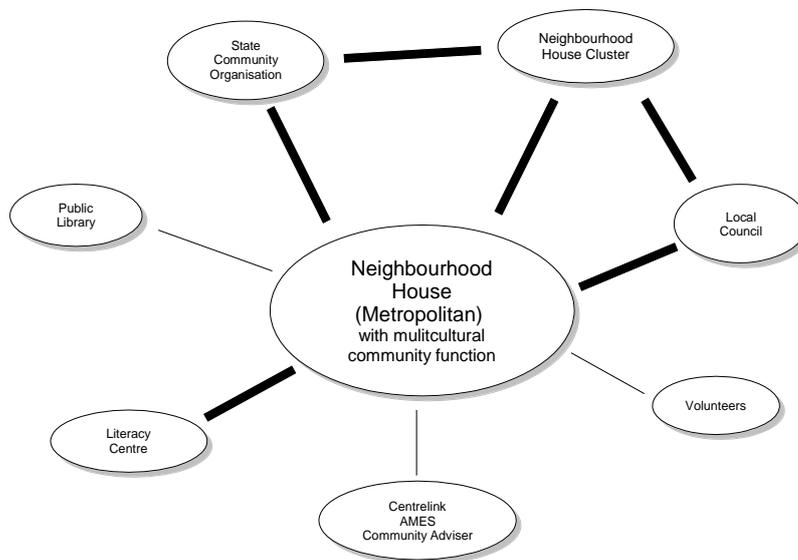


Figure 8 Multicultural community organisation (metropolitan)



Small organisations operating at the neighbourhood level, such as the service illustrated in figure 8, provide targeted services at the level of suburb and neighbourhood and have relatively fewer links. The links that do exist are typically developed personally and locally by the program coordinator, therefore providing challenges for succession planning. For these and other small community-based multicultural organisations, the networks of particular key individuals become much more important, as does the ability to recruit clients as volunteers.

Most of the relationships in all organisations are with other organisations. As organisation size reduces, the links to individuals become more critical (for example, figure 8). The trust, reciprocity, shared norms, networks and collaboration (collectively regarded as ‘social capital’) in smaller organisations are more evident between individuals, households and neighbourhoods.

While bonds between particular individuals and other community organisations and client groups may be strong, there is scope for perceptions of (or actual) favouritism or nepotism towards particular families or ethnic sub-groups.

We noted divisions within all three refugee communities examined. This particularly occurred in the communities where there were perceived cultural differences, which were magnified by different religions (for example, Christian or Muslim) or different languages. The research documented some mistrust of interpreters; some were seen, by virtue of their association with a particular family, clan or dialect, to be unable to impartially interpret cross-cultural exchanges on behalf of clients from different language, ethnic or religious backgrounds.

Compared with other network diagrams created in Australian community learning organisation contexts as part of Golding's research over a decade (Golding 2004, 2006), the diagrams generated for this research have stronger bridging linkages, particularly to other service, multicultural and funding organisations, than diagrams generated within dedicated learning organisations. These linkages presumably need to be varied and strong because of the immediate and pressing needs of refugees for a diverse range of integrated services during the early stages of resettlement in Australia. Most of the strong links in figures 1–8 are to 'mainstream' federal, state and local government-funded organisations (for example, justice, housing, tenancy, schools, technical and further education [TAFE], adult and community education [ACE], universities, police, local government, health and income support, the Department of Immigration and Citizenship and the former Department of Education, Science and Training). Other strong links are to service providers in the private sector (such as real estate agents, lawyers and banks). Looking at these multicultural community organisations specifically from a learning perspective, it is evident that they have the ability to minimise the barriers to both access and participation by providing integrated and holistic services.

The network diagrams demonstrate few blockages or competition other than at the margins. Our interpretation of this finding is that multicultural community organisations provide essential services for refugees and their families in the early resettlement process. There is little scope for 'choice' at this early stage. The question arising from this initial dependence is whether and how refugees later become independent of the services provided by these organisations, and particularly whether this disassociation process is desirable in the longer term. What became apparent from the interviews was that some of the most effective staff working in multicultural community organisations were themselves refugees who became unpaid volunteers and later paid workers. While many program coordinators have vocational and professional backgrounds in other areas, their skills were learned on the job, through personal experience. The reciprocal, trusting relationships and networks (social capital) they have acquired and share with other refugees are of great value to the Australian community. These staff act not only to empathise and interpret Australia to the refugees, but also to interpret the refugee experience to the wider Australian community.

Organisational practices enhancing refugee literacy, language and employability

Thematic analysis of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions pointed to a cluster of very specific practices which created the context in which to support positive outcomes for members of the three refugee groups. An analysis of examples provided by focus group participants showed that initiatives believed to lead to improved English language, literacy and employability skills are characterised by a web of interlinked practices based around outward focus and integrated practice, as well as timely and accurate information-sharing.

Successful organisations were outwardly focused. They were solidly connected to the community, with many strong links to other government and non-government agencies (see figures 1–8).

They were responsive and flexible in the face of funding constraints and cutbacks. Their organisational practices shared a common trait—they met all four criteria identified as critical factors in creating sustainable, long-term positive outcomes for refugees (see table 6). These four critical learning-related success factors—opportunities for sharing resources, embedded learning, the development of networks and access to practical support—are necessarily underpinned by the cultural and linguistic expertise found in multicultural community organisations. Analysis of the data showed that agencies providing positive English language, literacy and employability outcomes operated across all four dimensions.

No organisation saw itself primarily as an educational provider. However, during the in-depth interviews and focus groups, it became apparent that people from refugee backgrounds gained significant educational outcomes from their participation in and links to multicultural community organisations.

[I]here was [a] person working there [multicultural community organisation] who spoke our language ... They gave us information about how things work here—about the employment system here and the law, which is very different to my country.

(Female respondent, Bosnian focus group)

The interplay of these four dimensions had positive repercussions across a number of levels. Workers in these organisations were able to actively address refugees' learning and connect them to the wider community. They were also able to act as expert intermediaries, explaining the world of the refugee to mainstream agencies.

Representatives of the multicultural organisations who participated in the in-depth interviews emphasised that information provision was most effective and more likely to be validated through partnerships and information-sharing between multicultural and mainstream organisations. These partnerships were believed to be most successful when bilingual/bicultural workers and 'experts' from outside mainstream agencies worked together to provide refugees with timely and accurate information.

The research also suggests that some refugees were isolated, relying solely on the information and guidance of individual community members. Their isolation was due to a breakdown of significant relationships, the most important being the lack of a trusted point of contact or bilingual/bicultural worker in organisations servicing their area and a lack of choice. This was sometimes exacerbated in regional settings, regardless of cultural group. However, the research found it was not exclusively geographical context causing this breakdown in linkages. The Sudanese and Iraqi communities, including the Assyrian-Chaldean, lack the infrastructure available to some other refugee groups and experienced isolation in both regional and metropolitan locations. This breakdown was highlighted in focus group discussions, where participants spoke about a lack of representation in local community organisations.

We did not have any other option [when choosing a provider] ... because of the limited organisations that provide these services in our area, the decision was made for us.

(Male respondent, Iraqi [regional] focus group)

People from northern Sudan who know nothing about Southern Sudanese people are the staff they send to help us ... workers from the same ethnic background can work better with us rather than a worker who comes from an ethnic background that was an enemy back home.

(Male respondent, Southern Sudanese focus group)

[Name of community organisation] is a service for all people but sometimes it is not impartial.

(Female respondent, Southern Sudanese focus group)

Without a bilingual/bicultural worker to engage them, many of the more isolated refugees did not have the opportunity to be involved in discussions and consultation about their communities' needs and service requirements and to obtain objective information. First of all, this meant that

refugees missed out on appropriate service provision. Secondly, and possibly more importantly, isolated refugee communities without a wide range of links to outside organisations did not have the option to go elsewhere. Some focus groups highlighted these network breakdowns and attributed them to mistrust and misunderstanding. It was therefore considered essential for bilingual/bicultural workers to operate in multicultural community organisations in order to engage refugee clients in consultations and program planning.

Focus group data revealed cases where incorrect advice had been provided by community members. One woman in the Sudanese community told of how she was glad to be in a district where ‘Women are allowed to travel on public transport with concession cards—you can’t do that in Melbourne’. Focus group and interview data point to a community that is struggling with the new gender roles of Australian society; in such circumstances the role of impartial bilingual/bicultural workers becomes vital. In another case, an Iraqi participant wrongly believed that moving to another suburb would increase the Centrelink benefit entitlement. This perception was based on the experience of one member of the community who had moved to another suburb, paid a different amount of rent, declared it to Centrelink and consequently received a higher rate of rent assistance. The community was not aware of the intricacies of the rent assistance payment and mistakenly believed that ‘The Centrelink in that region pays you more’.

Learning-related success factors for refugees

A number of learning-related success factors were identified in a quantitative analysis of the in-depth interview data. Table 6 summarises the frequency of these factors and their impacts. These data informed the development of the focus group discussion guide. A summary of emergent themes for the three refugee groups, according to the variables of age, gender, educational background and place of dwelling in their country of birth, is provided in the support document.

Creating opportunities for sharing resources

Respondents from all organisations surveyed during the in-depth interviews emphasised the importance of addressing the immediate settlement needs of all refugees (including the three groups in our study) before encouraging the move into work, education or training. Essentially, it was seen to be impossible for refugees to be successful in formal learning environments or work situations if they did not yet understand the intricacies of the ‘Australian way’. It was seen to be important for organisations to take on an information ‘clearing house’ role. The reciprocal nature of information provision was seen as a key success factor. Mutually respectful partnerships involving two-way information-sharing between multicultural community organisations and other mainstream providers created during this dialogue were regarded as particularly important.

Links are stronger when both parties are benefiting and getting what they want.
(Multicultural community worker)

We have a women’s group ... when we meet they sometimes organise information sessions that help us fulfil our [information] needs on things such as everyday living, health issues, education and training, employment and English classes.
(Older female respondent, Assyrian-Chaldean women’s focus group)

Much of our experience and community involvement is through them [multicultural community organisation]. They organise different information sessions and invite people to come and speak to us, depending on what we need to know ... and they also organise many excursions and activities for our community to be involved in. (Iraqi women’s focus group)

Table 6 Learning-related success factors, initiatives undertaken and impacts identified from the in-depth interviews

Key success factors	Initiatives	Frequency		Impacts
		No.	%	
Creating opportunities for sharing resources	One-on-one support on a 'needs' basis	29	64	Better understanding of employment and education pathways Trust established Refugees supported through key settlement transition points Improved confidence Gaps bridged between refugee communities and mainstream providers Reciprocal networks with mainstream providers established
	Information sessions in partnership with mainstream service providers	28	62	
	Information brokering—providing advice and information about mainstream services	14	31	
	Information about new arrivals to mainstream organisations	8	18	
Creating opportunities for embedded learning	Contextualised programs related to culture/settlement	15	33	Delivered 'on time' when participants are ready Better understanding of Australian society and customs Better understanding of workplace rights and responsibilities Social interaction and networking Improved confidence Improved English language and literacy skills Participation in the broader community Improved employability prospects
	Informal (ethno-specific) English learning programs facilitated by bilingual/bicultural workers	9	20	
	English classes divided according to skill levels	6	13	
	English language support—one-on-one home tutoring	6	13	
	Work experience and volunteering programs	5	11	
	Homework groups for high school students	4	9	
	Targeted, everyday English lessons	3	7	
	Job clubs—job search training and assistance	3	7	
Creating opportunities for net-working	Community social groups	29	64	Social interaction and networking Participation in the broader community
	Community events	3	7	
Providing practical support	Material aid	25	56	Establishing links and participation in the broader community Equity for refugees in accessing mainstream services Burdens of initial settlement eased
	Support and advice to negotiate rental market	15	33	
	Transport	5	11	
	Material aid/sponsorship to set up recreational clubs/activities	3	7	
	Driving lessons	3	7	

Note: Percentages are based on data from 45 interviews. For each 'key success factor' initiatives are presented in order of those most frequently undertaken by participants.

By way of example, most multicultural community organisations, in partnership with mainstream service providers, developed and delivered information sessions. Representatives from relevant organisations were invited to speak to refugee client groups in familiar and safe community settings, therefore using the expertise and knowledge of service providers in conjunction with bilingual/bicultural workers. An important element of the role of bilingual/bicultural workers was to act as intermediaries between the refugees and staff from mainstream organisations delivering the information sessions.

I only come to the information sessions about Centrelink, or the education system, or other services because I know someone will be there who knows what I have been and am going through but also knows the ropes here. (Male respondent, Bosnian focus group)

Although in-depth interviewees identified a broad range of pertinent subject matter, the most commonly cited examples fell into four main categories. They were:

- ✧ education, including information on primary and high school systems
- ✧ Australian law, including family structure, family law, children's rights/child protection, domestic violence, anti-discrimination, legal aid services, tenancy rights and responsibilities
- ✧ employment, including job training, apprenticeships, Australian workforce
- ✧ general life skills, including income support information, banking and financial matters, housing, car management, probationary and learner driver information and shopping.

These programs were said to '... help ease the burden of the settlement experience ... making the transition into education and work smoother' (Multicultural community worker).

Discussion with multicultural community organisations highlighted other examples of informal and personalised community education delivered in conjunction with group information sessions. This was seen to be most effective on a 'needs' basis: 'We deal with problems as they arise'. In many cases, needs were assessed during both formal and informal consultations with the community and through other more ad hoc scenarios where clients brought up areas of concern or interest during group meetings, gatherings and other sessions involving settlement workers.

A number of in-depth interviewees mentioned that information about English language and literacy and education and employment programs and pathways required a far more exhaustive and personal approach. This often involved an early assessment of the client by a settlement worker. The settlement worker would then customise advice for the client. Some of the community workers interviewed mentioned that many refugees, especially those with limited schooling, struggled to understand the Australian education system and the relationship between education and employment pathways.

Initially, refugees have a very limited understanding of what is available and what courses/qualifications actually involve ... they also sometimes have little idea or unrealistic expectations about what the employment outcomes are. Staff at Centrelink or job-network agencies neither have the time nor the knowledge regarding the difficulties refugees endure. They are not able to speak to clients in depth to help them find the courses that meet their needs. Often, refugees are told to do certain courses and leave not knowing what the courses are about. They need to have an understanding of what the course is all about, the requirements, study skills and outcomes, what kind of employment may be attainable at the end of the course. (Multicultural community worker)

Many Sudanese for example, believe that TAFE is a third-class education and that being a plumber is low-status. They don't understand that they are more likely to be employed and earn a decent salary from these types of courses. (Multicultural community worker)

For many refugees, having a university degree confers special status amongst other members from the same community group. While [sic] they are undertaking uni courses, these do not usually translate into employment outcomes. Communities need to be educated about courses that promote practical training. (Sudanese committee of management member)

General employment agencies do not provide any follow-up aid ... they don't seem to help much ... the [multicultural community organisation] is now offering job search training ... they are able to help us more because they care and want to help. (Male respondent, Southern Sudanese focus group)

Another important area of work for many of the community organisations we interviewed included information sessions for mainstream organisations on newly emerging communities and cross-cultural training sessions. Designed to inform providers about the history and culture of

communities of new arrivals settling in their area, they have been found to be successful in bridging the gap between service providers and their newest clients. In particular, real estate agencies and education providers have been targeted for many of these initiatives. There were also some examples of refugees themselves taking on the role of session facilitator. This was said to help increase confidence and capacity on the part of both the refugee and the mainstream provider. Overall, it was a step towards greater mutual understanding.

Our community has established links to the coordinators/principals of the local schools ... a representative from the community is liaising with the coordinators and providing sessions to school staff with information on the Sudanese refugees' background and culture ... This has helped staff understand the cultural differences existing for some Sudanese children unfamiliar and struggling with the school system in Australia.

(Male respondent, Southern Sudanese focus group)

Information was again seen to be most effective when provided by or in conjunction with bilingual/bicultural workers. This finding was common to all stages of the research; all participants across the three groups agreed that bilingual workers were essential to the information process.

I was so happy when I found out that here was someone who spoke my language. From then on my life changed for the better. They helped me with everything from taking me to the doctor, housing, Centrelink, and other organisations I did not know existed. My wife spoke better English so she was going through all the papers and documents to try to understand them. Every time I received another paper in English it was just one more frightening thing for me—what to do and where to go. But having someone like this to help you in person was great. It is very hard to imagine how frightening this is at first, not knowing the system or people. I and my family were totally lost; everything was so different there was so much to learn.

(Male respondent, Bosnian general focus group)

I choose to go there because someone there speaks my language—people would prefer to go somewhere where they can speak to someone from their own background ... they would probably always choose this option over an interpreter.

(Female respondent, Southern Sudanese focus group)

They do not mind travelling a further distance [to community organisations] if it means they can communicate directly with a bilingual worker who is aware of their needs, backgrounds and all other sensitive issues ... they prefer dealing with bilingual workers directly to avoid English language embarrassment.

(Iraqi community worker, Victoria)

In-depth interviewees from multicultural community organisations commented that, apart from simply providing information, these information sessions were also important in the development of English language skills. With the assistance of bilingual workers, refugees were slowly developing their 'everyday English' vocabulary. These sessions were said to improve the confidence and capability of refugee clients to function outside the community organisation; while they introduced refugees to relevant jargon used in everyday life, they also provided an appropriate forum for clients to practise the language and ask questions.

When it comes to English, I prefer it if I am taught about my daily needs such as shopping, doctor's appointments and so on.

(Older female respondent, Assyrian-Chaldean women's focus group)

The sessions also provided refugees and service providers with a greater understanding of each other's functions and needs. Because the multicultural community organisations had initiated meetings between service providers, prospective employers and refugees, all were in a better position to trust, understand mutual needs and requirements and therefore liaise again in the future. Bilingual/bicultural facilitators helped to explain and interpret cultural norms and expectations for both parties and bridge understanding. This was reported to increase the

confidence and capacity of refugee clients and help potential employers to understand the refugees' background, thus facilitating the transition into work and employment. As one coordinator said of refugees:

If you have no everyday experience of work it's difficult. They don't know the system ...
Some apply for hundreds of jobs ... most of the time they work in other jobs. They
don't have [English] literacy after 510 hours and many have low literacy in their first
language. (Multicultural community worker)

Creating opportunities for embedded learning

It was clear that situated learning (as defined by Lave & Wenger 1991) embedded in everyday experience was common to all multicultural community organisations running successful programs. Programs were developed in an opportunistic manner to address the current needs of the refugee client groups. An example of this is a women's group based in Melbourne which established a parenting group to help community members better understand the new family structures present in Australia. In this way, the community organisation was able to embed practical learning into existing culturally appropriate settings. The parenting group became the platform for not only learning about Australian cultural values, but also about services for improving English language and literacy skills. Discussion of topics such as gender roles and family relations in Australia helped refugees to develop a clearer understanding of community expectations and a greater confidence in their ability to negotiate life in Australia.

Programs developed in response to the current needs of the group were typically delivered 'just in time', when the participants were ready. In all cases, multicultural community workers believed that delivering programs in safe and comfortable community settings with trusted bilingual/bicultural workers was essential to program success.

Six program types were typically used to increase the confidence of refugee participants and improve their understanding of Australian life and culture. Each program type highlights examples of embedded learning.

1 Contextualised culture/settlement-related programs

These culture and settlement-related programs were popular with focus group participants in many community organisations. They were developed in most cases as spin-offs from existing programs, were usually ethno-specific and sometimes multicultural (depending on the nature of the common activity or program), and were developed to provide ongoing information and training while offering a venue for social interaction. The most common programs, while not directly vocational, played an important role in helping refugees to improve their English language and literacy skills and eventually move into work. These included: programs that brought parents together to discuss issues relevant to children, school systems and family life; women's groups discussing gender roles, including domestic violence; cooking programs focusing on healthy eating, shopping and recipe sharing; and arts and cultural programs, established to maintain cultural customs and to share them with the broader community. They also included practical programs, including computer classes, financial planning, driving and road safety, Australian culture, targeted everyday English classes, and job clubs (job search training and assistance). In relation to these very practical programs, one respondent from the Iraqi men's focus group said: 'This is very important, especially for the beginners to help them function with basic daily living and to cope in a new country'.

In the case of multicultural groups, participants from different ethnic backgrounds usually communicated in English and shared their own cultural experiences and differences. Multicultural community workers were of the view that the best way to help refugees understand the broader community was to conduct these types of sessions in relaxed and safe informal learning environments in which refugees felt in control and 'at home'.

Because we are finding it harder to adjust to life in Australia, Sudanese and Chinese men are meeting in a group once a fortnight to discuss men's needs and how to build our own communities. (Male respondent, Southern Sudanese focus group)

We organise something that will attract them, like a soccer group for the younger ones ... then we talk about the important issues. (Sudanese community worker)

The women's group is established as a social group but we discuss important and relevant issues and provide information sessions in conjunction. (Iraqi community worker)

We have a playgroup ... we can address isolation issues present for some women as we offer them a chance to get out of the house with their children ... sometimes we also provide information sessions for the women on domestic violence, childbirth, health services, safety, security and parenting issues like healthy eating and lunches to prepare for children. (Sudanese community worker)

2 Ethno-specific learning programs facilitated by bilingual/bicultural workers

Ethno-specific programs facilitated by bilingual/bicultural workers were extremely popular with focus group participants across all three groups. Most focus group participants reported that multicultural settings were good for social and recreational activities but not for formal classroom learning. When it came to studying English, refugees needed the support and understanding of a bilingual/bicultural teacher in tune with the different needs of their community. The bilingual/bicultural workers' understanding of the refugee experience meant that they were considered to be less likely to infantilise refugees and to understand each individual's skills and capabilities. In the experience of focus group participants, this meant that programs were targeted at the correct level and used a methodology appropriate to adult learners with various levels of educational, work and life experiences.

I travelled throughout Europe but didn't speak English. So, when I came to Australia I went to English classes. Let me tell you what happened ... at the beginning of the English class the way the class was conducted, we had to keep repeating words and phrases. But, even worse than this was when the teacher brought a bear to class. She held up the bear and mimed: 'Hello, I am teddy, what is your name?' I was given the bear and had to repeat: 'Hello, I am [name of focus group participant], what is your name?' To get the bear and to have to take part in this pantomime, it was so insulting, I never forgot.

(Male respondent, Bosnian focus group)

By contrast, a small number of respondents stated that in their view multicultural class settings were better at encouraging English language acquisition as they forced students to communicate in English.

They [multicultural classrooms] help us with English as we are forced to speak to each other in English ... we don't want to be in a classroom with only us.

(Male respondent, Southern Sudanese focus group)

3 Informal English programs

Perhaps the most successful initiative for older refugees (of post-secondary school age) was the provision of conversational English programs. Essentially, these were informal English classes delivered, in most cases, to ethno-specific groups by bilingual facilitators/teachers in familiar settings. The safe environment and the relaxed nature of these English programs were embraced by all refugee communities consulted. Focus group data confirmed that refugees with no prior experience of a formal classroom structure (for example, some Southern Sudanese women) were initially alienated and overwhelmed by attempts to move them straight into formal mainstream English classes. Instead, and particularly during the first stages of settlement, it was seen to be important to provide an environment where these students were confident enough to speak up and take part. Some examples have been provided of contextualised culture/settlement-related

programs targeting Southern Sudanese women living in south-east Melbourne. As the following quote demonstrates, multicultural community organisations are also exceedingly adept at pinpointing and addressing the aftermath of torture and trauma.

A lot of Sudanese mothers are suffering with separation anxiety from their children. As they find it difficult to be away from them, they find it hard to have a life outside the home. The playgroup we have organised offers them the opportunity to bring the kids along with them while they learn English, learn about life in Australia, get out of the house and socialise with other women. (Multicultural community worker)

In the case of informal English language classes, it was mentioned by community workers that ethno-specific environments encouraged participation, because students were more willing to take risks and practise their English with others they knew and trusted. At the same time, it allowed them to discuss and understand lesson complexities in their first language—leading to higher levels of understanding.

We provide coffee and conversation meetings at the centre. This is particularly helpful for our older clients who have completed their AMEP [Adult Migrant Education Program] hours but still struggle with the language. AMEP does not seem to work well for older refugees with lower educational levels. It needs to be simplified; it is at too high a level. (Bosnian community worker)

When I am with people who speak my language and who understand me, I don't mind making a fool of myself because we all make the same mistakes and we can laugh with each other. (Iraqi women's focus group)

As confidence was seen by many interviewees to be integral to language learning, multicultural community workers provided these classes in informal, supportive and relaxed environments with bilingual/bicultural teachers. This approach empowered students and improved their confidence. Multicultural community workers felt that, by doing this, participants were made to feel safe about practising their English. It was also stressed during the in-depth interviews that this confidence was related to a client's employability. As noted by a Bosnian community worker, a confident attitude was seen to be closely correlated with improved language and literacy skills and employability: 'Capacity building and ongoing training are very important. This is how we help refugee clients into the workforce—we need to encourage in order to build confidence.'

4 Organisation of community events

Community events were seen by both community organisations and focus group participants to be helpful in including and involving refugees in the broader community. However, it was mentioned that this was not a reality for refugees struggling through the first stage of settlement. A certain amount of security and comfort was usually necessary before people were ready to be involved in such events. Therefore, involvement in both bonding and bridging activities, such as community events and festivals, were usually only undertaken during the second transition stage of settlement.

Refugees from the Balkans want to be a part of the Australian community but because of initial barriers [of language and culture] they find comfort and identity with their own cultural group ... this changes as they gain confidence and settle. (Bosnian community worker)

Our group participated in the ... festival, we were involved in dancing, cooking and singing, this gave us the chance to share our culture with the rest of the community. (Male respondent, Southern Sudanese focus group)

We wanted so much to get on with our lives and become citizens of Australia, but we could not connect straight away. (Female respondent, Bosnian focus group)

Some younger focus group participants felt it was difficult to take part in multicultural events as earlier generations often saw their participation as a betrayal of their cultural identity.

Our parents are not always happy when we are involved in a project or activity organised by other ethnic organisations. They think that because of our previous and painful experiences in our home country we will forget and lose our cultural identity. You can feel lost if you have no involvement with the outside community.

(Female respondent, Assyrian-Chaldean youth focus group)

5 Work experience and volunteering programs

Our research documented that work experience and volunteer programs are particularly successful ways of better assisting refugees from these three communities into employment. Looking at the structure of these programs and learning environments in more detail, we also identified modules vital to all work experience and vocational training projects. These included cultural knowledge—helping refugees to understand the Australian workplace—using situated learning modules and offering continued language support. It was seen as important to recognise previous life experience and existing skills, although being cognisant of the fact that low English-language proficiency does not equal low professional competence. This practice of glossing over one's professional skills was particularly painful for Bosnian focus group participants.

Overseas qualifications are not taken seriously, our schooling, training and work experience is at the same level as in Australia. But it did not matter what qualification I had, all they could offer me was: cleaning job, hospitality and some factory work. A friend, who was a biochemist from Sarajevo ... she applied for work at every hospital and pathology service with no success. She went in person and most of the time they would not even listen to her, telling her to go away. At the end of it all, she was so frustrated and devastated—only when she found bilingual worker in one employment agency that took an interest in getting her job was she successful.

(Female respondent, Bosnian focus group)

Most of us that came from the Former Yugoslavia had a European education ... these skills and experiences should have been taken into account and our qualifications recognised ... all we need is an opportunity to prove ourselves.

(Male respondent, Bosnian focus group)

Although many community organisation representatives commented that work experience opportunities for refugee clients would be the best way to help them into employment, only a small number of organisations had been able to develop and assist in such a process. Data from both the interview and focus group stages pointed to volunteering pathways as a way to paid employment. Many of the multicultural community organisations we spoke to cited examples of volunteer programs providing opportunities for refugees from the three communities to work at the organisation and receive training and ongoing support. In most cases, refugees with relevant skills were assigned to administration tasks and reception roles. In-depth interview data suggested that many multicultural community workers felt that these initiatives had assisted refugees into full-time paid employment. Our research found this to be particularly so for Sudanese refugees.

Refugees need to understand the nature of working in the Australian system; this in turn builds confidence and capacity in the long run. Work experience positions are a great way to do this.

(Multicultural community worker)

Volunteering is a good way to update and build skills in order to one day move into paid work ... from this group there are three of us volunteering at community organisations. I am studying welfare studies and volunteering at [name of community organisation] so the experience is very relevant to my studies and future goals.

(Male respondent, Southern Sudanese focus group)

Tangible work experience programs built into English as a second language courses were also found to be successful in assisting students into the workforce. A formal partnership between a multicultural community organisation and an Adult Migrant Education Program provider in Victoria offers a good example. Using contacts in the ethnic community, students were matched to a suitable job. The refugee participants in the program had the support of the English as a second language teacher and the bilingual/bicultural worker as they negotiated the workplace culture and language. The practical experience of an Australian workplace provided the opportunity to understand workplace expectations and offered a real-life setting for language learning. It also led to an increase in confidence that would otherwise not have been gained until they were 'on the job'. In many cases, students gained full-time or part-time employment as a result of the program.

Networks were also very important in the creation of partnerships and offered an opportunity for personal intervention with employers. One very successful work experience program, run out of Melbourne and targeting the Bosnian community, utilised links the organisation had established with Bosnian contacts in industry. The community organisation worked in partnership with potential employers through these links to provide work experience projects for refugees, utilising their previous life skills and experience. Wherever possible, clients were matched to a work situation based on their skills and interests, with many of these students gaining some form of employment as a result of the program.

Mentoring programs were also cited as being useful in the Bosnian community. Developed in a bid to overcome issues for professional refugees moving to Australia, they were designed to support people into relevant work, acknowledging their past experience and expertise. Overall, these programs were established to form links between unemployed, newly arrived refugees and existing professionals from the same culture who were already working in the industry. For example, a doctor from a Bosnian background would take on a mentoring role for a newly arrived refugee doctor and help them to navigate the Australian health system and its registration procedures and thus eventually find work. Successful participants usually registered their interest in repeating the favour for others once they were established.

Multicultural community organisations were considered to be more successful than mainstream agencies in helping refugees to find work. Their success was perceived to be due to their established networks, competence in brokering, local knowledge, and most importantly, their strong sense of commitment to helping refugees and providing feedback and ongoing support. By contrast, the Southern Sudanese focus groups did not elicit many such examples as the other groups, possibly because of the relatively small community size and the lack of established businesses and professionals.

6 One-on-one support

An important part of all effective practice was the one-on-one support offered by bilingual/bicultural workers. These workers provided the advice and guidance essential to encouraging refugee learning and involvement in the wider society. One-on-one support was common to both English language and literacy acquisition and job search/employment activities.

In relation to English language and literacy support (home tutoring/individual language support), the one-on-one approach has enabled tutors, sometimes bilingual/bicultural and sometimes English-speaking, to customise learning to the needs and language levels of individuals. Homework programs or tutoring programs delivered to current students (in particular, secondary school students) were reasonably common. However, it is important to note that, due to the intensity and time commitment required, this support was only available in well-resourced community organisations, staffed with both paid workers and volunteers. Although it was widely agreed that this approach was probably best for supporting students struggling with study and

English language proficiency, it was simply not an option for organisations without access to such resources.

Providing job search support, although not always an official role, was also common to many multicultural community organisations. This type of support included assistance with resumé-writing, searching for jobs, addressing criteria for applications, interview skills and identifying practical training pathways to employment. Bilingual/bicultural community workers again often took on this support role.

Creating opportunities for networking

Social interaction was seen by many community organisations to help increase the confidence and English language skills of refugee clients. It was felt that encouraging interaction with both the refugees' immediate community and the wider community helped refugees to broaden community networks and feelings of belonging. This notion of capacity or confidence-building was seen by many community organisations to be essential to the development of English language skills.

Through these programs, we aim and are able to build confidence and self-esteem. Without this our people will not take the risk of going out into the community and speaking English. If we didn't do this, our women would feel overwhelmed and not go out.
(Iraqi community worker)

By attending meetings with other cultural communities [set up by multicultural community organisations] we learn more and experience from them.
(Male respondent, Southern Sudanese focus group)

They [multicultural community organisation] organise multicultural forums ... these allow the Sudanese community to demonstrate aspects of our culture to others in the community and learn more about the other cultural groups living in the region.
(Male respondent, Southern Sudanese focus group)

The social groups established by many of the multicultural community organisations interviewed were popular amongst the refugee communities consulted, particularly women. These groups were seen as a critical means of involving adults otherwise not networked to the broader community. The groups would typically meet once a week or once a fortnight to provide avenues for socialisation through planned activities. Men's groups were not as common, but those that did exist, such as a Sudanese and a Chinese men's group in regional Victoria, were successful in facilitating social connections into the wider community. Our research identifies a need for more of these types of services for male refugees and migrants who, according to the data, struggle to overcome isolation and disconnection. The most common social groups set up by community organisations included the following: women's; cooking; parenting; mothers; youth; dance/performing arts; festival involvement and organisation committees; sporting (targeting youth); men's (not common but some examples presented); and pensioners/seniors groups.

There were examples of an Assyrian-Chaldean women's group set up in response to community interest in preserving traditional culture and heritage; performance, arts and culture were the main activities. This group was also encouraged to take part in multicultural community festivals. It was evident from both interview and focus group data that women were far more involved in these activities. Developed initially to address isolation issues present for many 'stay at home' women, established programs were usually gender-specific, although it was recognised that men were also in need of social activities, networking and programs.

Examples highlighted in the Bosnian focus groups included a social support group, created by a Slavic community organisation aiming to provide an inclusive service to all Slavic migrants and refugees, regardless of religion, culture or background. In Melbourne, the appropriately named

'Prijetelji/Friends' was established, with a mix of participants from different religions and backgrounds. Through this group bonding networks within the Bosnian community were formed and nurtured. This also led to employment, with networks established leading to paid work for some unemployed participants.

People could meet, talk in their own language, exchange information and assistance, and have social activities that helped overcome their loneliness. (Bosnian community worker)

Other ways community organisations facilitated social interaction for refugee clients included encouraging participation in community events, festivals and youth camps set up in partnership with service providers (for example, police). These were seen as a positive way to encourage involvement in the broader community and to break down barriers and isolation issues existing for some of the less-established refugee communities.

Providing services and practical support

The first transition stage, faced by newly arrived refugees, occupied the bulk of the workload of most community organisations. Supporting refugees in this immediate stage of resettlement required a practical and timely response.

Interview and focus group data show that during this first stage of settlement multicultural community organisations play a central role as support and information networks. Here, refugees were assisted, first of all, with intensive support to negotiate their new life in Australia, and, second, to progressively develop bridging social capital and move away from relying solely on their own communities and settlement organisations for guidance and information. This type of intervention largely involved: individual case work and assessments; helping refugees negotiate accommodation arrangements; and linking refugees to charity organisations in order to provide them with furniture, clothing and food vouchers.

Where they could, community organisations (sometimes in partnership with service providers) would also provide monetary assistance for recreation-related expenses such as youth soccer group uniform costs. It was also common for them to assist with transportation, for example, the provision of a community bus to and from social and sporting events and educational activities.

Many of the refugees that we see don't have a car and if they do, the family only has one and that is usually being used by a member of the family who is working ... there is no point organising activities for women if we don't also organise transport.

(Multicultural community worker)

How can they take their children to sporting events if both parents are working full-time and trying to set up a life here ... this is not important to adults during the first stages of settlement as they have to focus on survival ... it is important for children and teenagers because for them, this is a way of being normal, being like everyone else at school. With the parents, we have organised a rostered pick-up and drop-off scheme.

(Multicultural community worker)

Summary of findings

In summary, the research has documented the critically important role of multicultural community organisations in Australia in the successful settlement of refugees from Bosnia, Iraq and Sudan. Through network analysis, we conclude that multilingual, multicultural organisations provide both a bonding and bridging function. These organisations impart informal learning about the wider Australian context, while also providing links to formal education and employment. The informal learning, whether in their first language or in English, is vital to

refugee engagement in the wider community, because it builds social capital by re-establishing the trust, reciprocity, shared norms and networks depleted during the refugee experience. Our research has identified the features of the most successful organisations and their practices and recommended a closer link between these community-based organisations and the various education sectors.

Implications for policy and practice

Given that many adults derive educational advantages from social connections (Field 2005), the social and economic costs to the Australian community of a delayed, fractured and dislocated settlement process for refugees has to be recognised as significant and potentially inter-generational.

Our research into multicultural community organisations in Australia has a number of important implications for vocational education and training policy and practice.

- ✧ Governments need to recognise the valuable, informal, role of multicultural community organisations and begin a process of redefining adult education to include them and their practices.
- ✧ The critical role of social capital, generally, and bridging social capital in particular, needs to be recognised as valuable by governments and built into economic and social policies for both refugee communities as well as for the wider Australian community.
- ✧ Multicultural community organisations need assistance from and collaboration with, the wider Australian community to develop bridging social capital in order to maximise refugee English language, literacy, learning and employment outcomes.
- ✧ Formal education providers need to recognise the value to refugees of contact with community-based multicultural organisations in the initial settlement phase. Without the early intervention and ongoing informal support from multicultural community organisations, the move by refugees into further education and employment process is likely to be longer and more circuitous.
- ✧ All education sector providers need to forge better collaborative links with multicultural community organisations. It is there that the knowledge of successful pedagogical practices with refugees and the experienced bicultural and bilingual workers are to be found.
- ✧ The information brokering and interpretative role of bilingual/bicultural workers is central and needs to be harnessed by VET and ACE as well as other education sectors.

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Support document details

Additional information relating to this research is available in *Creating learning spaces for refugees: The role of multicultural organisations in Australia—Support document*, which can be accessed from NCVER's website <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1964.html>>. The document contains the following appendices:

- ✧ James' story
- ✧ Some definitions
- ✧ A summary of the emergent themes identified during the in-depth interviews and focus groups
- ✧ Tables
- ✧ Ethical protocols
- ✧ Interviews with community organisations
- ✧ Community focus groups
- ✧ Focus group recruitment template.



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