

# ▶ ADULT LITERACY RESEARCH

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

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▶ THROUGH THE EXPERIENCES of refugees from three countries—Bosnia, Iraq and Sudan—this study explores the role of multicultural community organisations as places where English language and work skills are taught. The research identifies specific practices that support informal skills transfer and highlights the important role that multicultural community organisations play in connecting people from refugee backgrounds to one another, to learning and learning contexts and to the wider Australian community.

The research was conducted across regional and metropolitan Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. Interviews were undertaken with multicultural community organisation staff and management committee members. Focus groups were held with refugees from Bosnia, Iraq and Sudan, and were conducted in the refugees' native language.

The research shows that refugees prefer to access services from community-based multicultural organisations for a number of reasons.

- Being partly independent of government, these organisations are more likely to be trusted.
- They tend to be staffed by multiskilled, culturally aware, sensitive and empathetic people who are either bilingual or have access to others who are bilingual.
- These organisations, typically being located in a public or community area, are able to create a professional but culturally inclusive environment.
- They provide specific services, information and advice at critical times and have networks that can assist refugees to establish links to employment and

to formal learning organisations, such as schools and vocational education and training (VET) providers.

- They provide initial sites for learning English, for introducing Australia (particularly government agencies and workplace culture), and for gaining practical experience of the types of information and methods of communication, including computer technologies, that many other Australians take for granted (for example, using the telephone, email, and the internet).
- They provide opportunities for refugees who have used this or a similar service to reciprocate—by mentoring, advising and giving back to other refugees, as well as to the wider Australian community.

When these volunteer, community-based multicultural organisations work collaboratively with government agencies, they enhance the effectiveness and reach of government services, not only in education, but also in housing, health, welfare and employment. They make a significant community contribution by encouraging bonding within a single community; they also play a major role in bridging cultures, religions and communities.

### ▶ Implications for learning

Refugees normally develop trusting and reciprocal network relationships with community-based multicultural organisations as a result of engagement in learning. This learning and the contexts in which it occurs may be informal as well as formal, and may occur both in the language(s) of the refugees as well as in English. Formal and informal learning can create pathways to further education and to employment.



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Learning is particularly important for refugees at two points in the resettlement process. The first is upon arrival, when refugees are faced with the daunting task of re-establishing their lives as independent adults. At this stage, multicultural community organisations play a central role as information providers and as facilitators of informal learning. Accredited formal and vocational learning in English at this point may be 'too soon and too fast' unless it is connected to real work contexts or until the learners have the confidence to engage with the wider community.

Facilitators of informal learning at this stage include:

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

Most community workers consulted by the researchers said that ethno-specific English classes encouraged participation because students were more willing to practise their English with people they knew and trusted. These also allowed them to discuss problems in their first language, leading to higher levels of understanding.

The second stage of learning occurs once the refugee has developed the confidence and capacity to step into the wider community, to engage in paid work and to undertake further education; refugees need to move away from relying solely on their own communities and settlement organisations for guidance and information. It is only when this is achieved that the refugees are ready to embark upon the path to further education and employment.

Many multicultural community organisations have established employment programs and initiatives for refugees and these are generally very successful. This success can be attributed to their established networks and strong links to government and non-government agencies, their competent brokering role and their local knowledge. These community organisations are committed to helping refugees and providing them with feedback and ongoing support.

Successful organisations, that is, those organisations which achieved sustainable, long-term results for people from refugee backgrounds used four critical strategies. They:

- provided opportunities for sharing resources and information with relevant mainstream service providers
- embedded learning into everyday experiences
- had good community connections
- provided practical support such as organising transportation to and from sporting or education facilities.

Despite their success with refugees, multicultural community organisations generally have not been widely embraced within the adult education sector—except for those with registered training provider status.

## ► Implications for policy and practice

Stronger and more resilient collaborative links between multicultural community organisations and those education sectors that understand the pedagogical practices that work best for refugees will go some way to ensuring optimum learning experiences for refugees.

The study recommends that governments recognise:

- the valuable role that multicultural community organisations play in informal learning. Perhaps it is timely to begin a process of redefining adult education to include these organisations and their practices
- the importance of social networks and resources, and particularly those used by refugees during transition into mainstream education and employment, and to build their role into economic and social policies for refugee communities, as well as those for the wider Australian community.

In addition, education providers are encouraged:

- to recognise the value to refugees of contact with community-based multicultural organisations, both in the initial settlement phase and subsequently. This is important in ensuring a smoother transition to further education and employment
- to harness the expertise of bilingual/bicultural workers as interpreters and information brokers.

***Creating learning spaces for refugees: The role of multicultural organisations in Australia*** by Beatriz Miralles-Lombardo, Judith Miralles and Barry Golding will be available shortly from the NCVET website at <<http://www.ncver.edu.au>>.