

THE MOONEE VALLEY CITY COUNCIL WOMEN, CAREERS & LEADERSHIP PROJECT:

An Emerging Model for Replication

Prepared by the Centre for Social Impact at Swinburne University

June, 2023

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Acknowledgement of Country

We respectfully acknowledge the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation, who are the Traditional Owners of the land on which Centre for Social Impact (CSI) Swinburne is located in Melbourne's east and outer-east, and pay our respect to their Elders past, present and emerging. We are honoured to recognise our connection to Wurundjeri Country, history, culture, and spirituality through these locations, and strive to ensure that we operate in a manner that respects and honours the Elders and Ancestors of these lands. We also respectfully acknowledge Swinburne's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, students, alumni, partners and visitors.

We also acknowledge and respect the Traditional Owners of lands across Australia, their Elders, Ancestors, cultures, and heritage, and recognise the continuing sovereignties of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nations.

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Disclaimer

The opinions in this report reflect the views of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Centre for Social Impact Swinburne or Moonee Valley City Council.

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Introduction

This paper reports on research conducted by the Centre for Social Impact (CSI), Swinburne University of Technology, into the Moonee Valley City Council (MVCC) 'Women, Careers and Leadership' (WCL) project. The evaluation had two core components: 1. an understanding of what participants view as outcomes for them, their families and community, arising from participation; and 2. identification of the key elements of the program design and the key enablers and barriers to outcomes. The purpose of this paper is to explain the potential for the program, or elements of the program, to be replicated in other areas of MVCC or other Local Government Areas.

This paper is one of a set of three documents that provides an overall evaluation of the Moonee Valley City Council 'Women, Careers and Leadership' program. Each document can be read separately or in partnership with the others. The other two documents are a) the WCL Interim report delivered in powerpoint presentation format and b) the Community Services Outcomes Tree (CSOT) outcomes report. Both documents were delivered in May 2023. Where relevant, this report may reference material included in either of these two documents for additional information or reading.

Overview: the WCL Project

The 'Women, Careers and Leadership' project sought to 'create and deliver a culturally-appropriate career guidance program with women of migrant and refugee backgrounds living in Flemington and Ascot Vale Housing Estates' (MVCC, Program logic). The 'Women, Career and Leadership' program was founded on learnings and outcomes from former programs, including the Mamma's Kitchen program. The Mamma's Kitchen program engaged 14 women from social housing estates, and leveraged their existing cooking skills to produce wholesome, culturally appropriate food for local community members during responses to the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak (2020-21). Mamma's Kitchen provided wrap-around support, work experience and guidance to encourage women to envisage and plan future career and business opportunities. At its height, Mamma's Kitchen delivered 200 meals a week to community members in need.

The 'Women, Career and Leadership' program was funded by the National Careers Institute (Department of Education and Department of Employment and Workplace Relations). The 'Women, Careers and Leadership' project offered women from migrant and refugee backgrounds living in the Housing Estates opportunities to further develop and pursue their career goals. The project had three major activity areas: codesign workshops (March 2022), the Women's

Leadership program (May-July 2022), and Career Guidance workshops and Mentoring Support (June-April 2023).

MVCC employed a strengths-based, codesign process, drawing upon the existing knowledge of women participants. Two codesign workshops were held with 34 women participants, including women from the Mamma's Kitchen program, from the Flemington and Ascot Vale Housing estates, 7 Moonee Valley staff and 3 project partners. A codesign and planning morning tea followed. These codesign events, held in partnership with the Skills and Jobs Centre based at Victoria University Polytechnic, identified core program activities important to participants taking part in the program. These included traditional employment skills such as resume writing, networking, and interview preparation; and less traditional skills such as first aid courses, and public speaking. Ultimately, the codesign process was iteratively applied to guide and inform activities throughout the program.

The Women's Leadership Program (May-July 2022) was provided by MVCC partners, including the Skills and Jobs Centre based at Victoria University Polytechnic and external consultants. The program provided 8 leadership sessions to a core group of 20 women. Key activities of the WCL model included networking, understanding self, identifying career vision, persuasive communication and storytelling, and career toolbox (amongst others). Over 100 people attended a leadership training graduation and networking event.

Career Guidance and Mentoring Support was provided to a larger cohort of 69 women recruited primarily through social connections of the women participating in the WCL. The career guidance sessions centred on 12 career guidance modules. These focused on career planning, public speaking, a university tour, interview skills, resume writing, career counselling and career guidance modules. Attendance at the 12 career guidance modules varied, from a low of 6 participants at the job interview skills, to a high of 16 participants at the transferrable skills module. Some modules, such as public speaking and career action planning, were delivered on more than one occasion. Overall attendance was 130 touchpoints, noting however that many of the participants would have chosen and completed multiple modules. (See slide 10 of the Interim Report [Davis et al. 2023] for a breakdown of attendance at the WCL Career Guidance modules).

Mentoring was provided by two dedicated mentors, with support from the program's manager and assistant manager. The mentoring delivered an underlying level of support for women participants throughout the program, and covered a wide range of personal (e.g., mental health, work-life balance, exercise) and professional issues (e.g., resume support, job interview preparation, applying for an Australian Business Number). The program was delivered at a range of venues including Moonee Valley City Council, with excursions offsite for employment related

and wellbeing opportunities such as a jobs expo, women in business luncheon, Victoria University careers day and picnics in the park.

The WCL program had 25 employment outcomes (a mix of fulltime, part-time and casual), and 15 women who received support to start or grow their business, who then became registered suppliers to the council. These 15 women were contracted to provide paid services to Moonee Valley City Council, ensuring a longer-term business relationship with the council.

Research Methods

MVCC commissioned CSI to undertake an evaluation of the WCL program. The evaluation consisted of both program data (collected by MVCC as part of the program implementation), as well as primary data collected by CSI. The primary data including 3 focus groups with participants (migrant women), interviews with stakeholders (including employers) and staff (program, mentoring or MVCC staff). A short outcomes survey of participants provided additional data (see the Community Services Outcomes Survey report [Campain et al., 2023]). In addition, a short literature scan was conducted to identify evidence of core program ingredients for interventions designed to support migrant, refugee and asylum seeker women in resettlement, particularly in relation to employment.

For the purposes of this paper, this data was analysed to identify the key elements and ingredients of the program to guide replication by others. Specifically, researchers sought to identify the main activities of development and implementation of the program (what was done), process ingredients (how it was done), and how these contributed to outcomes (the result).

Limitations: While the WCL was developed from learnings from previous projects (such as 'Mamma's Kitchen', conducted by MVCC), and had an inbuilt process of ongoing reflection and refinement, the WCL program has had only one full iteration. Second and subsequent iterations of the model would be likely to further refine and adapt the model. Additionally, while data has been drawn from multiple sources, the sample size is still small and from a single context. As a result, the model should be considered emergent and subject to further evolution.

Emerging WCL Model

The recent design and delivery of the 'Women, Careers and Leadership' project offers a model to replicate in similar contexts for similar purposes. The model is described below with some elements of the original design enhanced by findings from the evaluation.

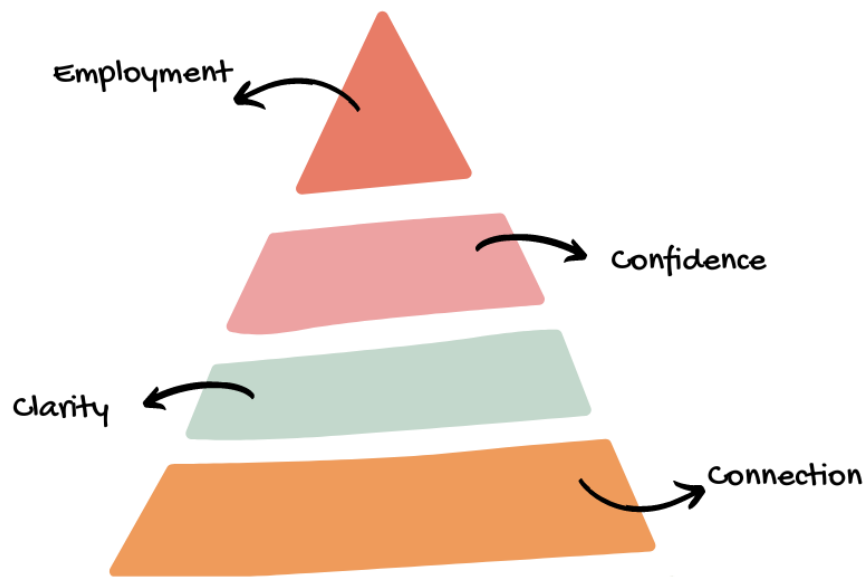


Figure 1: Building Blocks of the 'Women, Careers and Leadership' program

The activities of the program described above can be understood as contained within a set of 'building blocks' towards the core outcome areas of employment and leadership. The foundational building block is reported by WCL program staff and participants as being that of 'Connection', where increased connection to peers, employers and community underpins and enables attainment across all areas. Two further building blocks contribute to the employment and leadership outcomes, that of 'Clarity' in relation to personal aspirations, work life balance and career goals, and that of 'Confidence' based on recognition of strengths and building of skills.

These 'building blocks' are comprised of a set of elements or components that capture the focus of the various activities offered to participants. The elements of each building block are explained below and diagrammed in Figure 2.

Finally, the evaluation data also captured a set of practice ingredients that underpin and characterise the way each of the elements is delivered. These model 'ingredients' might also be seen as design principles. While they have been identified from the evaluation data, they also echo available evidence about the practice approaches that yield best results when working with this cohort.

For this reason, the discussion commences with a short overview of what is already known about key aspects of effective design for employment related programs for migrant and refugee women.

Research Evidence about Effective Program Design for Migrant or Refugee Women

Employment is ranked as one of highest priorities for refugee/asylum seekers in Australia and a key element of resettlement. Despite this, there is a 'relatively poor record of employment for refugee women compared to men... [and a] lack of available programmes specifically targeted to women' (Due et al., 2023, p.2).

A range of employment barriers hinder migrant women during resettlement. These include:

- Gender norms – family responsibilities and unpaid care work
- Gendered nature of labour market
- Cultural sensitivities re appropriate work for women
- Changing gender roles in resettlement contexts
- Work available is in informal economy
- Lack of networks
- Lack of knowledge of Australian job market culture
- Little knowledge of childcare benefits and how to access
- Lack of recognition of skills and qualifications
- Lack of English proficiency
- Low confidence (Due et al, 2023; De Maio et al., 2017; Whitaker et al., 2021).

A small evidence base exists that identifies the key ingredients of program design that support the efficacy of employment and personal development programs for women from migrant and refugee/asylum seeker backgrounds. Not surprisingly, a number of these ingredients address the barriers identified above and are summarised below.

Table 1: Aspects of Effective Program Design for Migrant and Refugee Women

| Key Program Design Aspects from evidence-based literature* | Description |
|--|--|
| Direct links to employers and workplaces | For example, via: Work experience Basic job skills training |
| Personalised approach | Address individual barriers (within gendered lens) e.g. address mental health needs Strengths based Responsive – ‘listening deeply’, ‘tailoring’ e.g., group and individual elements |
| Focus on empowerment, personal development and (re)building confidence | Opportunity to enable existing strengths – (re)empower Reinforce strengths Sense of solidarity |
| Cultural safety/appropriate program delivery | ‘Cultural safety is ... environments and practices which promote bi- or multi-cultural spaces that are seen as equal and safe for people from all cultural backgrounds, and where the effect of culture on human behaviour and experiences is acknowledged and taken into account, particularly in relationships where there may be power imbalances’ (Browne et al., 2009 cited in Due et al., 2021, p.12). Culturally competent delivery to engage clients and maintain relationships Knowledge of cultural and religious differences Employ migrant and refugee women as service deliverers Bilingual workers |
| Gender responsive | Acknowledge structural gender issues Recognise gender roles and family responsibilities |
| Build social capital | Build relationships between women, and community (via guest speakers, visits) |
| Consultation and collaboration with migrant and refugee community | Consult/collaborate with both target cohort and community leaders about needs |

| | |
|---|--|
| | Recognises diverse needs/interests across groups and stages of resettlement |
| Promote availability to client groups – overcome barriers to service access/participation | Outreach via members of community, support volunteers (leadership opportunities) |
| Intensive English language | Opportunities to enhance English language within program |
| Collaboration with other service providers | Offer referral opportunities to mainstream and specialist services |

* Due et al., 2021; De Maio et al., 2017; Whitaker et al., 2021.

As mentioned, many of these program design aspects are integral to the WCL program, which aligns the WCL program design well with existing evidence.

Elements of the WCL Model

As described above, the WCL program has a number of building blocks, each comprised of a set of elements (clusters of activity with a specific focus). While presented in a somewhat linear fashion, the building blocks and elements are iterative and continuous, with overlapping activities and with each element reinforcing and being reinforced by others around them. The elements of each building block are described below.

The core element that is common across all building blocks is that of mentoring. Mentoring is an essential element that activates and supports each of the building blocks and makes connections between them. Given the key role of mentoring, we commence with discussion of this element, below, then move into explanation of the elements of each building block.

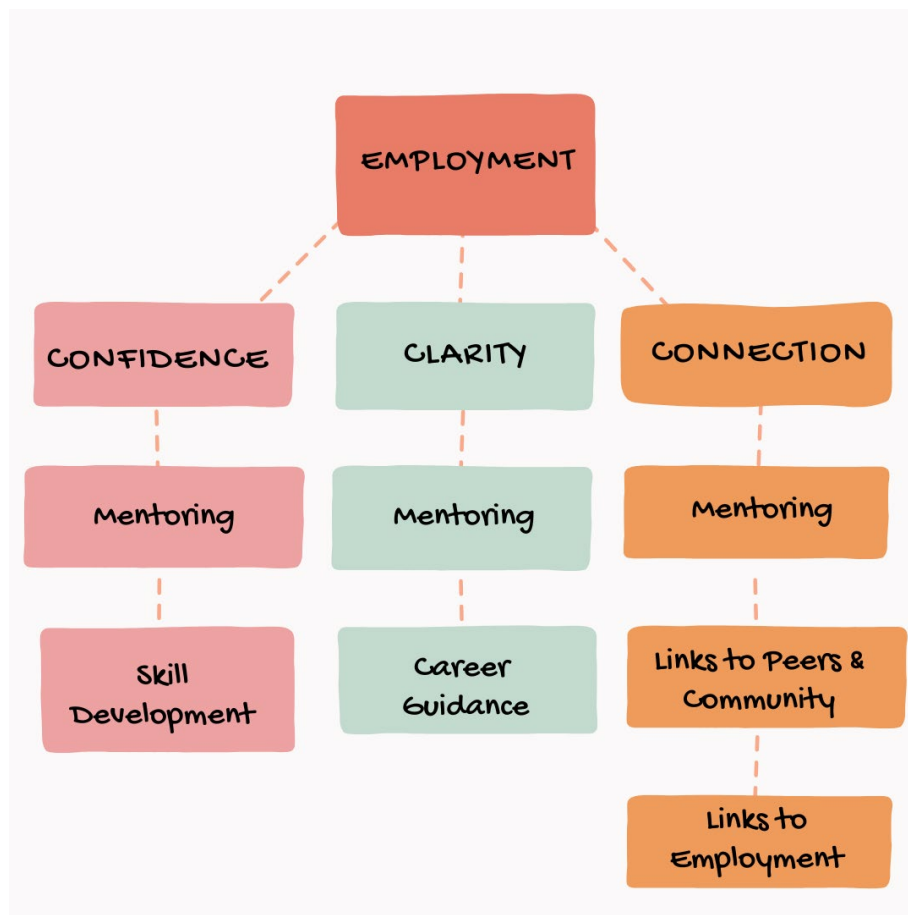


Figure 2: Diagram of Elements of the WCL Program

Mentoring

Mentoring was a key component of the WCL program and encapsulates many of the evidence-based approaches identified in the literature, discussed above. Mentoring support was provided

by two dedicated mentors. The program manager and the assistant program manager provided additional support when needed. In total 287 sessions lasting between one and a half and three hours per session were delivered over a ten-month period. The managers of the program delivered an extra 83 hours of support. This represents a very significant investment in this element of the model, well in excess of 500 hours overall.

Mentoring topics were diverse and included personal challenges such as mental health issues, physical health challenges, and caring duties. Professional challenges included support with the completion of forms, identifying or accessing employment pathways, writing resumes, or interview coaching, amongst others. Participant feedback on mentoring support was overwhelmingly positive:

“The mentoring service ... she really help me because sometimes was really stressful, like mental sick from my workplace, and there was so much going on. And then I’m happy to talk with [mentor], she really gave us so many advice.”
(Participant)

“And the mentoring, they help you with the résumé, how to apply for the job. They prepare you for interviews.” (Participant)

“I was so scared. I didn’t [even sleep] maybe for the two days. And then I call [mentor], I told [mentor], like you know, I’m scared, they ask me to do something. And then she told me, make it easy. And she just told me simply the steps.”
(Participant)

“Our mentors, whatever you want, they’re there to help.” (Participant)

Program staff elaborated on some of the key features and activities of mentoring support:

“It’s that peer engagement and peer learning opportunity and that’s what we wanted there.” (Program staff)

“I help with her resume. And then with the job, skill development, how to handle the job and how to talk to employer if she not happy with the job. Then with her health we organise the exercise group, and then she also happy to join for the wellbeing, general wellbeing.” (Mentoring staff)

The mentoring program was delivered by trusted women, who were known in the local community. Some mentors were multi-lingual, and thus able to better connect with participants in their own language.

“[The mentors] were already in leadership positions in the community or well known ... [and were] very able to provide that mentoring role. ... I think they were

very connected and one of them in particular was like multi language, multilingual spoken, ... which I think would have helped as well.” (Program staff)

Other participants noted that being allowed to speak in language to mentors was a point of valued difference from other programs they had encountered in the past.

The mentoring program was recognised by stakeholders as an important conduit into employment opportunities:

“So their mentors were brilliant, and they would actually communicate with us directly and case manage effectively that client. So we could have that intermediary where we would be saying to the client: ‘you sent us your resume. Here’s how we want you to change it. Or here’s an example of what we want you to do. Or here’s a course link to something you’re interested in’ and ... the mentor could actually follow up with them. That was invaluable, without that, they would have just fallen through the cracks, absolutely.” (Partner stakeholder)

The mentoring program had a ‘drop-in’ approach that resonated with the informal everyday practices of migrant and refugee women in their home countries. This provided both opportunities and challenges for the program, as mentors sought to respond to participants’ requests then and there.

“And I mean, they come from a culture of, you know, when you’ve got an issue, just knock on the door... You don’t need to make an appointment so [managing] that it can be quite challenging in itself [to the service], as much as you wanna help.” (Program staff)

“You know, we say ‘try to give us a call so we can make you a longer appointment’, because a lot of times someone will come in and be like, oh, ‘I wanna apply for this job’. OK, applying for a job is not a two-minute thing.” (Program staff)

Further, women participants did not always understand that mentoring was part of a service that had a completion point. Consistent with evidence-based approaches (discussed above), the program’s exit strategy included referring women to other services, and encouraging them to support each other, in response to some of these challenges. However, given trusted relationships were core to the program, participants found it difficult to no longer have access to program managers and mentors beyond the life of the project.

“So they want to come back and it’s very hard for them to understand that this was for this time frame, even if they understand, they just feel, ‘no, there must be another way we can continue this relationship’.” (Program staff)

The following section discusses a set of building blocks towards the core outcomes of employment and leadership. Next, we discuss 'confidence' based on recognition of strengths and building of skills.

Building Block: Confidence

"When I had the third baby, I just give up. Six years at home. Then I feel like I don't think now I'll be [able to go back to work] – I lost my confidence. As soon as I walked into that group, my confidence came back." (Participant).

Skills development

A series of key activities were identified via the codesign process with women participants from the former Mamma's Kitchen and other programs. The skills and professional development classes included computer classes, first aid, anaphylaxis and asthma management, a barista course, becoming confident and resilient, a 'get inspired' course as well as excursions to university, local government and job expos. The courses were tailored to the needs of individual participants, many of whom had been unemployed for long periods of time, or who were immersed in traditional caring roles for children, siblings or elderly parents. The focus on first aid, anaphylaxis and asthma management, for example, allowed women peace of mind in that they were reassured that they could support unwell family members, and train others at home to do the same, thus freeing themselves to engage in paid employment opportunities.

A stakeholder/ staff member described this as:

"Giving them the training for the next steps into careers that they're interested in." (Program staff)

The skills development component sought to (re)build confidence in women participants, many of whom felt they had lost this during periods of hardship.

"I feel very helpless at home before attending this program. I have to support my mum – mum is a carer of my disabled brother and I don't have enough money to find my own place. I am like homeless. I'm sleeping on my mum's couch. And Centrelink told me that I have to wait four years to apply for any job search – some kind of money. I really feel helpless at the beginning of the program, but now I feel more confident and I can understand – I can juggle all my responsibilities and I find a job [in customer service]." (Participant)

Tailored employment preparation, for example, course and mentoring support, provided women participants with individualised support when preparing for attending job interviews.

“I'm sure we're gonna have to coach (them) along the journey. It was interesting because (one participant), she had the phone on the table and was checking the messages on the phone and it's like, ‘come on, you know, you're in an interview now. You need to put the phone away’.” (Employer)

Stakeholders reported there were some additional areas that partners in the program would have liked to have spent more time on:

“If I could have done one more workshop, it would definitely have been on workplace rights and responsibilities. A lot of these women had horror stories of mistreatment and terrible experiences in workplaces to the point that they are emotional about it. And we gave the opportunity to share and sat in a circle and talked about these things to their level of comfort.” (Partner stakeholder)

Building Block: Clarity

One of the core building blocks for the program was in supporting women to achieve clarity around what their goals and aspirations were, then support them to identify pathways to achieve those. The focus on clarity arose from the beginning of the program, including during recruitment:

“The [community member] says, ‘sister, what do you want?’ And I say, ‘I want to get a job.’ But I’m not finding a job at that time. ... And yeah, he give me the number [of the WCL program staff] and he said, ‘call the number’.” (Participant)

“They told me, ‘you have a lot of opportunity. I know you are a mum, but at the same time, what’s your hope?’ And I said ‘I would like to work with the community, or [be a] community worker. Or just any kind, whether it’s volunteer or to get a job’. So they said to me, ‘Do you have any qualifications? What’s your experience?’ And then they put me to become a community worker. I am working now and they find for me a job.” (Participant)

“Yeah. And I just like that they have so many choices to choose from, to do whatever you would like to do. So that’s good. Yeah.” (Participant)

Career guidance

The Women, Careers and Leadership Career Guidance Modules were 12 career guidance sessions. These sessions were opt-in, and focused on individual participant pathways out of existing experiences such as long-term unemployment or caring roles, into future career pathways (e.g. study, employment, or volunteering roles). The 12 career guidance sessions included topics such as: identifying transferable skills, career action planning, building

confidence through public speaking, creating a resume, and honing interview skills. These guidance sessions were supplemented with excursions to an employment expo, and a university open day where a variety of employment, study and other opportunities were on display. The career guidance modules provided women participants with opportunities and choices they were not aware of previously and supported them to define an approach to achieve employment or other goals.

“I didn’t really know what exactly I wanted to do, because I didn’t know what options I had to choose, because I didn’t finish school. But yeah, they gave me options that I didn’t even know that it would be possible for me without a diploma or anything to get that, those opportunities.” (Participant)

For some participants the excursions were the first time they had been outside the vicinity of their local area.

“I did two campus visits, including a workshop on resume writing, one at Footscray Nicholson campus of VU Polytechnic, where we looked at the learning environments and hospitality training area and the early childhood, aged care individual support sort of classrooms. And then we went into a room and they did a workshop on resume writing, and that was on request. They loved that day and even more so, they loved the visit to VU Polytechnic in Sunshine, where we actually went through the whole trade school. And they had a tour. They looked at Brick Lane carpentry and and electrical and plumbing and sign writing, and they just loved it. It was so much fun and and then I sat with them at the end and talked through what we've seen and had a bit of a group discussion.” (Partner stakeholder)

Building Block: Connection

Another building block for the program involved building connections. These connections operated at various levels including building links to peers and to the wider community. Before participating in the program some of the women reported feeling alone, socially isolated, and without strong friendship groups. However, once they began to attend the program they had opportunities to meet other women with similar experiences and interests to themselves, from which they forged meaningful friendships.

“I think I build a good strong relationship with the other women.and we’re coming to Australia [and] social isolated sometimes - this is like networking. You need to talk to someone, and this is a good program.” (Participant)

“Then eight weeks [of program], I can’t forget in my life that time, to be honest. Friend, all of them, I met there. I don’t know anyone before.” (Participant)

Further, the friendships between women participants resulted in some women feeling a stronger sense of belonging with the Australian population more generally.

“With this program I have lots of friends now, and I feel more belong to Australia, and I feel supported.” (Participant)

A staff member reported that these friendships and sense of community were unlike other programs she had been involved with:

“The women were really engaged, the community they created within the room that we were in was unlike anything else I’ve been involved with in terms of the way they supported one another and encouraged one another.” (Partner stakeholder)

A key strategy of the program was to connect women to other services such as employment, legal, housing, childcare and community services. The program included a range of activities that aimed to build these connections, including supporting attendance at an Employment Expo and excursions to Victoria University.

“Yes, 26 of them attended that... and I think five of them got employment offers on the spot at that (Employment) Expo.” (Program staff)

Further there was an Exit Expo where a wide range of targeted community services were invited to attend and meet with the women.

“That was part of the exit plan, introducing them to other services that can provide them with the support that they need ... In total we identified 17 service providers and they’re the ones that came to our project Exit Expo... to provide the opportunity for participants to interact with these service providers and know where to go once the project wrapped up.” (Program staff)

Program staff felt that a strength of the program was its place-based approach, building on a deep knowledge of the local community that enhanced capacity to connect people and services. One value of the program being hosted by Local Government was the inherent links that a Council has to community service providers and activities within the locality.

“Because Councils are connected to so many different other services and we provide so many different resources, ...it means the community is better connected to a whole wide range of support networks.” (Program staff)

Links to Employment

A strong element of the WCL program is the direct and explicit connection to employers, including self-employment opportunities. Fifteen women were supported to start or grow businesses, with all registering their business as a supplier with Moonee Valley City Council. For other women there was an explicit focus on employment through a direct employment pathway between interested participants and an identified employer.

During the WCL program, a strong employment pathway was created between participants of the program and the Call Centre of Moonee Valley City Council. The program played an important role in not only preparing women for employment, but in directly connecting a potential workforce (WCL participants) with a potential employer (MVCC) via 'hands on facilitation of the employment pathway' (MVCC staff member). This resulted in the employment of three women in customer service roles where they had direct contact with the public via a customer call centre. The employer stated that once the women were confident in their roles in the call centre, they might transition into public-facing customer service roles.

A set of key steps were evident in this particular employment pathway, described below.

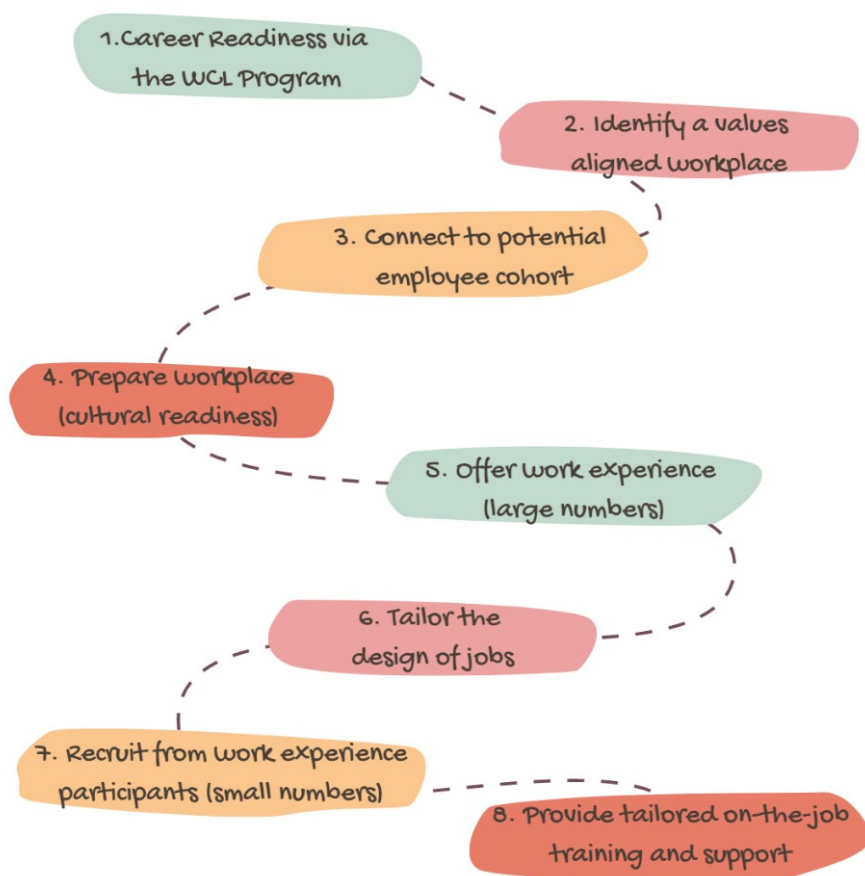


Figure 3: Diagram of Steps in the Direct Employment Pathway (one example of ways to operationalise 'Links to Employers')

Step 1: Career Readiness

The WCL program, outlined above, had provided a level of readiness among women seeking employment. This included a re-identification of personal strengths, clarity of career interests, skills development, community support and other elements.

With this base in place, women were able to engage in this employment linkage element of the program that directly connected them to a specific employer matching their skills and interests.

Step 2: Identify a Values-Aligned Workplace

The workplace needs to explicitly hold values that align to fostering employment opportunities for the target cohort, in this case migrant and refugee women. Values alignment occurs both at the organisational level, but also is echoed by the values held by individual team members (staff) already within the workplace. As often discussed in employment research, a workplace champion drove the agenda for inclusion:

“[A senior manager] was very passionate about the project. She really was the one that pushed it along to see it come to fruition.” (Employer)

The recruitment of migrant women was widely understood to have benefits not only for migrant job seekers, but also for the workplace, given that the strengths and skills of this employee cohort were recognised and valued.

“Just by bringing these ladies in, I think we've worked out, there was four different languages coming into the Call Centre, that's amazing!” (Employer)

“I cannot wait for these ladies to work at the front counter and for residents to come in and say, ‘hey, look at this’.” (Employer)

Step 3: Connect to Potential Employee Cohort

Forming meaningful connections between the employer and the potential employee cohort is step 3 of the direct employment pathway. In the context of WCL, this overlaps with the relational elements of the program and the links between this and ensuring cultural safety. In this instance, the workplace supervisor organised to meet the WCL group at a community venue they were comfortable with. This ‘meet and greet’ activity introduced people and also enabled some early information sharing about the workplace and job roles that may be available. Later reflection suggested that this would be a good time to set clear expectations about the number and type of jobs potentially available, and the expectations within the workplace in terms of workplace norms.

This inter-personal exchange built enthusiasm on both sides. The employer was immediately impressed by the level of skills and interest in the group.

“One of the first times we met the ladies, we went down to the Community Centre,...and had morning tea with the group there. And I was absolutely blown away by the skill set in that room that wasn’t being tapped into and, on top of that, their desperation to work.” (Employer)

This activity started to build both relationships as well as the vision for what can be achieved. This is an important step in directly connecting the potential employer with a potential workforce, particularly where the potential workforce is otherwise hard to reach and not responding to ‘business as usual’ recruitment practices.

Step 4: Prepare workplace (cultural readiness)

A level of preparation of workplaces and employees is necessary to ensure the workplace is ready to genuinely include and value new employees, especially where these may represent minority and diverse cultural groups. In this instance, significant thought was given to the everyday elements of the workplace: appropriate uniforms, spaces for religious observance (prayer rooms), protocols for working with colleagues of a different gender, and elements necessary for ongoing cultural safety of all employees.

“It’s made us also think about our uniforms. It’s made us think about our spaces in regards to prayer rooms and quiet areas. We’ve really had to sort of take a look at ourselves and go ‘hey, we call ourselves inclusive and everything, but are we really?’” (Employer)

A range of actions were taken prior to the commencement of new employees. Some of these actions were identified through the experience of step 5, where both employer and potential employees learnt new skills and ways of working and built a deeper understanding of what workplace elements were necessary to work together most effectively.

Step 5: Offer Work Experience

Work experience in-situ in the workplace is a key mechanism for building workplace readiness and allows all parties to assess the suitability of the job role and workplace. Work experience needs to be meaningful, that is, engagement in real tasks sometimes through observation or ‘job shadowing’. In this instance, meaningful engagement meant being able to ‘shadow’ or sit alongside call centre staff, listen to real-time calls, and handle equipment (including wearing head-sets), and learn about work processes. The work experience phase sought to provide repeated opportunity for a large group of interested women, via rostering of opportunities (3 hourly shifts) over the course of twelve months. Via this repeated engagement with the workplace, women were able to build comfort, confidence and understanding of the role.

“I didn't want it [work experience] not to have meaning, because I think there's nothing more condescending to anybody than we're just doing it just to appease the program.” (Employer)

“We also were mindful we didn't want to bring in a huge group and then just have people standing around not doing anything. So we had to make sure the ratio [of work experience participants in the call centre] was equal to the staff we had so that they could sit actually one-on-one with staff members.” (Employer)

Step 6: Tailor the Design of Jobs

Taking a strengths-based lens, the employer can identify and deploy the strengths of the new workforce in areas best suited to these strengths. In addition, the job requirements can be further shaped to match the circumstances of the new workers by recognising the ongoing familial and cultural commitments and needs of this workforce of migrant women. In this instance, this meant flexibility with rostering so that the women could care for children and family members, recognising that this may have peaks and troughs aligned with school holidays:

“All they [new employees] have to do is pop in the roster when they're available and we roster from there. So it's sort of back to front. It's not us dictating what days they'll work. It's more them telling us when they're available and then we work out if that works into our roster.” (Employer)

“She happy because gain her employment, she got a job working two days a week – and then she take care of the son as well.” (Translator for participant)

Step 7: Recruit from Work Experience Participants

Drawing from the wide pool of work experience participants, the employer is able to short list applicants to invite to apply for ongoing work roles. Preparation for interviews had been part of the overall WCL program, and program mentors were available to offer further coaching and support in readiness for the interview. This step included sourcing suitable clothing to wear for an interview, given women may not have had these opportunities recently or in Australia and may decline interview opportunities if they feel they lack appropriate clothing. In addition, mentors supported planning for childcare arrangements, both for the interview and for any ongoing work offered. Further, they provided advice on how to conduct themselves in interview situations, for example, to ensure their phone was on silent and not to answer it while in an interview. These behaviours are not necessarily known or taken for granted by women migrants and refugees, as behaviours might be more relaxed in their home and community settings.

Step 8: Provide Tailored On-the-Job Training and Support

A major component of the Direct Employment Pathway is the planning for and provision of tailored training and support once the job has commenced. This recognises that commencing employees all have different strengths and areas where further training is needed, so that training and support can be tailored on an individualised basis. In this instance, due to the work experience program, the employer could anticipate that new employees would need support in the first few weeks so as not to be overwhelmed, and also need support to learn and adjust to workplace norms and procedures. The workplace supervisor anticipated a graduated program of development where new employees would have opportunity to attain skills and competence and graduate into higher level or more complex roles when ready. Three key areas of support were identified to be support from an identified workplace trainer, support from co-workers - who understood that their role encompassed the provision of this support, and also the ongoing support of the WCL mentors.

“I think it's worked well, though one of the main reasons is because of [the mentor] position... that support person and the conduit between us and the and the ladies.” (Employer)

Underpinning Ingredients of the WCL Model

As described earlier, the overall program model is underpinned by a set of design principles or 'ingredients'. As with other elements of the program design, these ingredients echo those identified in the research literature about the most effective program design for migrant, refugee and asylum seeker women to support resettlement and employment.

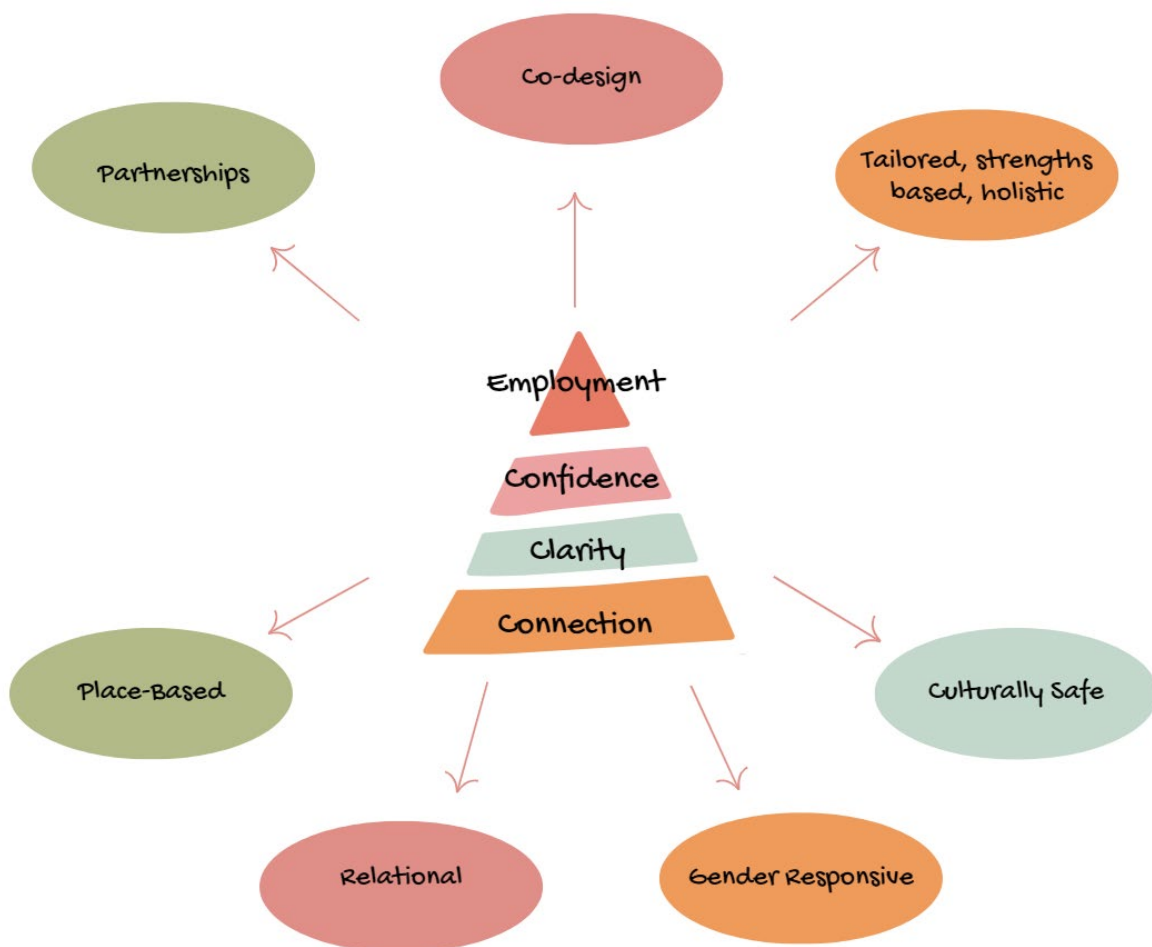


Figure 4: Ingredients Underpinning the WCL Model

Co-Design

As described earlier, the WCL commenced with a co-design process based on two workshops with 34 women from a wide range of cultural communities and also included project partners. Consistent with the literature, this enabled the program to privilege the views of potential participants in the program design, and to tailor the content and approach to their needs.

“People would come together and discuss an idea and write their ideas and share those - present those ideas to the bigger group.” (Participant)

“I think the benefit of this is the that it was codesigned. So the workshops were more tailored to the actual interests and needs of the community,...it's been a much more fluid iterative process of ‘OK well we've done this, now the core participants have enjoyed this, but they need more first aid training’ ...So they were much more able to pivot and actually be responsive. And I think as a result from the feedback that they've had from the participants, they feel more engaged. They feel more confident to actually use those skills that they've learned.” (Program staff)

The co-design process was critical in the sense of (re)empowerment for women, where they were able to direct and lead the process of change that they wanted.

“Codesign ...created a sense of ownership and empowerment and that they got to lead.” (MVCC staff)

“[The codesign process] allowed us to facilitate outcomes for them, but that they chose the outcomes.” (MVCC staff)

“This allowed us to take that strength-based approach in what we were doing knowing that people are the best experts in determining their own change and that's what those codesign sessions did for us.” (Program staff)

A Tailored, Strengths-Based and Holistic Approach

The WCL program utilised a strengths-based approach (as suggested by Due et al., 2023). That is, it recognised that women participants were often resourceful and had hidden strengths. This was despite the challenges the women participants had encountered both in their countries of origin, and particularly during responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, including lockdowns in the housing towers. The strengths-based approach was attractive to the program staff as it could be leveraged successfully:

“And I love working [on this program] because one of the things that attracted me in that job advertisement was to be able to use a strengths-based approach in the delivery of programs... because I know how capable a lot of these women are, even if we say they're highly disadvantaged... they're quite resourceful, and sometimes they just need someone to help them to sort of come alongside them and just remind them of how capable they are and provide that environment, which helps them bring out those strengths.” (Program staff)

“We realised that a lot of these women had very specific individual stories and needs and we needed to just work out the lay of the land before we then ploughed on with more information. For example, a lot of them had qualifications in individual support or early childhood education... so there would be no need for us to go on about that if they'd already done the qualification and they weren't interested. We needed to work out what they wanted.” (Partner stakeholder)

Culturally Safe

The WCL was culturally safe. It was delivered and attended by women with similar histories, and shared experiences. While the women participants were derived from a variety of backgrounds, they had shared experiences prior to and during the program.

“Just starting was so nice. I tell you, one lady was my friend and talk together, sit together in the bus. This day is so nice... My community, sometimes they often come together like Somalian, Eritrean, Sudanese, like this. I enjoy this day [on the bus excursion].” (Participant)

“And then we sharing the culture, so I think it's a really good program, because to compare there is Academy course service, very strict - you have to speak English or nothing. So I'm uncomfortable very often. ... And then this is very important - because it's a multicultural background.” (Participant)

For women participants, the recognition that the people delivering the program had shared experiences, or understand their experiences was key to building rapport.

“I think [mentor], she really has the skills to understand the different backgrounds and the new migrant. Because sometimes you can see the facilitator, she [has] just [been] told, but maybe she doesn't feel like what you have been through before you come here. You know what I mean? So this isn't, she doesn't have any - I mean, a bad life. But she show you she really understand you.” (Participant)

“And they really, you know, they understand our situation”. (Participant)

“They have empathy.” (Participant)

Echoing the key ingredients identified in the research literature, the program employed migrant women from within the community as program staff, who spoke multiple languages and had shared cultures. A Moonee Valley City Council staff member commented:

“I think the key thing is working with women in the community, you know, employing women from culturally diverse communities ...and having them provide support and engagement, but also giving them the resources of Council to do that which has been really helpful.” (MVCC staff member)

Gender Responsive

The WCL program was gender responsive. It recognised that women participants had complex lives, that often included parenting and caring responsibilities. The program recognised this by allowing flexibility in attendance, scheduling the program to be compatible with school drop-offs and pick-ups, providing pathways to childcare, and providing allowances for children to attend program activities.

“And the good thing is, [they] accept the mum with children. student came with the kids, with the babies in pram. Sometimes you put them in the childcare, sometimes inside the room. Like it's accept everyone. As a mum, as a single mum, as a worker... This program is good, especially for the kids.” (Participant)

“When we had the school holiday, they were so flexible with us. So they asked us to bring our kids with them. And really that's why we didn't miss any sessions because of the school holidays.” (Participant)

A staff member commented that:

“I think the fact that there was childcare included and a sensitivity towards the caring roles that women so often provide... has an impact”. (MVCC staff)

Relational

Relationships were key to the program's success. This included relationships between participants of the program as outlined earlier, and relationships between participants and program staff.

“The relationship between us [participants] and them [program staff], it was more than – like you know, we’re just like friends. Like true friends.” (Participant)

These relationships were built on a foundation of trust and understanding.

Employment and Leadership: Community Capacity Building

The ‘Women, Career and Leadership’ program culminated in leadership opportunities for many women participants. As mentioned previously, the program utilised a strengths-based approach that recognised and harnessed pre-existing skillsets.

“To be honest, our community, they have a lot of skills, like back home or our identity. But the hardest things is like we need a leader to bring them out, to build them, to open their mind, make them the experience as a business to make us knowledge or like something they can use long term... I mean, whatever they have as skills, or whatever they have as knowledge or whatever they have experience of back home, they [can] use to be – to share [with] the multicultural community.” (Participant)

Some women in customer service roles became the voice at the end of the phone, their ability to speak more than one language was recognised, and they were potentially able to support other community members in common language. Another woman who was previously long-term unemployed now represents her community in a public-facing role, wearing traditional clothing.

“But this particular woman, the one who said ‘this is my dream job’ and she’s the first woman that council have in that role that wears a hijab... and what this is creating is the phenomenon where the people in the community [say] ‘look at [that], Oh my goodness’.” (Program staff)

Other women became confident public speakers, honing speaking skills during the program, and then applying them beyond the confines of the program.

“So from before, I like to speak in public but still I have that barrier, you know, the confidence barriers. So [mentors] they ask me when we did our graduation at the last year, to do the emcee with my other partner. And I was a bit scared, but both of them, they keep calling me and we do a Zoom training. And we keep practising and practising. And I remember that word, ‘the Wurundjeri of the Kulin nation’, it was a good challenge. But yeah, I made it. And then from that day, I did three times a public speech with the emcee as well.” (Participant)

Another participant who had benefited from a work-life balance workshop she attended recreated and shared that workshop with her wider community.

“So one of the workshops was how to do balance between work – career. And really it was amazing. So, because of that workshop, I contact also the facilitator to do the same workshop to my community as well. Because really, it was a great benefit for me. And I want to share the same things with my community and my family members as well.” (Participant)

The program staff member reported that:

“We give them the opportunity to emcee the festive event, which was the graduation which was very formal. We had the Mayor, we had the Councillors, we had partners there. A lot of coaching that went into that and she said, ‘you know, this has really helped me because now I’m thinking I can actually do a lot more in terms of the career that I want’. So, she went ahead, and she applied for a grant to start a women’s community group to help other women.” (Program staff)

“She’s been asked to coordinate these programs and then the highlight of it was when she invited me to this event which she had organised and she again had received funding to organise this big event for International Women’s Day, bring other women to this and listen to different speakers.” (Program staff)

While the program made a significant difference to the lives of many of the women taking part, not all employment-related issues were able to be resolved for all women taking part. One participant, a parent with caring duties, reported on inflexibility in her area of employment choice, the childcare industry.

“If I have to become full-time, I can’t work a full-time job. I ask [at the interview] ‘Can’t you give me four hours or ... three hours, it’s better than zero?’ ‘No, sorry, we don’t have it. Bye-bye.’ They’re so unhelpful. So, I [still] need helping.” (Participant)

Where can this Model be Replicated?

“I think now that we’ve done one, I think the scalability and the return on investment, if we could do more and increase, because we have the resources and knowledge now to refine it.” (MVCC staff member).

The ‘Women, Careers and Leadership’ model offers an emerging model for working with migrant and refugee/asylum seeker women to enhance their careers and leadership outcomes.

In its current form, the model is suitable for replication in several areas:

1. With Women Migrants and Refugees/Asylum Seekers in the Moonee Valley City Council

Participants of the program repeatedly commented on the need to both continue the program and to expand its offering to other migrant and refugee women within their communities. While the program reached a large participant base (more than 60 women), the size of this population in the local government area, suggests that further program offerings are warranted.

“The culturally and linguistically diverse communities are still, I think, an important area of need”. (MVCC staff member).

“Make the program longer than one year and run this program again. We have so many women in the community that would love to participate.” (Participant)

2. With Women Migrants and Refugees/Asylum seekers in other Local Government Areas

As with MVCC, other Local Government Areas have sizeable populations of migrant and refugee women. This documentation of the WCL model offers a guide for other LGAs to adopt and implement the model.

3. As a Workforce Pipeline

Additionally, one specific element of the model - ‘Links to employers’- particularly the Direct Employment Pathway (Figure 3), offers a way to view the value of the model in a new way, that is, as a mechanism to connect employers with migrant and refugee women who are seeking employment. Though too early to assess the longevity of employment, the WCL program has been successful as a workforce pipeline for the MVCC Call Centre, matching the needs of the employer for a culturally and linguistically diverse workforce with the aspirations and skills of a set of job seekers who have been prepared and supported to access employment via the program. The steps of the Direct Employment Pathway could be replicated with this group, or a different group (if supported by a similar program), in the context of different business areas within Moonee Valley City Council, such as childcare. This approach would focus on identifying an area of workforce shortage, or need for workforce diversity to better match client needs, and assessing the match with this cohort. Where an interest and skills match exists, the WCL program offers a mechanism to build readiness (confidence and clarity) and connections, alongside the necessary ongoing mentoring and support.

4. With Different Cohorts

The model also has potential for replication with different cohorts, such as young people or other cultural groups. Given that co-design is a key ingredient of the model, the approach to development of a similar program with other cohorts would ensure relevance and suitability. Likewise, the other program ingredients echo 'best practice' ingredients for work with young people, and people with disability, as examples.

Conclusion

The 'Women, Careers and Leadership' project offers a model that has achieved substantial outcomes for the migrant, refugee and asylum seeker women involved (see the outcomes survey data, Campain et al., 2023). Participants and stakeholders strongly supported the model, and also identified areas for enhancement in future iterations. These included:

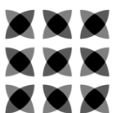
- A stronger focus on employment
- Expansion of direct links to a range of employers
- Possible contraction and concentration of the careers guidance activities (though this was not universally agreed)
- Increased focus on supporting participants to understand workplace norms, expectations and behaviours
- Continuance of the program and expanded offering to new participants.

Overall, the commentary around how critical this program was to the social connection and support of participants, as well as their career attainment, begs the question of what support will be available now to women post the conclusion of the program. The complexity of women's circumstances, particularly in relation to their varied care roles and the level of social isolation they experience, suggests the urgent need for ongoing programs of this nature.

The core building blocks of the WCL model, and underpinning ingredients of practice/ implementation, have been captured in this report, and offer potential for replication with the same or different cohorts. The model is consistent with existing research in the area of effective resettlement programs for women migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, and adds a dimension of direct employment linkage that has been recommended in the literature. Further, the model of employment linkage offers opportunity for replication where employers seek to connect to and activate a workforce pipeline of 'ready' employees from among a cohort that has previously been marginalised.

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