

The Nundah Community Enterprises Cooperative

Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration (EPRI)

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Executive Summary

The Nundah Community Enterprises Cooperative (NCEC) Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration (EPRI) Program is a flexible and supportive program designed to assist people from refugee backgrounds in South Brisbane and Logan areas overcome barriers to social and economic participation.

The program uses a relational and individualised approach to help participants achieve their training and employment goals through skills acquisition, vocational training, work experience, employment outcomes, English language improvement and specialised case work and support planning.

The NCEC team works within a strong practice framework, centred on the principle of ‘accompaniment’, while being mindful of the complexities of working with this cohort. Central to this approach is a philosophy of “living practice”, which prioritises understanding and responding to participants’ lived experiences in contrast to rigid or linear progress models. This ensures the program remains flexible, impactful, and genuinely supportive of the participants involved.

THIS REPORT IS DIVIDED INTO THREE SECTIONS

1

Part One is three case studies of participants’ experiences in the EPRI program.

2

Part Two is an evaluation of the EPRI program, including its strengths and challenges.

3

Part Three is an overview of the NCEC practice framework that has structured the delivery of this work, based on interviews and focus groups with participants and workers.

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Background of Nundah Community Enterprises Cooperative

Nundah Community Enterprises Cooperative (NCEC) is a not-for-profit workers cooperative that was established in 1998, with a mission to create sustainable employment and training opportunities for disadvantaged workers. Using a community development approach, a small group of community members came together around a shared concern, and a jobs club for people with disabilities was started. This grew to become a member-governed

workers cooperative with around 70 staff, half of whom have a disability or come from a refugee background. NCEC provides people with meaningful work opportunities through several small enterprises including two Brisbane cafes, a successful catering business, a large parks and gardens maintenance operation, a speakers group, as well as hosting employment related training in horticulture and hospitality for more than 60 people per year.

Background of migrant and refugee cohort

Migrant and refugee settlement in Australia is shaped by diverse challenges and complexities. Key barriers facing this cohort include language proficiency, limited access to transport, housing insecurity, and mental health concerns such as trauma, anxiety, and depression (Deloitte Access Economics & Paul Ramsay Foundation, 2024). Cultural differences and the complexity of navigating systems like Centrelink often exacerbate these issues, making it difficult for some individuals to fully engage with support services and employment pathways.

Employment outcomes are a critical indicator of successful settlement, yet participation in the job market remains low for many migrants and refugees. Only 3–5% secure employment within the first six months of arrival, increasing to 16% after 1–2 years and 23% after 2–3 years (Tudge, 2020). Unemployment rates remain high, with 77% unemployed after one year, 38% after three years, and 22% after 10 years (Tudge, 2020). Many experience “occupational skidding”, where they are unable to find work that matches their qualifications (Collins, 2017). EPRI cohort figures are likely significantly worse than this, as program eligibility criteria include having a low level of English proficiency and limited formal education, which often indicates low overall literacy. Many participants also

come from rural areas in their home countries, where access to education was minimal or non-existent.

Despite these challenges, migrants and refugees often demonstrate resilience and adaptability, particularly as entrepreneurs. Refugees show above-average success in self-employment, using informal community networks and targeted support programs to overcome systemic barriers (Refugee Council of Australia, 2019). Tailored programs focused on skills development, English language proficiency, and job readiness have proven effective, particularly when delivered in partnership with community organisations such as NCEC.

Studies consistently highlight that meaningful employment is pivotal to positive settlement outcomes, contributing to financial stability, social integration, and a sense of purpose (Deloitte Access Economics & Paul Ramsay Foundation, 2024). Flexible, individualised support – such as that provided by organisations like NCEC – can empower migrants and refugees to navigate their settlement journey, fostering long-term community contribution (Whereto Research, 2024).

Background of Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration (EPRI) program

NCEC's Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration (EPRI) program is funded by the Department of Home Affairs and works with people from a wide variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Most participants are women from Papua New Guinea and the Democratic Republic of Congo, many of whom are single mothers or partnered with young children. Other participants have come from Iran, Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Ethiopia, Eritrea, South Sudan, Burundi, Rwanda, Kenya, Myanmar and Ukraine.

NCEC provides migrants and refugees with several options to engage in the EPRI program. These are based on the individual needs of participants and include:

- **Individual based case work** – flexible, ongoing and client-specific case work meetings with a NCEC employment case worker whose role is to support people to increase their English language and skills into employment. An individual training and support plan is developed which includes employment preparation goals and activities.
- **Group work** – a six month group sewing class, formed in partnership with the local Congolese community, with an experienced vocational trainer and an NCEC case worker present. In these group sessions, participants learn how to sew and have the opportunity to build meaningful connections with others. The sewing classes have experimented with a variety of Swahili and English language delivery modes. Earlier in the project there was two days per week with a Swahili speaking sewing trainer and two days per week with an English speaking sewing trainer. More recently the project has two days per week with a Swahili speaking sewing trainer and there is also a dedicated English language class being run in partnership with the

Ethnic Communities Council Queensland (ECCQ) three days/week. This class is also working to increase digital literacy and other skills. The training helps participants improve employment opportunities, as well as address social isolation, loneliness, low self-esteem and increase pre-employment skills.

- **Business development workshops** – providing a pathway for refugees who are looking to start their own business. Participants receive training and mentorship by NCEC case workers and are also connected to employers and business mentors.

EPRI participants are also offered opportunities to complete a minimum of 12 weeks of Australian work experience through an NCEC social enterprise or other Queensland social enterprises.

As part of the EPRI program, participants can take part in an English language course to increase their language skills. These include:

- Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) and receive a certificate
- Conversational English group at the local community centre
- Weekly conversational English class run by NCEC.

Each option in the EPRI program is not a mutually exclusive pathway – participants are able to engage with any EPRI stream, and their journey through the program is led by their needs.

NCEC had a target of 45 participants to be engaged in the program. As of November 2024, 55 participants had engaged in the program with interest and demand from target cohort increasing steadily.

EPRI Sewing group

As part of the EPRI program, NCEC initiated group-specific training programs in partnership with community groups who expressed particular needs or interests. The Sewing Group is a six month program and was established to support anyone from a refugee background. It has primarily attracted women from Central and East African backgrounds by providing a safe space to learn sewing skills, build confidence, and foster a sense of community.

Participants, including single mothers, widows, and those facing social isolation, often experience barriers such as limited English proficiency and difficulty finding employment, which this group aims to address. The evaluation of the sewing group (below) demonstrates that it has significantly contributed to participants' personal growth and capacity, helping them gain practical skills while forming strong social connections.

Evaluation methodology

The evaluation of the EPRI program took place between June – December 2024, drawing on individual interviews, focus groups, and desktop research of previous reports. It was conducted by a research team from Community Praxis Co-op Ltd - Rachael Donovan and Dr. Peter Westoby. Data collection included:

- two focus groups with sewing group participants, 19 participants total
- four individual interviews with EPRI participants
- two focus groups with three NCEC workers (two case workers, and one manager).

Information about the interview and focus group was sent in advance to participants, and interpreter support was offered when required. Interviews were held at the participant's home, or the NCEC office, depending on what was most convenient for each individual.

Focus groups with the sewing group were held at the training premises after one of their sewing classes. Information sheets with the interview questions were also sent to each participant [see Appendix 1]. This information was also outlined at the beginning of each interview and focus group, emphasising that participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw at any time.



Rachael Donovan



Dr. Peter Westoby

After each interview and the second focus group, transcripts were sent to participants for verification.

Data analysis was conducted by the research team from Community Praxis Co-op, identifying and clustering themes from the transcripts. The themes key to evaluating the program are discussed in Part Two of this report. The themes relevant to the practices of NCEC are discussed in Part Three of this report.



PART 1

NCEC welcoming Minister Andrew Giles at the EPRI program launch

Case Studies

To provide the context and essence of NCEC’s implantation of the EPRI program, we start this report with some stories of participants. The following case studies were developed based on interviews with three EPRI participants. They highlight the strengths and some of the limitations of the EPRI program, and the resilience and courage of these participants.

CASE STUDY 1

Sally’s journey of resilience and growth

Sally¹ first connected with NCEC in 2019 when she joined the Skilling Queenslanders for Work traineeship. After completing the program, she volunteered at Community Living Association (CLA) offices and later secured a paid position within NCEC, where she worked for 2–3 years before taking extended unpaid leave to care for her new baby. During this time, she faced significant challenges related to various insecurities and unstable housing, leading to her referral to the EPRI Program for support.

Through EPRI, Sally was supported to navigate a range of legal and practical challenges. This included assistance in securing and maintaining housing through liaison with other services, enrolling in a Certificate III in Individual Support, and accessing childcare subsidies. She also received help managing Centrelink processes, particularly in responding to document requests that she was unable to meet

alone. With her daughter now in childcare, Sally has returned to part-time work and is beginning to reconnect with her community after a period of significant isolation. With long-term aspirations in nursing, Sally sees work in aged or disability care as a meaningful first step toward her goals.

Sally acknowledges the vital role of the community and organisations like NCEC in her journey, expressing deep gratitude for their guidance and encouragement. As she states in her own words:

“...I thought I was lost... But Chris and Lesley helped me... an organisation is behind me to help me build my life.... And it was like ‘ah, I’m not alone’. I am so grateful.”

1 All participants are de-identified.

Sally's story highlights the profound impact of individualised support in empowering individuals facing systemic barriers in the settlement process. Through this support and her own resilience and determination, she has built new skills, gained confidence, and set a clear path for her future. While challenges remain, her progress serves as an inspiring example of how access to the right resources can create meaningful change in a person's life.

CASE STUDY 2

A refugee's journey to entrepreneurship

Ali arrived in Australia from Syria in April 2022, after spending five years as a refugee in Iraq, where work was prohibited and survival was a daily struggle. Determined to rebuild his life, he and his best friend Akram dreamed of opening a restaurant, drawing from Ali's experience as a restaurant owner in Syria. However, navigating Australia's business landscape proved overwhelming. The high costs of rent, rigid lease agreements, and a lack of financial support made starting a business feel impossible. Despite seeking guidance from several organisations, they found themselves stuck, as they were told to take the first step alone before receiving help, even though that first step was their greatest hurdle.

While working as Uber drivers to support their families, Ali's cooking caught the attention of community members, leading to an introduction

to Lesley from NCEC, who connected them with potential business resources. Yet, their excitement soon turned to frustration when financial advisors focused on risks rather than opportunities. They needed more than advice. They needed hands-on support in securing a location, handling paperwork, and navigating legal requirements. Without this guidance, their dreams remained just out of reach.

Ali envisions more than just a restaurant; he dreams of a thriving business that brings people together and creates jobs. His cuisine has already won hearts, demonstrating its potential, but without foundational support, the road to success remains uncertain.

Ali and Akram have valued the support and connections enabled by NCEC however their story highlights the systemic barriers that face many refugees who want to start small businesses in Australia, a challenge that is difficult to address. As Ali and Akram state about their support from the NCEC worker:



NCEC workers and EPRI participant

She is generous with her time, and helpful to introduce us to Silverchef ... make connections with other people and introduce us. She is giving us help as much as she can. She can bring the organisations and people to help, but she can't give from her own pocket. We don't think anything can change, 99% its financial things...

CASE STUDY 3

Cecily's transformational journey of leadership

Cecily arrived in Australia in 2018, navigating a new and unfamiliar system with limited English and a past shaped by hardship. She struggled to find the support she needed, feeling unseen and unheard. However, her life changed when she joined the Skilling Queenslanders for Work (SQW) traineeship with NCEC in 2019, an opportunity that became the gateway to her personal and professional growth.

Determined to succeed, Cecily quickly became a pillar of support for other trainees, guiding them to access essential supports and services. She felt this was an important role to guide and inspire other new migrants, as she states:

"...when they see me talking and acting with the white people, they get confidence."

Her initiative and compassion led to employment as a support worker within the SQW Program shortly after completing her training. She also secured a position with the NCEC Parks Team, balancing multiple roles with unwavering dedication.

Her journey was not just about securing employment, but also about creating opportunities for others. Cecily played a crucial role in forming the PNG Highlands Women's Association (MELPA), fostering a sense of community for migrant women facing similar struggles. She also accessed support from EPRI to explore further employment, education, and social enterprise options, advocating tirelessly for better opportunities for migrants and refugees.

Despite her professional success, Cecily continues to face challenges. Housing insecurity, cultural adaptation, and systemic barriers often make her journey difficult. Yet, her commitment to helping others never wavers. She has become a bridge between migrant communities and



First Aid training

support services, ensuring that others do not have to navigate the same struggles alone.

Her work in aged care, disability support, and community leadership has been driven by a deep sense of gratitude and responsibility, in part made possible by the support of NCEC, as she states about the NCEC staff:

"They were so lovely and they understood us, our needs. They are 'people's people'. They really care for people and the last five years that I have been working for this organisation, I've got a lot of help and support from them. More than any other organisation. So I felt 'oh someone is here for me'. Back home I was classified as a nobody you know, the system [in my home country] overlooks women and children."

She sees her role as not just a job but a mission to give back to the country that gave her a second chance:

"I want to look after these old people. It was a way of saying thank you or giving back to this great nation."



PART 2

NCEC workers and EPRI participants at Logan Multicultural Careers Expo

Qualitative evaluation from the research

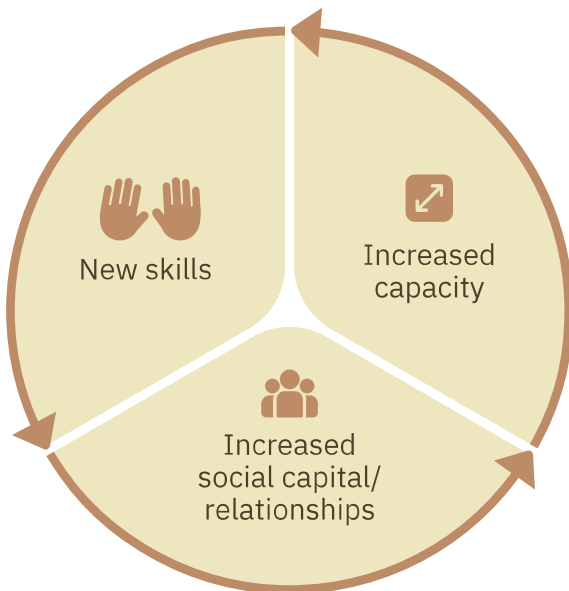
This part of the report discusses key themes identified by participants about:

- 2.1 Benefits for participants
- 2.2 Challenges of the EPRI program.

2.1

Benefits for participants

We have identified three key benefits for participants.



BENEFIT 1

New skills

Participants identified several skills that they learned through participation in the EPRI program, including:

- business skills
- technical skills (i.e. horticulture, sewing, hospitality)
- English skills
- general communication skills.

One participant shared the value of this skill development:

“Very grateful to NCEC, they taught me so many skills, showed me how to do things I never thought possible, that I would experience those new skills. Very very grateful for that”.

Another shared how this skill development can improve a sense of self identity and worth:

“Before, I have not spoken a word of English, but I can understand and speak a bit now... they look at me that I am someone and somebody. NCEC showed me so much, I

learned how to use the phone, to email, and I am grateful for this.

Participation also enabled people to work towards their aspirations through skill development. Many people mentioned that they had wanted to sew for some time and through participation in the sewing group they now can.

BENEFIT 2

Increased capacity, new confidence, relationship skills and self-esteem

The data showed participant benefits not just in skill development, but also in what we have framed as increased capacity - particularly in the domains of increased confidence, relationship building, and self-esteem.

At the beginning of the programs, participants self-reported a lack of confidence, finding it difficult to communicate with workers. Yet, over the course of the program, their confidence grew and they were able to assert more agency over decisions.

One teacher shared that:

“Their confidence rose, they become bigger, their posture changed as well as their manner.”

Another worker agreed and shared:

People’s confidence is such a massive difference from when we first met them and how they present today ... when they come in and announce themselves to the room, there is such a huge difference in confidence. ... it opens them up to interact with other organisations and people within the community outside their comfort zone.

One participant shared:

“Sewing was my dream, before I didn’t know how to open the machine, but now I can sew by myself!”



Conservation and Land Management graduates

One of the participants also identified an increase in confidence in building connections as a key benefit, stating:

“We are more confident to connect with other people”.

Participants also felt a deep sense of pride in what they were learning and the skills that they were building. One participant shared:

“We are happy because our kids will come and see what we are doing, and our family”.

This participant also reflected on their sense of opportunity and self-worth this enabled:

“I always tell my people – we were never given this opportunity, especially women. Back home we were treated like a doormat. People walk over you in and out.”

Thus, capacity was built through increased confidence and ability to make new relationships and was evident through their participation in the program.

BENEFIT 3

Increase in social capital

Through participation in the sewing group in particular, participants shared that they felt much more connected to their own community *and* the broader Australian community.

In relation to their own community, even though very few of the participants knew each other before the group, friendships were forged, and new connections were made during and after the training. Using social capital theory (Putnam 2000), the sewing group enabled the formation of *bonding social capital*, which are reciprocal and non-transactional relationships with people *that have similar experiences, interests and values* (in this case, others from an African background).



Sewing participants

For example, one participant shared:

“Now we have new friends. We’ve enjoyed meeting new people and making new friends”.

This kind of reflection was repeated many times.

Someone else shared the importance of sharing stories and feeling supported by others with similar experiences;

“I enjoy being with other mothers, we share life stories and get encouraged from one another”.

Most participants valued the relationships that developed as much as the skill development:

“More than just sewing, it’s about relationships”.

The depth of these relationships was demonstrated by this participant:

“They put us together and we are like family”.

An increase in *bridging social capital* was also evident from the data. *Bridging social capital* refers to the connections that cross social boundaries, particularly across socio-economic, cultural or political areas (Putnam 2000). Participants shared that they felt welcomed and connected to the broader Australian community through their participation in the EPRI program. One participant shared:

“Previously we have found ourselves mixing with the African community [our own community] while the rest of the Australian people seemed to live quite separately... We now feel that we are welcome in this country.”

A church leader who participated in the sewing group also shared:

“This program puts us together with the Australian community, through this we came together ... we feel more welcome in this country. We are all Australians.”

The following quote, indicative of the sentiments of many, shows just how important this benefit of new relationships is. This participant commented:

“I was at home feeling sick before this program and now I feel alive; I was isolated, but now when here I feel happy”.

Similarly, another shared:

“To be connected is very important for us, I live alone, I don’t have anyone at home, I am isolated, when I am here I am happy, I feel happy, it’s like a family”.

Linking social capital was also increased due to participants’ strong relationships with workers and connections to other business networks. *Linking social capital* refers to relationships across different levels of power, enabling greater access to resources and economic development options (Putnam 2000). These relationships helped build confidence and a sense of personal power and esteem for many of the participants. The data suggests that for many participants, it was the first time they had experienced this type of positive relationship in Australia.

One participant shared some of the important attributes of the teachers and NCEC staff:

“They listened to us, respected us, encouraged us”.

This was repeated by other participants for example:

“The NCEC workers care about everything we do, and I feel supported by them. They showed us that everything is possible together”.

These types of relationships help build a sense of place, belonging and support. As this participant shared:

When I first came I was so confused with the Australian system, I never spoke English to any white people, was so so extremely hard for me to understand or even look them straight in the eyes ... there wasn’t any system that could understand me. But I built my communication skills. It has helped me with training. They [NCEC workers] were so lovely and they understood us, our needs. So I felt ‘oh someone is here for me.’



Sewing graduates and NCEC worker

Challenges of the EPRI program

Despite the strong benefits to participants through the EPRI program, there were some challenges identified by participants and workers, outlined separately for the sewing group and individual support below.



Sewing Trainer and participants

Challenges in the sewing group

The interviews and focus groups throughout the second half of 2024 identified four key challenges of the EPRI sewing group. Participants expressed a strong desire to extend the program duration, secure additional sewing machines, and receive structured business training to turn their skills into sustainable income. In response to these challenges and concerns, in early 2025, NCEC secured additional funding to extend the program, and began implementing business development skills with participants. With adequate support, this initiative has the potential to empower women, foster economic independence, and create lasting social impact.

1. Duration and sustainability of the group

The duration and sustainability of the sewing group was a key concern for participants. Participants acknowledged their reliance on external funding and support, yet expressed the need for a longer duration, suggesting that six months was insufficient to establish themselves in competitive markets. Both teachers and participants emphasised that a one-year program would be ideal, with continued resourcing to support the program.

One participant said,

“The first 6 months was like we were blind, but now we start to see and we start to see to do something. Now it’s like we start. We need this to continue – maybe it takes long, but need more support...”

Costs associated with materials and sewing machines were also identified as barriers to sustaining activities at home. In response to these concerns, NCEC has secured additional funding to extend the program and has started working with participants to build fundraising skills for additional resources.

2. Design and delivery issues

The sewing group faced some design and delivery challenges. Participants noted a need for clearer plans and a more structured approach to sewing instruction. The first sewing group expressed dissatisfaction with one of the teachers due to unreliability (turning up late, or sometimes not at all). This was rectified with the second sewing group, and a new teacher was brought on.

However, inconsistencies arose due to having two teachers on different days and varying levels of experience among participants. As this participant shared:

There are some [participants] that have come recently and some that have come before ... If we are good, they should separate us - some have some knowledge, can do more. Ones that come recently don’t know anything. There are different levels. Needs two groups.

Expanding the scope of skills beyond clothing production, such as learning alterations for broader market opportunities, was also suggested. The lack of access to sewing machines at home limited their opportunities for skill development and practice outside the group itself.

3. Access and logistical barriers

Transport and logistical barriers posed significant challenges to participants. While the program fostered connections and bonding within the group, these connections are difficult to sustain outside the program due to transport and logistical limitations and lack of a driver’s licence for many participants.

Without the program’s structure, participants fear returning to isolation as they feel unable to continue on their own due to these challenges. English language learning was also highlighted as an essential skill for better integration and access.

This participant shared her distress at the program ending and returning to isolation:

“It will be very very very very very sad. We will fall down, we want to continue, we don’t have any place to go. We pray so God gives us the money to continue. We will be going back to isolation.”

4. Participant expectations in a participatory group

Participants in the sewing group exhibited a dependency on external support - from the program or government - to meet their needs. Any future groups will need to encourage collective problem-solving and foster independence, to address concerns around isolation and unmet expectations. Managing participants’ expectations for continued support after the program ends is critical to avoid a return to isolation.

Challenges of individual support

The interviews and focus groups identified three key challenges of the EPRI individual support program.

1. Geographic and resource limitations

NCEC's lack of a physical presence in Logan limited its ability to build strong relationships with local employers and stakeholders. One practitioner noted:

[We need to] put more work in around establishing connection and relationships with employers in Logan that we see people commonly looking for work, there is probably a fair bit of work that would go into that, making connection with employers, and potential pathways.

2. Challenges with other business development professionals and potential employers

Participants were sometimes connected with other professionals who were pessimistic about business development possibilities. One participant shared their experience meeting with a business development officer:

If you want to open a restaurant, they bring a guy to help you start a business or a restaurant. We got afraid after sitting with him. He shows you the bad effect of starting a business. We were very discouraged. We were happy and ready, but he stressed us more. For example, he says "hundreds of applications will come to me, I only approve three a year, 99% it is losing."

This experience reflects a broader pattern in which early enthusiasm and momentum can be undermined by gatekeepers who focus on risk rather than possibility. Similarly, a great deal of work often goes into building relationships with potential employers who express initial interest in hiring people from refugee backgrounds. Multiple meetings take place, participants are supported to prepare resumes, practice for interviews, and coordinate transport and availability, only for the employer to go silent,

stop returning calls or emails, and ultimately disengage. While the reasons for this vary – perhaps they find a “more convenient” pool of workers or become apprehensive about the perceived support needs – this pattern highlights the emotional and practical toll of employer engagement that, despite best efforts, frequently leads nowhere. The cumulative effect of these encounters can be deeply disheartening for both participants and staff.

3. Need for more comprehensive support

Structural issues, such as bureaucratic processes and misaligned objectives among service providers, created further challenges and frustration, causing participants to lose hope. One participant highlighted the importance of continuous support and mentorship, starting at the beginning of the program. They struggled with fragmented support systems, cultural differences in business practices, and significant administrative barriers, such as lengthy and confusing processes for finding suitable premises.

An intensive, hands-on guiding approach was requested in this case, but not feasible within the current program structure. As this participant shared:

When we ask for help, we expect to get help with the first step. But all of them say do the first step then we will help you later. We have difficulty with the first step. If we do the first step and have the restaurant, we won't need help doing the other things. But no one is willing to help us at the beginning. We need help to find the restaurant, doing paperwork, license, finances. Need someone to do that with us. We don't have experience here; we don't know anything. If I do one paper, it will take you 5 minutes, it will take me one month.



PART 3

NCEC worker meeting with community members and participants

NCEC's practice

This part of the report discusses seven key elements of NCECs practice:

1. Intake and Assessment process
2. Working with complexity
3. Learning from the experience of both practitioners and participants
4. NCEC's emerging practice framework
5. A framework of accompanying
6. Typical service approach vs. NCEC approach
7. Building partnerships across place, from a place-based perspective.

3.1

Intake and Assessment Process

Below is an overview of the assessment process when working with individual EPRI participants - as outlined by NCEC staff.



NCEC's assessment process is focused on deepening listening, over time, and ongoing dialogue with each participant. Participants' reflections show they experienced this as a warm and heartfelt process that made them feel welcomed.

3.2

Working with Complexity and navigating complex systems

The EPRI program works within a highly complex environment. This is shaped by the multifaceted needs of people from migrant and refugee backgrounds, and the systemic challenges they face when settling in Australia. Many systems operate under unrealistic expectations, such as the belief that enrolling in a training program will directly lead to employment. These assumptions fail to account for the significant personal and systemic barriers that migrants face, making even basic tasks challenging.

For example, people from refugee backgrounds often arrive with experiences of trauma from war and displacement, and then ongoing social trauma stemming from lack of trusted relationships and experiences of alienation. Questions like “How do I live in this country?” and “How can I be accepted here?” are common and were reflected in EPRI participant interviews.

NCEC practitioners noted that it can be hard to know how much of someone's story is needed as *“the layers of the settlement journey are often private to people until they get to know you”*. Yet practitioners tend to agree that although it's complex to work with people without understanding their history, it is more important to build rapport and trust, and work with their current issues and barriers as they arise.

NCEC practitioners note that EPRI participants benefit greatly from opportunities that allow them to feel capable and successful. Experiences of self-efficacy—where individuals attempt something, succeed, and gain control over their lives—are essential for building

confidence. Without these opportunities, participants can fall into patterns of defeatism and low confidence, believing that progress is too hard or unachievable. As one practitioner noted:

...[the importance of] learning and mastery of a skill. This gives layers of richness that help people address (not transcend) and manage the trauma and anxiety in a healthy way. It creates a bridging opportunity to build confidence and take up other opportunities that they might not have felt they could previously.

Navigating Australia's fragmented and complex service systems is another significant challenge that increases complexity of working with this cohort. Refugees often describe themselves as “ping pong balls,” bounced between organisations without making meaningful connections or receiving consistent support.

Systemic fragmentation means that refugees often receive pieces of information but are left to piece it all together on their own. This confusion exacerbates settlement trauma, as individuals struggle to make progress within a system that feels impersonal and inflexible. As this participant shared:

When I first came I was so confused with the Australian system ... I never spoke English to any white people, [and it] was so so extremely hard for me to understand or even look them straight in the eyes ... there wasn't any system that could understand me.

NCEC's practice in contrast is trying "to guide people through the system and address the barriers rather than saying it's too hard."

As mentioned in the previous discussion of limitations of individual support (Part 2 of this report), for those EPRI participants interested in starting small businesses, the complexity is particularly overwhelming. Starting a business in Australia involves significant financial risk, literacy challenges (e.g. paperwork, licensing, and legal systems), and a lack of sustained support. Refugees often encounter discouraging attitudes from support organisations that focus on highlighting barriers, rather than offering solutions or encouragement. This is in stark contrast to their countries of origin, where starting a business may be simpler and less capital-intensive.

NCEC addresses many of these complexities through sustained mentorship and relational support in order to counteract systemic fragmentation and ensure participants are not left feeling isolated. Instead of transactional approaches that many other criteria-based services use, NCEC adopts relational approaches to not only address immediate needs, but also the underlying barriers refugees face as they navigate life in a new country.

3.3

Learning from the experience of practitioners and participants

The research team used Chris Argyris and Donald Schön's framing of theory-in-action, particularly *espoused vs. actual practice* to identify key dimensions of the practice framework (Argyris & Schön, 1974). This means we analysed what was espoused by the NCEC workers, but theory-tested this with what was experienced by EPRI participants.

One clear finding is that there *was strong resonance* between the espoused practice of the workers and participants' experiences.

A recent Deloitte Access Economics report, *Understanding the benefits, costs, and funding flows to tailored jobseeker supports*, highlights that successful support services for refugees are individualised, responsive to need, offer continuous support and connect across systems (Deloitte Access Economics & Paul Ramsay Foundation, 2024). A key strength of NCEC's delivery of EPRI is their framework of practice, which both recognises and works with this complexity, based on the understanding that refugee experiences are rarely straightforward.

Thus, working within this complex environment can be distilled into some key principles of practice:

- Working with an understanding of the multiple complexities of refugee lives (settlement trauma, social trauma, forced migration trauma, racism and discrimination, etc).
- Acknowledging the complexity of Australian settlement systems of support and the complexity of bureaucratic processes.
- Understanding the complexity of building relationships of trust in light of the two points above.

As such, there was no conflict of 'data' between what was said by workers and what was experienced by participants.

Some key elements of practice identified by workers were also supported by interviews with participants. These have been integrated into the practice framework below.



NCEC workers and EPRI participants host a trade market stall

3.4

NCEC's emerging EPRI practice framework

NCEC's emerging EPRI practice framework is pictorially depicted through eight dimensions below.

These dimensions were distilled from both practitioner and participant interviews and are woven through the findings in this report.

The 'accompanying' dimension is central to this practice framework. The other seven dimensions are of equal weight and sit around the accompanying dimension. We depict this in the diagram below and then name key sub-dimensions.



The Seven Dimensions of the Practice Framework (see Accompanying Section 3.5 below for detailed explanation), with sub-dimensions named (but not unpacked in this report).

1. Working with complexity

- a. Trauma informed
- b. Acknowledges change is not linear
- c. Working with the whole person (not just through lens of 'employment')
- d. Becoming comfortable with uncertainty
- e. Navigating complex systems *with* people

2. De-professionalising

- a. Non-professional, every-day language
- b. Reflecting on our professional identities – moving from public to personal approach, using friendly and approachable language
- c. Deinstitutionalising ourselves (awareness that the people we work with, cross-culturally are not so used to institutions)
- d. People we work with have an experience of our friendliness

3. Discerning

- a. Responsive to people where they are at
- b. A cycle of pause, let go (of agenda), listen/sense into people's energy and aspirations, pivot (from our agenda to theirs), respond
- c. Noticing what is alive and relevant
- d. Working with our intuition and creativity

4. Continuous reflection and adapting

- a. Letting go of judgements and interpretations, always being open
- b. Adapting to 'what is' ("fidelity to the actual") – i.e. work with what's real, not what we want
- c. A gentle thoughtful intake and assessment process (see framework in Section 3.1)

5. Relationally focused

- a. Human and warm values-ethos/pathos
- b. Friendly and accessibly language
- c. Heart-centred
- d. Trust is central

6. Building Partnerships Across Place (see 3.7 below for details)

- a. Staying true to a CD approach – ie. work where invited and there is a shared concern between NCEC and people/orgs of that place
- b. As such, there's a shared intention emerging from that shared concern
- c. There's a real time commitment, beyond one-funding cycle
- d. The partnerships built with that place are relational and structural (with orgs)
- e. The partnerships mirror the values of the central dimension 'accompanying'

7. Harnessing Networks

- a. Creating opportunities and pathways for the people we work with
- b. Leveraging all networks – personal and professional
- c. Opening up, even 'lending' our social capital (bonding, bridging, linking)

The evaluators consider this to be a strong practice framework for EPRI work. But it is still in the process of emerging as NCEC reflects on this work. It will be subject to ongoing refinement.

The central dimension of accompanying

NCEC uses an intentional practice of accompaniment when working with EPRI participants. It sits at the centre of the framework above, and as the central dimension we have given extra space for explicating it.

In a nut-shell it is a relational and intentional practice developed through trust and sustained support, which is particularly important for those who have experienced trauma or face systemic barriers to economic and social participation.

As previously mentioned, people settling in Australia face many obstacles related to language, culture, transportation and navigating complex and unknown systems. These barriers make even reaching the “starting point” of employment or stability an overwhelming task.

A practice centred on accompanying helps bridge these gaps by working alongside people, where they are at, and being flexible and adaptive to their needs and circumstances.

When accompaniment is done well, it is characterised by four key subdimensions that were reflected in the data from EPRI participants and NCEC workers. These are as follows:

1. Working together (with & not for)
2. Walking alongside (a metaphorical stance; and literally for referrals etc.)
3. Cultivating a slow, patient and gentle approach (“at the person’s pace”)
4. Encouraging capacity of the person to ‘walk ahead’ (take steps on their own and walk together with others).

Working together (with & not for)

This principle recognises that accompaniment is rooted in shared humanity, mutual respect, and

deep relational work. It’s not about doing things *for* people, but *with* them, building trust through connection and reciprocity.

You are connecting, connecting, connecting. You’re building trust. You are exposing some of your humanity in a professional way – I am another human being here to help. I’ll do what I can.



Conservation and Land Management trainees

The intention to relate as equals rather than as expert and client is powerful. It fosters a sense of welcome, safety, and dignity:

There are other organisations that can help people, but migrants like me, I have to go knock at the door. Maybe a smiling face will let me in. If I don’t see a smiling face it automatically pushes me away. I feel that I’m not welcome. I feel embarrassed. And I don’t want to go there again. So I ...roam around and look for it until I find someone.

Accompaniment here involves honouring people’s strengths, understanding the broader context of their lives, and co-creating pathways forward.

Walking alongside (a metaphorical stance; and literally for referrals etc.)

Walking alongside is both a mindset and a practice. It means standing with, not above someone. It means being present, relational, and committed, especially as people navigate new, uncertain, or complex situations. As these workers note:

...working with people's energies and having an awareness that we are a small aspect of what is happening in people's lives.

Depending on where the person is at, there is a lot of work that needs to go into supporting people to do things we think are basic... For example, finding jobs to apply for to begin with, and attending job interviews.



Hospitality training

Walking alongside means not just referring, but remaining present through the process:

When applying for jobs ... support them to apply, being involved in each step... checking in with them the next day, the day after, asking if they've heard back... going through the next step over the phone, or going to see them...

It also means making the formal feel informal, reducing the barriers that systems often impose:

Getting alongside is easier. Across the table conversations can be scary... When you do things alongside... a lot of valuable information comes out... Waiting in line at Centrelink, driving, doing things together—side to side—this is often when trust is built.

Cultivating a slow, patient and gentle approach (“at the person’s pace”)

Accompaniment honours the pace of the person. It means being consistent, gentle, and unhurried. Trust, healing and readiness can't be forced, they emerge over time. As this worker reflects:

In the individual work, it takes quite a few meetings ... for that person to feel comfortable sharing just the small things...

...It takes many conversations to understand some of the barriers, before you even get to solutions.

This principle also involves being comfortable with complexity and uncertainty. Rather than rushing to outcomes, workers stay present in the messiness of the journey:

We can offer support but can't manufacture an outcome. Being comfortable with the complexity. Knowing where it is best ... to support people in the complexity.

Going on a journey with people in their indecision and uncertainty... knowing that they still have support no matter what they decide.

There are a lot of unknowns when you meet people... But over time you build a sense of what will help... You won't get that in a couple of meetings.

A trauma-informed lens is essential here. Being patient and responsive allows workers to understand barriers that may not be visible at first:

Some people might come late to training every day. If you are unaware of their background... you might get frustrated. But as you know more info over a few months, you build a more nuanced picture of the barriers.

Encouraging capacity of the person to 'walk ahead' (take steps on their own and walk together with others)

Accompaniment isn't about dependence, it's about growing a person's confidence and capability so they can walk forward in their own way, with support when needed. As this worker shared:

There is trauma of living in a society where you are a stranger... They are lacking relationships of trust and connection and need opportunities to have a go at things and have success... To have some control over their situation – this makes a big difference.

Helping people walk ahead also means supporting them to navigate systems and connect with networks that enable long-term change:

The approach we are trying to take is to guide people through the system and address the barriers rather than saying it's too hard.

The path is windy – like a noodle or thread – finding points of connection in a complex process. Accompanying creates an anchor in a world that is shifting... a stable point of connection to address whatever is coming up.

And sometimes, it's as simple as using what you have to open doors:

This means that personal networks aren't out of bounds... I linked them with my mum who needed a mower... she linked them to 20 others... then hundreds. It helped link them to many networks which helped start their business.



Sewing participants with their first completed garments

3.6

Typical service approaches vs NCEC approach

Elements of the NCEC practice framework can also be contrasted to typical service approaches to working with migrants and refugees - as reported by EPRI participants - outlined in the table below.

Typical service approaches	NCEC's approaches
Appointment oriented and rigid	People oriented, flexible and responsive to when participants need support
More rigid guidelines and eligibility	Open approach to eligibility and use of guidelines
Occasional appointments	A mix of intensive and quiet periods of support as needed by participants
Linear process of assessment	Assessment is on-going to allow trust to be built and for participants to share more information over time
Professional posture	Side-by-side approach (sitting alongside)
Rigid boundaries	Adaptable boundaries
Use of professional networks	Use of all appropriate networks (personal, professional, customer/supplier, local neighborhood)
Professional language	Language of companionship

The table above highlights some dimensions of the uniqueness of NCEC's practice, compared to many of the other service and support providers operating in Australia.

3.7

Building partnerships across place, from a place-based perspective

NCEC is not physically based in the key areas where the EPRI program was delivered, which created several new challenges as NCEC has historically been committed to working in a place-based approach to their local context in the Brisbane suburb of Nundah. As such, part of the evaluation goal included distilling principles

to enable NCEC to learn from this experience, for future work across places.

The research team identified key elements of what was learned about doing effective and ethical partnership work when working outside the original base.

- **Staying true to the community development model.** This implies only working in another place where there is a shared concern among people in that place. For NCEC, the primary concern with the potential to link their work in Nundah to the new place, is alternative and transformative approaches to employment. Finding other communities with a similar shared concern is a crucial place to begin.
- **There's a shared intention** emerging from that shared concern. That is, there is a shared intention to work together, collaboratively, to address the concern. As one practitioner stated: *"Need to know, what is the intention? Is it shared? Is there energy?"*
- **There's a time commitment** beyond just the initial funding, recognising the length of time really needed. For example, in the story of partnering with the Congolese Church, practitioners identified that it requires 5-10 years to establish and develop a lasting relationship, not 2-3 which is what the funding affords. Thus, it is important to develop a strategic approach to sustain partnerships over this length of time, potentially across multiple funding programs and sources.
- **The partnerships that emerge need to be both relational (real relationships) but also structural (with local organisations).** It's not possible without a partnership with a Community Based Organisation that is in turn connected to people in that community. It has to be a genuine people's organisation. In terms of a community development methodology, NCEC needs a partner that can provide them with an authentic 'base' in that 'place'.
- **Mirroring the accompanying framework.** The work of partnership between NCEC and its community-based partner should have all the features of NCEC's framework of practice. It is useful to reflect on ways the framework of accompanying informs the relationship between organisations, and between communities. As one practitioner reflected: *"It's like accompanying a community, not an individual."*



Community meeting with Minister Charis Mullen

Conclusion

The EPRI program, delivered by Nundah Community Enterprises Cooperative (NCEC), has demonstrated meaningful impact in supporting refugees and migrants to overcome complex barriers to employment and social integration. Through a relational and individualised approach, underpinned by a framework centred by *accompaniment*, the program fostered the development of new skills, increased confidence and capacity, and significantly enhanced participants' social capital.

Participants gained vocational, business, and language skills while also forming strong relationships within their communities and with broader Australian society. The case studies and qualitative findings highlight the transformative effects of tailored support, especially for those who have experienced trauma, social isolation, and systemic exclusion.

Nevertheless, the program also faced some challenges, including program duration, resource constraints, and systemic barriers to employment and entrepreneurship. Participants expressed a need for more structured and sustained support, particularly in business development and post-program continuity. These concerns and challenges have recently been addressed by NCEC, with extension to the sewing program and business skill development underway.

NCEC's emerging EPRI practice framework centres accompaniment, and offers a compelling alternative to conventional service models, marked by its deep commitment to humanising support, embracing complexity, and working in true partnership with participants. The findings also underline the value of long-term, place-based, and community-rooted work – even when delivered beyond NCEC's original local base – requiring sustained investment and genuine collaborations with local organisations.



Community Group Meeting



Sewing trainer and participants

Overall, NCEC's flexible, trauma-informed, and relationship-based approach makes a compelling case for reimagining refugee employment supports in Australia that enables equitable access to meaningful economic and social participation.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Information sheet

Evaluation of EPRI project with Nundah Coop.

Information sheet:

My name is Rachael Donovan and I am working with Nundah Co-op on behalf of Community Praxis Coop to learn about your experience in the EPRI program. This information will be used to improve the work of Nundah Co-op and the EPRI program. Everything you say is confidential. Some of your quotes or information may be used in reports to Nundah Co-op or the funder, but *your name or any identifying information won't be used*. I will record the interview so that I can relisten and write up exactly what you said. I won't share this recording with anyone and it will be deleted once I have finished the notes.

After your interview, I will email you the notes so you can check that it is correct. You will have a week to review it. If there is anything you've said that you don't want to include we can remove it.

These are the questions I will ask in the interview:

- Could you tell me your story of how long you've been in Australia and how you've been trying to find work?
- What kind of support have you had from Nundah Co-op, Leslie or Chris?
- In what ways has it been helpful?
- In what ways has it made a difference?
- Are there any ways it's been unhelpful or could be changed?
- Have you had any other organisations support you? In what ways has this been different (if at all)?

If you have any questions about the interview, or you would like to talk to me, you can contact me on rachael@communitypraxis.org or 0434 364 771