

In Transition: employment outcomes of migrants in English language programs at AMES Australia

Preliminary findings from a study tracking the employment outcomes of Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) clients in the Settlement Language Pathways to Employment and Training (SLPET) program

Introduction

AMES Australia provides a comprehensive range of initial settlement support, English language and literacy tuition, vocational training and employment services to migrants, refugees and asylum seekers primarily resident in Victoria, and employment services in Western Sydney. The Research and Policy Unit at AMES Australia conducts research to inform policy and practical decision making around migration and settlement service provision.

This summary reports findings from the 'Transitions to Employment' research study. This was designed to investigate the employment outcomes and experiences of recently arrived adult migrants who completed the Settlement Language Pathways to Employment and Training (SLPET) program with AMES Australia.

Settlement Language Pathways to Employment and Training (SLPET)

SLPET is a sub-program of the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP). It provides opportunities for clients to prepare for employment in Australia within a context of English language learning. SLPET focuses on familiarising clients with Australian workplace language, culture and practices. It includes a work experience component of 40 to 80 hours. Course delivery can be customised to reflect the local labour markets and client needs. AMES Australia offers a range of SLPET courses; some provide general employment skills and others are industry specific.

Research Design

To gauge the impact of the program on employment, we conducted a telephone survey of SLPET clients six months after they completed their course. We aimed to contact all clients enrolled in a one year period from 2014 to 2015 at the nine AMES Australia sites across AMES¹. Overall 460 of 630 clients (73%) were surveyed. More than 75% of respondents were contacted by a Research Assistant who spoke their first language.

Research project respondents

At enrolment in SLPET, 56% of the 460 respondents had been in Australia for less than 18 months, 20% between 18 months and three years and 23% for more than three years.

Most respondents were women (76%). Two thirds (67%) migrated to Australia on a Family visa usually as a spouse, 19% came on a Humanitarian visa, 6% on a Skilled visa and the remaining 8% through a range of temporary visas with AMEP eligibility.

The majority (64%) of the SLPET clients in this study had tertiary qualifications; 44% had a bachelor or higher university degree and 20% a trade or technical qualification.

Employment outcomes

Although 75% of respondents had overseas work experience, at the point of enrolment in SLPET less than one quarter (24%) had been engaged in employment in Australia.

¹ Clients included in this study were enrolled in a 10 week SLPET program between term 4, 2015 and term 3 2015 (inclusive). 38 out of 42 classes ran during this period were included in this study. We excluded a small number of people who: 1) withdrew in the first month, 2) provided no contact information, 3) had low level English and did not speak one of the 20 languages of our Research Assistants.

At six months following the program, we found that 61% of respondents were available to work. That is, they had either found employment or were actively looking, or planning to look for work within the next year. Those not available to work had gone on to further study (27%) or were no longer looking for work due to family responsibilities and other reasons (12%).

Table 1: Employment situation six months post-course: all respondents

	Count	%
Available to work	282	61%
Further study	124	27%
Not available, family responsibilities or other reasons	54	12%
Total	460	100%

For those available to work, 56% had found work in the six months since completing SLPET.

Table 2: Employment outcomes six months post-course: those available to work

	Count	%
Employed	159	56%
Unemployed and still looking for work	123	44%
Total	282	100%

Research Assistants noted that some respondents may have been reluctant to divulge details of employment that was very menial or unrelated to their desired work in Australia. It is therefore possible that employment is under-reported in this study.

For those who said they were not looking for work because they were undertaking further study (124 people):

- 50% were studying English – in this group 77% were studying at AMES Australia
- 47% were in a vocational course – in this group 22% were studying at AMES Australia.

Types of employment

For those employed (159 people), most worked on a casual basis and fewer were in permanent, fixed term or self-employment.

Table 3: Employment arrangements: those employed

	Count	%
Casual	107	67%
Permanent	30	19%
Fixed term contract	14	9%
Self-employed/ABN	7	4%
Unclear or no response	1	1%
Total	159	100%

There is evidence of significant underemployment amongst the SLPET clients in this study. The majority of workers (67%) were in part time work of less than 35 hours per week. Of these, 61 percent said they would like to work more hours.

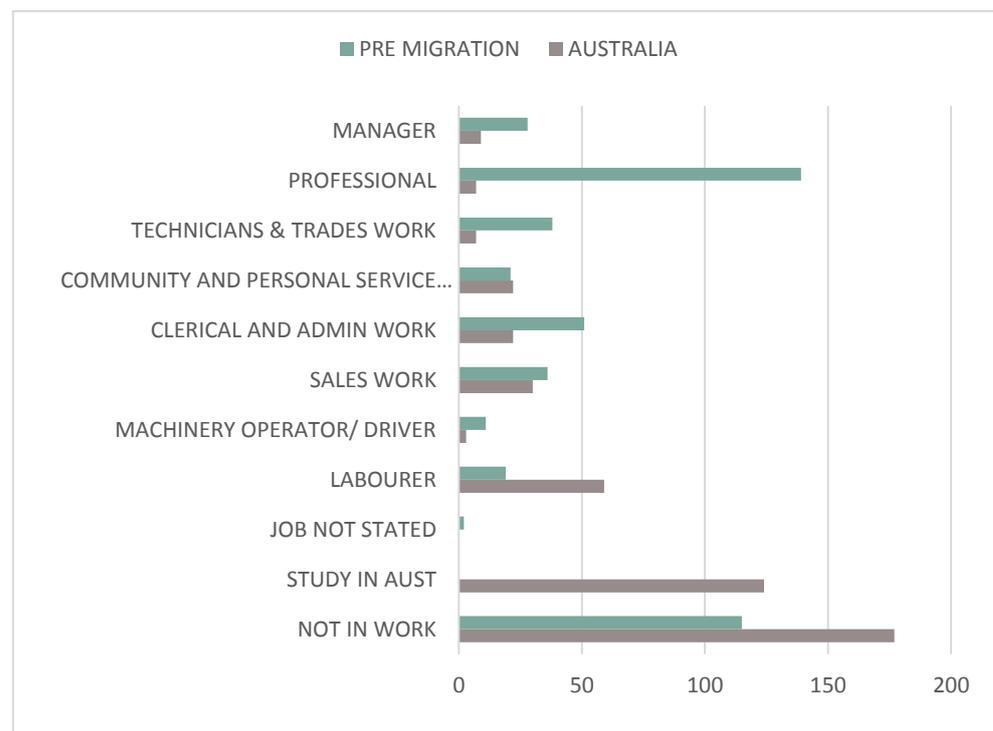
Half of working respondents (50%) told us they were earning more than \$20 per hour (4% more than \$30), 32% less than \$20, and 18% declined to answer this question. The relatively low pay rates reflect the low status occupations of many respondents. Adult casual workers receiving a

25% casual loading would be paid more than \$20 per hour under the current national minimum wage order in Australia².

Main occupation before and after migrating to Australia

Three hundred and forty five people in this study had worked prior to their migration. The main occupations they held prior to coming to Australia were as managers or professionals (48%), clerical and administrative workers (15%) and technicians and trade workers (11%). In contrast, occupations for the 159 people who had found work since SLPET were labourers (37%), sales workers (19%), community and personal service workers (14%) and clerical and administrative workers (14%)³.

Figure 1: Employment situation before and after migration: all respondents



² National Minimum Wage Order, 2016. Fair Work Commission Australia, <https://www.fwc.gov.au/awards-and-agreements/minimum-wages-conditions/national-minimum-wage-orders>

³ Occupation categories based on the Australian Bureau of Statistics Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations 2013 V1.2

Methods used to find employment

For those who had found work in Australia since finishing SLPET the main ways they found their job were:

- personal and social connections e.g. family, friends (42%)
- internet and newspaper search e.g. job or employer websites, newspaper adverts (20%)
- work experience or volunteering (16%)
- *jobactive* support (3%)
- cold calling/canvassing (5%)
- self-employment (4%).

The most common way that people found employment was through connections with friends and family. This indicates the powerful influence of personal and social networks for connecting with the labour market in Australia. However, among those still looking for work at the time of the survey (123 respondents), the majority were focussed on online job searching (69%) with less than half of people (46%) relying on personal connections to look for work. Other ways the unemployed group were looking for work included cold calling (13%) and volunteering (7%).

Half of the respondents looking for work (51%) did not have any support for their job searching, whether from friends or family or from more formal employment supports such as *jobactive*. Less than a third of respondents were connected to *jobactive*.

SLPET teachers are aware of the lack of networks and support available for job seekers once they leave AMES Australia. As one teachers said:

I think the biggest gap is actually the post-course support. Most students have a great time on work experience and they're feeling confident and they're looking forward to finding work. But then four, five weeks out of the class, they no longer have that day to day support. And I think they start to lose confidence and focus. To prepare somebody to go and find the job they want, they need a lot of individual attention.

Feedback about the SLPET program

The main reasons people gave for enrolling in SLPET were improving English, confidence building and general assistance with looking for work. Overall they were positive about their experiences. Ninety-one per cent of respondents said that the course was helpful for finding work in Australia. The components of the course that were helpful ranged from improving English and confidence as well as practical information and advice about employment.

Table 4: What were the things in the course that helped you find work?

	Count	%*
Improving my English	313	73%
Improved confidence	254	59%
Interview practice	217	51%
Job search activities (e.g. resume writing, interview skills)	198	46%
Work experience / work placement	168	39%
Australian workplace cultures	168	39%
Encouragement from teachers and classmates	126	29%
Industry-related information	94	22%
Networking (meeting others in the same situation)	75	18%
Making plans/ planning next step (e.g. counselling)	39	9%
Getting a required qualification for work	33	8%
Employer talks and presentations	26	6%
Other reasons	25	6%
Total number of respondents	429	-

* More than one response allowed

Respondents offered positive comments and feedback about their experiences and in particular the assistance they received from their teachers. As one person explained through their research assistant:

The course is good, there is nothing as such to improve in the course. The teachers were really good and supportive. They gave me total support and helped me in my placement. One of my teachers gave me her name as a referee.

Other respondents commented on the difficulties they faced looking for work after the course finished and their need for additional support:

I definitely need more help in finding a job, but I have no idea what kind of help I need now. Even though the course is good, I feel that finding a job in Australia is still too hard as we don't have the required English level and enough work experience.

Summary findings

Respondents said the program was useful to prepare them for the transition to work in Australia. For many this was underpinned by continuing to improve their English and increasing their confidence. The additional support provided by AMES Australia teaching staff, such as reviewing resumes, being referee and circulating job opportunities is very effective to support clients into work.

SLPET is an effective program that increases opportunities for new migrants learning English to find employment. The flexibility to offer programs that are adapted to client needs and local employment markets is essential.

More than 60% of respondents were available for work six months post program and 56% of this group were working. One third of respondents were in further study after completion of the SLPET program.

Respondents were employed in a range of occupations prior to migration. They experienced a loss of career status in Australia, where a high proportion were employed as labourers or in other low-status occupations.

Of the employed respondents, the majority (67%) worked on a casual basis and relatively few in were in permanent positions or self-employed.

While the use of online employment websites was the most common method used for job seeking, the most successful way of securing employment was to engage with personal and social connections.

Six months after the program, respondents were often disconnected from sources of support for job searching. Few were eligible for or connected to formal employment assistance.

Policy and practice recommendations

Post program support for those who do not find work in the first months after completing SLPET, such as a job club, is required to further increase employment outcomes. This needs to be offered in different formats to suit different job seekers including those with professional backgrounds.

Increasing employment information and resources of communities who support newly arrived migrants would enhance the effectiveness of this major channel for finding work in Australia. This requires resources to develop and distribute accurate information in appropriate formats through community networks.

AMES Australia should continue to promote access information and support for people who experience workplace discrimination and exploitation.

A more detailed report about this research study is being prepared and will be available in 2017.