

30 October, 2021

Kia ora koutou,

The English Language Institute (ELI), within the School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies at Victoria University of Wellington, welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Productivity Commission's, Immigration, productivity and wellbeing issues paper. This submission focuses on the successful settlement of 'skilled' migrants and the barriers faced by them and their partners in finding work. In particular, it responds to the following questions:

Q7: Are there barriers to migrants fully contributing to NZ's productivity growth?

Q10: What does 'successful settlement of migrants' mean to you?

Q31: What are the barriers that partners of migrants face in finding work?

Background

Since 2005, the ELI has supported 347 skilled migrants and skilled former refugees in their employment and settlement goals through the Workplace Communication for Skilled Migrant Programme in the Wellington region. This has provided us with deep experience and insight into the many obstacles they face due to language barriers, limited cross cultural understanding, lack of local networks or limited New Zealand workplace experience. The Skilled Migrant Programme addresses these obstacles by sensitising skilled migrants to NZ workplace culture and language use and providing access to NZ work experience in professional organisations that match their qualifications, skills and experience.

Up until June 2021, this programme has been funded by Refugee and Migrant Support, Immigration NZ, Ministry of Business Innovation and Employment. The programme was offered to two cohorts of 12 participants per year. Currently, funding has ceased.

The Skilled Migrant Programme

The Skilled Migrant Programme facilitates access to employment for underemployed and unemployed skilled migrants. It is designed for migrants whose first language is not English, who have a bachelor's or higher degree, and who have several years' professional or commercial experience. The course helps migrants to develop cultural and communication skills and to deploy their skills and qualifications as interns in Wellington workplaces. It involves both classroom learning and work experience:

- Six weeks' fulltime classroom learning, focusing on communication and job interview skills.
- Six weeks' fulltime work experience, returning to class each Monday afternoon to debrief.

Employment barriers

Based on 16 years of teaching, observing and working directly with skilled migrants, as well as interacting with managers and employers across a diverse range of Wellington workplaces, we have identified numerous barriers encountered during the job search and initial employment process. These include:

- A lack of NZ workplace experience and NZ referees
- Unfamiliarity with employment processes: style of job interviews, in particular unfamiliarity with the behavioural competency style interview
- Lack of awareness of the style of CVs commonly used in NZ
- Unfamiliarity with the communication styles suitable for the NZ professional context
- A lack of networks in the professional and business community
- A lack of contact with New Zealanders
- A lack of understanding of workplace practices in NZ
- Diminished confidence in own abilities and skills

Overcoming barriers

Gaining employment related to their professional areas contributes enormously to the successful settlement and retention of skilled migrants and skilled former refugees in New Zealand. This is true not only for skilled migrants who apply as primary applicants to NZ, but arguably more so for secondary applicants who worked as professionals in their countries of origin and find themselves tasked with putting aside their career goals to support their partners and settle their families in a new home and country. Partners of skilled migrants who aim to re-establish their professional work goals and reclaim their professional identities despair when they are unable to realise their aspirations. If they fail to find meaningful employment, there is a risk the entire family will leave NZ resulting in a loss of cultural diversity and highly valuable skilled talent.

For skilled migrants without relevant NZ experience, who may be isolated at home with few professional or personal networks and with few opportunities to interact with NZers, a programme of instruction with high levels of dedicated support into the workplace is required. The Skilled Migrant Programme provides such intensive support to improve employment and settlement outcomes. Key features of the programme include:

- Thorough assessment and selection of applicants to ensure they are eligible for the programme, receptive to communication training and work ready. On average, 40-50 people apply for each course, 24 reach the selection interview stage and 12 are selected.
- Research-based classroom practice benefiting from continual action-research.
- Authentic NZ communication materials sourced from professional workplaces which raise awareness of NZ workplace communication norms.
- Guest speakers sharing expertise and insight into a diverse range of topics related to NZ society, intercultural competence, the job search process, NZ workplace cultures, NZ workplace communication practices and NZ workplace employment practices.
- Communication training, job interview training and development of intercultural competence in preparation for internships and future employment.
- A strong collaborative partnership with the Rotary Club of Wellington involving a significant number of Rotary Club of Wellington members (over 120 members since 2005 and at least 40 members per course) voluntarily contributing specialist skills as guest speakers, mentors and guest tutors working one-on-one with interns.
- Careful sourcing of 6-week internships by a well-established recruitment company to match interns' skill sets with organisations in their extensive database.
- Networking opportunities with programme alumni, the Rotary Club of Wellington, the recruitment company and guest speakers.
- Workplace consultants who support interns and liaise with workplace team members and mentors during the 6-week internship to raise the cultural and pragmatic awareness of all concerned.

Impact and outcomes

In its first ten years, over 70 per cent of programme graduates found professional or commercial employment within six months. More recently, the percentage has been closer to 90 per cent, with some graduating

classes scoring 100 per cent. Many graduates have now become programme champions. They encourage prospective participants in their communities and networks to apply for the programme and some have advocated within their workplaces to offer unpaid internships, at times acting as mentors and managers themselves. Key programme outcomes include:

- 70-100% of programme participants find skilled work soon after graduating.
- A Cost Benefit Analysis shows that for each \$1 the government spends on this programme there is a \$70 return to the country.
- Reports from graduates that they have improved their communication style and professional persona to optimise their chances of securing employment and establish positive workplace relationships.
- Graduates consistently reporting of much higher levels of confidence in the job search process, higher levels of success in being invited for job interviews and navigating these more effectively and appropriately.
- Much greater awareness and critical understanding of NZ workplace culture, norms and expectations of behaviour in a range of NZ social and professional interactions.
- Participants who are equipped with a vast repertoire of communication tools and a range of frameworks to assist with analysing, reflecting and acting on workplace issues.
- Ongoing support of graduates through individually assigned job mentors, quarterly alumni reunions, referees and ongoing workplace advice.
- Reports from employers highlighting the immense value of internships to their organisations: interns contributing positively to projects and work tasks; greater awareness of gaps in organisational induction processes; opportunities for mentoring, intercultural learning and how to promote more diverse, inclusive work practices.
- Partnering with the Settlement Unit, MBIE, to contribute numerous research-informed workplace resources on the Settlement Unit's website.

Conclusion

The Skilled Migrant Programme is remarkably successful. Graduates find it lifechanging. Re-instating a sustained source of government funding to deliver the programme each year would certainly contribute to the goals of facilitating employment for skilled migrants and their successful settlement into NZ. By attracting and retaining highly skilled migrants who are committed to settling in NZ, we ensure the future prosperity of our communities and wider society.

Ngā mihi nui,

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Appendix 1: Statements from Skilled Migrant Programme graduates showing the contribution of this programme to their successful settlement.

- I no longer feel separated from society. It may be a long time before I fully integrate into New Zealand life, but now I understand what to do in order not to be a complete outsider. I also realized the importance of networking and how much it affects all aspects of life. And thanks to this course, I have these connections and I know what to do to continue to develop them. During the course, I met many wonderful people, heard many interesting stories, and finally made the decision that I would like to stay in New Zealand to become a part of it.
- The internship provided me with the best chance to further practise and improve my communication and professional skills. I was able to make meaningful new connections from the programme and in the workplace.
- All the things I learned sowed golden seeds for my future career and life. I hope the programme will continue to benefit more skilled migrants to survive and thrive in this beautiful country.
- From having lost all the confidence in my capabilities due to being unemployed for so long - to slowly gaining it back and believing in myself all over again – I sure have come a long way.
- This programme has given me a lot of confidence to believe in myself and come back to the corporate world. I would strongly recommend this course to anyone looking forward to start their career in NZ after a break.
- Through the course, I've made significant improvements in all aspects of my understanding of NZ culture, my communication skills in the NZ workplace, and my job search skills. I've regained my confidence, and I have been building many meaningful relationships. I have a solid footprint in the NZ workplace. I secured a job in my chosen professional area in the public sector, and I've rebuilt my sense of identity. I look forward to a fulfilling and meaningful life in New Zealand.
- This has been a life-changer for me and my family. Such a great programme is a valuable gem for any skilled migrant who what to make a difference in this country. I highly recommend it to other newcomers.
- Understanding NZ culture and workplace culture, having the right mindset and mastering the right skills of interacting with people in NZ workplaces and having a plan to further these skills are extremely important for migrants to unlock their potentials, start their career in NZ, contribute to the NZ employers and the NZ society, and live a meaningful/fulfilling life, as they expected. This programme helps them significantly with all these aspects.
- The course entails all that I needed to know to become employable. The emphasis given on making us understand how NZ operates, how people interact, the culture, the workplace environment, the workplace communication and working styles really helped us come up the settlement curve. The exposure we got, the immense help received from The Rotary Club members and mentors as guest speakers and tutors is beyond words. And the help continues even after the program to help us get placed in the right jobs we want for ourselves. I am so grateful for what this course has offered me and at a time when I needed it the most.
- I now feel more belonging to New Zealand, and have started to acquire some of the Wellingtonian characteristics. Now, I have a network of great people who made me feel at home and reassured me that I always have a back to support me.
- I became happier, more confident, more secure, and way more belonging and grateful.
- I feel part of the community now, I am not afraid to answer the phone and be in contact with professionals in my area help me to regain my confidence as a professional Accountant