Using a Work Integrated Learning (WIL) model for preparing Skilled Migrants for Australian Employment

Freny Tayebjee¹
Careers and Cooperative Education, University of Western Sydney
Srivalli Nagarajan
Professional and Community Programs, UWS College

This paper describes experiences and reports on findings from a recent Work Integrated Learning (WIL) pilot project - Skillmax Plus. The program was funded by NSW Adult Migrant English Service (AMES) and offered through University of Western Sydney College (UWSC) in collaboration with Careers & Cooperative Education, University of Western Sydney (UWS). It used a WIL model that comprised course work followed by work placement. The participants were skilled migrants seeking employment in their chosen profession. The course work component focused on the development of greater awareness of Australian workplace culture and job seeking skills. The work experience component provided the real world experience. Such programs and initiatives have specific implications for skilled migrant employment and general implications for the whole Australian skilled migration program which aims to address skill shortages.

Keywords: Skilled Migrants, Long term unemployed, work integrated learning and skill shortages

Background

Overseas born migrants form a critical cohort of the Australian workforce. This cohort accounts for 57% of Australia’s annual population growth (ABS, 2012a) and importantly 76% (ABS, 2012b) of all overseas born migrants are of working age (15-64 years). Migrants usually come to Australia under the skilled migration (67% of the total Migration Program) or the family reunion program (32%) (DIAC, 2012). The criteria for applying for skilled migration to Australia are modified regularly, but addressing skills shortages in specific areas has always been a high priority for the Australian government. In fact migration is regarded as one of the most effective means of addressing skills shortages in Australia (DIAC, 2012; ABS, 2012e). However, the reality is that many well qualified migrants with years of relevant experience are unable to get an appropriate job in their field.

The Labour Force participation rate of recent migrants is reassuringly high (over 74% in 2010 compared to Australian born which is 69%) (ABS, 2012c). However, it is when this figure is unpacked that the more interesting information is revealed: such as the unemployment rate which is 6.3% as compared to 3.2% of Australian born unemployed and more importantly that only 53% were employed in the occupation nominated in their visa (ABS, 2012d).

One can assume that migrants in general may not have the support of family or resources and consequently need to get a job as soon as possible, hence the high Labour Force participation rate – but they may be forced to take up jobs in areas outside their chosen profession – hence the large number of engineers, architects and teachers driving taxis in Sydney and Melbourne! Notwithstanding the great waste in human resource and potential social capital, such skilled migrants also face the inevitable “human” consequences of frustration, family breakdown and clinical depression (Kennedy and McDonald, 2006).

Chang (2003) reported on a study of skilled and unskilled migrant groups in Australia on the effects of these groups on the national unemployment rates. The results suggest that the general perception that skilled migrants were ‘job robbers’ was incorrect. According to the study, skilled migrants are not “job robbers” as their work contribution leads to growth in the economy creating more jobs. On the other hand, unskilled migrants compete with Australians for unskilled work which contributes to fewer opportunities for Australians. This is another reason why it is important that skilled migrants are employed in skilled jobs.

It should be noted that international students can migrate under the skilled migration program if they have successfully completed at least two years of education with an Australian education provider. Preparation of such students during their study before they are granted skilled migrant visas is critical. In their review of the Australian higher education final report to the Australian Government, Bradley et al. (2008) state that “a holistic approach needs to be taken to “better supporting students (both domestic and international) to improve their experience on campus and ensure their work readiness in the global environment”.

¹ Careers and Cooperative Education, University of Western Sydney, + 61 2 4736 2376, f.tayebjee@uws.edu.au
Bradley et al. (2008) further recommend that when preparing overseas migrants (who initially come to Australia as international students) “governments and higher education providers need to place a much greater emphasis on the preparation of international students for the world of work and particularly for working in Australia. This should include a greater focus on English language proficiency that goes beyond the language competence required for the course and adequately prepares students for the working environment. Providers should give serious consideration to the development of work-placement programs to assist international students to become work ready in the Australian context.”

Support for Skilled Migrants in NSW

The Australian government has a number of support programs for migrants (skilled or family reunion migrants) to assist them to settle and find suitable employment. In NSW, AMES offers a range of courses for migrants, refugees and humanitarian entrants (AMES, 2012). One of the main objectives of these courses is to provide assistance to all migrants to learn and develop their English language skills, job seeking and workplace skills for successful settlement in Australia. Some of the courses they offer for skilled migrants are English For Employment (EFE), Skillmax and Public Sector Online - Skillmax. While the EFE course covers all the job-seeking skills and topics that are also covered in a Skillmax course, it also covers more English language skills including awareness of workplace culture and English language pronunciation. As the name suggests the Public Sector Online course is delivered online and assists participants to develop their language skills so that they can improve their career opportunities in the public sector. AMES also has a comprehensive website and databases on resources for migrants such as information on the labour market, recruitment practices in Australia, work place rights and responsibilities and employment expos and events.

About Skillmax Plus Program

UWSC is one of the providers approved by NSW AMES for offering Skillmax programs since 2010. UWSC staff noted that although many of the Skillmax students who completed the course seemed to have the majority of ingredients for success (such as discipline specific skills, relevant industry experience, satisfactory completion of the course and acceptable English language skills) they still experienced difficulty in securing suitable jobs, primarily due to lack of local work experience. In 2011, a proposal was put forward by UWSC to AMES to offer additional language and work placement support for skilled migrants as an enhancement to the Skillmax course. A decision was made to collaborate with the UWS Careers & Cooperative Education (CCE) unit to extend the course and include professional work experience. The new course was called Skillmax Plus. After receiving approval from NSW AMES the course was piloted in September 2011.

UWSC delivered the Skillmax Plus course or the theory component. Three guest speakers from industry presented their perspectives on employer expectations and provided job seeking tips. A half-day workshop on pronunciation skills was also conducted. During the course, staff from CCE unit which runs a very successful internship program for UWS students took responsibility for placing Skillmax Plus students with suitable employers for their internships. The Skillmax Plus cohort involved reverse marketing – instead of finding the best student for a job opportunity, CCE staff had to find the best employer for each student. Despite having contacts in a large number of organisations, the unit found it extremely difficult to get employers to commit to taking on a mature age student to work, albeit for no pay. There was the added constraint, as specified by AMES the funding body, that the four weeks of work experience had to be completed within a seven week period. Employers not only had to agree to host the student, they had to agree to do it almost immediately – which made it very hard.

CCE staff decided on a new modus operandi: to get the students to put their job seeking skills into practice and play a lead role in their work experience quest. Students were asked to research and identify two “dream jobs” in Sydney. They had to research the organisation in-depth and take into consideration factors such as the ethos of the organisation, the location (ease and cost of commuting – a critical factor for many migrants who do not own a car and are not eligible for any travel concessions), the disciplines from which that organisation generally recruits and whether a job with that organisation would enhance their career. In addition students had to identify the name and contact details of a specific person in that organisation in whose area they would like to work and the position they would realistically like to work in. Students were advised that it was not necessary for the organisation to be currently recruiting for someone with their particular skills. In fact if the organisation was recruiting it could reduce the student’s chances of gaining work experience as it would be construed as interference with the objectivity of the hiring process.
The students were asked to prepare a resume and cover letter targeting the job and organisation identified by them. This process forced students to apply a range of skills which they had learnt in the course. They also received the support of the UWSC trainer who was able to assist, advise and enhance their resumes and letters of application – which understandably went through a number of iterations.

Importantly, the students were instructed that on no account were they to contact anyone in the organisation about their “dream job”. It was the role of CCE staff to act as the liaison between the student and the organisation and to contact the targeted person. CCE staff explained to the potential employer that UWS was arranging work experience for migrants who have the education and skills and that the students regard working with them to be their “dream job” and requested that the student be hosted for four weeks. The reactions of most employers were initial surprise, followed by feeling flattered and then cautious interest in the program. In general there was a very positive response with several employers recalling their own experience as a migrant or that of a colleague.

The student’s application letter and a resume were emailed to the employer and followed up with a phone call. Whilst several employers explained why they could not participate (too close to Christmas and the holiday season, no suitable space for student, no one to supervise the student, in the midst of recruiting for that or similar position) most made a real effort to accommodate the student.

The CCE team was delighted when finally four out of the 13 students were placed in their dream job. The remainder were placed through contacts both professional and personal. The most helpful contact was UWS itself, which is one of the largest employers in Greater Western Sydney, and hosted five students. Students were supported during their work experience with regular phone calls, a facebook site where students and the CCE team regularly posted messages and a few site visits. Student feedback was very positive with students, with one exception, indicating it was a very valuable experience. One student considered the placement to be at a much lower level than his ability warranted and said the work was boring and unsuited to his skills.

At the end of the work experience there was a celebration for students and their industry partners. An industry partner and a student reported on their experiences. One student and one industry partner received Outstanding Awards based on nominations received.

More importantly, four students were retained for ongoing work by their employers (to date they are still employed). Two students after completing their placements decided to enrol in post graduate courses, one for a Masters in Hydrology – the area in which she worked – and one for a PhD with her UWS supervisor for the work experience. The rest of the students gained employment in their chosen professions.

What was especially pleasing was the turnaround in attitude of a couple of students. One student in particular who had worked at senior levels in several countries had become bitter and cynical after being unemployed for over a year and frequently expressed his frustration to staff. After his “dream job” was arranged his attitude changed completely, becoming a mentor for other students and supportive of the Skillmax Plus course.

**WIL Methodology**

The success of the Skillmax Plus program is attributed to the underpinning WIL methodology used in the design, delivery and assessment of the program. According to Patrick et al. (2009), WIL includes a “range of approaches and strategies that integrate theory with the practice of work within a purposefully designed curriculum”. The WIL model used in Skillmax Plus (Figure 1) comprised a five weeks course that assisted participants with developing a career portfolio including a resume and cover letter suitable for Australian employers. Career management skills and workplace language, customs and culture were also covered during the course. Both the course work and work experience provided students with multiple opportunities to reflect upon their experiences and understand their own progress from the start to the end of their Skillmax Plus journey. By its design, the WIL model used in the Skillmax Plus course enabled transformative learning, situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and reflective learning to occur, ensuring students developed both career management and self management skills that are applicable to Australian employment.
Study Implications and Conclusions

There are implications arising from running the Skillmax Plus program, which are discussed below.

**Personal implications:** The skilled migrants who participated in the program indicated that they experienced increased self-confidence and high motivation. Some students who were depressed at the beginning of the course due to repeated episodes of failure at securing employment were grateful for the support provided during the program. Hence, programs such as Skillmax Plus have implications for the morale of skilled migrants and their successful settlement in Australia.

**Professional implications:** Skillmax Plus developed skilled migrants’ awareness of the expectations of Australian employers and the Australian workplace culture. This has implications for employer acceptance of skilled migrants and the Government’s initiatives for addressing skill shortages. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Australian employers hesitate to hire skilled migrants because of the fear of how they might (or might not) fit into their workplaces and roles. By taking skilled migrants who have been through preparatory programs such as Skillmax Plus that element of uncertainty is reduced.

**Reputational implications:** A mismatch in alignment of employer expectations of skilled migrants and government initiatives to allow skilled migration to address skill shortages has potential implications for Australia’s reputation as a destination for future skilled migration. In their discussion about the relevance of internationalisation of the Australian Education to Skilled Migration, Bradley et al. (2008) state that “adopting a more coordinated approach across governments to better align policies supporting industry development, regulation and quality assurance and facilitating skilled migration is necessary as part of the internationalisation.”

**Conclusion**

Feedback from the Skillmax Plus program indicated that skilled migrants found the program extremely valuable for developing their understanding of job seeking in Australia and gaining local experience. Many of the skilled migrants who participated in the Skillmax Plus program stated that they were unaware of such support programs for skilled migrant job seekers prior to their arrival in Australia.

Based on the Skillmax Plus program and research it is recommended: that all skilled migrants be informed about the existence of employment support programs prior to arrival in Australia, highlighting that such preparatory programs will increase their chance of gaining appropriate employment; secondly that participation in these courses be made mandatory (or at least strongly recommended) when granting skilled migrant visas; and thirdly

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<td>5 Weeks Course Component</td>
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<td>Exposure to workplace language &amp; Culture</td>
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<td>Develop Career Management Skills</td>
<td>Understanding of Australian workplace culture and practices applicable to their chosen professions</td>
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<td>Develop Career Portfolio</td>
<td>Opportunities for industry networking</td>
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<td>Develop Self-confidence and self-management</td>
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![Figure 1: WIL Methodology for Skillmax Plus Program](image-url)
that a national portal be created (similar to an approved national register or database) that lists all skilled migrants who have successfully completed programs such as Skillmax or Skillmax Plus. Making such databases available for employers will increase the number of employers who are willing to take on migrant workers and mitigate their fears about whether migrant workers will fit into Australian workplaces.

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