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Settlement
Council
of Australia

Settlement Council of Australia submission on the proposed licensing system for the New Employment Services Model

Introduction

The Settlement Council of Australia (SCoA) congratulates the Department on the New Employment Services Model initiative and welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Discussion Paper on the proposed licensing system.

SCoA is the peak body representing the vast majority of settlement agencies across Australia providing direct services and support to people of refugee and migrant backgrounds.

Our members include organisations large and small, who are committed to the successful settlement of refugees and migrants across the country. Their services range from greeting new arrivals at the airport, through to assisting them to secure housing, learn English, access services and find their first job. Australia's settlement agencies are recognised as being among the best in the world.

This submission has been informed by consultations with and other feedback from our members.

Summary

SCoA supports the development of the New Employment Services Model and the proposed licensing system as a significant opportunity for the settlement sector to improve employment outcomes for refugees and migrants. We propose several considerations for informing the licensing system:

1. Proceeding with the proposal to have cohort specialists, and ensuring the requirements maximise the effectiveness and efficiency of cohort specialists
2. Ensuring the tender process enables settlement agencies to tender and adequately recognises and values their specialist expertise
3. Embedding collaborative practices within the system
4. Establishing a network of specialists to enhance best practice

We elaborate on each of these in turn below.

1. Cohort specialists

Retaining cohort specialists

SCoA strongly supports the addition of specialist services under the new model. In particular, SCoA commends the establishment of ‘cohort specialists’, which recognises the needs of those who may require specialist support, such as refugee, migrant, and culturally and linguistically diverse job seekers. Having distinct specialist services that comprehensively understand the distinct needs of refugee and migrant job seekers, is preferable to the alternative option of generalist providers offering areas of specialty within their servicing arrangements, in order to overcome the deficit of cultural competency and lack of multicultural services networks in generic services, offer adequate employment support and achieve positive employment outcomes.

Throughout SCoA’s network there are many examples of settlement agencies delivering employment programs that generate exceptional employment outcomes. For example, Settlement Services International delivers the Ignite program has seen 110 small businesses established to date, with 68 people employed in these small businesses, and 60% having generated enough income to be economically dependent. In South Australia, the Women’s Employment into Action program, which has only been running since early 2019, has seen 40% of participants enter paid employment. These are just two of many examples, and we would be happy to provide further examples of successful employment programs being delivered by settlement agencies. Further examples can also be viewed on our website.¹

Tendering for more than one cohort as a cohort specialist

As identified above, settlement agencies bring a wealth of expertise and experience in supporting refugee and migrant job seekers. SCoA notes that cohort specialists will only receive license and referrals for their target cohort. Though SCoA agrees specialist services focused on refugee and migrants should not be expected to service other cohorts for which they do not have the expertise and resources, SCoA notes that specialist cohorts of ‘CALD’ and ‘refugees’ have been identified as distinct potential cohorts. Should the cohorts of ‘refugee’ and ‘CALD’ job seekers be established separately, SCoA advocates for settlement agencies to be able to apply to be a specialist for both of these cohorts. Though these cohorts have distinct needs, settlement agencies have a strong understanding of, and engagement with both cohorts, and are therefore highly capable of supporting their employment outcomes.

Cohort specialists only operating in location of identified need

SCoA has concerns regarding the proposal of cohort specialists only operating in an area of ‘identified need’. Refugees, migrants and culturally and linguistically diverse people comprise a significant proportion of the Australian population and job seekers.² SCoA suggests that having a cohort specialist to cater for refugee and migrant cohorts should be the default position in all 51 employment regions to cater for this diversity. For the model to fulfil its objectives and support greater employment outcomes, specialist support must be accessible for diverse cohorts, including refugees and migrants. Settlement agencies have significant experience and are adept at delivering tailored programs to a small number of people, for example through

¹ For best practice examples of some of the work settlement agencies are doing across employment, see <http://scoa.org.au/category/settlement-best-practice/best-practice-case-studies-innovation-centre/>

² Australian Government Labour Market Information Portal, 2020, <https://lmip.gov.au/default.aspx?LMIP/Downloads/EmploymentRegion>; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016 <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/lookup/Media%20Release3>

outreach, and a combination of face to face, online and phone methods. For example, in Victoria, web-based employment and settlement tools have been used to provide targeted services for migrants and regional employers.

Further, although the cohort in regional areas may be small for both settlement services and employment services, having both programs funded in a single agency in a regional area make both more cost efficient and effectively targeted.

Clarity around the minimum number expected in each cohort, or how the department will assess whether the number is sufficient, is also required in order for organisations to make an informed decision as to whether to engage in the tender process.

Factors determining where cohort specialists should be located

When considering factors that determine where cohort specialists are located, SCoA notes that the model must align with and support the objectives of regional migration and growth. In order to meet broader government objectives of regional population growth and secondary migration of refugees and migrants to regional areas, cohort specialists must be established in regional areas, and particularly those identified as potential settlement locations.

The capacity for regions for cohort specialists to be suggested by the department or by other organisations is a positive step in achieving this, and this should be an iterative process as the model develops and as settlement patterns continually change.

2. Making the tender process accessible to settlement agencies

Settlement agencies have specialised and comprehensive knowledge about the diverse and specialised needs of refugee and migrant job seekers, as well as substantial experience in supporting these cohorts into employment through their ongoing work.³ Importantly, for migrants and refugees the barriers to employment often fall within the realm of settlement needs. For example, English language learning, a key component of settlement, is often needed to facilitate employment outcomes. A person may wish to relocate to a regional area to pursue employment, however may need assistance entering the housing market and navigating unfamiliar tenancy processes. Health issues such as the impacts of torture and trauma may also present barriers to employment. Settlement service providers are well placed to address employment barriers across the full spectrum of settlement needs.

Harnessing the expertise of settlement services through the model can only be beneficial for refugee and migrant job seekers, and employment outcomes more generally, and is an effective use of their skills and expertise. However, in order for that expertise to be adequately harnessed, the tender process must be accessible to settlement agencies.

To achieve this, it is important the tender process does not exclude small and medium-sized service providers who may wish to apply, as these make up the majority of settlement service providers. The tender process should also ensure the specialised knowledge of delivering services to the specialist cohort is the focus of assessment, so as to ensure settlement service providers can meaningfully compete in the tender process.

³ For best practice for examples of some of the work settlement agencies are doing across employment, see <http://scoa.org.au/category/settlement-best-practice/best-practice-case-studies-innovation-centre/>

3. Embedding collaborative practices

Collaboration should be a requirement under the New Employment Services Model in order to ensure job seekers with intersectional experiences have their needs addressed. SCoA has seen the benefits of collaboration in supporting refugee and migrant job seekers, and have been told of the detrimental impacts of a lack of collaboration.

SCoA's members have reported inconsistent experiences of working collaboratively with employment service providers. Some settlement services, including Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) providers, have been able to develop a strong collaborative relationship with employment services, which has resulted in improved outcomes for shared clients. However, this is currently highly dependent on individual relationships and the extent to which employment services prioritise tailoring their services to migrants and refugees.

SCoA suggests collaborative practices be more strongly embedded through measurement, accountability, KPIs, and adequate resourcing for both settlement services and employment services to collaborate at a deeper level to address the specific needs of migrants and refugees. This is particularly important in areas where a cohort specialist may not be established.

4. Establishing a network to enhance best practice and employment outcomes

SCoA recommends establishing a network to share knowledge and best practice on achieving positive employment outcomes for migrants and refugees. For example, cohort specialists for refugee and migrant job seekers could participate in a network to share information, key learnings, and best practice. There is significant benefit to be gained from national best practice sharing. SCoA has seen this benefit through our ongoing work as the national peak body to support capacity building within the settlement sector, for example by sharing innovation and key learnings through best practice case studies and collaborative webinars, and regular communication and information sharing through regular network meetings.⁴ We would welcome the opportunity to discuss our capacity building work further as a potential model for an employment-specific initiative.

A national network to learn from the experiences of other providers would also provide an opportunity for cohort specialists to support generalist providers who are supporting refugee and migrant job seekers in developing their own best practice and competencies. This is especially important in locations where funding for a cohort specialist is not available. Further, in the long-term, increasing the capacity of non-specialist services to work with diverse clients will enhance the accessibility of the overall employment services system.

Conclusion

The development of the New Employment Services Model and the proposed licensing system presents an opportunity to improve employment outcomes for refugees and migrants in Australia. Effectively harnessing the expertise of the settlement sector will be essential in achieving this. SCoA urges the following essential building blocks and processes be reflected to ensure success: effective cohort specialists, a tender process that includes settlement agencies, embedding collaborative practices, and a specialist network to monitor, evaluate and enhance best practice.

⁴ To see more of SCoA's work around sharing best practice, see <http://scoa.org.au/category/settlement-best-practice/>