Understanding the value and impact of the ASRC Working for Victoria Initiative for people seeking asylum

Empowering people seeking asylum through employment

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We would also like to thank Mr Kon Karapanagiotidis, CEO of the ASRC, whose input was valuable. His input was valuable in contextualising the report and understanding the strategic intent of the organisation.

This report provides evidence of the valuable contributions of the ASRC WfV to the capability of WfV participants, as well as to to the ASRC as a whole. We hope it will contribute valuable insights, as well as policy and practice recommendations to the ASRC, and to other organisations (governmental and non-governmental) that work with people seeking asylum.

We also hope this report demonstrates the value of such an initiative to the government and other potential investors. We are convinced that the report provides valuable information to enhance sustainable employment pathways for people seeking asylum.

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Report Introduction - ASRC CEO

When the first wave of COVID struck Victoria in 2020, people seeking asylum were among the communities hardest hit. Already one of the most marginalised groups in Australia, they were the first to lose their jobs or work hours due to COVID restrictions, yet were ineligible for basic income support or the Federal Government's Job Keeper and Job Seeker payments.

As a result, the ASRC faced a tidal wave of requests for urgent humanitarian assistance, as newly jobless individuals and their families - many of whom had never before presented for support - reached out to the ASRC to stay fed, sheltered and safe during the lockdown.

At the same time, as we were experiencing escalating demand for our services, COVID restrictions meant that most of our dedicated volunteers were excluded from their regular on-site shifts with frontline programs.

This was the point at which we applied for the State Government's Working for Victoria Initiative, a $500 million fund to connect workers impacted by COVID to new, six-month job opportunities with organisations facing growing demands due to the Pandemic.

We seized the opportunity (as people seeking asylum were losing their jobs at a record rate due to COVID and no Jobkeeper eligibility) to be a critical place of employment during this pandemic. We asked ourselves if we could not lead by example in taking on our community as employees, how could we expect anyone else to at this time?

The ASRC's mission has always been to address the immediate, medium and long term needs of people seeking asylum in Victoria. We also work to free the 'trapped' potential of our members - to support not only their needs but their goals and what they hope to contribute to our nation. Born out of the COVID crisis, the Working for Victoria Initiative was a unique opportunity for us to do both simultaneously.

Despite their capabilities and resilience, people seeking asylum are forcibly de-skilled upon arrival in Australia due to the barriers and biases imposed on them. What is lost is not just their rich potential, skills and talent, but a continuation of Australia's great multicultural success story at a time when we need that the most.

We knew that paid work would provide the best possible 'safety net' for people seeking asylum who had lost their jobs or income due to COVID-19 while also relieving their need for frontline humanitarian services, which were already at capacity. Restoring their income would not only stabilise their lives and circumstances but allow them to maintain their work skills and employability into the future and meet skills gaps in Australia due to COVID border closures.

And so it was that the ASRC - with the support of the VTHC through the Job Ready Pathways project and the Victorian Government - was able to offer over 100 people seeking asylum paid work across crucial service delivery and operational areas of our organisation, between June and December 2020 - the height of the COVID crisis in Victoria. These placements also included intensive induction and onboarding, structured learning and professional development opportunities, two online conferences, comprehensive placement support, mentoring and professional development, and support to secure new work once their contracts ended.

Implementing the Initiative did not come without its challenges. We were ambitious and intentional in the outcomes we wanted for the people seeking asylum that we employed. We didn't want to give meaningless work that provided no pathway to career development and a future. We did what few were willing to have the courage to do, to build a recruitment model where many of the staff would be onsite helping us in critical areas of need to meet the demands of our community, so they were both gaining real-world professional skills and having an immediate positive impact and contribution.

We had to recruit, onboard and commence 106 new staff in under 3 weeks, amid a global pandemic, with strict social distancing requirements in place. This certainly tested our organisational capacity to absorb a sudden and substantial increase in staff numbers and roles. Then, just weeks after our new staff commenced work, Victoria was plunged into a second, extended lockdown, with most staff required to work remotely.

The integration of staff with lived experience of seeking asylum also challenged and strengthened the cultural competencies of our organisation. Yet ASRC staff and leadership seized the opportunity to show up, say yes, and excel in a mass-scale and fast-paced change initiative that drove unprecedented organisational learning and innovation.

In doing so, we were not only able to enhance the economic security and inclusion of people seeking asylum during the Pandemic. Still, we harness their skills and strengths to scale up ASRC's service provision to our members. E.g., home delivery of culturally appropriate food parcels, member outreach and engagement; health research that identified that audio-visual channels are most effective for communicating vital health information in community languages to our diverse member base.

While we hope that the immediate crisis of COVID will eventually pass, its economic and social impacts are likely to continue, particularly for people seeking asylum and others who are already disadvantaged within the local labour market.

We saw Working for Victoria as an opportunity to mitigate those risks and to build capacity and opportunity for our members in the medium to long-term, allowing them to maintain and expand their work skills, employability and career adaptability into the future, and supporting them to secure new work opportunities after their time at the ASRC.

The evidence has born out those aims. Almost 70% of staff employed through Working for Victoria at the ASRC have gone on to secure new roles, predominantly full-time and in their preferred fields, within 2 months of finishing their contracts. The experience has provided a catalyst for career restoration and recovery for many who had professional skills that had never been effectively used in the Australian labour market before.

The Initiative also allowed us to place lived experience expertise and voices at the heart of the ASRC's advocacy and service delivery. It provided an opportunity for mutual growth and learning, discovering the competencies required (in new and existing staff) for authentic cultural diversity and inclusion, and the inclusion of lived experience expertise within our organisation and sector. It was a career highlight for many staff and has ignited a desire and commitment to exploring authentic inclusion of lived expertise within our organisation across all levels, moving forward.

There is no greater evidence of the success of our Working for Victoria Initiative than being offered a second WfV recruitment round. The ASRC has been one of only a handful of organisations that have been afforded this opportunity, with 24 new staff commencing work in May this year.

This report further highlights the opportunities for ASRC to refine its model for enabling employment opportunities for people seeking asylum into our workforce. As the CEO, I am pleased to see the increased appetite and openness to member consultation, expertise and voices across all levels of our organisation. In the feedback gathered from our strategic planning review, there was a strong alignment from all our stakeholders to embed lived experience voices in all we do. I firmly believe we could take that a step further by developing an ecosystem of inclusion, stimulated by a range of existing initiatives and actioning the recommendations in this report as a catalyst for transformational change.

I would like to thank the staff, volunteers and stakeholders of the ASRC who contributed to the success of this project, including ASRC staff recruited through the Working for Victoria Initiative. I especially thank our wider staff group, our Program Managers and Program Coordinators, who worked directly with our new staff. United by a shared commitment to the potential of people seeking asylum, they went above and beyond their roles to support their new colleagues to succeed.

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Executive summary

Employment plays a significant role in the successful settlement of migrants in Australia. Nevertheless, people seeking asylum are frequently excluded from successful participation in the Australian labour market. During the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, people seeking asylum were among the worst affected in Australia. Many lost their jobs or had their work hours reduced but were excluded from Federal Government safety net packages such as Job Keeper and Job Seeker.

In response, between June and December 2020, the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC) and its partners delivered a $3.8 million program to enhance the economic security and participation of people seeking asylum in Victoria. The program was part of the Victorian Government's "Working for Victoria Initiative" (WfV). The funding enabled ASRC to employ 106 people (equivalent to 90 FTE) over six months, of whom nearly all (99 people, 85 FTE) were people seeking asylum.

This report provides an evaluation of the impacts of the ASRC WfV. The evaluation research was conducted between May 2020 and March 2021. It assessed the impact of the Initiative for: 1) the individuals employed through the Initiative, 2) the ASRC as a not-for-profit organisation supporting people seeking asylum in Australia; and 3) the overall social value of the Initiative; as well as broader lessons learned for policy and practice.

The objectives of the ASRC WfV initiative were to:

- restore income and stabilise the lives and livelihoods of people seeking asylum who had lost jobs or work hours during the Covid-19 Pandemic;
- maintain recruits' work skills, employability, and career adaptability into the future;
- enable them to contribute to their communities; and
- enhance the service capability of the ASRC by placing people seeking asylum (their lived experience, expertise & voices) at the heart of the organisation's communications and service delivery.

The Initiative was also expected to relieve reliance on broader welfare and social services, including the ASRC's own frontline humanitarian assistance, which faced unprecedented demand during the 2020 COVID-19 outbreak and subsequent lockdowns in Victoria.

Participants in the ASRC WfV were employed on six-month contracts in a diverse range of roles within the ASRC across 18 areas of the organisation, in both service delivery and back-end operational roles, including IT support, Human Resources, Finance and Payroll, communications, legal assistance, health, food security, and member outreach and engagement.

Many were highly qualified and skilled, with nearly half (47%) holding Bachelor's degrees and over a quarter (29%) holding Masters degrees. The WfV participants represented a diverse range of age groups and nationalities, including women (51%) and men (49%). Sixty per cent of the Initiative recruits were unemployed before their recruitment, and 55% of those had lost their jobs due to the COVID-19 outbreak.

The evaluation study was framed conceptually within the academic literature on human capital, social capital, and career construction theory. These lenses were useful in understanding the available evidence on the importance of skills, networks and employment experiences in creating short-term jobs and pathways to employment and satisfying careers. The evaluation study sought to answer the questions:

1) What difference(s) has the Initiative made to the participants' capability,

empowerment, and employability?

2) What are the processes put in place by the ASRC to ensure that the Initiative achieves its intended objectives?
3) What are the lessons learnt at the organisational level?
4) What is the overall social return on investment of the Initiative?
5) What are the broader policy and practice implications?

The methodology used to assess the Initiative's impact was mixed-methods evaluation research. Data were collected through surveys, focus group discussions, and semi-structured interviews with participants and ASRC staff. Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify impacts. A Social Return on Investment (SROI) analysis was conducted to quantify the social value of the Initiative.

The finding of the evaluation research indicates that for individual participants, the Initiative had specific impacts around skills development, employment pathways, and empowerment. While having a job and a steady income over the six-month period was clearly valuable for participants, other benefits included:

- developing "skillsets that suit the Australian workforce" and gaining a better understanding of Australian workplace culture;
- creating employment pathways for participants; and
- contributing to the empowerment of participants.

The short-term job provided through the program was seen to contribute toward participants' future employment in Australia, by providing relevant skills and experience in the Australian context. The success of the Initiative in creating employment pathways was evidenced by the observation that sixty per cent of participants went on to new jobs within two months of program completion, many of these in their preferred field. Further, the program contributed to the empowerment of participants, not only economically through providing an income but also through increased confidence, a sense of self-efficacy, and expanded personal and professional networks in Australia.

At the organisational level, the Initiative also had several positive impacts, which went beyond the initial intent of the Initiative to enable ASRC to fill service gaps during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The following impacts were identified:

- the availability of staff to deliver meaningful and appropriate services to members;
- the integration of "Employees with Lived Experience of seeking asylum", which has challenged and strengthened cultural competencies at the ASRC;
- the creation of opportunities for staff to develop their leadership skills and cultural competencies' and
- the creation of opportunities for people seeking asylum to inform and contribute to the ASRC.

While the availability of additional staff to fill service gaps was important, most of these staff had lived experiences of seeking asylum, which meant that they were particularly well positioned to provide meaningful and appropriate services to their fellow members. The embedding of a significant cohort of employees with lived experience at the heart of ASRC operations and service delivery provided important learning and reflection opportunities for the organisation and its staff and provided an opportunity for former service recipients to

contribute back to the organisation that had helped them.

Social Return on Investment (SROI) analysis was employed to calculate the social value of the Initiative. The SROI analysis demonstrated that the Initiative has contributed over $5.3 million in social value. This represents a positive social return on investment of $1.21 for every dollar that the Victorian Government, ASRC and other stakeholders invested in the Initiative. This is significant, and the overall socio-economic impact, including direct and indirect economic impacts created through spending, the employment multiplier effect and economic flow-ons is expected to be higher.

The program also generated several important lessons and insights with larger relevance for policy and practice.

First, the experience of delivering the Initiative has created an opportunity to explore and demonstrate innovative alternative models for creating long-term pathways to employment for people seeking asylum. While the Initiative was focused on the short-term goal of creating jobs to boost economic recovery during the pandemic, the ASRC was able to use the Initiative as part of its employment and empowerment model to prepare participants for future employment. This innovative model can serve as a prototype for the ASRC to demonstrate the benefits of directly employing people seeking asylum.

Next, the Initiative challenged the social role of "service recipient" by enabling a shift in participants' identity from service recipients to employees. This created both challenges and opportunities**.** The challenges included, for instance, questions around access to client databases, confidentiality, and the need to provide appropriate support for staff experiencing complex needs. Opportunities included staff with knowledge drawn from the lived experience of seeking asylum, opportunities to make services more user-responsive, and enhanced member ownership and empowerment. These experiences provide fertile learning opportunities for the ASRC and other organisations seeking to serve people with lived experiences of disadvantage.

Finally, the Initiative took place in the particular historical context of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic and the extended State Government lockdown in Victoria. This meant that many of the participants worked remotely rather than face-to-face, which limited the Initiative's ability to provide direct, on-site exposure to daily interactions and networking opportunities in an Australian workplace setting. Conversely, participants observed that remote work enhanced their digital skills, which in turn increased their employability. These reflections highlighted the value of both face-to-face and digital interactions in building human and social capital and ultimately, stronger employment pathways for people seeking asylum.

In conclusion, our analysis indicates that the ASRC WfV had significant impacts at both the individual level and organisational level. It also has the potential to impact policy and practice more broadly through attention to lessons learned about creating employment pathways for people seeking asylum. Drawing from the findings and the lessons and insights, we present two practical policy recommendations for consideration.

Firstly, we recommend that the ASRC and other organisations working with people seeking asylum further explore and test innovative models to create long-term pathways to employment for people seeking asylum in Australia.

The ASRC used direct, in-house employment of service recipients as an intentional strategy for building their workplace skills and confidence and creating long-term pathways to

employment for people seeking asylum. Early results indicate that the model was successful. Thus, we suggest further exploration to test innovative models that create sustainable employment pathways for people seeking asylum.

Secondly, we recommend that the ASRC and other organisations working with people seeking asylum value and recognise "Lived Experience of seeking asylum" as a skill for service design and delivery.

The ASRC WfV experience showed that the employment of people seeking asylum and their integration into the organisation created an opportunity for the ASRC to learn from their lived experience of seeking asylum to better inform service design and delivery. Thus, we encourage organisations working with people seeking asylum to employ people with lived experiences of seeking asylum to embed their experiences into their organisational process to inform service design and delivery.

1. Introduction and background

The ASRC is an independent not-for-profit organisation founded in 2001 to support and empower people seeking asylum. From a humble beginning as a small food bank, the ASRC has grown to be one of the largest independent human rights organisations supporting people seeking asylum in Australia. In its early days, the ASRC attracted a few skilled volunteers and began to offer services for people seeking asylum. Mainly funded by philanthropy and supported by a network of more than 1000 volunteers and more than 100 staff, the ASRC today runs more than 40 programs to assist around 7000 people seeking asylum each year. From its offices in Footscray and Dandenong, the organisation serves people seeking asylum across greater Melbourne.

The various programs of the ASRC are focused on providing material assistance, legal aid, employment and empowerment, community services, and activities designed to ensure organisational sustainability. The services provided through these programs include housing, casework, counselling, legal aid, healthcare service, support through employment and empowerment, including education, and support through social enterprises such as ASRC Catering and ASRC Cleaning (ASRC, 2020a). The ASRC is governed by a Board that works closely with the management and volunteers of the organisation through various subcommittees to make strategic and management decisions that support and empower people seeking asylum. The subcommittees comprise Board Members, external subject matter specialists and senior ASRC Management.

People seeking asylum were among the most affected by the Coronavirus Pandemic in Australia. At the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic (as at 31 March 2020), there were 5860 people seeking asylum with bridging visas living in the community in Victoria (Department of Home Affairs, 2020). Many had lost their jobs, and a significant number had been forced to reduce their working hours. Yet, people seeking asylum were excluded from Federal Government safety net packages such as Job Keeper and Job Seeker. For people seeking asylum who lost work or income during the Covid-19 outbreak, rapid deployment into new roles was considered the best possible ‘safety net’. Thus, the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC), with the support of the VTHC through the Job Ready Pathways project and the Victorian Government, launched the ASRC Working for Victoria Initiative (WfV) (the Initiative) in June 2020.

The Victorian Government’s $500 million Working for Victoria Initiative was announced in March 2020 as part of the Victorian Government’s $1.7 billion Economic Survival Package. The Working for Victoria Initiative aimed to help Victorian jobseekers find work and employers to find workers. This included people who had lost their jobs and businesses that needed workers due to the impacts of coronavirus (Covid-19). As part of this Initiative, the Victorian Government funded the ASRC a total of $3.8 million to enhance the economic security and participation of people seeking asylum in Victoria during the pandemic. The funding enabled ASRC to employ 106 people (equivalent to 90 FTE), providing work for those who had lost jobs while filling service gaps at the ASRC during the pandemic. The WfV provided fixed-term employment for six months (June-December 2020), primarily for people seeking asylum. Of the roles funded under the Initiative, 85 FTE were occupied by people seeking asylum. The other 5 FTE were occupied by people outside of the asylum seeker community with relevant technical skills to enable the efficient roll-out of the Initiative.

The objectives of the ASRC WfV initiative were to:

- restore income and stabilise the lives and livelihoods of people seeking asylum who had lost jobs or work hours during the Covid-19 Pandemic;
- maintain recruits’ work skills, employability, and career adaptability into the future;

- enable them to contribute to their communities; and
- enhance the service capability of the ASRC by placing people seeking asylum (their lived experience, expertise & voices) at the heart of the organisation's communications and service delivery.

The Initiative was also expected to relieve reliance on broader welfare and social services, including the ASRC's own frontline humanitarian services, which were facing unprecedented levels of demand during the Covid-19 outbreak and subsequent lockdowns in Victoria. Figure 1 shows the program logic of the Initiative as envisaged by ASRC staff.

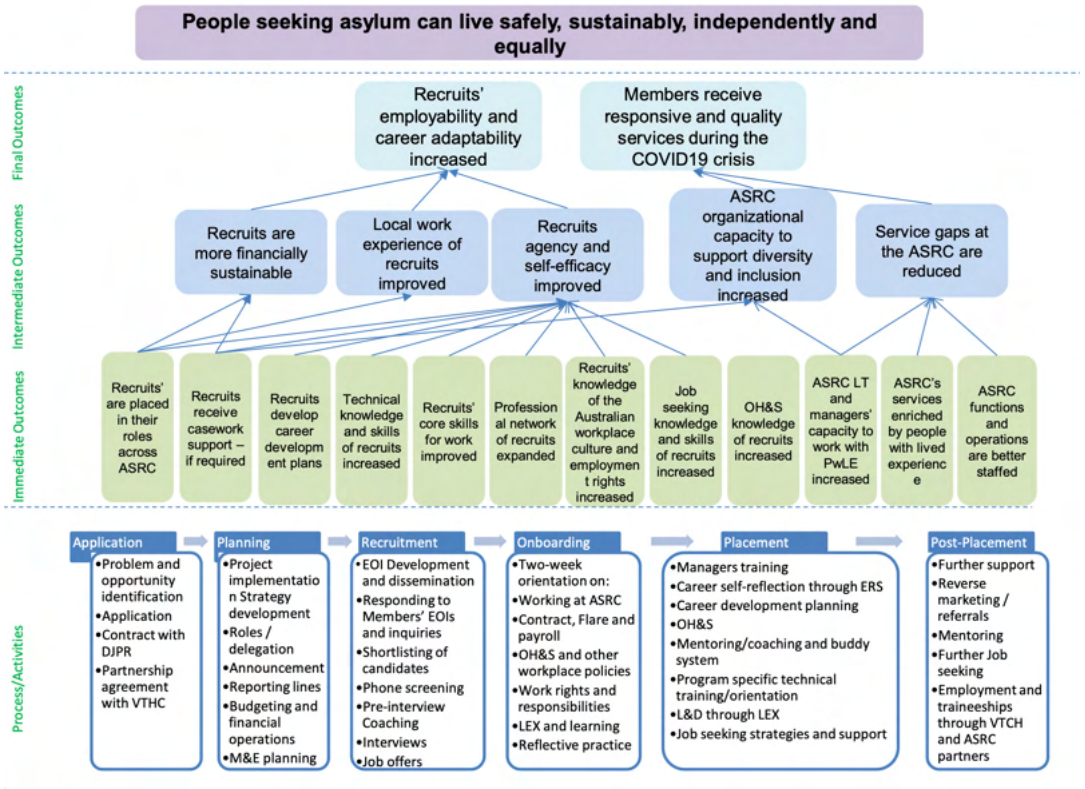

Figure 1. Program logic of the ASRC WfV

Given this background, the Centre for Social Impact (CSI) Swinburne was commissioned to conduct research to evaluate the Initiative. The purpose of the evaluation research project was to understand the value of the Initiative and assess its impact at three levels:

- the individual level (its contribution to capacity building, empowerment and employability of people seeking asylum);
- the organisational level (organisational learning for the ASRC); and
- the macro-level (the broader implications of the Initiative for policy and practice).

The methodology chosen was mixed-methods evaluation research. Data were collected through surveys, focus group discussions, and semi-structured interviews with participants and ASRC staff to assess the Initiative's impact. A thematic analysis of the data indicates that the Initiative has contributed to the capacity building, empowerment, and employability of individual participants. It has created important organisational learning opportunities for the ASRC and generated broader insights for policy and practice about employment programs for people seeking asylum. The SROI analysis also shows that the Initiative has contributed over $5.3 million in social value. This report presents the outcomes of the evaluation research conducted between May 2020 and March 2021.

2. Employment, social capital, career construction and empowerment and people seeking asylum

Employment plays a significant role in the successful settlement of migrants in Australia. Nevertheless, people seeking asylum are primarily excluded from the labour market, both structurally through policy restrictions and normatively through practices of direct or indirect racism (Fleay, Hartley & Kenny, 2013). People seeking asylum are at risk of higher unemployment rates, lower earnings, and lower occupational attainment compared to other migrant groups (Fozdar and Hartley, 2013). Further, they are vulnerable to long-term unemployment and are less likely to secure 'good' jobs (Junankar & Mahuteau, 2004). They are also more likely to be under-employed and experience occupational downgrading where their pre-existing qualifications and experiences are not recognised by employers (Hugo, 2013).

Unconscious bias can lead to discriminatory hiring practices, particularly for people seeking asylum; this is especially the case when the labour market has more job seekers than job opportunities (Victorian Government, 2020). Australia was experiencing a "soft labour market" prior to the Covid-19 pandemic (Victorian Government 2020). According to the National Employment Services Association, in 2018, there were 19 applicants for every job vacancy across Australia (Victorian Government, 2020). In recent years, the Australian labour market has been characterised by declines in the number of job opportunities relative to the working-age population, increased casualisation of the workforce, and credential inflation (Victorian Government, 2020).

The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated these labour market conditions. For example, the number of job advertisements in Australia fell by 23.3% between July 2019 and July 2020 (National Skills Commission, 2020). The decrease in the number of jobs advertised translate to reduced job availability, making it particularly difficult for people seeking asylum to find employment at the time. The ASRC, in its submission to the Commonwealth Select Committee on Covid-19, reported that it saw an elimination of paid work placements by employers due to the pandemic (ASRC, 2020b). Additionally, people seeking asylum who were self-reliant before the pandemic had to seek services at ASRC due to loss of employment income (ASRC, 2020b).

Government policies intensify the effects of a narrowing job market on refugees and people seeking asylum. For example, people seeking asylum do not qualify for social security benefits or for the enhanced government benefits created to combat the economic effects of the pandemic, known as "JobSeeker" and "JobKeeper" payments (ASRC, 2020b). The effects of these policies can be seen concretely at the service delivery level. Without access to employment income or government income security benefits, people seeking asylum who lost jobs or had their hours reduced were presenting to the ASRC and other charitable organisations for basic services such as emergency housing and food during the pandemic (ASRC, 2020b).

This chapter reviews the literature regarding the challenges people seeking asylum face in finding and keeping jobs, the literature on human and social capital, recognition and career construction theory. The literature on human and social capital suggests that education and skills development and developing professional and social networks can assist people seeking asylum to integrate into the workforce. There is also evidence to suggest that the recognition of prior knowledge, skills and education of people seeking asylum plays a role in their social and economic integration. Moreover, career construction theory, particularly the notions of career adaptability and career counselling, explains that people seeking asylum can construct their career in their country of asylum by mobilising their assets, such as human and social capital.

2.1. Barriers to employment for people seeking asylum

While all migrants in Australia face challenges in finding meaningful work, people seeking asylum and refugees face multiple barriers to employment (Fozdar & Hartley, 2013). A research report published by the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC) shows that these barriers include economic, health and socio-cultural issues (Hiruy, Walo, Abbott, Barraket, & Hutton, 2019). These challenges are also common to other disadvantaged groups. However, the literature indicates that the history and lived experiences of people seeking asylum can compound the impact of these barriers on their employability (Hari & Liew, 2018; Hiruy et al., 2019). Many arrive having fled regional conflict or personal persecution and may have spent years in refugee camps or detention centres, and subsequently suffer from the ongoing effects of trauma and stress (Davidson & Carr, 2010; ASRC, 2020). There is also an indication that the physical and mental health conditions of people seeking asylum might have deteriorated on arrival because of their ordeal and lack of appropriate healthcare access. Refugees and people seeking asylum can also have a history of disrupted education or work history (Hiruy et al., 2019; Victorian Government, 2020).

In addition to the history and lived experiences of people seeking asylum, the barriers they experience can also be structural. English acquisition and employment outcomes are closely linked. Increasing English proficiency decreases unemployment rates while increasing labour force participation (Hiruy et al., 2019). Additionally, poor functional English can prevent the recognition or effective utilisation of prior skills acquired by individuals in their countries of origin (Shergold, Benson, & Piper, 2019).

While government-funded English and employment services are available to some people seeking asylum, these services have been described as piecemeal and uncoordinated (Shergold, Benson, & Piper, 2019; Victorian Government, 2020). Separate pieces of research completed for the Commonwealth and Victorian governments indicate the need to move towards client-centred services and integrate with other settlement services to achieve better labour market outcomes (Victorian Government, 2020; Shergold, Benson, & Piper, 2019). Such integrated services for people seeking asylum can intentionally build social capital for those who are not work-ready by allowing them to work with a support person on a one-to-one basis (Victorian Government, 2020; Shergold, Benson, & Piper, 2019).

Potential employers may also exhibit unconscious bias in recruitment processes, which can lead to difficulties in obtaining employment. Unconscious bias involves people making quick assessments of a person or situation based on background, culture or personal experience (Victorian Government, 2020). For example, it has been observed that applicants are less likely to be shortlisted for a job interview if they have an ethnic name (Victorian Government, 2020). Some employers assume that refugees lack awareness of Australian workplace culture and are therefore more challenging to employ (Hugo, 2013).

In 2020, the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee within the Victorian Parliament conducted an inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged job seekers (Victorian Government, 2020). The Inquiry found that employers see hiring disadvantaged workers as having social benefits, but they are concerned that the social benefits may have a trade-off with productivity (Victorian Government, 2020). This indicates that employers do not always see a net benefit in hiring workers from disadvantaged backgrounds, underscoring Hugo's conclusion that "Australian employers need to be made aware that migrants and refugees bring in a diverse and valuable range of skills that can generate innovative practices and knowledge within the workplace " (Hugo, 2013, p. 13).

In general, people seeking asylum have faced multiple challenges in finding and keeping jobs during the pandemic. This is unlikely to change in the near future unless structural changes are

made. However, the research literature indicates that certain factors can enhance opportunities for people seeking asylum to access the job market. These factors include enhancing their human and social capital, recognising their skills and qualifications, enabling them to access education and training, and supporting their career adaptability to the job market in Australia. It is also imperative that the empowerment of people seeking asylum is given attention, as empowerment indicates their ability to self-determine employment and career trajectories. In the following sections, we briefly review the literature on human and social capital, career construction, and empowerment as they relate to the question of what enables successful employment for people seeking asylum.

2.2. Human and Social Capital

Human capital refers to assets or qualities such as education, training, skills, and health that can influence workplace productivity. Human capital also comprises cultural norms and lived experiences. Culture can play a role in developing human capital by motivating an individual to accumulate it (van Hoorn, 2019). There is an indication of a strong link between the culture of the country of origin and an individual's desire to participate in education and training or human capital accumulation (van Hoorn, 2019).

On the other hand, social capital is defined as the networks of relationships among people who live and work in a particular society. It refers to a resourceful social network that enables increased success for people who can access resources through social networks (van Hoorn, 2019). The OECD defines social capital as "networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups" (OECD, 2001, p 41.). It can also be defined as a group of individuals' ability to work together toward a common goal (Manole & Schiff, 2013). Research indicates that obtaining social capital is valuable in gaining access to employment opportunities (Lancee, 2012). However, a cautionary note should be added here, as in some cases, seeking employment through social networks can lower the quality of opportunities (Lancee, 2012). For people seeking asylum, engagement in social capital opportunities can also lead to increased human capital and the ability to take advantage of opportunities specific to the resettlement country's needs (Lancee, 2012).

People seeking asylum are more likely to be overqualified for the employment opportunities available to them in the resettlement country (Buber-Ennser et al., 2016). In a study concerning the human capital of people seeking asylum in Austria, it was found that most people seeking asylum had engaged in the labour market of their country of origin (Buber-Ennser et al., 2016). However, a lack of experience in the resettlement country may prevent them from accessing employment opportunities in line with their qualifications (Buber-Ennser et al., 2016; Lancee, 2012). It is well understood that migrants do not have equal opportunities in the labour market compared to native residents or citizens (Lancee, 2012). The development and attainment of human capital can improve economic equality and employment opportunities (Lancee, 2012). There is an indication that human capital can enhance social capital. This can provide the opportunity for greater economic access and assist immigrants, including people seeking asylum, to integrate into the workforce (Lancee, 2012).

However, research by Deloitte Access Economics finds that 49% of humanitarian visa holders surveyed were working in jobs that do not fully use their skills and qualifications (Deloitte Access Economics, 2019). Indeed, overseas qualifications of people seeking asylum and refugees may not be recognised (Burhani & Sayad, 2017; Hugo, 2013), and evidence shows that humanitarian migrants are more likely to experience "occupational skidding", where they are unable to find work that matches their skills and qualifications (Hugo, 2013, p. 7). Lack of recognition of people seeking asylum and refugees' human capital potential can be a missed opportunity for the Australian labour market, as their participation in the labour market can contribute to an increase in productivity (output per worker) by enhancing the workforce's

skill level (Hugo, 2013). In other words, an increase in skills recognition leads to a better match between labour supply and demand, raising workforce productivity (Deloitte Access Economics, 2019).

2.3. Career construction theory

The migration to a new country poses further questions about their career as they seek to find ways to earn income in the country of asylum. As a grand theory of career development (Rudolph et al., 2019), career construction theory explains career trajectory changes for people who had interrupted career trajectories. People seeking asylum fled persecution, violent conflict, and war to seek better lives in other countries. However, their employment prospects can be bleak, and they can find it challenging to construct a career commensurate to their skills and experience in the absence of recognition of their education and training in the new country. This can lead to disenfranchisement as people begin to doubt whether they have made the right job choices (Lease, 2004). While some can continue in their chosen careers despite experiencing frustration, inadequate career construction can result in a lack of job satisfaction and feeling undervalued (Maree & Twigge, 2016; Savickas, 2011).

It can be argued that career construction theory responds to the needs of today's people seeking asylum and refugee workers who may feel fragmented and confused by the restructuring of occupations (Savickas, 2013; Xie, Xia, Xin, & Zhou, 2016). This reshaping of the work environment is making it increasingly challenging to understand careers in light of person-environment and vocational development models that emphasise commitment and stability rather than mobility (Xie et al., 2016). However, these models remain useful today when considering matching workers to a job and supporting them to develop a career (Johnston, 2018; Maggiori, et al., 2013).

In other words, career construction theory helps us understand how individuals can use their vocational behaviour to adapt to a sequence of job changes while remaining faithful to themselves (Johnston, 2018). In essence, the theory describes the notions of work adjustment and occupational choice; it asserts that individuals build their careers by imposing meaning on occupational memories, present experiences, and future aspirations by patterning them into a life theme (Busacca, 2007). This way of understanding how people adapt to job changes is particularly useful for people seeking asylum as it can equip them to adapt to the social changes that are playing out in their work lives. Understanding this process is also important for those who support people seeking asylum, whose life and employment trajectories are in constant change. Career construction theory encourages employment counsellors to listen for a client's career story from the perspectives of actor, agent, and author (Savickas, 2011).

2.3.1. Career Adaptability

It is also important to note that in a complex and changing life and work environment, as in the environment where people seeking asylum find themselves, proactively adapting to the changing career environment is essential to navigate the new job market and construct a new career path (Akkermans & Tims, 2017; Duffy, Blustein, Diemer, & Autin, 2016). Career construction theory asserts that developing one's career in such a complex and changing environment is driven by adaptation to an environment and integration into the community (Super, Savickas, & Super, 1996). From this perspective, employment can be seen as a mechanism of social integration that offers a strategy for sustaining oneself in society (Dunwoodie et al., 2020). Careers are constructed by using adaptive strategies that implement a set of specific attitudes, beliefs, and competencies (ABC) in the workplace (Jiang, Hu, & Wang, 2018; Merino-Tejedor, Hontangas, & Boada-Grau, 2016). The ABC of career construction shapes the basic problem-solving strategies and coping behaviours that individuals use to create their vocational self-concepts with work roles (Merino-Tejedor et al., 2016).

Adaptation involves adjusting to a series of changes that include changes in occupational tasks, dealing with work traumas, and negotiating job transitions (Busacca, 2007; Savickas, 2013; Zacher, 2019). In the case of people seeking asylum, these changes can include dealing with trauma and uncertainty. Career construction theory views adaptation to these changes as fostered by five principal types of coping behaviours: orientation, exploration, establishment, management, and disengagement (Tokar, Savickas, & Kaut, 2020). These coping behaviours form a cycle of adaptation that is occasionally repeated as new transitions appear on the horizon (Tokar et al., 2020). The assertion here is that an individual can adapt more effectively if they meet the change with growing awareness, information-seeking followed by informed decision making, trial behaviours leading to a stable commitment projected forward for a specific period, active role management, and eventually forward-looking deceleration and disengagement (Cardoso, Savickas, & Gonçalves, 2019; Taylor, Siegele, Smith, & Hardin, 2018; Tokar et al., 2020). Therefore, growing a client's career adaptability is an essential goal in career construction counselling (Cardoso et al., 2019).

2.3.2. Career construction counselling

Counselling for career construction or career construction counselling represents a significant advancement in Holland's vocational behaviour and development theories (Holland, 1997). The paradigm of life design emphasises the importance of facilitating career adaptability in people to help them deal with transitions in the world of work, become employable, and discover a sense of meaning in what they do (Holland, 1997). The latter is also linked with identity as an adaptive process (Holland, 1997). This is an important conception in light of the life and employment trajectories of people seeking asylum. Whereas identity gives employees an idea of when it is time to change, their adaptability sheds light on their capacity to change (Savickas, 2011). Employees, including people seeking asylum normally seek the help of career counsellors for guidance (Savickas, 2011). Workers facing transitions in their careers predictably experience career indecision and believe they lack the degree of career control needed to deal with such transitions (Guay, Senécal, Gauthier, & Fernet, 2003; Savickas, 2010).

Workforces with career indecision tend to display symptoms such as distress, self-doubt, insecurity, a diminished sense of self, sadness, anger, and feelings of having 'lost control' of their condition (Maree & Twigge, 2016). Such emotion is even more pronounced in people seeking asylum due to the compounded impact of trauma and uncertainty. Several strategies, and techniques, are used by career counsellors to help these clients resolve their indecision (Maree & Twigge, 2016). However, qualitative approaches such as stories that reveal the life trajectories of clients can be powerful in assisting people in developing their career (Maree & Twigge, 2016).

2.4. Employment and empowerment

Empowerment is a multidimensional construct that involves intrapersonal, interpersonal and socio-political elements (Williams et al., 2003). As a social process, empowerment embraces practical approaches and applications to achieve individual and collective outcomes. Empowerment occurs at individual or psychological levels, or, more collectively, within the family, organisation, and community. Thus, empowerment can be perceived as an umbrella term covering personal and group attempts to achieve self-fulfilment through self-regulation, a practice leading to freedom from within (Wallengren, 2018).

Culture and identity also play an important role in empowerment. Recent political and economic changes have led to increased movement of people and cultures, particularly from less developed countries to countries with stronger economies and better welfare systems (Williams et al., 2003). Thus, as Williams et al. (2003) argue, it is crucial to investigate how

the movement of people and culture can effectively result in collective action and positive change in the receiving countries. Furthermore, looking into human capital, empowerment and post-structural theoretical frameworks on adult English language learning, Kaiper (2017) notes that the post-structuralist perspective emphasises the often-overlooked complexities of human identity and how linguistic and symbolic power shape motivations of adult learners. The author mentions the critical debate around empowerment theories and notions of language, identity, and power, including the diversity of adult learners, particularly both men and women, in the debate (Kaiper 2017).

Agner (2017) views empowerment as an essential element of occupational justice or employment. Occupational justice is defined as the ability to participate in meaningful occupation or employment to achieve wellness and community integration. Such participation is based on the intersection of individual skills with the social, built, and political environment (Frank & Zemke, 2008). The literature also posits a direct relationship between employment and empowerment (Spreitzer, 1995), which has been empirically supported (Butts et al., 2009; Fritzsche, Dhanani & Spencer, 2014)). The argument is that people are empowered by driving satisfaction and fulfilment from their engagement in meaningful employment and responsibilities at work (Butts et al., 2009). An Australian study also showed that employment could empower people seeking asylum and refugees by enabling them to support themselves and their families and derive a sense of worth and satisfaction from their work (Fleay, Hartley & Kenny, 2013).

The literature on empowerment also argues that power directly shapes individuals' ability to participate in meaningful professions in society and, therefore, "empowerment and power redistribution are essential to the actualization of occupational justice" (Agner, 2017, p. 281). This describes why organisations involved in service delivery to vulnerable communities such as people seeking asylum (including the ASRC) should recognise the power imbalance inherent in their relationship and that their lack of access to resources creates a psychological power imbalance in an already politically difficult context (Nayton & Baker, 2019).

In the above sections, we explored the challenges people seeking asylum face, particularly in relation to employment (career) pathways. People seeking asylum face multiple challenges in finding and keeping jobs, which has been exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic. However, human and social capital literature has shown that education and skills development and developing professional and social networks can assist people seeking asylum to integrate into the workforce. Recognition of skills and education level of people seeking asylum can also play a role in their social and economic integration. Moreover, career construction theory, particularly career adaptability and career counselling, explains that constructing a career in a new, complex, and ever-changing environment can be challenging to people seeking asylum. The literature also shows that people (including people seeking asylum) can construct their career by mobilising their assets, such as human and social capital. In this regard, the literature notes the importance of adapting to job changes to forge a career – an employment pathway using adaptive strategies that implement a set of specific attitudes, beliefs, and competencies. Career construction theory also encourages the use of employment counsellors to assist people in developing their career.

3. Research and Evaluation approach

3.1. Research aim and questions

The main aims of this project were to:

- assess the contribution of the ASRC WfV to the capability, empowerment, and employability of participants (people seeking asylum) post-COVID 19;
- assess the impact of the Initiative in filling service gaps at the ASRC;
- document the organisational learning from the delivery of the Initiative; and
- assess the social return on investment and the broader policy and practice implications of the Initiative.

The main research and evaluation questions included:

1) What difference(s) has the Initiative made to the participants' capability, empowerment, and employability?
2) What are the processes put in place by the ASRC to ensure that the Initiative achieves its intended objectives?
3) What are the lessons learnt at the organisational level?
4) What is the overall social return on investment of the Initiative?
5) What are the broader policy and practice implications?

3.2. Demography of participants, methods of data collection and analysis

3.2.1. Evaluation design

To assess the value and impact of the Initiative at the individual, organisational, and macro levels, the Centre for Social Impact (CSI) Swinburne research team worked with ASRC to co-design evaluation research that integrated Developmental Evaluation (DE) principles. The DE approach is often used in long-term projects with complex and dynamic environments where continuous learning, adaptation, and experimentation are encouraged, and design changes are likely (see Patton, 2010). However, the principles of DE are equally applicable to co-design processes where the evaluators/researchers and staff implementing the program can work collaboratively, asking evaluative questions and collecting data to support and inform program and organisational development (Patton, 2006). Thus, in our case, the principles of DE, mainly its learning-orientated, feedback-based approach, were employed to provide feedback throughout the Initiative's implementation.

The research design was guided by participatory co-design principles to ensure that ASRC staff's contributions were incorporated throughout the evaluation research process. Researchers from the Centre for Social Impact convened a fortnightly meeting with ASRC staff responsible for the WfV. These meetings were instrumental for the research team and the ASRC, and its stakeholders to glean policy and practical lessons from the Initiative's implementation. ASRC staff also contributed significantly to the review of the literature. This participatory approach to the design and development of the evaluation also contributed to developing organisational capacity within ASRC and provided greater ownership of the evaluation outcomes.

3.2.2. Demography of participants

The ASRC WfV ran from June to December 2020; during which time, 106 people (of which 99 people were people seeking asylum) were employed across 18 areas of the organisation, in both service delivery and back-end operational roles, including IT support, Human Resources,

Finance and Payroll, communications, legal assistance, health, food security, member outreach and engagement (see Figure 1).

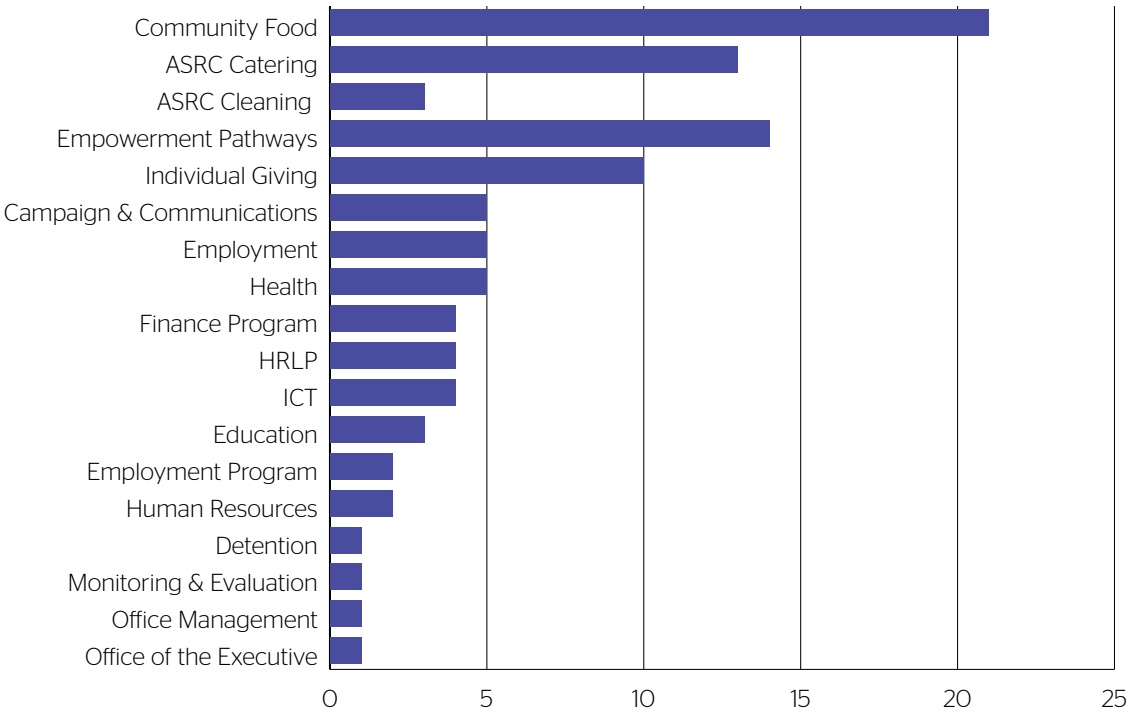

Figure 2. The placement of WfV recruits in various ASRC units (departments)

Overall, 51% of the WfV employees were women, and 49% were men. Recruits had a broad range of skills and qualifications, with nearly half (47%) holding Bachelors degrees and over a quarter (29%) holding Masters degrees. Diverse nationalities and age groups were represented in the WfV staff cohort, with 43% of staff aged 36-45 years; 35% aged 26 to 35; 16% above 45 years of age and the rest (5%) were 18-25-year-olds.

Sixty per cent of the Initiative recruits were unemployed before their participation in the Initiative, and 55% of those had lost their jobs due to the Covid-19 outbreak. Figure 3 shows the employment status of participants at the time of recruitment.

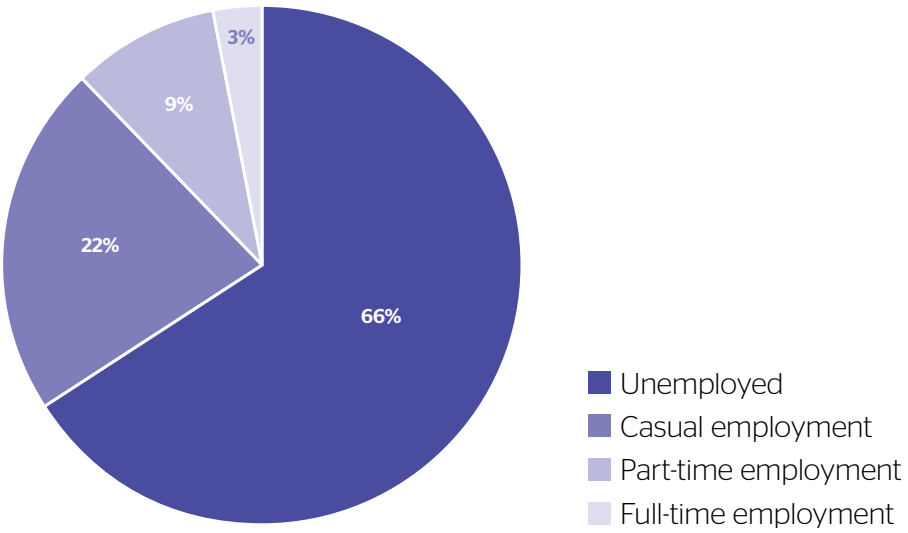

Figure 3. Employment status of WfV recruits

3.2.3. Data collection methods

To evaluate the program, initially, survey data were collected by the ASRC through the administration of the Employment Readiness Scale (ERS). A review of relevant literature followed this. Two focus group discussions with ASRC staff were conducted, as well as twenty-one interviews with selected ASRC staff and Initiative participants.

As part of the overall evaluation of the Initiative, the ASRC team administered the ASRC Employment Readiness Scale (ERS) to assess the Initiative's impacts on people seeking asylum. The Employment Readiness Scale is based on the Employment Readiness Model developed by Valerie Ward and Dorothy Riddle (1998; 2003). The ERS measures capability and empowerment at the individual level. The ERS questions focus on people seeking asylum's capability and strengths rather than their weaknesses and challenges (Preskill & Catsambas 2006).

The ASRC administered the Employment Readiness Scale (ERS) to participants at different times over the project's lifecycle (at the beginning, after three months and at the end of the program) to assess their capability, empowerment, and employability. The ERS model assessment is based on four employability factors and five soft skills. The employability factors include career decision-making, skills enhancement, job search and ongoing career management. In contrast, the soft skills assessed include self-efficacy, outcome expectancy, social support, work history and job maintenance. A summary of the ERS report was used to triangulate the thematic analysis of the focus group and interview data.

ASRC and the CSI research team conducted a review of the literature on relevant theories related to the employment and empowerment of people seeking asylum to inform the impact assessment of the Initiative.

Two focus groups and twenty-one interviews were conducted by the CSI research team, as follows:

Two virtual focus group discussions with ASRC staff were held at the 3-month point from the start of the Initiative via Zoom videoconference. A total of 11 ASRC staff, selected purposively, participated in the focus group discussions. The first group comprised senior staff who had overall responsibility for the program (n=6). The second group comprised ASRC staff who had directly engaged with the WfV employees throughout the program (n=5). The purpose of these focus groups was two-fold: to discuss the process and impact of the Initiative as observed by ASRC staff and to establish values to inform the SROI analysis. The Focus group discussions were each around 1.5 hours in duration.

The interviews included both ASRC staff and program participants. ASRC staff invited to an interview were closely involved in supervising most of the participants and those who had direct leadership and managerial roles in overseeing the Initiative roll-out. Five ASRC staff volunteered for interviews. In addition, purposive stratified sampling was used to recruit 16 program participants for interviews. All 21 interviews were conducted towards the end of the six-month Initiative and took between 20 and 30 minutes on average. The interviews explored the interviewees' perceptions of the value and the impacts of the Initiative at all levels (for individual people seeking asylum, the ASRC, and the overall lessons and policy and practice implications).

3.2.4. Data analysis

Data analysis was carried out by conducting a thematic analysis of both the focus group and interview data. These results were then interrogated using the literature review and the summary of the ERS survey report. The analysis focused on responding to the research questions and providing an overview of lessons learned and practical policy recommendation and insights.

The data were also used to understand and measure the Initiative's Social Return on Investment (SROI). We followed the SROI guidelines to draw on financial proxies that are available where appropriate. Both qualitative and quantitative data and relevant reports form the ASRC were used to inform the SROI analysis (Nicholls et al., 2009).

Overall, data from interviews and focus groups and summary data from ERS were analysed to address the research questions and assess the contribution of the Initiative.

The findings respond to the research questions and are organised into five chapters. These are:

1) Individual level contributions of the Initiative;
2) Organisational level contributions of the Initiative;
3) The Social Return on Investment of the Initiative;
4) Lessons learnt and insights; and
5) Conclusion and recommendations.

4. Individual level contributions of the Initiative

A key focus of the ASRC WfV was to generate benefits for the participating employees. Of the 90 FTE staff employed at the ASRC through the Initiative, 85 FTE were people seeking asylum. The Initiative provided these participants with a six-month employment contract with ASRC. However, beyond simply providing a job when one was needed, the ASRC sought to generate broader benefits for participants in the form of restoring their income and stabilising their livelihoods, as well as maintaining and improving their work skills, employability and career adaptability into the future.

Key outcomes of the ASRC WfV for individual participants identified include:

1. developing "skillsets that suit the Australian workforce" and gaining a better understanding of Australian workplace culture;
2. creating employment pathways for participants; and
3. contributing to the empowerment of participants.

4.1. Developing "skillsets that suit the Australian workforce" and gaining a better understanding of Australian workplace culture

One of the key outcomes identified for participants was the development of skill sets for Australian workplaces. The Initiative has contributed to the development of participants' capacity by creating opportunities for people seeking asylum to build and improve skillsets that suit the Australian context and better understand Australian workplace culture.

The identified outcomes included:

- development of technical skills for the Australian context,
- development of soft skills for the Australian context,
- development of general skills such as digital skills, and
- better understanding of Australian workplace culture.

Whilst the data indicated that these were the main outcomes identified, there were nuanced differences across the various work units within the ASRC. This is mainly because the participants undertook a wide range of roles at different skill levels and with varying levels of face to face/ digital interaction with their workplace..

4.1.1. Development of technical skills

Developing the abilities and knowledge needed to perform practical tasks required in their profession in a new country is one of the immediate concerns of migrant workers seeking employment, upskilling, and reskilling. Developing technical skills commensurate to those demanded by the local labour market can determine their success in finding meaningful employment. Many technical skills require specialised training and experience. They often require qualifications that confirm that a person has these technical skills (such as mechanical, IT, mathematical, and scientific skills) to perform practical tasks at work. Individual interviews with participants at the ASRC indicated that some were able to develop their technical skills, such as those related to accountancy, engineering and architecture, and other professions, through their roles at the ASRC. Here it is important to note that participants brought important skill sets already; it was not that they lacked technical skills, but they were able to further develop their skills in a way that was relevant to Australian workplace contexts.

For example, one of the participants noted that despite being a trained accountant back home, she had not been exposed to some technical software that is in common use in Australia. She

observed that, *"I become familiar with two new – for me, they are new software. One is MYOB, and the other is Salesforce, which I had no experience with before coming to Australia or ASRC" (Participant 003).*

Another participant indicated that her exposure to new software at the ASRC had been fulfilling and indicated that she had previously lost an employment opportunity because she had not been familiar with that software:

> *Once I went on an interview with a company. And the interview went really well. I had this feeling that the HR person liked me and she's about to set me for another interview with the professional people in the centre. And then what happened was at the end of the interview, she asked me, "How confident are you about using Revit?"... I told her, "If you want me to use other software I'm very confident. I use them for more than ten years, but about the Revit, I am not that fast". It was the only reason that I lost that job; I lost that position. ... But now I know if I go to another interview I won't have this discussion anymore (Participant 007).*

While some participants had opportunities to extend their existing skills in an Australian workplace setting, this was not true across the cohort. Some participants were placed in jobs that did not directly match their skill sets or professional aspirations, and as such they felt that their placement did not help them advance their technical skills, As a result, they did not think that their experience working in the ASRC would contribute to their employability in their profession of choice. One participant argued that although the placement was useful, it may not help some participants gain employment in their professional field.

> ***There is a big difference in the experience and the practical knowledge [required] in your profession that help you enter to the job market. For me to return to my profession, I need to be placed in the [right firm]. I need to be placed where I can personally engage, involve in [professional practice]. So even though I have learned to seek employment, there is a gap. I'm not saying that it is not good. It's good, but this is the reality for a lot of us. Engineers must be placed in an engineering job. Lawyers must be placed in a legal firm. The same with the scientists. If [ASRC] can help us in this area, finding a job [in our profession] will be easy. In finding meaningful employment, that is the key (Participant 5).***

Overall, participants identified value in profession-specific work experience in the Australian context to further develop technical skills, and that in some cases, the Initiative was able to provide this.

4.1.2. Development of Soft skills

Throughout the focus group discussions and the interviews, the data indicated improvement in participants' soft skills, such as oral and written communication, problem-solving and teamwork. ASRC staff and participants reported an increased level of awareness among participants about the value of soft skills in relation to what soft skills are and the currency that soft skills have in the Australian employment market. The data indicated that creating a learning environment and an opportunity and space for participants to self-reflect during the training sessions and staff performance reviews throughout their six months of employment have helped participants to develop these skills. For example, one participant reflected that working at the ASRC helped her develop her interpersonal skills.

> ***It [working at the ASRC] has helped me and in a way that gave me much room to experiment, do things differently, my way, and test and trial whether this works or not and they - my supervisor and my manager were very open. It gave me much playing area, so I developed my interpersonal skills, and I learned specifics***

about the job search. So, while in the employment department, we were helping people look for a job, but it directly helped me get myself those skills (Participant 08)

Another participant also supported this view, noting that the Initiative helped her develop interpersonal skills, including communication skills.

> *I developed interpersonal skills and stakeholder management skills as well as communication and team skills because I needed to work with my colleagues and my boss as well, the team leader, the coordinator – always sending e-mails back and forth to ask about the tasks for the week and giving a report on what I have done and what I was not able to do. So, it was a lot of new skills to learn at a time (Participant 11).*

The data indicated that training and regular performance review and feedback mechanism set-up by the ASRC contributed to improving participants' soft skills. Focus group participants argued that the training and performance review processes have been instrumental in changing participants' attitudes towards soft skills acquisition by improving those skill sets during the placement period. As one focus group participant put it:

> *The changes that I've seen [in participants] are understanding what workplace expectations are and what soft skills are required, not just in this role but in general and going forward. We've just completed about 15 performance reviews in the last two or three weeks with [participants], and it was amazing to see how many people looked at the soft skills and went, "Oh, I didn't know that that was something that was wanted"(Focus group 2).*

The development of soft skills is reported to have occurred across a range of work areas of the ASRC. The following focus group participants' comments reinforced this notion.

> *Our guys, a lot of them are just packing boxes…. In our team, we've a guy with a PhD, an architect. So, getting people to see the value of giving 100% and building your soft skills will exponentially benefit you beyond this role; that's how I've tried to get buy-in from them. It's like it doesn't matter that it's about how you fold the cardboard box or how you stack the thing; it's about how you handle problems, how you handle conflict, your professionalism, the language, the style that you choose to say something when you're upset (Focus group 2).*
>
> *I've really found that through the performance reviews and through pushing the sense of the value of having a strong work ethic, regardless, is starting to pay off (Focus group 1).*
>
> *In terms of soft skills, there's just so many there, … communicating with clients and exercising judgement about when to seek help and when to check-in. What does being supervised mean in a legal practice? Lots of those kinds of issues, too, and then written skills, drafting, all of those are things that have been a big focus of the training and support (Focus group 1).*

Regardless of what helped develop soft skills in participants, both focus group and interview data indicate that the employment of people seeking asylum at the ASRC through the Initiative has substantially contributed to the development of their skillsets in the context of an Australian workplace by helping them hone soft skills such as communication, problem-solving, and teamwork.

4.1.3. Development of digital skills

Perhaps one of the unintended consequences of the second Victorian lockdown[1] and the consequent move from the office to working from home was the significant development of participants' digital skills. Many participants reported that they had used some online platforms for the first time, and the majority considered an improvement in digital skills to be one of the most significant outcomes of their employment with the ASRC.

Here are some excerpts of participants' accounts that demonstrate the value they assigned to gaining digital skills.

> ***I have not touched a computer in years. I thought that this was going to eat me up, and I was so nervous. But there we go again. When you learn the skills, everything comes easy. When they tell me, and they train me, and – oh, look, … they are amazing. They treated us like human beings, you know. Because I used to do bookkeeping, but in a book! Like old school. And I felt, "I know how to use a computer." I never knew that I could be good at it (Participant 02).***
>
> *I had to learn a lot, especially with my digital skills, because everything went remotely with the start of COVID-19. We started working from home. So, I had to improve on my digital skills, working with the Google suite, learning how to work with Zoom and all the other online meeting apps, like the Google, the Zoom, the Google Meetings and all of that (Participant 11)*
>
> *Since we've been working remotely, I didn't know a lot of technology stuff by then. So, I think I've learnt something. How to set up a Zoom meeting, a Google meeting, a Google document and things like that. So, I've learnt a lot from that area (Participant 13).*

Overall, many participants reported that they had improved their digital skills. The development of digital skills is expected to significantly improve participants' employability as digital skills are required to perform many jobs.

4.1.4. Understanding the Australian workplace culture

"Workplace culture" simply means the culture in a place or how things are, and how they are done, in that setting. The Australian workplace culture is different from workplace cultures in the countries where many of the Initiative's participants came from. For example, some participants were used to hierarchical workplace culture in their home countries, and it is not common practice for them to communicate with their supervisor in a collegial manner. Thus, understanding of and familiarity with the Australian workplace culture is expected to contribute to participants' employability in the long term.

Our findings indicate that the Initiative has provided participants with an opportunity to work and be immersed in Australian workplace culture. The following reflections from two of the participants demonstrate the value of the Initiative in improving participants' understanding of Australian workplace culture.

> *I told you that understanding the Australian workplace culture was very important because ASRC is a big organisation and has several departments. How they communicated with each other was very important for us to know that because it reflects how they are successful in their workplace and have multicultural staff and*

[1] As a result of increased coronavirus infection, the Victorian government imposed a lockdown on Metropolitan Melbourne, and Mitchell Shire for the second time on July 9, 2020 and the lockdown remained until October 28 in Melbourne. This forced many of the WfV cohort to work from home for much of their employment period with the ASRC. Thus, all communication and work had to be done virtually, demanding high digital skills.

> *how they deal with each other and as colleagues was amazing (Participant 14).*
>
> *I can't say that I haven't learned; I have learned a lot. So new things, yes, but in terms of if it is like my digital literacy was all right, my English was all right, and the things that I've learned are more of what is, you know, you can say about Australian work culture (Participant 08).*

Our findings indicate that the onboarding training provided to participants coupled with continuous follow-up and performance assessment by supervisors has played a crucial role in enabling participants to understand the Australian workplace culture in the few months they were employed at the ASRC. A supervisor reiterated that "*the on-boarding process and continuous support were useful in providing participants with the opportunity to understand the Australian workplace culture on the job*" (Focus group 2).

Participants reported having learned things through their employment at the ASRC that they identified to be different from the work culture in their countries of origin. These included:

- punctuality,
- the lack of hierarchy,
- the fact that staff are allowed to speak freely and provide suggestions to their supervisors, and
- the presence of several rules and regulations such as occupational health and safety and other rules that govern workplace settings.

Understanding the nuances in the Australian workplace culture is likely to contribute to participants' employability by boosting their confidence to respond to pre-employment interviews and their ability to operate in the Australian workplace as a team member.

4.2. Creating employment pathways for participants

Besides reporting the improvement of some specific skillsets relevant to the Australian workforce, participants also acknowledged that the Initiative has helped them in:

- **overcoming barriers to employment in the Australian context, such as lack of Australian work experience, and**
- **creating professional contacts who can act as references.**

4.2.1. Overcoming the barrier of lack of Australian workplace experience

One of the critical challenges to finding employment for people seeking asylum is their lack of Australian work experience. Thus, most interviewed staff and those who participated in the focus group discussions considered gaining knowledge of Australian workplace culture as a key to creating employment pathways – i.e., this experience paved the way for people seeking asylum to seek and secure meaningful employment somewhere else. For example, one of the focus group participants noted that: *"the first employment … has been like the start of their career in the Australian context."* Another reiterated that *"it was almost like literally opening the pathway [for them]."* Another focus group (2) participant clarified what the metaphor of opening the first door to Australian employment for people seeking asylum meant by explaining that it was like "*for the first time being able to create that employment pathway just by breaking down that first barrier and creating Australian workplace experience."*

> *… for most of these people, they've got their first experience through this Working for Victoria Initiative, and then I will talk about the sort of cultural understanding and the working relationship they have got back in their country. So that has got a huge role to play, and then the leadership style they have experienced in their home countries and*

> *the management style. So from time to time, they are still thinking of their own experiences because it's their first experience in Australia (Focus group 2).*

By employing people seeking asylum, most of whom had no prior professional work experience since their arrival in Australia, the ASRC has effectively contributed to removing this barrier. However, it should be noted that placing someone in a new working environment without providing the support required, including training and close supervision, can be disempowering. What is particularly important in the Initiative was that appropriate training was provided at the beginning, middle and end of the employment period. Moreover, the data showed that staff were intentional in providing a conducive environment for their new employees to learn.

4.2.2. Creating professional contacts who can act as references

One of the barriers to securing work for people seeking asylum is their lack of professional and character referees who can attest to their capability. This can limit their prospects for employment regardless of their qualifications and experience. However, as the literature on social capital indicates, building social and professional networks can remove this barrier and increase the opportunities for people seeking asylum to gain employment (Lancee, 2012). Towards this end, the focus group and interview data indicate that participants' employment at the ASRC has been instrumental in creating social and professional networks that increased participants' opportunities to find new employment.

As one focus group participant noted, "… *having more networks and having others in the team as a reference, can help"* participants gain employment somewhere else. A second focus group participant reiterated the value of the Initiative to participants by noting that the professional reference provided to a participant proved helpful for the participant to access employment.

> ***With the one who got the job offer, I was the person who gave the reference. I think this helped the person - and hopefully more people in the team - to be more independent beyond the ASRC, more confident, and more aware that they have a lot to offer to this society professionally. They have the knowledge and are capable of making a difference, regardless of their visa and regardless of their difficulty in this journey (Focus group 1).***

A staff member interviewed also attested to the value of the networks fostered through the Initiative in creating employment pathways for participants.

> *I was talking to all the staff, including this cohort and going, look, I know as it comes to an end, some of you will have a heavy heart because you've loved working here, and we've loved having you, but I want you all to know you've only moved forward with another Australian job, an Australian reference. And new Australian connections, new Australian networks, new – an updated LinkedIn profile. And I can't wait to see what you do next, and this is one of the really important things (Staff 03).*

As noted earlier, a lack of personal and professional connections and references can lock people seeking asylum out of the employment market. On the other hand, fostering expanded networks and new connections, mainly through work experience such as the one offered through the Initiative at the ASRC, can unlock employment opportunities for people seeking asylum. While the literature cautions that seeking employment through social networks, particularly ethnic networks, can sometimes limit the employment pathway or lower the quality of opportunities (Lancee, 2012), access to recent Australian work experience at the ASRC has expanded the personal and professional networks of people seeking asylum beyond their own cultural community. However, as Dunwoodie and colleagues (2020) note, expanding one's network

beyond one's own ethnic community can contribute to the success of re-establishing career pathways among refugees and people seeking asylum.

4.3. Contributing to the empowerment of participants

The results indicate that the ASRC has contributed to participants' empowerment by:

- enhancing participants' confidence and a "mind shift" towards self-efficacy,
- expanding social and professional networks and supports, and
- enhancing participants' agency by providing economic resources.

4.3.1. Enhancing participants' confidence and a "mind shift" toward self-efficacy

Our findings indicate that the employment of people seeking asylum at the ASRC through the WfV has helped participants to believe in themselves and their ability to contribute to Australian society through work. As dialogue in the focus group (see below) indicated, it was not easy for many participants to see their abilities or what they could offer to Australian society, regardless of their visa status. Nevertheless, as can be gleaned from the excerpts of focus group 2 dialogue below, ASRC staff helped participants appreciate and value themselves and their abilities.

> *What I found working with this cohort is that their confidence is very low. So, trying to increase their confidence in their ability to perform well [is important]. Because if they don't have that confidence, they don't necessarily make good self-affirming choices in future jobs - and even just applying for it. ... So, their expectation for success and willingness to take responsibility for their futures is for me really important. ... Because some of them tend to be a bit passive and entitled, and that's something that the sector has done to them, ... So, this has been something that we have been able to change a little bit and empower them to say it's all about them, rather than just helping them. Yes, it's a lifeline, but then other people have lifelines through JobKeeper and JobSeeker, so they are not the only ones; there are many people.*
>
> *Some of them didn't know they had leadership skills; some of them didn't know they had confidence. ...'So [through this engagement], they become more professional, as a result; more independent, more accountable, and more professional... I think what really helps is ... hopefully, more people in the team - to be more independent beyond the ASRC, and more confident, and more aware that they have a lot to offer to this society professionally, and that they have, especially, knowledge as well, and that they are capable of making a difference, regardless of their visa, and regardless of their difficulty in this journey.*
>
> *I totally agree with what [staff member] said around the mind shift and the confidence. I've heard a lot about, ... some people felt like they're part of something bigger and part of a good team.*

Participants' self-reflections also indicated that the opportunity to work at the ASRC helped them regain their confidence and self-efficacy. As one participant recalled, her employment at the ASRC contributed to her regaining confidence and seeing her value and what she can offer in a different light.

> *I was pursuing something ..., but they told me, "you're going to be good in fundraising." I didn't know that I was good until I started this job, to be honest. Because I stopped believing in myself, and I thought that I was mad to go further than a cleaning job. That was my job, cleaning toilets. And I thought, "I'll never have an opportunity in this country to show who I am and what I can give to a role, an organisation or a company. [Now] I am*

confident, more independent, knowing that now I know. That makes me feel my self-esteem better. It has changed the way I see life in Australia. It has made me change the way I see people of Australia (Participant 02).

Two other participants also reflected that the opportunity to work at the ASRC had helped them gain their confidence.

Working with people outside my community with a different perspective gave me some confidence. Coming from a country where you used to be someone and starting from scratch is not always that easy. So, you feel that you are not at the same level. You feel that everything that you have is just nothing significant. But working [at the ASRC] and getting some positive feedback will increase that confidence for you to take it to the next level of your development for your career [Participant 13].

Yes, so I gained confidence in myself, so I have some hard or technical skills, I've got some soft skills, but I wasn't sure if those skills were what my employer would like to see from me. But I tested all those skills at the ASRC. I'm approaching the end of the contract so at the end of that I realised that I gained some confidence in myself and I felt that the skills that I've got so far, and the experience are real and this is what exactly my potential or my future employer would like to see (Participant 15).

Overall, the program contributed to the empowerment of participants by enabling them to gain confidence in their own abilities, which in turn may enhance the employability and employment outcomes of participants, for instance, through an improved ability to communicate their skills and abilities in job interviews.

4.3.2. Expanding social and professional networks and supports

Our data indicate that the Initiative facilitated the empowerment of participants by providing them with the opportunity to develop or expand their social and professional networks. The opportunity to work with ASRC staff on a professional basis opened an opportunity for participants to network and seek support from professionals who may have wider connections.

As discussed in the previous section, the support can be in the form of references or providing a necessary contact or introduction. In other words, the social and professional networks may provide participants with the essential support needed to gain employment elsewhere. A focus group 2 participant argued that Initiative had empowered participants by providing "*social supports, which are important for emotional and practical support, for job leads and moving forward."* She continued, "*Social supports are important for this cohort. It is, I think, a strong predictor of work success."*

Others pointed out that the mentoring program offered as part of this Initiative empowered participants by expanding their professional network.

The mentoring program is helping members currently working elsewhere to be successful in their career, or the ones who are still trying to find a job. So in both cases, that mentoring program is working with them to get them to the success level they want (Focus group 2).

Participants also noted that the Initiative had played a role in expanding their social and professional networks. One participant reported that the mentoring program helped her create new professional networks "*because [I am] working with a huge range of mentors who are Australians and they know the job market and the field in Australia, I now know a lot of people, a huge network connection, especially in my field of community development (Participant 11).* Others have also noted that the Initiative had helped expand their social network (participant 03) and added a few people to their network as "*friends; [and] Australian colleagues" (Participant 07).*

Overall, by enabling participants to build and access a resourceful network of relationships in the workplace (at the ASRC), the Initiative has contributed to the empowerment of participants and enabled them to increase their success in gaining employment. This is consistent with the literature that indicates that obtaining social capital is valuable in gaining access to employment opportunities (Lancee, 2012; Dunwoodie et al., 2020).

4.3.3. Enhancing the agency of participants by providing economic resources

Our findings indicate that the Initiative has enhanced participants' agency by providing economic security and a safety net for them and their families during the pandemic. Most participants restated that earning income as employees of the ASRC had been significant for them and their families. As such, they expressed it as "*a blessing at the time of the pandemic*" (Participant 01), as something that changed their life and the lives of their families by sustaining their life (Participant 06), "*a light in the dark; not only a financial help but a mental support*" (Participant 07), "*a 360-degree change, our lives has totally got upside down in a good way*" (Participant 08).

Economic stability and other factors also seem to have boosted morale and created positive attitudes among participants. As one participant pointed out, these positive attitudes are related to regaining dignity and feel valued as a professional. "*You feel valued, you know. Now you are working in a professional role" (*Participant 06*)*. Another reported that the opportunity to work at the ASRC helped her to feel differently about Australia:

> **I have a better feeling about Australia. Before, I felt that I was a stranger to this country because they still didn't accept us. But now, I do not have this feeling. I have this feeling that we are contributing to each other, Australia to us, us to them (Participant 07).**

Overall, it can be argued that the Initiative had enhanced the agency of participants by providing them with employment opportunities and the economic resources to take care of themselves and their families during the coronavirus pandemic. This is likely to contribute towards a sense of hope and reinforce a positive attitude towards life in Australia.

In summary, it can be concluded that the Initiative has generated benefits for the participants by 1) developing skillsets that suit the Australian workforce, 2) creating employment pathways, and 3) facilitating their empowerment. The short-term employment through the Initiative has contributed toward participants' future employment in Australia by providing relevant skills and experience in the Australian context. This is evidenced by the fact that sixty per cent of the participants had already secured work two months after exiting from the Initiative; most (73%) of these were full-time jobs in their preferred field. Further, the program contributed to the empowerment of participants, not only economically through providing an income but also through increased confidence, a sense of self-efficacy, and expanded personal and professional networks in Australia. This is likely to enhance the employability of people seeking asylum and their career adaptability into the future.

5. Organisational (ASRC) level contributions of the Initiative

Analysis of the interview and focus group data indicates that the employment of people seeking asylum has been instrumental in enabling the ASRC to deliver appropriate services to its members, develop responsive systems, and enhance the leadership capabilities of its staff. The Initiative has also enabled members to contribute positively to the ASRC.

Overall, the key outcomes of the Initiative to the ASRC included:

1. the availability of staff to deliver meaningful and appropriate services to members;
2. the integration of "Employees with Lived Experience of seeking asylum", which has challenged and strengthened cultural competencies at the ASRC;
3. the creation of opportunities for staff to develop their leadership skills and cultural competencies; and
4. the creation of opportunities for people seeking asylum to inform and contribute to the ASRC.

5.1. The availability of staff to deliver meaningful and appropriate services

The Initiative has enabled the ASRC to provide meaningful and appropriate services to its members during the Covid-19 outbreak. Our findings indicate that the employment of people with lived experience of seeking asylum during the Covid-19 pandemic has enabled the ASRC to:

- **fill service gaps to meet extra demands,**
- **create opportunity for staff with lived experiences of seeking asylum to support and deliver services to their peers, and**
- **reduce the demand for services during the pandemic for those individuals.**

5.1.1. Fill service gaps to meet extra demands

During the Covid-19 outbreak, the ASRC could not deploy all its existing volunteer workforce due to restrictions. This, coupled with the increase in demand for services, made it difficult for the ASRC to provide appropriate services to its members (people seeking asylum). Thus, the employment of 106 people through the WfV played a significant role in increasing the capability of the ASRC to provide critical services such as food, health care and other essential frontline services during the pandemic. As one focus group 1 participant reports:

> *from the perspective of the ASRC, … as some of our volunteers were on leave, we were not able to provide the services that we are providing now. [Thus], we can say that [the employment of this cohort] has contributed to the ASRC, the service provision objective of the ASRC, be that for the food bank, or the other critical services that we have delivered to our members.*

In other words, without the employment of the participants at the time, the ASRC would not have been able to meet the increased demand during the pandemic. To put it in focus group 1 participants' own words:

> *'if we didn't have this 100-plus person from Working for Victoria Initiative, we might not have been able to provide the services that we are providing now.'*
>
> *'the continuity of service and the idea that we wouldn't be able to deliver our services in the COVID environment without some of these roles.'*

The ASRC recruitment data indicates that 106 people were employed and deployed across 18 areas of the organisation during the reporting period. Of these, 34% worked in catering and food delivery to meet the significant service demand in assisting people seeking asylum who were hardly hit by the social and economic fall-out of the pandemic. As the 2020 annual report of the organisation indicates, during this period, the ASRC distributed $1.73 million worth of fresh food (ASRC, 2020).

5.1.2. Create opportunities for staff with lived experience of seeking asylum to support and deliver services to their peers

From the perspectives of the participants (people with lived experience of seeking asylum), beyond filling the service gaps, it was an opportunity to understand what it takes to organise support, how it is done and an opportunity to share their experience with the organisation and support their peers at a time of critical need. One participant's reflection sums this up well:

> ***When we are working for an organisation that supports people like us, I think it is an excellent opportunity to see and know better about the gap, I think, what the organisation can maybe support in other ways. It helps to see if we have that mentality, we can see as well, as a person, this is how it works; this is how we get supported. And then you bring your experience, which also helps the organisation see through, from the other perspective and in another way (Participant 08).***

Our data also indicate that the appointment of a significant number of people with lived experience of seeking asylum at the ASRC has created an opportunity for the ASRC to learn and improve service delivery. Although it is hard to point to the changes made to service delivery because of the involvement of people seeking asylum (people with lived experience), the data indicates that there has been a meaningful exchange between participants and other ASRC staff regarding modalities of service delivery at the time, as the interview excerpt below shows.

> *We are the people seeking asylum, and we get to work for an organisation supporting people seeking asylum. So, we brought in that lived experience. So, we get to suggest to ASRC. This is what could be done to better support people seeking asylum. We make our opinions known. We get our voices heard. Maybe ASRC offered a program that is not quite relevant for people seeking asylum, but with us working with them, we get to tell them, "Look, I'm the one seeking asylum. I know how this feel. If you do it this way, then it goes better." So, I think the fact that we bring in lived experience is going to help the ASRC a lot* (Participant 11).

Overall, the employment of people with lived experience of seeking asylum to support their peers has helped the ASRC to provide meaningful and appropriate service to its members.

5.1.3. Reduce the pressure on service demand by creating jobs for people seeking asylum

Our findings indicate that the creation of jobs for people seeking asylum at the ASRC had reduced the demand for services, at least from those employed through the Initiative during the pandemic. As one focus group 1 participant argued, "if *these people [participant] were not provided with these job opportunities, they would have been relying on our humanitarian services. And then we might have more requirements financially as well as staff-wise for those other services."*

Although the Initiative's impact in reducing service demand pressures on the ASRC was not discussed at great length in the focus group discussions, it is logical to deduce it. The number of those recruited through the Initiative may seem small, but their employment increased the capability of the ASRC to deliver services to people in need.

Overall, the Initiative assisted the ASRC to provide meaningful and appropriate service to its members by filling service gaps that were created due to the increased service demands during the COVID-19 outbreak, by creating opportunities for staff with lived experience to support and deliver services to their peers and reduce the demand for services during the pandemic for those individuals.

5.2. The integration of "Employees with Lived Experience of seeking asylum" has challenged and strengthened cultural competencies at the ASRC

Besides making additional staff available for the ASRC to deliver meaningful and appropriate services, the integration of "employees with lived experience" into the workforce has challenged and strengthened the cultural competencies of ASRC staff. The integration of "employees with lived experiences" has particularly played a role in:

- **strengthening the ASRC's diversity and inclusion policies and practices and**
- **increasing understanding of the challenges people with lived experience face as staff.**

5.2.1. Strengthening the ASRC's diversity and inclusion policies and practices

ASRC staff members interviewed recognised that the WfV had provided a unique learning opportunity for the ASRC to deepen its diversity and inclusion policies and practices. However, different interviewees presented different perspectives on what was learned and how that might have contributed to actual changes within the organisation. To some, the contribution was informing current policy and practice by providing different perspectives about people's skills and opportunities to incorporate these skills into the organisation. "*This opportunity gave us a way of really quickly having to incorporate many different perspectives about not only the needs of people but also how they can contribute and what opportunities they present to the organisation" (Staff 01*). For others, the presence of a diverse cohort with lived experiences was an opportunity to test current policies and practices and see what needs to change in the future: "*I had the ambition to use this opportunity to inform the organisation what practices could be in place regarding a more inclusive organisation. What does it look like, not just diversity but inclusion" (Staff 02).*

However, it is hard to gauge the overall change that the Initiative made on diversity and inclusion at the organisational level, as there was no reportable action at the time of data collection. What is certain is that the appointment of people with lived experience of seeking asylum has contributed to the start of a conversation about diversity and inclusion within the ASRC, which has the potential to inform and transform future policies and practices. As one staff member anticipates, the learning from the Initiative may help create an organisation that is more culturally informed and responsive.

> *What I believed would happen … is that people would see that,…, this was us being able to be stronger, more enriched, more flexible, more adaptive, more culturally informed, more culturally responsive (Staff 03).*

5.2.2. Understanding the challenges for people with lived experience as staff

The focus group data indicate that one of the challenges related to working with people seeking asylum for the ASRC was the change in the identity of participants from service recipients to staff. It is expected that the challenge and experience in managing the WfV cohort have provided an opportunity for the ASRC to ensure that its policies accommodate people seeking asylum as employees, as the excerpt below shows.

> ***I think that the transition between being a member or a service recipient and being involved in service delivery is not a black and white scenario, and I think it***

has been tricky to navigate. I don't think they just woke up the next day and reframed their identity. I am not sure that that is possible. Anyway, that did present a level of complexity to working in that - and I am sure we will get into that a bit later. But yeah, I saw those same sorts of thing (Focus group 1).

One of the complexities of managing and working with people with lived experience was data security and access. As some focus group participants suggested, it is important that the organisation drafts a clear policy regarding how and what kind of data people seeking asylum can access as employees.

> *I still do have issues about our data security and who has access to what. I think that is really highlighted, for me, some further work that we need to do, as an organisation, as a whole. And I guess, also, just because our volunteers are a day a week, and even though they are with us for a long time, when you have got people that are with you three or five days a week, the intensity of the capacity-building that you are doing is obviously much higher. So that is probably the main difference (Focus group 1).*

Another learning from this Initiative was that regardless of the change in identity from service recipients to staff, employees with lived experience may require psychosocial support depending on their needs. Even organisations such as the ASRC that were created to support people seeking asylum can fail to understand the issues for staff and inadvertently fail to respond adequately. As noted in the focus group 1 discussion:

> *there have been numerous occasions over the last number of years where, unfortunately, something hasn't worked out in people being in various roles as an employee with lived experience… "Well, how do we actually fix that systemically?" And I think WfV has not fixed that, … but it has helped us bring all of that to the forefront where it is absolutely a consideration in all that we do.*

The excerpt from the focus group discussions below indicates that the response or support to staff with lived experience might have been inadequate because staff/supervisors were not trained or resourced to deal with these kinds of issues. The WfV seems to have created the opportunity to change this by setting up appropriate support mechanisms for managers.

> *Our initial thinking around how to support the cohort and how to support program managers had to flip because our program managers are not equipped to deal with a number of issues arising within those communities that have become our employees. So, transitioning from a member relationship to an employee relationship and supporting leaders to experience and manage all of that, meant that we had to build in these additional patchwork quilt supports like a caseworker. And even that is a challenging space.*

In other words, it is important to be aware that the complex challenges – past trauma and related health challenges of people seeking asylum – do not cease to exist because they have found employment and are part of the workforce. In fact, in some cases, employees can have ongoing legal cases for refugee determination still underway, even long after they have secured employment. "W*hen hiring people with a lived experience .. [it is important] to acknowledge that the refugee determination process is a very complex process and that the needs of those staff may be different from others" (Staff 01).* Thus, it is necessary to ensure that appropriate support for both staff and supervisors is available to meet the additional needs of staff with lived experiences of seeking asylum.

5.3. The creation of opportunities for staff to develop their leadership skills and cultural competencies

The presence and participation of the WfV staff in the organisation have created a safe space

for other ASRC staff to develop their cultural competencies. Our findings demonstrate that the initiative has contributed to the development of leadership skills of managers and staff by strengthening their ability to lead and develop diverse employees and teams.

As noted in the focus group 1 discussions, the presence of a diverse group such as the WfV staff cohort has forced some existing staff to expand their leadership and coaching skills.

> *Those people leading those teams, the development of their own skills as leaders, I think we have seen a lot of program managers really hitting their strides in how to coach a team because they have taken on board groups of people with no Australian workplace experience, and they have been really forced into developing their own coaching and leading skills (Focus group 1).*

In essence, the presence of the WfV staff cohort has challenged and helped ASRC managers to grow and strengthen their capacity to work with cultural difference.

5.4. The creation of opportunities for people seeking asylum to inform and contribute to the ASRC

Participants felt that they were able to contribute to the organisation that helped them for a period by providing their lived experience insights as well as technical and professional expertise to inform service design and delivery to support other people seeking asylum and contribute to positive cultural change within the organisation.

The appointment of members (people seeking asylum) as employees at the ASRC has provided participants with the opportunity to see the inner workings of the organisation and support their peers. This seems to have encouraged many to consider giving back to the organisation and help their peers as volunteers. One participant expressed her commitment to giving back to ASRC in this manner.

> ***ASRC helps us gain the experience to learn, help us, and support us in everything they have. We should give back to them, you know, one day we should return all the goodness to them. It is my motto; I do not know about the others (Participant 06).***

Similarly, another reported that she has already filled a vacant position and working as a volunteer.

> *I am very happy with what the program is giving to us members. … And, in return to that, I am giving my time. I already fill in the volunteer position ..at the employment program, which I am doing. …, One hour a day I will do something in return, which is my sign I really appreciate what they are doing (Participant 01).*

Besides volunteering or giving back to the organisation, our findings indicate that participants supported the ASRC by sharing their knowledge and experiences as people with lived experiences of seeking asylum. Commenting on this contribution, a participant noted that people seeking asylum bring a different and necessary perspective to the organisation:

> *I think we do bring our perspectives, like having the lived experience of seeking asylum. Having gone through this experience is totally different from those in Australia and are working in the professional areas, without the stress; this is a unique perspective. Maybe we see things a bit differently. I think ASRC, as an organisation, providing support to people like us and having people like us; this makes a great combination because they get to know what they can expect (participant 09).*

Another interviewee also put this in simple terms, saying, "*we kind of know how it feels like to be on the other side. While we are talking to the members with lived experience, we know where they're coming from and understanding that" (Participant 10).*

Besides generating benefits for participants, the placement of people seeking asylum across the ASRC enhanced the capabilities of the organisation in several ways. The Initiative provided additional staff for the ASRC to deliver meaningful and appropriate services to people seeking asylum. Most of these staff had lived experiences of seeking asylum, which meant that they were particularly well positioned to provide meaningful and appropriate services to their fellow members. The embedding of people with lived experience across the ASRC also created an opportunity for learning and reflection and enabled the organisation to assess and deepen its diversity and inclusion policies and practices, and strengthened the leadership capabilities and cultural competencies of staff. Evidence also suggests that the employment experience during the pandemic has created the prospect for participants to be actively involved in the life of the ASRC, not only as service recipients but also as volunteers and professionals.

6. The Social Return on Investment of the Initiative

Social Return for Investment (SROI) is a methodology used to understand and measure the social value of a program or organisation by monetising the intangible social, economic, cultural, and environmental outcomes created by the program or organisation compared to the investments made by each stakeholder in the process to create these outcomes (Nicholls et al., 2009). SROI is presented as a ratio of the Present Value of Benefits to the Present Value of Investments.

As indicated in previous sections, in 2020, the Victorian State Government funded the ASRC $3.8 million to employ people seeking asylum for six months as part of WfV. This SROI analysis aims to assess the social value of the ASRC WfV. The ASRC WfV is a six-month program. However, the SROI analysis covers the possible impact of the project over 4 years. The main stakeholders of the ASRC WfV are determined to be the Victorian State Government, the ASRC and people seeking asylum (beneficiaries of the project).

The SROI Guidelines (Nicholls et al., 2009) stipulated six stages to guide the process, including establishing scope and identifying key stakeholders; mapping outcomes; valuing the outcomes using financial proxies; establishing the impact; calculating the SROI and verifying the results (Figure 4). We have adhered to the guidelines throughout the SROI analysis to ensure compliance.

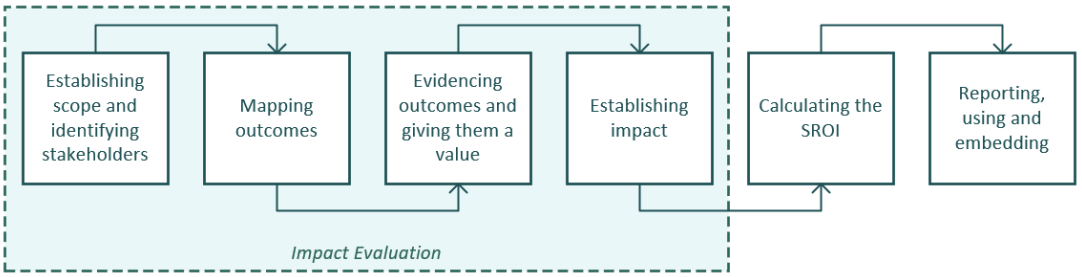

Figure 1. Six steps of SROI (source Nicholls et al., 2009)

6.1. Establishing scope and identifying stakeholders

The research team has engaged with key stakeholders, particularly the ASRC and people seeking asylum who were employed through the Initiative. However, the interaction with the Victorian Government representatives and other partners was limited. ASRC staff and a group of beneficiaries were involved in the design of the evaluation. Both stakeholders were also engaged in interviews and focus group discussion at the data collection stage of the evaluation and research process. The stakeholders' perspectives informed the scope of the SROI, what needs to be measured and how we might measure the values created because of the investment made by the Victorian Government and other stakeholders during the implementation of the project.

6.2. Mapping outcomes

Based on thematic analysis of interview and focus group data, outcomes were identified at three levels – at the individual (participants), organisational (ASRC), and government levels. The outcomes that were considered for further analysis included digital skills, confidence, income, and health and well-being (individual-level outcomes); organisational learning and service gaps filled (organisational level); and welfare payment savings and tax income to government because of employment (government level outcomes). We used available evidence from our interviews and focus group data, and information from the ASRC to understand what changed because of the Initiative and what matters to each stakeholder.

We endeavoured to select appropriate financial proxies for each outcome to ensure transparency and verifiability of the results (Nicholls et al., 2009)

6.2.1. Inputs (investments)

The main inputs or the contribution and investment of the key stakeholders in the WfV included:

1) **People seeking asylum –** Time spent for application and interviews and associated costs incurred to attend interviews.
2) **Victorian Government funds (inputs) –** The Victorian Government provided a grant of $3.8 million.

   Table 1. Grants dispersed between July 2020 and December 2020

Items	Costs	
Salary	$	2,506,797.80
Employee on costs	$	501,359.56
Personal Protective Equipment and training	$	162,000.00
Administrative cost	$	634,031.47
Total	**$**	**3,804,188.83**

3) **ASRC inputs –** In addition to the activities that were costed in the WfV budget, the ASRC provided additional mentorship to participants. The ASRC also used its existing infrastructure to support participants throughout their employment at the ASRC and in their endeavour to find employment afterwards.

   The ASRC provided structured mentorship to participants employed through the WfV who volunteered to be involved in the mentorship program. The mentorship program engaged 22 volunteer mentors within the ASRC to support the Initiative. On average, the mentors provided two hours of mentorship six times each during the reporting period.

4) **Other inputs** –include the investment made by other partners such as the Victoria Hall Council to support the Initiative.

   We estimate this to be at least an additional 10% of the grant received from the Victorian Government.

6.2.2. Outputs

The main outputs of the program include the number of people employed, number of training conducted for the new employees, number of mentorship sessions provided to participants, additional services provided to members during the pandemic (number of home deliveries made during the six months) and other services.

Table 2. Outputs of the ASRC WfV

Number of people employed	106 (90FTE)
Number of training sessions conducted	5
Mentorship sessions (22 mentors x 6 session x 2 hours each) = 264 session hours plus two networking sessions with an average attendance of 48 people (estimated equivalency of 1 mentoring session hour each (48x2=96))	360 session hours
Number of food packs produced and distributed by ASRC Foodbank during the reporting period (July to December 2020). Food packs are fresh and non-perishable food and non-food groceries such as toiletries.	21,342
Number of people who secured employment after the six months (by Feb 2021)	63

6.2.3. Outcomes of the ASRC WfV

As noted in the introduction, the objectives of the ASRC WfV were to restore income and stabilise livelihoods of participants, to maintain or improve work skills of participants (such as soft, digital, and technical skills), to enhance the capability of the ASRC (through organisational learning and filling service gaps), and to enable participants to contribute to society broadly. Thus, the main outcomes of the program that were considered for further analysis include an increase in soft, digital, and technical skills, increased in overall confidence, increased income, and health and well-being (individual-level outcomes); increased cultural competence and service provided (organisational level); and savings on welfare payment and personal income tax payments due to increased employment (broader level outcomes).

1) **Increase in digital and soft skills:** our findings indicated that the Initiative helped employees improve their digital and soft skills. This included using various online platforms to communicate and work.

2) **Increase in confidence:** All participants felt more confident in their capability in joining the Australian workforce because of their employment experience at the ASRC. Participants also noted the contribution of the various training and mentorship conducted by the ASRC.

3) **Increased income and improvement in health and well-being:** our findings indicate that the income received by participants has contributed to their and their families health and well-being significantly. Income received from employment is likely to significantly contribute to health and well-being, although other factors can also enhance participants' health and well-being.

4) **Enhanced cultural competence at the ASRC**: the presence and interaction of many people seeking asylum (106) with lived experience has created an opportunity for staff at the ASRC to learn. Focus group and interview data indicate that participants have enhanced the cultural competence of staff significantly.

5) **Increased services during the pandemic**: one of the main objectives of the ASRC WfV was to fill service gaps to enable the organisation to serve its members (people seeking asylum). During the six months of employment, participants have worked in 18 units of the ASRC. A significant number (34%) were placed in two units where there was high service demand. These were Community Food (21%) and ASRC Catering (13%). These and other units enabled the ASRC to distribute over 20,000 food packs during the pandemic.

6) **Contribution to government savings and income**: the ASRC WfV has contributed to

government savings in welfare payment savings and income in the form of personal tax income. Our findings also indicate that the work and placement of people seeking asylum are likely to continue contributing to government savings and income by enabling participants to find employment afterwards.

6.3. Measuring change – evidencing and valuing the outcomes of the Initiative

To measure change at the three levels (individual [participants], organisational [the ASRC] and government levels), interview, focus group data, outcomes of the ERS survey and other internal ASRC reports were used to estimate the value of the changes.

6.3.1. Measuring investments/inputs

The entire cost of the ASRC WfV includes all financial and in-kind investments that all stakeholders made to achieve the outcomes. For the ASRC WfV, these include costs incurred by participants to attend pre-employment training and interviews, Victorian Government funds dispersed, financial and in-kind investments made by the ASRC, and financial and in-kind investments by other partners, and voluntary time made by ASRC volunteers.

Table 3. Overall investments of the ASRC WfV

Stakeholder	Inputs	Calculation	Investment
Program participants	Participants' time is not included as suggested by the SROI guidelines, and there is no evidence to suggest that there was an opportunity cost to them.	[$0]	$0
Government – ASRC WfV funding	Amount of Victorian Government funding used by or dispersed by the ASRC by December 2020.	[$3,804,189]	$3,804,189
ASRC input	It was estimated at 10% of the funding. The actual in-kind input, including volunteer input for the program, is likely to be higher. However, as 20% of the funding was earmarked as administrative cost, we have estimated the input to be only 10% to avoid double counting.	[$3,804,189x0.1]	$380,419
Other inputs	The investment made by other partners such as the Victoria Hall Council to support the Initiative is estimated at 5% of the cost.	[$3,804,189x0.05]	$190,209
Total investment in the ASRC WfV			**$4,374,817**

6.3.2. Measuring outcomes

We have costed the outcomes considering the counterfactual scenario of what would have occurred had the ASRC WfV not existed. All assumptions and justifications and associated valuation filters (deadweight, attribution, displacement, and drop-off) employed are provided in Table 5 to ensure the transparency of the process.

Financial proxies – to value intangible outcomes that matter to the main stakeholders, financial proxies are used when direct market values are not available. Appendix A Table 5 describes the financial proxies used to approximate the value of each outcome and the rationale for using the financial proxy.

6.4. Establishing Impact

To provide a realistic picture of the social value of the Initiative, besides measuring the value of the outcomes, it is necessary to apply filter coefficients such as deadweight, attribution,

displacement, and drop-off for each outcome. This is to help avoid over-claiming and assure credibility in accordance with the SROI guidelines. Appendix B, Table 6 explains the different filter coefficients used in the analysis, and how the different filters were applied to the financial proxies following SROI principles.

The application of the different filter coefficients helps to value the outcome attributed to the investment by adjusting each value of the financial proxies used. Table 4 presents the unadjusted value of the outcomes.

Table 4. Gross Value of Outcomes

Outcome	Quantity	Financial proxy value (per annum)	Attribution	Dead weight	Duration	Drop-off	Non discounted value (impact)
Increase in participants' soft and digital skills	106	$748.00	25%	20%	4	10%	$163,602.00
Increased in participants' confidence	106	$80.00	20%	10%	4	20%	$16,021.00
Improved health and wellbeing	212	$328.00	30%	20%	4	25%	$100,436.00
Increased service delivery	203,000	$8.25	10%	30%	1	100%	$1,055,092.00
Increased cultural competence	133	$177.70	30%	30%	4	10%	$39,826.00
Government Saving on welfare payment	106	$6,632.00	0%	0%	4	10%	$2,417,808.00
Government income through personal taxes	106	$5,602.00	0%	0%	4	10%	$2,042,302.00
Total gross value before adjustment							**$5,835,087.00**

6.5. Calculating and understanding SROI ratio in context

The SROI ratio is a comparison of the Present Value of Benefits to the Present Value of Investments.

The total investments (Present Value of Investments (PVI)) of the WfV is **$4,374,817** (Table 3). The unadjusted Present Value (PV) of the Initiative's outcomes is **$5,835,087** (Table 4). Since the Initiative's impact is expected to last four years, we have used a discounting rate of 5%, assuming that the future values of the outcomes will be less by 5 per cent. This is reasonable as the circumstances of participants are likely to change. Thus, the total adjusted PV is **$5,310,110.**

Therefore, the SROI ratio calculated by dividing the PV by the PVI is **1.21**. This indicates that every dollar invested in the Initiative has yielded **$1.21** in social value. As the SROI ratio is higher than one, the social value created for the main stakeholders is more than the stakeholders invested in the program. Thus, the investment in the ASRC WfV can be considered highly beneficial to society.

Table 5. Present Value of each year after discounting

Outcome	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
Benefits	$2,461,108	$1,263,340	$1,135,347	$1,020,485
Discounted Value	$2,343,912	$1,145,887	$980,756	$839,556
Total Present Value	**$5,310,110**			
Total Investments	**$4,374,817**			
Net Present Value	**$935,293**			
SROI RATIO	**PVI/PV**	**$1.21**		

A sensitivity test was carried out to assess the importance and sensitivity of elements of the assumptions made in our analysis by using alternative variables/proxies and low and high estimates of those variables, as shown in Appendix C. The aim was to see which assumptions might have the most significant effect on our model. Reasonable extremes (high and low estimates) of the parameters we anticipated to change the SROI ratio were tested. Our sensitivity analysis demonstrates that under all variations of assumptions, the SROI ratio remained higher than one, implying that the social value created for stakeholders was more than the stakeholders invested. Therefore, the findings are robust to variations.

6.6. Final remarks and insights

The results demonstrate that the funding of the WfV program by the Victorian Government is a sensible policy decision with a social return significantly higher than the initial investment of the program, with **1.21** dollars created in social value for every dollar invested by the program. This means the ASRC WfV has created an additional **$5.3** million in social value. This is encouraging, as it presents convincing evidence for the Government to continue investing in similar programs in the future.

Noting that our analysis did not include the direct and indirect economic impact of the investment or spending of the Initiative to the local economy, including income received by participants during the six months, and the post-program employment outcomes of participant (which was 60% two months after they left ASRC). The additional direct and indirect economic impacts of the Initiative would include additional jobs created due to the increased economic activities such as spending or purchase of goods and services. Thus, the Initiative's overall socio-economic impact could have been higher if we were to account for additional economic impacts of the Initiative created through spending and employment multiplier effects.

7. Lessons and insights

In the previous sections, we have presented our assessment of the impact of the Initiative at the individual level (its contribution on the capacity building, empowerment, and employability of participants) and the organisational level (impacts on service delivery and organisational learning), as well as the Initiative's broader social return on investment. This chapter presents the most important lessons and insights drawn from the data with significant relevance for policy and practice.

1. The experience of delivering the Initiative has created an opportunity to explore and demonstrate alternative models of creating long-term pathways to employment for people seeking asylum.

While the ASRC aspires to create pathways to sustainable employment for people seeking asylum, like many service providers, it has traditionally played an intermediary role linking job seekers with external employers. The ASRC WfV provided the opportunity to test a very different model, in which ASRC itself provided an employment experience in-house. While the Initiative was focused on the short-term goal of creating jobs to boost economic growth (recovery) during the pandemic in the state, the ASRC was able to use it as a strategy to create long-term employment pathways for people seeking asylum. The direct employment pathway model was new for the ASRC, as a focus group participant recalled, it was,

> *different from anything the ASRC has done before in the employment space, and we are an organisation that is known for our employment program. But this completely turned that on its head and made it something totally different.*

Another focus group participant explains the importance of having the opportunity to test the direct employment pathway model.

> ***To have the ability to create an employment pathway with this climate feels so much more powerful to have it play out within our organisation than to always be externally facing it and placing pressure on external organisations. I think we've been able to demonstrate something that we've perhaps been talking about advocating for a long time and put it into practice, and it can literally say, "This is what we do in our house. It can work in your house too," which is not something we have been able to speak to previously. So really a demonstration potential (Focus Group 1).***

The "demonstration potential" of directly employing people seeking asylum as staff was seen as a potentially powerful way to demonstrate to other organisations the value that these staff (people seeking asylum) could bring to an organisation. All participants appreciated the opportunity to work at the ASRC and recognised the Initiative's contribution in creating employment pathways for them. Their main concern was that they might not get a job immediately after the program ended. A six-month contract is not the same as a permanent job. Nevertheless, there is evidence that actual employment pathways were created: as of February 2021, two months after the conclusion of the program, internal reports showed that 60% of the participants had secured work, of which 73% were full-time jobs in participants' preferred fields of work.

2. The Initiative challenged the social role of "service recipient" by enabling a shift in participants' identity from service recipients to staff. This created both challenges and learning opportunities at the organisational and individual levels.

The placement of people seeking asylum as employees across the organisation, and the subsequent changes in the identity of participants from service recipients to staff, challenged organisational norms and created learning opportunities both at the organisational and individual levels. The organisational challenges included questions regarding database access for service recipients who were now on staff and the confidentiality issues this raised. Another organisational challenge was the recognition that some of these new staff were facing complex challenges in their lives, and there was a need to provide appropriate support in the workplace; this resulted in the appointment of a staff support worker. At the same time, employing service recipients as staff created some important opportunities for the organisation.

These opportunities included the availability of staff with knowledge from lived experience: as people seeking asylum and as people who had the experience of being on the receiving end of services. Having this experiential knowledge on staff opened up the opportunity to make services more user responsive. For the organisation and individual members, this shift in identity from service recipient to staff was an opportunity to enhance member ownership, empowerment, and voice within the organisation. Participants had the opportunity to see how services were provided from the perspective of service providers. This impacted them positively by creating a better understanding and ownership of the organisation.

The experience of incorporating people with lived experience as staff into the organisation provides fertile learning opportunities for ASRC and other organisations seeking to serve people with lived experiences of disadvantage.

3. Remote working limited some of the impacts of the Initiative, but also had unintended positive consequences in the form of enhanced digital skills.

The six months' employment offered through the Initiative was between July and December 2020, which coincided with the extended government lockdown during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic in Victoria (112 days between July and October 2020). As a result of the lockdown, many participants had to work remotely. This limited their opportunity to experience face-to-face workplace interactions and networking opportunities with co-workers and service recipients. The lack of on-site workplace experience limited the extent to which many participants were able to become immersed in Australian workplace culture and gain the benefits of this experience.

However, as our findings indicated, an unintended but positive consequence of remote work was that participants enhanced their digital skills. Many participants reported that working remotely had allowed them to improve their skills and confidence with digital technologies significantly, increasing their employability. The experiences of the Initiative highlighted the value of both face-to-face and digital interactions for building human and social capital and, ultimately, stronger employment pathways for people seeking asylum.

Overall, the key lessons for policy and practice suggest the value of an employment model in which the direct, in-house employment of service recipients as staff is used as an intentional strategy for building their workplace skills and confidence and creating long-term pathways to employment for people seeking asylum. This model, which focused on empowerment and career pathways beyond the immediate job, required time and resources to implement. It challenged and extended the cultural competencies of staff as service recipients joined them as colleagues. Yet, the results were positive, both in terms of individual development and employment outcomes and organisational learning. The Initiative provides a powerful demonstration of the challenges and learning opportunities that arise from incorporating people with lived experience as staff, and the opportunities this provided to build human and social capital across the organisation.

The learning from the Initiative shows that directly employing people seeking asylum as staff, with a strategic intent to create long-term employment pathways for them, may provide a replicable model for other organisations. This not only provides a way to create employment pathways for people seeking asylum, but it also provides fertile learning opportunities for organisations that seek to serve people with lived experiences of disadvantage.

8. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The Victorian Government funded the ASRC a total of $3.8 million to enhance the economic security and participation of people seeking asylum in Victoria during the pandemic. Through the funding, the ASRC provided fixed-term employment for six months (July- November 2020) for 106 people, 99 of whom were people seeking asylum. The Initiative aimed to restore income and stabilise the lives and livelihoods of people seeking asylum during the Covid-19 Pandemic; maintain their work skills, employability, and career adaptability into the future; and enhance the service capability of the ASRC.

The objective of this evaluation was to:

- assess the contribution of the ASRC WfV to the capability, empowerment, and employability of participants (people seeking asylum) post-COVID 19;
- assess the impact of the Initiative in filling service gaps at the ASRC;
- document the organisational learning from the delivery of the Initiative; and
- assess the social return on investment and the broader policy and practice implications of the Initiative.

The main research and evaluation questions were:

1) What difference(s) has the Initiative made to the participants' capability, empowerment, and employability?
2) What are the processes put in place by the ASRC to ensure that the Initiative achieves its intended objectives?
3) What are the lessons learnt at the organisational level?
4) What is the overall social return on investment of the Initiative?
5) What are the broader policy and practice implications?

Our interview and focus group data analysis demonstrated that the ASRC WfV generated value both to participants and the organisation. It also generated some important insights with relevance to policy and practice.

At the individual level, our findings show the Initiative restored the income of participants and stabilised their families' livelihoods over the six months. It has also improved their work skills, and consequently, their employability and career adaptability into the future. The key outcomes of the Initiative for individual participants identified include:

- developing "skillsets that suit the Australian workforce" and gaining a better understanding of Australian workplace culture;
- creating employment pathways for participants; and
- contributing to the empowerment of participants.

The impact of improved skillsets (human capital), connections into employment pathways (social capital) and empowerment (sense of self-efficacy in career development) is evidenced by the finding that 60% of participants in the Initiative went on to find another job within two months of the end of the program.

At the organisational level, our findings indicate that the Initiative has enabled the ASRC to deliver appropriate services to its members, develop responsive systems, and enhance the leadership capabilities of its staff. The key outcomes of the Initiative to the ASRC included:

- the availability of staff to deliver meaningful and appropriate services to members;

- the integration of "Employees with Lived Experience of seeking asylum" which has challenged and strengthened cultural competencies at the ASRC;
- the creation of opportunities for staff to develop their leadership skills and cultural competence, and
- the creation of opportunities for people seeking asylum to inform and contribute to the ASRC.

The SROI analysis showed that the Initiative contributed over $5.3 million in social value with a social return of $1.21 for every dollar that the Victorian Government, ASRC, and other stakeholders invested in the Initiative. This is significant and is in addition to the economic value of the initiative; the additional socio-economic impacts from the economic spending and employment multiplier effects could be higher.

The broader lessons for policy and practice from the Initiative included the opportunity to demonstrate an employment model in which the direct, in-house employment of service recipients is used as an intentional strategy to create long-term pathways to employment for people seeking asylum; as well as the challenges and learning opportunity that arises from the incorporation of people with lived experience as staff. The Initiative also identified the value of both face-to-face and digital interactions in strengthening skills and employment pathways for people seeking asylum.

Overall, the focus of our analysis was to understand the value (impact) of the ASRC Working for Victoria Initiative. As such, our analysis suggests that the ASRC WfV had significant impacts at the individual level (participants' capability, employability, and empowerment), organisational level (organisational learning), and has the potential to impact policy and practice more broadly through attention to lessons learned about creating employment pathways for people seeking asylum. The unique nature of the ASRC – the way it operates, its relationship with people seeking asylum and its employment and empowerment model – has contributed to these outcomes and lessons learned. Drawing from the findings and particularly the broader lessons and insights, we present two practical policy recommendations for consideration.

Recommendation One: To build on the findings of the Initiative to further explore and test innovative models to create long-term pathways to employment for people seeking asylum in Australia.

The literature indicates that people seeking asylum in Australia face multiple challenges in finding and keeping employment as well as other challenges related to economic, health and socio-cultural and structural issues. Additionally, evidence suggests that people seeking asylum can lose their confidence due to trauma and other factors. Lack of Australian experience may also prevent them from accessing employment opportunities. They are likely to be overqualified for employment opportunities and may struggle to re-establish their careers in the Australian context.

The outcomes of the ASRC WfV demonstrate a promising approach to creating better employment outcomes for people seeking asylum. The model employed in this Initiative builds on ASRC's extensive experience with employment programs and empowerment-focused approaches. The Initiative enabled ASRC to employ people seeking asylum within the organisation on a short-term basis, providing the training and support required to

develop the locally relevant skill sets, experience, and social and professional networks needed to secure employment elsewhere. At the same time, the skills and lived experience of these new employees enriched the organisation. Overall, the impacts of such an approach to creating employment pathways can be significant if adequately resourced.

While such a model has the potential to improve outcomes for people seeking asylum, we also recognise the complexity of delivering a program like this well. The reality of time pressures involved in recruiting and effectively on-boarding a new cohort of employees, the sudden change for the organisation of having a large number of new employees arriving at once, and the need to provide additional support for employees with complex needs can be challenging and needs to be adequately resourced.

Recommendation Two: Valuing and recognising "Lived Experience of seeking asylum" as a skill for service design and delivery.

Many people seeking asylum tend to be well qualified, and in addition to their professional and technical skills, they also bring cultural and experiential knowledge, including their lived experiences of seeking asylum. Nevertheless, the literature indicates that the qualifications, skills and experiences of people seeking asylum may not be recognised in their host country, even by organisations that support them. A failure to recognise the skills and experiences of people seeking asylum can be a missed opportunity for the Australian labour market in general and organisations that work with them in particular.

Organisations such as the ASRC work directly with people with lived experiences of seeking asylum and often explicitly seek to empower them and facilitate pathways into employment. Yet organisations often miss the fact that their members' or clients' lived experience can be a vital knowledge-set and skill to inform better service design and delivery. The Initiative has highlighted the opportunity to draw upon the skills of service users by employing them as staff and, in so doing, to provide an initial step on an employment pathway. Based on the findings of this study, we encourage organisations that work with people seeking asylum to consider employing skilled service users as staff, to embed their lived experiences into the organisation's fabric, stimulate both individual and organisational learning, and inform more user-responsive service design and delivery.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Financial Proxies used

Table 6. Outcomes and preferred financial proxies

Outcome	Financial proxy (description)	Financial proxy value	Financial proxy rationale
Increase in participants ' soft and digital skills (106)	Cost of Certificate III in Information, Digital Media and Technology at TAFE Valuing method: willingness to pay. Valuing method: cost of a course	$748 tuition fee per person Cost of Certificate III in Information, Digital Media, and Technology at Victoria University Source: Victoria University (2020) https://www.vu.edu.au/courses/certificate-iii-in-information-digital-media-and-technology-ict30118	We argue that the Certificate III in Information, Digital Media, and Technology at Victoria University is equivalent to on-the-job training in digital and soft skills. It was designed to upgrade the digital skillset of people who want to step into the job market as tech-ready employees.
Increased confidence in participants (106)	The market value of the cost of training and mentorship required to achieve the same outcome to develop confidence (at least 7 sessions of 1 session mentoring) Valuing method: cost of mentorship	$80.00 Per session cost. The cost of a mentoring session in Australia multiplied by the number of mentoring sessions provided in the six-month period of employment. Source: See https://www.sbms.org.au/mentoring-costs.html (SBMS, 2020)	The ASRC WfV increases participants' confidence by providing them with the opportunity to learn how to navigate the Australian workplace through onboarding training and mentorship. Based on Average Costs and Cost Allocation Approximations, the cost of mentoring and training sessions provided by the ASRC was calculated. We calculated the mentorship cost for 360 sessions (26x6x2=264 for individual sessions plus estimated 48x2=96 for mentoring events). Source: (SBMS, 2020)
Improved health and well-being (for 212 people assuming average family size of 2)	Schedule Fees (Medicare) for GP consultation and counselling services to support individuals experiencing mental health issues	$286.95 We have used Medicare Benefit Schedule items 2721 (GP Mental Health Treatment), which is capped at $286.95 per patient. This includes consultation and further attendance for providing focussed psychological strategies to support patients. The value Source: Medicare Benefits Schedule (items 2721) www.mbsonline.gov.au	The literature indicates that unemployment and financial insecurity are risk factors for mental health and can be a burden on the health system. Thus, by calculating cost savings arising from mental health issues (costs to see physician or counsellor), one can account for the contribution of income security due to employment on their health and well-being for participants and their families.

Filling service gaps (203,000)	The average cost of meals on wheels in Australia	$8.25 The cost of meals of Meals on Wheels Australia is estimated to range in price from $ 4.50 to $12.00 (average $8.25) Source: Wheels on meals (https:// mealsonwheels.org.au)	Although production and distribution of food packs was not the only service gap filled by participants, we have used this service to estimate the value of participants to the ASRC regarding filling service gaps. The total number of food packs produced during the reporting period was 21,342, and only 21% of the recruits were working at Foodbank. That means 101,629 would have been produced if all were engaged (21,342 X 100/21 = 101,629). Assuming that one food pack is equivalent to 2 meals, the total would be equivalent to 203,257 or 203 000 meals rounded). To calculate the value of meals, we have used estimates provided by Meals on Wheels Australia. This is a reasonable estimate as Meals on Wheels pricing accounts for volunteer's time to help cook and drive the cars to deliver the meals.
Increased cultural competenc e (133 ASRC staff)	Cost of cultural competence training	$177.70 per person Source: The (Parker, Fang, & Bradlyn, 2020)	Focus group results have shown that there was a significant improvement in cultural competence among ASRC staff because they engaged with the ASRC WfV cultural competence. To attain the same level of competence, it would require a tailored cultural competence training, which according to a recently published paper, costs an average of US$ 138.52 ($177.70 AUD) (see Parker, Fang, & Bradlyn, 2020).
Saving on welfare payment (106)	Savings on welfare payment in Australia	$510.20 per fortnight $6,632.6 for six months Source: https://www.aph.gov.au/ about_parliament (Parliament of Australia, 2020)	Under the Status Resolution Support Service (SRSS) eligibility is severely restricted. However, people seeking asylum with bridging visas can be eligible for assistance which is paid at the rate of 89% of the DHS Special Benefit. Currently, a single person with no children entitled to receive $492.60 per fortnight, which is $438.41 for a person under the ASA (at 89%). Asylum seekers on bridging visas may also be eligible for rent assistance. Currently, the maximum rate of DHS Rent Assistance for a single person with no children is $80.67, which is $71.79 for a person under ASA scheme. Source: https://www.aph.gov.au/ about_parliament (Parliament of Australia, 2020)

Income to government through taxes (106)	Personal income tax withheld by ASRC	$5,602 per person	Personal income tax withheld and paid to ATO provides the government's actual income during the six months. However, there is also ongoing income that the government is likely to receive as a result of participants securing employment. This is also accounted for.

Appendix B – Valuation Filters applied

Consideration of the different filter coefficients used in the analysis are as follows:

- **Attribution**: attribution is concerned with how much of the outcome was the direct consequence of an investment in the ASRC WfV rather than the contribution of other programs or organisations. To determine the attribution of the ASRC WfV for each outcome (change experienced by the participants), we have estimated the contribution of other programs or organisations to these outcomes that were not included as input or investments and discounted these contributions from the overall value of the outcomes accordingly.
- **Deadweight**: deadweight is an estimation of the value that would have been created if the activities from the ASRC WfV did not happen. To estimate deadweight, we have considered the context under which the Initiative was implemented and the nature of each outcome. We have also considered our findings on the counterfactual for the Initiative.
- **Displacement**: we have used the interview and survey findings to identify and understand whether any of the outcomes have displaced in part or in full any other outcomes that the participants would have achieved.
- **Duration and drop-off**: informed by other research and our analysis, we have estimated how long the changes experienced by the participants may last.

Table 5 shows how the different filters were applied to the financial proxies in accordance with the SROI principles.

Table 7. Valuation Filters

Outcome 1 - Increase in participants' soft and digital skills		
Filter	**Assumption**	**Rationale**
Deadweight	20%	It is highly unlikely that participants would have obtained the same level of exposure to digital technologies and training on digital skills without the ASRC WfV during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, we do not anticipate the deadweight to be more than 20% as there were no other programs designed to improve the digital skills and knowledge of participants that we are aware of at the time.
Attribution	25%	The interview data indicate that most respondents considered an improvement in digital skills to be one of the significant values of the ASRC WfV. However, looking at the background of participants, we anticipate at least 25% of the improvement to have taken place because of previous training and other factors.
Duration	4	This outcome is expected to last for a period of four years.
Drop-off	10%	Participants are less likely to lose their skills if they are in the workforce. Given 60% of participants secured employment by February 2021, we anticipate the majority to secure job progressively and maintain their digital skills. Thus, we have estimated the drop off to be low (10%).
Outcome 2 - Increased confidence		
Filter	**Assumption**	**Rationale**

Deadweight	10%	Had it not been for their engagement with the ASRC through employment, participants would have further lost confidence. Thus, we estimate the increase in confidence that would have happened without participants engagement in the Initiative to be low.
Attribution	20%	Although the employment through the WfV and participation in mentoring and other activities is reported to have lifted participants' confidence, we anticipate other factors to have also contributed to them attaining this value, which may include interaction with others outside work.
Duration	4	This outcome lasts for four years.
Drop-off	20%	Confidence built because of the ASRC WfV is not likely to reduce significantly as it is likely to be maintained by improvement in livelihood and through experience; however, the confidence of those participants who did not find employment after three months is expected to reduce after a year if they do not get the opportunity to maintain and update their skills.
Outcome 3 - Increased health and well-being		
Filter	**Assumption**	**Rationale**
Deadweight	20%	Finding employment and securing income during the COVID-19 pandemic is expected to have significantly lifted personal morale and improve health and well-being. It is hard to see how people seeking asylum could have achieved this through other means. Thus, we do not anticipate the deadweight to be more than 20%.
Attribution	30%	The income from the ASRC WfV and engaging with other colleagues at work is likely to have contributed significantly to the health and well-being of participants. However, we also anticipate other factors such as visa determination processes and family interactions to play at least 30% in this outcome.
Duration	4	This outcome is expected to last at least four years.
Drop-off	25%	We have applied a drop-off of 25% considering that the loss of a job by some and other factors related to visa determination processes may affect the health and well-being of participants.
Outcome 4 – Increased service delivery to members		
Filter	**Assumption**	**Rationale**
Deadweight	30%	ASRC annual report for 2018/9O shows that 5,971 people seeking asylum were supported, and $1 million worth of fresh food was distributed during the year. Thus, it is likely that the ASRC would have still distributed fresh food to its members, although the scale would be reduced.
Attribution	10 %	We anticipate volunteers to have contributed a bit to this effort. Thus, we have an estimated attribution of 10%.
Duration	1	This outcome lasts for the period of investment (six months).
Drop-off	100%	The increase in services was an emergency measure taken during the pandemic. Thus, the activity and its impact are expected to drop entirely after the investment period.
Outcome 5 – Increased in cultural competence		

Filter	Assumption	Rationale
Deadweight	30%	Even without the opportunity to learn from people's lived experiences through the WfV, the interaction with people seeking asylum and online staff training modules are likely to contribute to the cultural competence of staff at least by 30%.
Attribution	30%	Following the above argument, other activities such as internal training and overall interaction with people seeking asylum can contribute to the cultural competence of staff at least by 30%.
Duration	4	This outcome lasts for four years.
Drop-off	10%	Significant drop-off is not expected as cultural competence skills developed are likely to be maintained by staff as they continue to work with diverse people.
Outcome 6 – Government savings from welfare payments		
Filter	**Assumption**	**Rationale**
Deadweight	0%	The savings on welfare are direct results of people employed through the WfV and are less likely to have occurred without people being employed at the ASRC at during the pandemic. It is also worth noting that the participants were employed because many were unemployed or lost their jobs during the pandemic.
Attribution	0%	See the point above.
Duration	4	This outcome anticipated lasting for four years. Although the employment at the ASRC has ended, 60% have already secured a job. Some more are likely to secure employment in the coming months. Thus, the savings will keep accruing.
Drop-off	10%	As noted above, as many people secure employment, the savings will keep accruing. However, we have applied a drop-off of 10% to discount for contributions of other factors for people to find and maintain jobs during the calculation period of 4 years.
Outcome 7 – Government income from personal income tax payments		
Filter	**Assumption**	**Rationale**
Deadweight	0%	The income on personal tax is a direct result of the employment of people through the WfV. Thus, it is less likely to have occurred without employing people who were unemployed or those who had lost their jobs during the pandemic.
Attribution	0%	See the point above.
Duration	4	See rationale for outcome 6 above.
Drop-off	10%	See rationale for outcome 6 above.

Appendix C – Sensitivity test applied

Table 8. Sensitivity Test

(item)	Variable (parameter changed)	Baseline assumption	Method of change	Low estimate	High estimate	New SROI ration
Victoria Government Input	Proportion of WfV Grants	Actual Grant was taken (no need to test)	Acquittal	DNA		
ASRC Inputs	Proportion of ASRC Input	10 % of funding	Proportion	5%		1.27
ASRC Inputs	Proportion of ASRC Input	10 % of funding	Proportion		20%	1.12
Other inputs	Proportion of others and Victoria Hall Council contribution	5% of funding	Proportion	0%		1.27
Other inputs	Proportion of others and Victoria Hall Council contribution	5% of funding	Proportion		10%	1.16
Increase in participants' soft and digital skills	Cost of Certificate III in Information, Digital Media and Technology at TAFE	$748 tuition fee per person Cost of Certificate III in Information, Digital Media, and Technology at Victoria University	Cost of training	$249		1.19
Increase in participants' soft and digital skills	Cost of Certificate III in Information, Digital Media and Technology at TAFE	$748 tuition fee per person Cost of Certificate III in Information, Digital Media, and Technology at Victoria University	Cost of training		$1496	1.25
Increased confidence in participants	Market value of mentorship (at least 7 sessions)	80.00 Per session cost.	Cost of training	$40		1.21
Increased confidence in participants	Market value of mentorship (at least 7 sessions	80.00 Per session cost.	Cost of training		$160	1.23
Improved health and wellbeing	Counselling as proxy	Schedule Fees for counselling services at $286.95	Membership of a bowling club 3 years	$38.95		1.20

Improved health and wellbeing	Counselling as proxy	Schedule Fees for counselling services at $296.95	Membership of a bowling club 3 years		$285	1.21
Increased service delivery	The average cost of meals on wheels in Australia	Estimated cost of meals of Meals on Wheels Australia at $8.25	Estimated cost of meal	$4.15		1.10
Increased service delivery	The average cost of meals on wheels in Australia	Estimated cost of meals of Meals on Wheels Australia at $8.25	Estimated cost of meal		$16.5	1.44
Increased cultural competence	Cost of cultural competence training	Estimated cost of training at $177.70 per person.	Cost of a textbook on cultural competence as a proxy	$40		1.21
Increased cultural competence	Cost of cultural competence training	Estimated cost of training at $177.70 per person	Cost of training		$355.40	1.22
Government Saving on welfare payment	Savings on welfare payment	$510.20 per fortnight $6,632.6 for six months	Proportion (10% less)	$5,968		1.16
Government Saving on welfare payment	Savings on welfare payment	$510.20 per fortnight $6,632.6 for six months	Proportion (10% more)		$7,295	1.26
Government income through personal taxes	Personal income tax withheld by ASRC	$5,602 per person	Proportion (10% less)	$5,042		1.17
Government income through personal taxes	Personal income tax withheld by ASRC	$5,602 per person	Proportion (10% more)		$6,162	1.26
Increase in participants' soft and digital skills	Deadweight	20%	Percentage	10%		1.22
Increase in participants' soft and digital skills	Attribution	25%	Percentage		90%	1.18
Increased confidence in participants	Deadweight	10%	Percentage	10%		1.21
Increased confidence in participants	Attribution	20%	Percentage		90%	1.20
Improved health and wellbeing	Deadweight	20%	Percentage	10%		1.22
Improved health and wellbeing	Attribution	30%	Percentage		90%	1.20

Increased service delivery	Deadweight	30%	Percentage	10%		1.28
Increased service delivery	Attribution	10%	Percentage		90%	1.01
Increased cultural competence	Deadweight	30%	Percentage	10%		1.22
Increased cultural competence	Attribution	30%	Percentage		90%	1.21

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