

# Refugee Employment Pathways

## A project of The Tasmania Opportunity

### REVIEW OF THE PILOT EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM

In March 2018, Refugee Employment Pathways (REP) established a pilot employment program in conjunction with the owners of a local berry farm, Catholic Care, and CVGT. The program aimed to seek long-term employment for former refugees in the horticultural industry and to explore opportunities that might arise from such an initiative. The farm offered to employ people to work throughout the year and then to team-up with 20 part-time pickers in the November to February picking season. REP appointed a voluntary facilitator for this project, CVGT acted as the Jobactive provider, and Catholic Care (Safe Haven Hub) assisted with recruitment and induction.

In July 2019, REP reviewed this project to assess the perceptions and experiences of the participants regarding the success or otherwise of the trial, their performance, the performance of the four partners, and how employment opportunities could be improved. The review also assessed the viability and appropriateness of this model for other berry farms in Northern Tasmania.

#### Methodology

The review was conducted internally, and a questionnaire was circulated to the Farm Manager, the Manager of CVGT, the Volunteer Facilitator, and the REP Taskforce representative. A focus group was held with three members of the All-Year-Round team using the same questions in the questionnaire.

#### Findings

The Reviewers found that:

1. All respondents were generally quite positive about the trial, averaging as Good. The least positive respondent regarding the trial came from farm management and their concerns focused on the performance of the workers. One comment stands out:

The [Farm] Manager, Facilitator and the Manager of CVGT were essential to the success of this pilot program.

2. The performance of both the employees in the All-Year-Round Team and the Whole-Season Team were rated as between Fair and Good. Those who have remained in employment have been rated on average as being Good. Comments included:

They came with limited training in rosters, informing employers of appointments as soon as they are known, arriving on time for work, being honest and communicating with management about issues they may be having.

They need a more comprehensive preparation-for-work training program that helps them to better understand Australian workplace law and work practices and the importance of timekeeping. Strategic use of Jobactive funding at this stage would be very beneficial.

Employees need to understand that the learning of English is an ongoing expectation and essential in the workplace.

There were a lot of health, mental and family issues that impacted the performance of some [employees].

Issues regarding the physical and mental health of the workers and their family members were more than predominant than one would expect in a casual workforce. However, Tamara was much more supportive during each of these issues than most employers in this industry.

Dedication, motivation and reliability have been a problem for some workers.

Workers need to have a car and a driver's licence. Relying on others has proven difficult and created problems for farm management.

The distance from Launceston is an issue for some workers.

3. The performance of the farm management was rated as Very Good. Comments included:

It provided an excellent test site for REP.

The [Farm Owners] supported this program from the outset. They wanted a local workforce and one that would be available year after year.

[The Farm Manager] showed respect and adjusted well to the cultural differences of this new workforce. She was professional and well organised, and she showed an understanding of the health issues, supported those without driver's licences to be rostered with drivers and considered the family responsibilities experienced by her workers.

4. The performance of CVGT was rated as Very Good. Comments include:

CVGT helped provide the workers with appropriate gear and assisting with truck and forklift licences when asked for the appropriate workers.

CVGT played an important role in this project. [He] and his team were supportive and flexible and did everything they could to make the trial a success.

The government employment subsidy for the farm was not promoted in discussions with the farm and the Manager did not seem to be aware of the subsidies until they arrived.

CVGT provided funding for all-weather clothing and protective equipment, paid for interpreters for training and reviews on the job, and provided employment grants to the farm to offset the extra time required to employ and train the new workforce.

5. The performance of the Volunteer Facilitator was rated as Good or Very Good. It is noted that the Facilitator contributed sacrificially and substantially to the success of this pilot project and the project would not have succeeded without this dedication. The Facilitator's involvement in the selection and scheduling of the casual pickers was unexpected and the on-farm workload lasted longer and had more complexity than had been originally expected. Some comments included:

[The Volunteer Facilitator] was great considering the limited time and her volunteer capacity. She was able to help the farm understand the backgrounds of the workers and was always prompt with addressing any issues we may have had with communication and cultural issues.

I believe the [Volunteer Facilitator] should be in a paid role if possible and they should undertake farm visits at least weekly for the first twelve weeks of the integration period and then possibly be reduced fortnightly.

The next Facilitator needs to be a paid worker with EAL qualifications. Timing of the funding for new employees needs to be planned carefully.

6. The role of the Facilitator (excluding English learning) should include:

- Liaison between REP, farm management, the workers, and CVGT.
- Development of cross-cultural understanding between farm management, CVGT, and the new and existing workers on the farm.
- Regular farm visits.
- Provision of initial English resources at the workplace.
- Provision of advice on the best use of cross-cultural interpreters.
- Support for the farm and the workers for performance reviews and disciplinary conferences.
- Development of WhatsApp groups for roster dissemination.
- Pre-employment training for new workers.

The time needed to carry out the role of the Facilitator (excluding English learning) is in the first month, because of the inductions and set-up, 10 hours per week, and thereafter, 5 hours per week. To be viable and effective, this crucial role needs to be a paid position.

There are no Australian standards for agricultural vocabulary and the development of this resource would assist with cross-cultural communications.

7. At the time of this report, a proposal was being developed in the area near the farm to employ an adult literacy teacher, however this proposal has not been finalised. Comments included:

There has been a growth in [the employee's] confidence but English acquisition during employment requires a well-structured program and a supportive employer.

8. The performance of the REP Taskforce was rated as Good. Comments included:

The start of the program was great, the profiles from the men and the interview process were good. It gave the farm access to a different workforce that we hoped would be a stable group that would return for future seasons and long-term employment.

9. Some other responses to the question 'what was most helpful about the trial' included:

A fresh approach for an industry that can be hard to crack.

The prospect to support and realise an opportunity that without the support of all parties collaborating, it would otherwise be impossible to achieve.

The benefits have been an improvement in English conversation skills and confidence by all.

This experience has provided improved status in family and community for men and women and self-esteem in having employment that is paid by the hour for most of the year. However, the women were always asking for their husbands to have the hourly paid work, rather than piecework.

Several workers also gain additional certification for truck and forklift licences with the help of CVGT and the farm.

The workers have also gained experience working in a multicultural workplace where all are respected, and they have developed new skills that are transferrable to other workplaces.

[Former refugees] who want to be casual pickers now have another option of a workplace other than the Hillwood farm. They seem to like working at [the farm], but the distance [from Launceston to the farm] is a problem.

10. Comments in response to the question 'what could have been done better' included:

Starting the English program from the start would have been a great idea as it would have helped to not only learn working terminology but also teach the workers about the expectations of working in Australia, e.g. rosters, informing employers of appointments as soon as they are known, arriving on time for work, being honest and communicating with management about issues they may be having.

Monthly catch up of all stakeholders, nothing too heavy (30 minutes out of hours, could be by phone).

The distance between Launceston and Red Hills was a problem. It was at the outer limit of practicality. Many of the casual workers did not have cars or driving licences and this meant that rostering was complex, needing to consider the availability of individuals, school delivery and pick-up times, and carpooling arrangements.

11. Some other responses regarding 'what has been learnt from this trial' included:

It requires a lot of time, effort and planning to teach and train the workers which the farm is happy to undertake if a level of commitment is demonstrated. We have learnt different processes that we are going to implement for effective training of all staff members.

An accountability matrix (or similar) would be useful. [For example] for details relating to X issue call Y person – it is Y's accountability to share actions with all members of the REP taskforce.

Open, clear and regular communication is paramount.

It is very pleasing to see the way the women demonstrated their ability and show leadership skills.

Initially, some of the existing casual workers felt threatened by the support being provided to the new workers, but they did not lose any work and the farm keeps expanding. Next year, the farm has contracted to take 50 casual workers from Tonga and East Timor.

12. In response to the question, 'could this project be replicated on other appropriate farms and possibly in other selected industries', comments included:

Yes, this could be replicated - the development of shared goals in the initial phase is vital.

The capacity to work well together (Farm Manager and Facilitator) and communicate respectfully through a range of often complex scenarios is important.

Several of the crises that occurred in the program would not have turned out in the same way without the goodwill between the [Farm] Manager and Facilitator.

The Facilitator and the Adult Literacy Teacher needs a more comprehensive Position Description and the roles of the Farm Manager and CVGT need to be documented.

**Recommendation**

The Reviewers recommend that the REP Taskforce should discuss these findings with the Tasmanian Department of State Growth to develop an effective employment strategy for humanitarian entrants.

Reviewers: Jeff McKinnon and Ivan James  
24 July 2019