

# a new start ::

From refugee to society  
through technology  
a social inclusion program  
for refugee youth

It's not easy to see a bright future when your childhood has been spent running from war, living in detention camps and receiving little, if any, education. But for fifteen young refugees now based in Fairfield NSW, life's starting to look a little brighter thanks to an initiative from Microsoft Australia and their social enterprise partner of 25 years, WorkVentures.

A photograph of two young people, a man and a woman, sitting at a desk in a computer lab. The man is in the foreground, looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The woman is behind him, also looking towards the camera. They are both working on laptops. In the background, other people are visible working at similar desks. The room has large windows on the right side, letting in natural light.

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*Many of these refugees have been in Australia for less than two years with the majority of them having escaped from war-ravaged countries such as Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan. While their nationalities may differ, their backgrounds are sadly similar. As Sadia, a young Afghani woman states, "After the war began in 1994 we had to leave Afghanistan because the Taliban thought we were targets. We stayed in Pakistan for six years living in two rooms with 34 other people. I did not go to school because my family had no residency card".*

Hopefully, Australia will provide Sadia with the security she dreamed of however, initially it was a confronting place. For any migrant, starting a new life can be difficult but with limited education and even less English, arriving in Australia for refugees is particularly hard. As young Iraqi male, Ameer, observed, "without English you are all lost...you don't understand the culture...you don't understand government services like Medicare or Centrelink" and even things that others take for granted such as a catching a train or bus "can be hard and embarrassing".

Enter WorkVentures and Microsoft with a program entitled i.settle.with.IT, which will supply these young people with the IT resources and guidance to help them fully participate in Australian society. It was a simple thought that would see this group help themselves by helping their fellow refugees. After all, Ameer, Sadia and their friends may not understand English all that well and they may still have a lot to learn about Australia but one thing they know all too well is what it's like to be newly arrived in Australia. They know first-hand that sense of isolation and rejection and the frustration that comes from an inability to communicate. They are also acutely aware of the lack of skills they need to enter the workforce.

With the support of Microsoft, WorkVentures provided the centre with 20 refurbished computers to replicate a workplace environment that promoted hands-on, collaborative learning in order to provide better opportunities for employment. Add in the watchful eye of Virginia Piccone and

Cansu Sezer of WorkVentures and Dr. Linda Leung of the University of Technology and i.settle.with.IT was ready to begin.

The foundation stone of the program was to develop a website specifically catering for newly arrived refugees. The contents had to include everything from practical advice for everyday life to where to find help learning English to dealing with essential government services. More importantly, as young Afghani, Layla, wisely noted, "We could not put it all in words because refugees would not understand." She laughingly added that it had to be so simple that "my grandparents could understand".

Since the very first session the participants were introduced to the workplace conditions of a web agency, and were encouraged to experiment different roles.

The participants interviewed potential users to get an accurate understanding of the support services they were accessing, such as Centrelink and Medicare. This in itself was a major challenge with Ameer speaking for all when he said, "I worry about my English when I talk to people I don't know". But through peer support and persistence they gathered a great deal of useful information.

If conducting interviews however, was to prove nerve wracking the next step was to prove even worse - having collated the information, each group was to develop a power point presentation to present to the entire group. This, Sadia told us, was both "scary but much fun too. In some ways it was





*With the group's confidence growing, the power point presentations were translated to simple online videos courtesy of Ameer and his newly acquired Microsoft Moviemaker skills. The result is a highly visual, simple to understand website that makes refugees first steps in Australia far easier. And while it will no doubt prove valuable for others, the entire project has provided Ameer, Sadia, Layla and their friends with skills that will prove invaluable throughout their lives.*

(the) best of the project". Having successfully confronted their fears, "everyone smiled and we were proud of ourselves". Sometimes, as Paul Clark Microsoft's Citizenship Manager noted, "it's not a case of teaching young people but giving them the tools to teach themselves".

Thanks to i.settle.with.IT they've learnt interview and presentation skills as well as increasing their computer skills. Through their participation in the project, they also have a better understanding of the Australian workplace and of the support services available to them.

But for all these skills there's one thing that will prove more valuable than any other and that is a sense of belief in themselves and their abilities. A belief so strong it can overpower memories of war, refugee camps, and deprivation. After all, WorkVentures and Microsoft can't help them regain their childhoods but they most certainly can help them find a better future. As Hijran said, "I feel settled in Australia. It is a peaceful and free country. I hope that I can have good future that will make me proud of myself".

The final word, however, goes to Microsoft's Paul Clark, "A big part of these programs relies on engaging the participants to achieve their personal goals. Technology has become THE tool required to interact socially and economically, whether it be for students to engage actively in learning experiences or job seekers obtaining skills for a 21st Century workforce. Technology is now a necessity. Ensuring that there is equitable access is vital if we are to ensure that technology does not become a barrier to social and economic engagement.

As for Ameer, a couple of weeks after the completion of the program, he was accepted to undertake work-experience at BMF, a Sydney-based interactive agency.

As this program begins to roll out across the network of vibrant Migrant Resource Centres across Australia, thousands of new arrivals will have the opportunity to learn these vital skills and take an active part in shaping their own bright future.



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