

Economic Pathways for Refugee Integration (EPRI) Program Evaluation December 2025



Summary

Whittlesea Community Connections (WCC) is funded by the Australian Government Department of Home Affairs (DHA) to pilot and deliver the Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration (EPRI) from February 2023 to June 2026.

DHA commissioned an independent evaluation in December 2024 which evaluated all 20 EPRI providers and found EPRI models that appeared more effective included support for employers, had strong connections to the settlement sector to support recruitment, were flexible in supporting variation in participant need, had a focus on career planning and emotional support, and included wages for participants.

WCC undertook an internal evaluation in November 2025 to capture learnings to refine the EPRI program design and delivery. This report provides a summary of the findings.

The WCC EPRI program is achieving its' intended outcomes with 95% participants increasing their social connections and confidence and 58% of participants achieving employment, training or volunteering outcomes. These outcomes have been achieved through a range of engagement and support strategies and partnerships with local and regional training and education institutions, settlement related providers and employers.

The WCC EPRI model creates flexible building blocks (eg. training, volunteering, paid placements, pre and post-employment support) that can be combined and tailored to meet individual learning, employability and settlement needs. Rather than assigning participants to predetermined pathways according to language proficiency or skill level, experiences are curated based on people's real aspirations and readiness for different forms of employment and community engagement. This allows for personalized progress while still working toward shared outcomes like employment readiness and social integration. The model fosters a more responsive integration process by prioritizing adaptability over rigid structures and shows that a combination of supports is needed to achieve successful outcomes.

Evaluation Aims and Methods

This evaluation aimed to understand the extent to which EPRI is meeting its intended outcomes, the effectiveness of targeted interventions in supporting refugee cohorts to access economic opportunities, and to identify recommendations for strengthening the program and other relevant supports.

The evaluation sought to answer the following questions:

- Among different EPRI participants what barriers do people need to overcome to achieve economic integration?
- To what extent are targeted interventions achieving their intended outcomes for participants and how has this been achieved through EPRI (and/or through other supports)?
- How can program design and delivery be adapted to better reflect intersectional experiences and needs of humanitarian entrants with low skills and/or low English?

11 in-depth interviews were conducted with EPRI clients, including 9 interviews conducted in-language for participants with low English proficiency. The sample was selected to capture diversity across the four key categories for English proficiency and skill level, along with length of time in Australia, level of EPRI support provided, and settlement support journeys for eligible clients.

The qualitative data from interviews was complemented by demographic and service data from WCC's client database and DEX to provide a deeper understanding of participant profiles and contextual factors. Interviews were transcribed in English and then coded and analysed using NVIVO.

Program Overview

Whittlesea Community Connections (WCC) Economic Pathways for Refugee Integration (EPRI) program provides structured intake, assessment and tailored support for refugees and recently arrived eligible migrants with low English proficiency and/or low skills. The program focuses on building individual pathways to employment including English language and digital literacy skill building, understanding Australian workplace culture and job readiness workshops, pre-accredited training, volunteer opportunities, student, paid placements, casual and permanent employment.

Training, volunteering, paid placements and casual employment is offered in a range of settings including WCC's social enterprises: Women in Work, nugal biik plants and seeds, Driver Ed, Food Collective Café and Wholesaler. [Social Enterprises - Whittlesea Community Connections](#)

While English proficiency is the biggest significant barrier, most EPRI participants face multiple and intersecting barriers, including lack of local work experience, connections and networks, lack of recognition of overseas qualifications, skills, and racism, discrimination, and unconscious bias in the recruitment process and workplace settings. To tailor support provided through EPRI, WCC uses the following categories to understand individual needs and develop relevant and achievable activities. Age is also a significant factor.

Up to the end of 2025, WCC has worked with 500 EPRI participants and provided 2,600 EPRI support sessions. 83% participants identified gaining employment as the main motivator for participating and 17% were focused on improving education and skills through training. 76% of participants identified as female and 24% identified as male. The percentage of women in the program grew over time as women led and women only programs were introduced in response to participant feedback and needs.



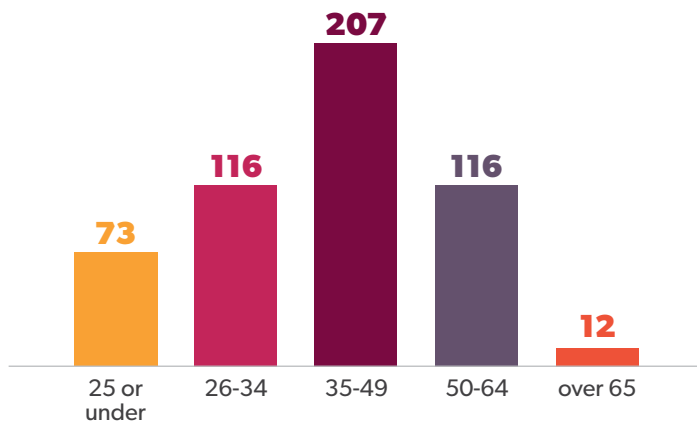
Whittlesea Community Connections: Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration Project

The project has successfully reached over 500 refugees, helping them achieve both short- and medium-term outcomes.

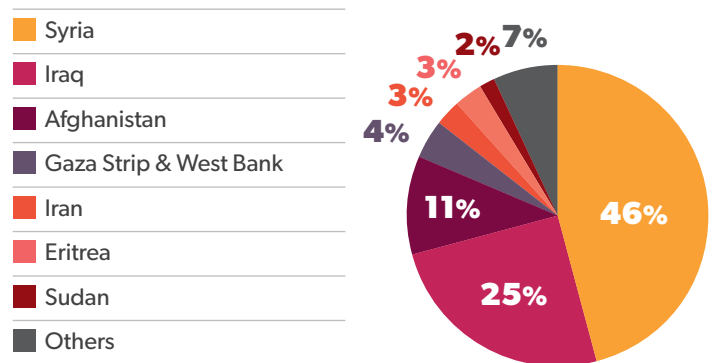
95% of participants reported an increase in skills, confidence, and English language proficiency related to economic participation.

58% of participants enhanced their economic participation through paid placements, employment, or self-employment.

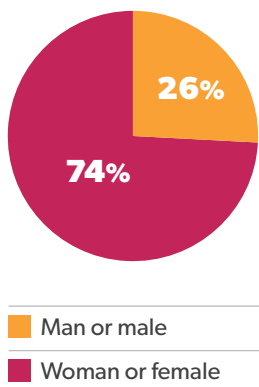
Age Band at Session*



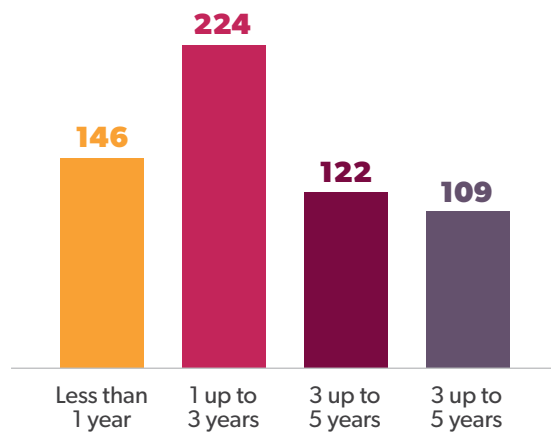
Country of Birth



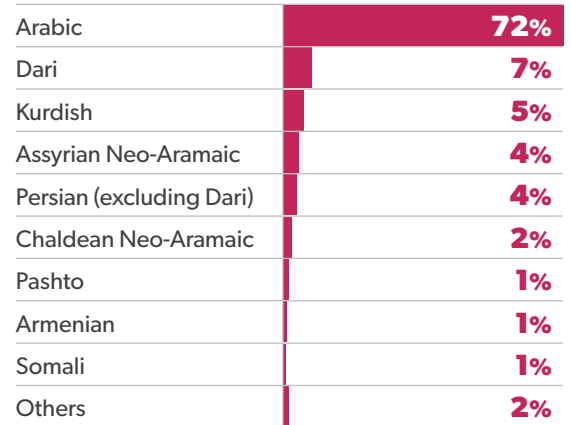
Gender



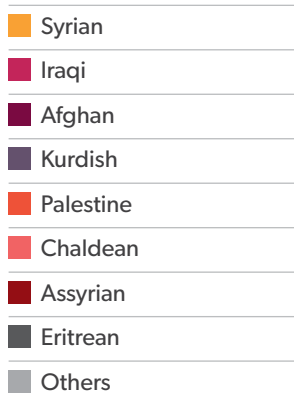
Years in Australia**



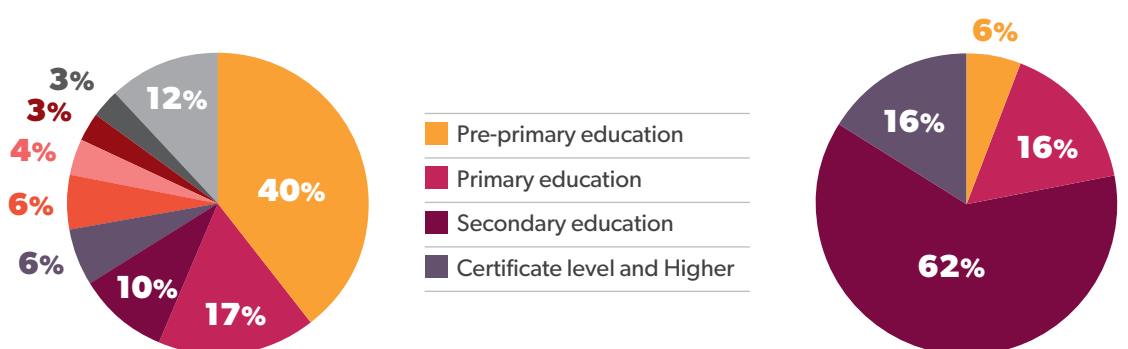
Main Language



Ancestry



Highest Level of Education



* Age represents age at session so if a client changes age group between sessions, they will appear in multiple age categories.

** Years In Australia is the difference in years between when the client migrated to Australia and their session conducted dates. Since a client can have sessions at different points in time, a single client may be counted in multiple categories of years in Australia.

Evaluation findings

1. What are the primary barriers to economic integration

All interviewees identified similar factors and barriers affecting their settlement journey and economic integration. These included age, ongoing health challenges, poor access to transport, cost-of-living pressures, cultural differences, limited opportunities, health issues, residency status, digital challenges and difficulties navigating support services.

Interviewees identified the three most common barriers to employment as low English language proficiency, lack of local work experience and difficulties with skill recognition, and competing priorities such as study and caring responsibilities, particularly for women. Common responses to these employment barriers are detailed below.

1a. Low English language proficiency

73% of interviewees identified low English language proficiency as one of the key barriers in gaining employment in Australia.

Interviewees with inter-mediate or higher English proficiency, noted that getting used to Australian accents and vocabulary was a significant challenge and took time and practice.

“

Australia is a distant country with different cultures and customs. You get to meet many people. I expected that my English language skills would help me find a job quickly, but I faced difficulties with the accents...”

Difficulties learning English in a classroom setting was raised, “the benefit reaches about 50% because studying on benches without actual practical training is boring”. Practical programs such as volunteering which provides the opportunity to speak English with a range of people and accents and opportunities that could be considered as part of study like the Settlement Language Pathways to Employment and Training (SLPET) program, especially if hours available could be extended.

1b. Lack of local work experience and skill recognition

All interviewees identified lack of local work experience as an employment barrier. Without local work experience interviewees struggled to get references for job applications or prove transferrable skills.

“

I have an experience, but I didn't know that that experience has not counted here. You should have a local experience and reference in Australia. So that was a step back for me, but I didn't give up.” Interviewee with low skills level

“

When we arrived in Australia, I expected that the path would be easy since I have a university degree and big experience in Jordan. Unfortunately, our lives are shaken by a harsh reality: education and experience are not recognized in Australia, and we found ourselves starting over again from zero...or getting a job in this field would be difficult because it requires extensive local experience, knowledge and networking.” Interviewee with medium skills level

EPRI participants frequently note that their international qualifications and professional experience are not regarded as equivalent to Australian experience. The lack of recognition of overseas qualifications and work experience was a persistent theme across all cohorts.

1c. Caring responsibilities for women

Primary caring responsibilities were frequently identified by female clients as a key barrier to obtaining employment. 74% of all EPRI program clients were women; 46% were couples with dependent(s), 6% were single parents and 17% had formal caring responsibilities.

“

I am alone here; no one is helping me. I came here with my husband, my daughter, and my mother-in-law, who is an elderly woman in need of assistance. My husband suffered a heart attack...so he is currently unable to manage things as he used to, which has increased the responsibilities on my shoulders...likewise, my daughter's kindergarten hours end at 3:30, which is during peak work time, and there is a lot of pressure at work, and I am forced to leave work to pick up my daughter.”

2. To what extent are targeted interventions achieving their intended outcomes

DHA's stated objective for the EPRI program is to facilitate the social and economic integration of refugees and humanitarian entrants with low skills and/or English language proficiency.

Through WCC's EPRI program to date, 58% of clients achieved employment, training or volunteering outcomes.

124 (25%) secured long term employment and 164 (33%) participated in volunteering, job readiness training, paid placements and/or seasonal employment. The primary sectors were:

1. Hospitality
2. NDIS and Aged Care
3. Participant-owned businesses, majority in catering and sales
4. Retail
5. Manufacturing

Standardized Client Outcome Reporting and Evaluation (SCORE) results showed positive improvements for 95% of all clients after participating in WCC's EPRI program including:

- Improved knowledge and access to information
- Confidence in dealing with issues
- Learning skills to address issues

Most interviewees noted that participating in EPRI contributed to increased knowledge of the employment system in Australia and increased confidence.

“

I was informed about the nature of work in Australia and how the work laws operate, in addition to continuous encouragement and working on improving me through appropriate training. I was also helped with creating my CV, police check, tax return lodgement, obtaining work wear, as well as training on how to conduct job interviews and how to successfully pass them.”

“

Of course, my self-confidence has definitely increased. My language skills have improved, I can now search for a job, handle situations, and if I have any weakness in any skill, I try to develop it and work on it. And now I will gain local experience that [is] needed.”

Interviewees who gained employment noted having to revise their aspirational goals or put them on hold due to financial pressures and having to look after other family members.

“

I completed high school but did not attend university and I hope to continue university in Australia, due to the war and circumstances.”

“

I had a dream of working as a carpenter, but due to the circumstances here and to support my family quickly, I had to work in other jobs.”

The EPRI model is achieving its intended outcomes and has been progressively refined and targeted throughout the pilot phase. Findings from WCC's EPRI internal evaluation, informed by participant-level data collected and submitted as part of this process, indicate that economic participation and employment outcomes are shaped by a combination of interrelated factors. These include English language proficiency, the transferability of existing skills, age, gender, and individual aspirations and motivations.

Analysis of the evaluation data indicates that these variables interact to influence both the intensity and type of support required, as well as the length of time participants need to be engaged to achieve sustainable employment outcomes.

In response to these findings, the WCC's EPRI team has developed the table below, drawing on data collected and participant assessments conducted throughout the pilot evaluation. The table illustrates the relative likelihood of participants achieving employment outcomes based on key determinants-specifically English proficiency, skills level, and age.

The EPRI Participants' Journey

The probability of obtaining a job or starting a successful business after completing the EPRI program is based on English proficiency and skills.

English Proficiency Level		Level PRE and Level 1			Level 2 and Level 3			Level 4+
		Low	Medium	High	Low	Medium	High	Low
Age Band	Under 25	6-24 Months	6-18 Months	SBP 6-18 Months	6-20 Months	6-18 Months	SBP 3-12 Months	3-18 Months
	Age 26-34	12-30 Months	6-24 Months	SBP 6-18 Months	6-24 Months	6-18 Months	SBP 3-12 Months	3-18 Months
	Age 35-49	12-36 Months	6-30 Months	SBP 6-24 Months	12-30 Months	12-24 Months	SBP 3-18 Months	6-24 Months
	Age 50-64	18-36 Months	12-36 Months	SBP 6-30 Months	12-36 Months	12-30 Months	SBP 12-24 Months	6-30 Months
	Age 65 +	Very Low	Very Low	SBP 6-36 Months	Very Low	6-36 Months	SBP 6-36 Months	Very Low

- Very High probability
- High probability
- Medium probability
- Low probability
- Very low

SBP Small Business Project (SBP)

We also supported our participants with options for Self-employment and home-based business. In this case, if participants have the skills needed, regardless of English level, with EPRI support, they can open their own business, at least at home.

* Skills: In this context, "skills" refers to the transformed abilities that can be recognised as local experiences in Australia.

** #-# months represent Numbers stated in the table reflect the estimated number of months of support needed.

3. How can program design and delivery be adapted to better reflect intersectional experiences and needs?

Findings related to program design and approach

3a. Intake, Assessment & Advice

Being newly arrived with few support networks in Australia placed greater importance on the role of EPRI caseworkers, who provided valuable information and advice. Information and advice were tailored individually to each person's experience, previous skills, interests and aspirations.

“I was guided to the program that I was according to my experience and what skills I had.”

“[When] I came here, I don't know what to do, what to study. They helped me to decide, which course is suitable for me.”

“They took time to understand about me and my culture, my language, or in my religion, before starting any program or anything about my timings, what I'm doing, everything they first of all, they took time.”

The importance of being supported by people with lived experience was also highlighted.

“While I started with you, I was with similar people like me, who understood my challenges and tried their best to help.”

“When they are communicating with someone who is for their background and speak their own language, they are more comfortable with them to talk and share their problems and needs.”

The ability to engage with newly arrived humanitarian entrants using bi-cultural and bi-lingual skills, respond to individual needs and provide appropriate support led clients to promote EPRI within their communities through 'word of mouth'. This is reinforced by the fact that most interviewees were introduced to the organisation through friends or family and subsequently approached WCC for support themselves.

3b. Work Placement in social enterprise

Interviewees mentioned how placement within one of WCC's social enterprises helped them in their settlement journey, providing an opportunity to gain practical work experience in a supportive environment.

“Respect, appreciation, working on understanding your needs, providing assistance, and most importantly, providing job opportunities through the program.”

The evaluation did not show a clear difference in employment outcomes between social enterprises and other paid placements. However, integrating the EPRI program within our enterprise structure provides a distinct operational advantage in supporting participants. By embedding pathways into WCC's own enterprises, we can maintain consistent engagement across multiple stages of their employment journeys. This approach allows for timely intervention and continuity, strengthening the link between training and actual work environments.

Operating within an enterprise context also allows us to design targeted learning and development opportunities. Participants gain practical experience while contributing to meaningful outputs, and in some cases, progress toward entrepreneurial goals. This flexibility creates unique pathways, including opportunities for individuals to establish and manage their own businesses. The model allows WCC to offer a more adaptive and sustainable approach to refugee employment integration, beyond traditional placement methods.

3c. Student Placement

32% of all EPRI participants were referred by an education institute, mostly, Melbourne Polytechnic AMEP with whom WCC has a longstanding partnership. Another important referral pathway and opportunity to learn and gain practical skills was through student placements offered as part of the Settlement Language Pathways to Employment and Training program (SLPET).

“I did my SLPET hours through your organization, and it was a wonderful opportunity to learn and benefit and with you to learn more”

“They give me the opportunity for study, having placement, and of course, I'm going to complete my journey with WCC as a volunteer.”

3d. Volunteering

The majority of interviewees acknowledged the positive impact of volunteering. Volunteering through EPRI helped them develop skills within a new socio-cultural environment, improve English language, cross-cultural communication and contributed to health and wellbeing.

“

Now, because I volunteer with transport in WCC, I can speak fluently and understand what another person is talking about.”

“

I started volunteering and began regaining my confidence”

“

When I became a volunteer, I benefited a lot from conversations with others whether Arabic or English speakers. My free time was filled with meaningful work...through volunteering, you meet people, expand your connections and grow. All of this happened through the program. It pushed me to integrate more, expand my knowledge and meet more people.”

3e. Integrated Service Delivery Model

Whittlesea Community Connections has a range of services and programs operating in an integrated model. The majority of EPRI clients accessed other support services at WCC, including:

- 65% accessing casework through the Settlement Engagement and Transition Support (SETS) program,
- 65% accessing group or capacity building activities,
- 21% accessing Emergency Relief and
- 10% accessing legal support services.

One interviewee received a range of support from different programs across WCC since arriving in Australia 4 years ago including food relief, settlement support, volunteering and EPRI.

“

At one point before COVID, I went through financial hardship and requested help from the organization. Thanks to them, they assisted me by referring me to the Food Collective, where I received help through food and emergency cards like vouchers. They also talked to me about my situation, assessing whether I was able to work and what type of work suited me. They suggested that to be a volunteer at the organization, spend time and interact with people.” Reflecting on the volunteer experience the interviewee said, “I love helping and receiving thanks from others..[it has] restored my self- confidence.”

9 out of the 11 interviewees received SETS support in addition and/or combined with EPRI. The median number of SETS sessions was 9 sessions that focused on advocacy, social issues, housing and financial support. The number of one on one EPRI sessions provided to each interviewee ranged from 11 to 28, and they with a focused on employment and education.

While there was no data available to determine the direct correlation between English proficiency, skill level and intensity of support required through EPRI, observationally it can be said that clients with both low English and low skill level required medium to high intensity of EPRI support over a longer period of time.

Integrated service delivery enabled WCC to respond effectively to the diverse needs and barriers clients faced gaining and maintaining employment. This was particularly important given the level of English proficiency and skill level of clients, where additional support was integral to addressing settlement and other barriers to work.

3f. Gendered Lens

WCC’s EPRI program evolved over time to better respond to the barriers women with refugee backgrounds face; gendered systems overlaid with diverse cultural, linguistic, religious, and psychological factors. This has been an important development within the program considering that 76% of all clients are women. Gendered considerations within EPRI include:

- Providing support for women to achieve their goals within the context of having primary caring responsibilities
- Ensuring access to EPRI activities through the provision of childcare, transport and flexible hours
- Creating safe spaces for female participation through women only groups/ sessions
- Offering one-to-one support to address individual barriers and build confidence
- Leveraging peer learning and mentoring support that builds positive female role models within community

“

So having a childcare subsidy with Centrelink helped me. And of course, here, the environment here [at WCC] is very supportive. Like if a day I have a medical appointment for my kids or for myself, they are very understandable.... And I feel that I gave some, what do we call it, some energy, some power to the other ladies in my community.”

3g. Employment support

Pre and post-employment was also provided. Work readiness support included job search, resume writing, interview skills, understanding employer expectations, rights and responsibilities in the Australian context. Participants placed in employment were supported with employer onboarding processes including applying for Working with Children's Check and police check, setting up employee profiles and navigating different employment on-line systems.

“

I was also helped with creating my CV, police check, tax return lodgement, obtaining work wear, as well as training on how to conduct job interviews and how to successfully pass them.”

Placements into work were facilitated through employer engagement and building relationships with local employers. These included Victoria Cold Storage, REPURPOSE IT, and the other manufacturers.

“

When I arrived in Australia as a refugee, I engaged with an employment service for over a year. Despite my efforts, I struggled to secure employment due to my lack of local experience and limited language skills. My friends suggested that I seek help from the EPRI program at WCC, mentioning they had valuable support and connections that could assist me in finding a respectable and decent job. I am truly grateful for the support and opportunities provided to me through WCC's EPRI program. The team helped improve my CV, prepared me for interviews, and even accompanied me to interviews for support. I am now happily working full-time at REPURPOSE IT, which allows me to support my family and start contributing to the community.”



Participant's input on model design and approach

Some of the key success factors highlighted by participant's feedback include the importance of:

- 1.** Responses that are individually tailored to take into account level of English, skills, work experience and other settlement needs are critical. Humanitarian entrants with diverse backgrounds experience similar employment barriers, however approaches that will work in response is different for each person.
- 2.** English language acquisition related to vocational outcomes through work experience both paid and voluntary, as English and lack of local work experience are major employment barriers.
- 3.** Diverse participation opportunities including paid and student placements, training, further education and volunteering, which all provide valuable and practical work- place learning.
- 4.** Work experience and employment opportunities through social enterprises that provide opportunities to learn and build practical skills in supportive and inclusive Australian work environments.
- 5.** Support to re-enter education pathways while building on informally developed and diverse skills and experiences, in response to the refugee experience and impact of conflict on humanitarian entrants' ability to complete higher education.
- 6.** Employment mentoring that supports people to secure entry level employment while creating time and opportunity to develop higher levels of skill and knowledge for improved long-term employment outcomes.
- 7.** Employment support provided in combination with settlement and other wrap-around support services.
- 8.** Greater preparation on the practicalities of Australian workplaces such as occupational health and safety, racism and discrimination
- 9.** A gendered approach to ensure equity of outcomes for female humanitarian entrants. This includes programming that is flexible around caring responsibilities, supports independence through transport and promoting positive female role models.

Internal evaluator comments

The careful intake and assessment, the introduction to the program and the tailored and varied nature of the supports and pathways available through WCC's EPRI program is key for many participants. Given the strength of these foundations the focus can now be on employer engagement and capacity building, particularly within local growth employment industries. This will build more supportive workplace environments facilitate entry into the labour market and more secure employment opportunities.