WESTERN SYDNEY
UNIVERSITY
W

Understanding the experience and perceived impact of the Ready Arrive Work Program

Susanne Gannon
Danielle Tracey
Rachael Jacobs

Centre for Educational Research, Western Sydney University

INTRODUCTION

The Ready Arrive Work (RAW) program assists high school students from refugee backgrounds to explore vocational learning pathways in a supportive and positive environment. It aims to equip them with a better understanding of employment, workplaces, career planning and the pathways which can lead to a successful career after completing school. Designed by JobQuest and the NSW Department of Education, the RAW program targets government high schools in metropolitan and regional NSW. It has been operating in NSW High schools since 2006. The program consists of 10 structured sessions, comprising 6 x 2hr, 4 x 1.5hr sessions, as well as workplace (industry) and community engagement (civic) events. Other learning opportunities conducted outside school sites are special days named FRUIT (Fun, Realistic, Unbiased Industry Teaching Day) and SALAD (Services and Local Agencies Day). These provide students with hands on and interactive opportunities to engage with guest presenters from a range of professions and industries.

For students from refugee backgrounds, careers advice has been consistently identified in policy and research as a point of vulnerability and as an ideal opportunity for intervention. A recent Victorian inquiry into school-based career advising (Parliament of Victoria, 2018) identified numerous issues faced by refugee students including: unfamiliarity with systems of education and work, inadequate knowledge of career options and prerequisites, isolation, trauma, disruptions, lack of connections and mentors, parents' limited knowledge and accompanying expectations.

More than a decade after the RAW initiative and resources were developed, and after rapid expansion of the program beyond its original site, it is timely to gather an understanding of the perceived impact, enablers and barriers of the RAW program.

400+ STUDENTS from refugee and new arrival backgrounds

26 SCHOOLS

REGIONS: Sydney, Coffs Harbour, Armidale, Albury, Wagga Wagga, Illawarra

Study Objectives

This research engaged students and key stakeholders in order to provide a rich account of the impact of RAW on schools, students, industry, and civic organisations. Central to this was the identification of enablers and barriers to participation in, and success of, RAW.

The central questions of the study were:

Research Question 1.
What do participants report are the impacts of RAW on schools, students, industry and civic organisations?

Research Question 2.
What are the enablers and barriers of participation in RAW and the perceived success of RAW?

Research methods

With an emphasis on qualitative data, interviews and focus groups with 58 key stakeholders were the primary source of data for this open inquiry investigation. A 'vertical slice' involving stakeholders from all layers of participation in RAW provided insights from those closest to and furthest from the delivery of RAW. This enabled a triangulation of perspectives in order to create a comprehensive understanding of RAW. Two case studies examined the impacts on particular schools in their local contexts.

Number of participants per stakeholder group

Participant group	Number of participants
Current students	32
Alumni students	6
School staff	6
JobQuest staff	5
Industry and civic partners	3
RAW Steering Group members	6
TOTAL	**58**

FIND

Students and adult stakeholders reported that the Ready Arrive Work program was beneficial for students, schools, industry and civic partner organisations. All the 'impacts' reported by these stakeholders were positive. This indicates that participating RAW stakeholders hold the program in high regard and the continuation of the program should be prioritised by the NSW Department of Education. More specifically, the following impacts were reported by stakeholders for the participating groups:

For schools, RAW:

- provides an opportunity for teachers to advance their knowledge regarding:
  - the vocational needs of students from refugee and recent arrival backgrounds,
  - industry and civic organisations,
  - student-centred pedagogies,
  - careers and vocational training and pathways;
- complements and deepens current career education at the school;
- fills gaps in provisions for this cohort of students; and
- meets the Department of Education and individual school needs and priorities.
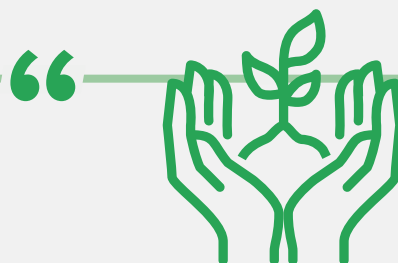
> You need to chip away at it. You plant the seed and then you come back and water it and you keep doing that. I think that the RAW program's really crucial in growing that plant (teacher).

INGS

> ❝ RAW shifted the emphasis to 'make you think more in detail, not just vaguely about your plans' (Year 11 student).
>
> Students described the active hands-on learning of skills they may have already touched on at school as now being 'covered physically this time which is better' (Yr 10 student), or 'not just actually saying it but practically, actually making them alive' (Yr 11 student). ❞

For students with a refugee background, RAW:

- increases their individual knowledge about all aspects of work and potential vocational pathways;

- increases their engagement with the content through the hands-on personalised learning approach utilised;

- prepares them for work, facilitating both hard vocational skills and soft employability skills;

- boosts their confidence in work related behaviours;

- positions them for employment and helps their resilience in applying for jobs;

- helps them to recognise the skills, personal attributes and assets they already have;

- enhances their communication skills and confidence through their visits to civic partners; and

- civics days also contribute to citizenship broadly as well as work related learning.

For industry partners, RAW:

- connects industry with schools and students to inform the future workforce about requirements for specific roles;

- industry visits emphasise diversity of employment opportunities and pathways; and

- builds and expands connections between schools, refugee communities and industry.

For civic partners, RAW:

- provides opportunities for the organisations to meet their strategic goals;

- supports students to connect with cultural organisations; and

- builds and expands connections between schools, refugee communities and these agencies.

> ❝ [Students] can consider: 'What have I experienced today? Am I excited by this experience? Is it something that makes me feel great and fulfils me? Does it give me a future pathway somewhere?' (civic partner organisation) ❞

The findings of the current study should be interpreted considering the following limitations. The stakeholders who agreed to participate in the study may have been motivated to do so as they were engaged with the program in a positive way, resulting in a somewhat biased sample. The findings represent participants' perceptions of impact rather than objective measures of impact achieved through an experimental design. Finally, the study was unable to recruit as many participating industry partners as anticipated which could also impact on the findings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this small-scale qualitative study suggest that the Ready Arrive Work program should be continued, expanded and celebrated as participants of the study not only attested to the positive impacts on students with a refugee background, but also on their schools, and the associated industry and civic partners.

Notwithstanding this high regard for the program, participants provided valuable insights which may serve to further improve the process and outcomes of RAW in future iterations. These recommendations are provided below:

- A teacher (ideally the Careers Adviser) should be actively involved in the delivery of RAW, noting the impact of the program upon students is directly related to the involvement of the teachers at the school;

- More avenues should become available for parents and carers to be involved in RAW to strengthen the impact of the program. This may include the production of targeted materials or events for parents and carers or developing strategies for their ongoing engagement in RAW;

- Similarly, sustained attention over time beyond the RAW program is important to change deep seated ideas about desirable vocational pathways held by students and by parents and carers;

- Maintain the specificity of the target student group;

- Maintain the delivery of RAW by the external organisation;

- Ensure the program continues to be offered for free to schools and students;

- Provide ongoing rather than annual funding to RAW to facilitate school uptake;

- Address the issue of retention of RAW coordinators;

- The pedagogy and curriculum were viewed as strengths, however, some specific aspects require attention;

- The resources provided to students need to be improved, through a compiled booklet and/or updated and accessible website;

- Partnerships with industry and civic organisations provide valuable benefits to the program and should be continued as a core feature of the program;

- Continue the current structure with RAW governed by the Steering Group. The active role of the Department of Education (DoE) on the Steering Group and coordinating across schools has particularly been noted as it keeps RAW relevant and responsive to DoE priorities; and

- Document the hands-on and practical pedagogies used in RAW for the purposes of sharing with educators outside of the refugee and EAL/D learning space. The overwhelmingly positive feedback on these strategies has implications for the broader field of vocational education to potentially enhance the relevance and interactivity of programs leading to greater student engagement.
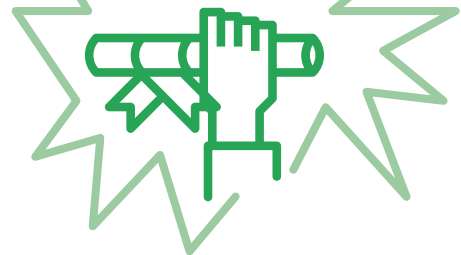
> Well my dad has the idea of like when a girl has her own certificate, like uni certificate or high certificate, it's actually like a weapon in your hand… So, like whatever happens to you in the future, you're actually independent and you will actually get a job no matter what happens. He wants it to be like – we're doing something in the future. We're not actually lost. (student)

WESTERN SYDNEY
UNIVERSITY