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Sociocultural Competency Training for Migrants in a Job Placement Program

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Abstract

Recent migrants from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds are often unfamiliar with the implicit social rules for effective workplace interactions vital for career search and advancement in the adopted country. Job placement programs available for the unemployed may have limited use for CALD clients unless they also receive intercultural social skills training aimed at enhancing their sociocultural competency in preparation for the culturally different workplace. This paper will report the implementation and preliminary evaluation of the EXCELL (Excellence in Cultural Experiential Learning and Leadership) Program - as a sociocultural competency training module - in an innovative and comprehensive labour market program for CALD migrants in Brisbane, Australia. On completion of EXCELL, a sample of 101 migrant jobseekers (37% male, median age = 35 years, median residence in Australia = 2.25 years, 80% from non-English-speaking background) reported increases in job search self-efficacy and intercultural social self-efficacy, compared with their pre-training survey responses. Program ratings and trainers' observations have further indicated high levels of client satisfaction with the EXCELL training and its relevance to enhancing social interactions in job placements. The implications for future evaluation research as well as practice in employment and migrant services will be discussed.

Introduction

The Australian economy has a growing dependence on skilled migrants and, by implication, a high need to develop and maintain a productive, diverse workforce. In 2005-06, of the 180,000 permanent additions of migrants, 51% came under the Skill Stream of the nation's migration program (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2007). According to the ABS (2006), of the migrants who arrived between 2000 and 2004, their labour force participation rate was 58.4%

(compared to 67.3% among the local-born), and their unemployment rate was 9.0% (compared to 4.9% among the local-born). Migrants who come from countries where English is not the main language and who have lower levels of English proficiency, had a low labour force participation of only 37%. While immigration policies continue to be influenced by ongoing skills shortages, the essential concern is that significant numbers of migrants from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds experience difficulties obtaining suitable employment that is commensurate with their skill level (Forrest & Johnston, 2000; Ramsay, Barker & Shallcross, in press). The adverse impact of unemployment or underemployment on mental health is well-documented (e.g., Murphy & Athanasou, 1999) and inevitably adds to the challenges that migrants and their families face in their resettlement (Mak & Barker, 2006).

English proficiency and training in job search strategies alone may not be sufficient for some highly skilled CALD migrants to relocate their professional careers to Australia (Mak, 2001). Recent migrants may be unaware of the prevailing values and norms in the Australian workplace. Even CALD migrants who have settled in Australia for a number of years may not have a full grasp of the implicit social rules for interacting effectively with supervisors, colleagues and clients, and face barriers in transferring their professional and management skills. Job placement programs available for the unemployed may have limited use for CALD clients unless they also receive training in intercultural social skills. Such training can help migrant workers and jobseekers develop intercultural social self-efficacy vital for career success and social integration (Mak & Barker, 2006).

Job hunting is an exhausting process requiring high levels of resourcefulness and job search self-efficacy from jobseekers and particularly migrants (Eden &

Aviram, 1993; Mace, Atkins, Fletcher, & Carr, 2005; Mak, 2001). The process is complicated by their status as newcomers and their drive to make the decision to migrate worth the sacrifice that has been paid by themselves and their family. Psychological services, in the form of intercultural social skills training programs, can promote migrants' mental health by equipping them to deal with all the challenges involved in securing employment. What is required are programs that are underpinned by Bochner's (1986) intercultural social learning model, rather than focusing on the deficits inherent in the migrants' unfamiliarity with the social rules of engagement in the host culture.

EXCELL Sociocultural Training for Jobseekers

The EXCELL (**Ex**cellence in **C**ultural **E**xperiential **L**earning and **L**eadership) Program is a structured social competency training system initially developed by the authors along with two Canadian counseling psychologists for developing international students' sociocultural competencies (see Mak, Westwood, Barker, & Ishiyama, 1998) and facilitating intercultural relations between international and local students (Mak & Barker, 2004). EXCELL is based on an integrated instructional model with Bandura's (1986) social cognitive learning model and self-efficacy theory (1997) in particular as its cornerstone (Mak, Westwood, Ishiyama, & Barker, 1999). The processes underpinning EXCELL skills development are facilitated by the use of various group counselling techniques (Westwood, Mak, Barker, & Ishiyama, 2000). Review of the efficacy of the Program in educational settings in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the UK (Ho, Holmes, & Cooper, 2004; Mak & Buckingham, 2007), indicates its utility in enhancing international, migrant, and local-born university students' interaction skills and social self-efficacy, as well as interest in and time spent with culturally different friends.

In an innovative application implemented since 2004, EXCELL has been incorporated as part of a job training program for migrant jobseekers by Bridgeworks Personnel Limited, a Brisbane-based job placement agency in Australia. The Queensland Government funds Bridgeworks to implement a program, known as the Host Employment and Training (HEAT) Scheme (see (), to assist highly skilled CALD migrants and refugees into the workforce. The Scheme includes five-day preparatory training that addresses curriculum vitae and application letter writing, job search skills, occupational health and safety, networking, and interviewing skills. Clients also undertake a module on cultural knowledge about the Australian workplace. Clients are then placed for three months with non-profit organisations that can best utilise their professional skills. During the placement, clients can gain accreditation for their competencies in

the Certificate III, Business Administration. Central to the success of the HEAT program is the emphasis on professional development which acknowledges migrants' and refugees' skills and experience prior to coming to Australia.

The EXCELL Program is integrated into HEAT's on-going professional development training while clients are in their job placements in the community. They return to the training centre every two weeks across the 3-month placement to undertake one of the six EXCELL sociocultural competency sessions. Specifically, the sessions are: making social contact, seeking help, participating in a group or team, refusing a request, expressing disagreement, and giving feedback. The sessions, each of 3 hours' duration and offered to groups of between 8 and 20 participants, are co-facilitated by two accredited EXCELL trainers – where possible, a local-born group leader from the mainstream cultural background (providing a credible role model in terms of the host cultural code) and a leader from a culturally diverse background (a credible role model in terms of CALD experience). The process for the development of each key social competency follows stages referred to as alliance building, cultural mapping, coaching and practice, goal-setting and contracting, and transfer to real life (Westwood et al., 2000).

A Preliminary Program Evaluation

In this paper, we will report the preliminary evaluation of EXCELL sociocultural training offered as an integrated part of Bridgeworks Personnel's HEAT Scheme. The first part of this initial evaluation was based on quantitative ratings from jobseekers who had undertaken the integrated training. Specifically, we tested the hypotheses that jobseekers' levels of job search self-efficacy and intercultural social self-efficacy on completion of the training, would be higher than those recorded just prior to EXCELL training. Jobseekers' ratings of the usefulness of different aspects of the EXCELL Program would also be analysed. The second part of the preliminary evaluation was drawn from the observations made by four trainers responsible for facilitating the EXCELL training for the jobseekers.

Method

Jobseeker Participants

Participants of the program evaluation were 101 migrant jobseekers (36 males, 61 females, and four with unspecified gender) who completed EXCELL training sessions as part of Bridgeworks Personnel's HEAT Training Scheme in Brisbane, Australia. The participants' age ranged from 17 to 58 years, with a median of 35 years. Their period of residence in Australia ranged from one month to 37 years, with a

median of 2.25 years. Eighty percent of the participants were from non-English-speaking background. They had come from 36 nations in different parts of the world, with four or more participants born in India, the Philippines, Russia, China, Sudan, or Columbia. The participants as a group were very well-educated, with eighty-four percent of the participants holding a Bachelor's degree or higher, and another 10% possessing technical or professional qualification at the diploma or certificate level.

Measures for Pre- and Post-Training

Both the pre- and post-EXCELL Training survey questionnaires included measures of two domains of self-efficacy - job search self-efficacy and intercultural social self-efficacy.

Job search self-efficacy was assessed using a 4-item measure developed by the first author for this study. Respondents were asked to indicate, on 7-point Likert-type scales, how confident they were in various job search situations, e.g., those involving contact with potential employers or others regarding the availability of jobs. This measure attained a satisfactory coefficient alpha of .84 at pre-training.

Intercultural social self-efficacy was assessed using a 12-item abridged instrument presented as 7-point Likert-type scales; it was adapted from Fan and Mak (1998). This measure attained a satisfactory coefficient alpha of .83 at pre-training.

Additionally, the pre-training survey included questions on demographic background. The post-training survey had an item on participants' perception of the overall relevance of the EXCELL sociocultural training, on a four-point scale, where 1 = *Very relevant to my needs*, and 4 = *Not at all relevant to my needs*. The second survey also sought respondents' perceived usefulness of various components of the training, with possible ratings ranging from 0 = *No value at all*, to 10 = *Extremely valuable and useful*.

Procedure

Participants consenting to participate in the evaluation of the EXCELL module of their job training were asked to complete a pre-EXCELL survey at the beginning of their first session, and an EXCELL Program Evaluation Survey on completion of the sociocultural competency training module. Participants were assured of the confidential and voluntary nature of the evaluation. The anonymous surveys were linked by individual three-digit tracking codes to enable the comparison of responses at the two different points of time.

Results from Jobseekers

Compared to their pre-training job search self-efficacy scores ($M = 20.25$, $SD = 4.96$), jobseekers reported a significant increase in their job search self-efficacy following EXCELL training ($M = 21.82$, $SD = 3.67$), dependent-samples $t(83) = 3.27$, 2-tailed $p = .002$, 95% CI of the difference = .61 - 2.53.

Further, compared to their pre-training intercultural social self-efficacy scores ($M = 57.26$, $SD = 11.03$), jobseekers reported a significant increase in their intercultural social self-efficacy following EXCELL training ($M = 60.45$, $SD = 9.43$), dependent-samples $t(98) = 3.40$, 2-tailed $p = .001$, 95% CI = 1.33 - 5.06.

At post-training, the Pearson correlation between job search and intercultural social self-efficacy scores was .50 ($p < .001$) and smaller than the scales' alphas.

In the post-EXCELL survey, 65.3 percent of respondents perceived the overall program as "*very relevant to my needs*", and another 31.6 percent found it

“relevant to my needs”. Table 1 presents the participants’ mean ratings of the usefulness of various components of the sociocultural competency training.

Table 1: Ratings of the Usefulness of Sociocultural Competency Training.

Aspect of Program	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Demonstration by trainers	8.63	1.56
Practice and coaching sessions	8.59	1.44
Talks by trainers	8.58	1.61
Discussions in the group	8.42	1.66
The cultural maps	8.31	1.97
Pre-session self-study using the EXCELL Participant’s Manual	7.50	2.07
Action plan at end of session	7.85	1.98
Contract for success in Participant’s Manual	7.84	1.98
Homework practice	7.86	2.12

Trainers’ Observations

Interviews were conducted with four accredited EXCELL trainers who were responsible for facilitating EXCELL training at Bridgeworks Personnel. They were asked to reflect on their experience as trainers and their views on the relevance of the program for migrant and refugee jobseekers. Thematic analysis of their qualitative responses revealed a uniform perception that the program was relevant to the needs of skilled migrant jobseekers.

The most frequently occurring response related to the role of EXCELL in increasing awareness about the influence of culture on behaviour. An Australian woman who has been the senior trainer on the program for over four years commented: *What makes EXCELL stand out from other programs is its focus on helping migrants to recognise the impact of their original/or home culture on the way they act. Most migrants don’t know that this affects even simple interactions on the job, such as being able to say “no” to a boss or co-worker if you are asked to do something that is unreasonable at work.*

An Australian male trainer described the contribution of the program in a similar way: *The EXCELL program opens the eyes of migrant and refugee workers to understand how culture plays a part in important everyday interactions in the workplace. Through the EXCELL program, migrants learn a type of map that guides them through cross-cultural encounters such as chatting informally to a supervisor, which is unheard of in many cultures.*

Similarly, an Australian female trainer stated: *EXCELL helps migrants to understand that that everyone wants to achieve the same thing, but we use different behaviours. For example, if the aim of the interaction with a colleague or client is to make them*

feel respected, safe and honoured, then the way you do it may be as different from the way I do it as the North Pole is from the South Pole. However, we may both be trying to show respect. You do it by avoiding eye contact with the other person, and I look them straight in the eye. This is really important in the job placement but also in “real” jobs.

Another category of response addressed the nature of the Australian workplace. For example, a Canadian-born male trainer commented how shocked many migrants were about the multicultural nature of Australian organisations. He stated: *In a multicultural country such as Australia, the Bridgeworks migrants need to develop skills for interacting with a vast array of ethnically and linguistically diverse colleagues, as well as with the host-country Australians. They reported to us that they did not expect that there would be so many people from other cultures in the organisations. The trainer also commented how the EXCELL programs’ co-facilitation model mirrored the workplace. He said: I found having two EXCELL trainers was particularly important; one from the host country (Australia in this case) and the other a migrant who could relate to some aspects of the skilled migrants’ experience.*

Trainers also described how the program contributed to migrants’ satisfaction in the workplace. A female trainer said: *Our experience has taught us that EXCELL offers migrants a chance to practise new skills in the safety of the training room. For example, a Chinese male jobseeker found lunch times very stressful. He did not know how to join in the lunch room conversation which was almost always about cricket or Rugby Union, neither of which he was familiar with. He feared his workmates thought he was not interested, or a loner. We practised how to break into the conversation by asking questions about sport. The whole group congratulated him at the next session when he reported that he had tried it out at work and his colleagues explained the rules of cricket to him enthusiastically. EXCELL provided the opportunity to practise the words and skills in the training room before trying it out at work.*

Finally, an encouraging response was made by the trainer who worked consistently with all the Bridgeworks participants. She said: *I believe that migrants who graduate from the EXCELL program have a higher chance of staying in their jobs longer. The problem for many migrants is that they don’t last long in their jobs. If they are more aware that a problem is caused by cultural differences or cultural misunderstanding, not personal differences, then that improves their likelihood of staying in that job. For example, some migrants always comment on how much Australians smile at work. Through the program they learn that in Australia you can often achieve more at*

work if you try to smile and be friendly, than if you are always serious about everything all the time.

Discussion

The EXCELL social competency training program, has been integrated into an innovative and comprehensive labour market program for highly skilled and primarily CALD migrant jobseekers in Australia since 2004. EXCELL's integrated theoretical framework has its cornerstone in Bandura's (1986) social cognitive learning and particularly self-efficacy theory. In our preliminary evaluation conducted with the jobseekers, we found increases in the jobseekers' levels of self-efficacy in both job search and intercultural social interactions on completion of the 3-month job placement incorporating EXCELL sessions. With enhanced job search self-efficacy, migrant jobseekers are likely to remain motivated to look for employment and persist in job search behaviours. Improvement in intercultural social self-efficacy would suggest a greater willingness and confidence to initiate and engage in cross-cultural social encounters, which is vital for developing interpersonal and communication effectiveness in a culturally different workplace.

In the current evaluation, jobseekers rated all aspects of the EXCELL Program favourably. The most useful components have been identified to be demonstration by trainers, practice and coaching sessions, talks by trainers, group discussions, and cultural maps. Interestingly, all of these components involve learning by doing (following directed observations and coaching) and interactions among group members, and have a focus on social behaviours appropriate to the host culture.

Trainers' observations suggest that EXCELL sessions heighten migrant jobseekers' awareness of cultural influences on behaviours and help them adapt to the challenges of Australian workplaces. Trainers' comments have revealed that their clients have found the co-facilitation model, explanation from the trainers, cultural maps, practice focus, personal safety, and group support of the EXCELL process to be particularly useful. These perceptions are broadly consistent with the jobseekers' ratings of the most useful components of the program.

The findings of the initial evaluation are encouraging in relation to the integration of culture learning models with job placements in preparing skilled migrant jobseekers for the world of work in their adopted country. Further investigations could investigate the utility of incorporating the EXCELL sessions into a job placement program using an improved research design. Future evaluation research will need to include a control or comparison group of migrant jobseekers who are not provided with the sociocultural competency training, so as to assess the benefits of adding structured group-based sociocultural competency training sessions to individual job placements. Further investigations

should also consider additional indicators of psychosocial adjustment and which types of participants could best benefit from the program. Longitudinal studies are needed to examine whether changes to self-efficacy are sustained over time and whether the addition of the EXCELL module enhances CALD migrants' employment outcomes and future career advancement. Given Australia will continue to source skilled workers from overseas to address the society's critical skills shortage, it is crucial to determine how sociocultural competency training such as EXCELL contributes to facilitating migrants' job search as well as career advancement and general resettlement in their newly adopted culture.

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