

Homework Clubs Evaluation

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Research Topic:

The research question for this paper is *“What are the best practices for homework clubs for new arrival highschool students? An analysis of an Australian Refugee Association Homework Clubs program.”*

Executive Summary:

This report provides a comprehensive evaluation of the “Homework Clubs” program, run by the Australian Refugee Association. Homework Clubs provide free tutoring in a group environment to newly arrived refugee students in various locations around Adelaide, South Australia, and have been doing so for the past thirteen years. During this time, the Australian Refugee Association have gathered feedback from participating students and volunteer tutors on the success of the program. These surveys have been gathered as qualitative research for this report, and used to identify key themes surrounding the program, as reported by students and tutors. Supplementary research has also been gathered through an interview with the Homework Clubs program coordinator, as well as wider academic research into the specific educational and language needs for refugee high school students in Australia. Through this data and research, it was found that three key needs stood out for young people from refugee backgrounds that Homework Clubs help to address. These were:

- The ongoing development toward *English Proficiency*,
- Non-academic learning in the form of *Social Inclusion*, and
- *Academic success* and the associated feelings of improved confidence in school.

Within these three major topics, this report will identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats surrounding the Homework Clubs program, developing a reference for best practice for the Australian Refugee Association’s Homework Clubs and other similar refugee student tutoring programs.

Introduction & Background:

According to the UNHCR, 12,700 refugees were resettled in Australia in 2018 (2018, p.32). Statistics from Australia’s Department of Home Affairs show that in recent years, the most common countries of origin of Australia’s refugee intake included countries in Middle East (making up the highest proportion), then Central Africa and the Horn of Africa, and certain parts of Asia (notably Myanmar, but also Bhutan and Tibet)(DHA 2019). The experience of refugees is distinctly different to other forms of migrants. Where most migrants are able to prepare and plan for their relocation (by learning the language of their new host country, for example), the transit of refugees often involves severe trauma, rushed or abrupt departure from their home

countries and long periods of time in refugee camps or other situations where basic needs may not be met (DSS 2013; Hamilton & Moore 2004; Sidhu & Taylor 2007). The result of this is the refugees may arrive in their host countries feeling highly disorientated, and can therefore benefit greatly from a vast range of services to assist with settlement and integration.

The Australian Refugee Association (ARA) was established in 1975, with the purpose of assisting and championing the capacity for newly-arrived refugees to *“be productive citizens through contributing to the social, cultural and economic life in Australia”* (ARA, no date). ARA provides many services, one of which is the ‘Homework Clubs’ program, which has been running successfully since July 2006 (DSS 2013). The Homework Clubs program is an after school hours program run in various locations and times throughout the week. High school students who have settled in Australia as refugees within the last five years are invited to bring their homework to these clubs for free group tutoring. Each Homework Club has its own facilitator and a number of volunteer tutors who attend. As students arrive, tutors are assigned small groups of students to assist, or paired one-on-one if numbers permit. Some Homework Clubs may meet in libraries, schools or communal spaces that provide access to computers and other necessary resources. Healthy snacks are also provided.

The Department of Social Services (DSS) have a written document on the Homework Clubs program, which has been used as the primary point of reference for the program. This program is funded by the DSS under the Settlement Engagement and Transition Support (SETS) program. In the DSS document, the primary objective of the program is identified as *“assisting high school students from refugee backgrounds with their studies and overall schooling experience”* (DSS 2013, p.1). This document also identifies the importance of social outcomes, such as the formation of friendships with peers, and positive mentor relationships with tutors. It also lays out funding guidelines, including the limitation of intake to students who have arrived in Australia within the last five years (DSS 2013). This report will be evaluating the Homework Clubs program, identifying key outcomes as reported by participating students and tutors. This information will be compared with recommendations found in research on the needs of refugee young people associated with second language learning, social integration and educational success.

Methodology:

ARA has been gathering data from both students and tutors in annual feedback surveys, dating back to 2012. Overall, the questions in surveys aim to gather information about the strengths and weaknesses of the program, and what outcomes are being produced for students. The tutor surveys also include questions that aim to gauge the satisfaction of the tutoring experience. The questions themselves have varied over the years, with the earliest surveys also including questions about overall school experiences. It is also important to note that there are gaps in the survey data. Student surveys from the years 2012, 2013, 2014, 2018 and 2019 were sourced, but original surveys from all other years have been lost. When looking at this data, it also became apparent that the data sets from 2013 and 2014 were identical, meaning that, firstly, the data from one of these years has also been lost, and secondly, it is not known whether this data set is from 2013 or 2014. Tutor surveys from the years 2015 to 2018 were sourced. It is not known whether tutor surveys were conducted prior to 2015. Another limitation of the survey data is that most surveys lack information regarding the demographic of respondents. Where it has been included, it was not linked directly to the answers of the respondents, so that the reader cannot identify which differing outcomes might apply to different demographics of students.

The methodology for this report included the gathering of all available data from the surveys and coding it, generating a set of key themes for both the student and tutor data (Appendix 1; Appendix 2). The goal of this method of analysis is to identify overarching themes that remain present throughout the years that Homework Clubs have been functioning, and to aim to identify some of the key outcomes of the program as identified by participants in the program. Overall, tutor data contained a lot more qualitative content than student data, with tutors almost always elaborating on their answers to questions, while students were more likely to provide one-word answers. The student data was categorised into seven main themes, in order of how frequently they were mentioned, the themes were: *Tutors & tutor helpfulness*, *Academic outcomes*, *English learning outcomes*, *Resources* (Relating to what ARA is able to materially provide, or to the space they work in), *Social outcomes*, *Emotional outcomes* and *Personal barriers* to attending Homework Clubs (Appendix 1). The tutor data was also categorised into seven main themes, although these differed from the student themes. In order of frequency, these themes were: *Student developmental outcomes* and *Feelings of limited helpfulness* (which were mentioned an equal number of times), *Organisation* (for example: time allocated for Homework Clubs; school communication), *Relationship building* (student communication, and communication

difficulties), *Resources*, *Rewarding feelings* and *Student barriers* to their attendance of Homework Clubs (Appendix 2). As supplementary information, an interview with the program coordinator was also conducted in an effort to gain more qualitative information in areas that the surveys did not provide. This includes information relating to demographic and student outcomes, as well as an analysis of strengths and weaknesses from the perspective of ARA themselves, and their desired outcomes.

Discussion & Analysis:

All of the above information has been analysed through themes found in academic research. These relate to identified needs of newly arrived refugee students, and have been categorised into three main areas that relate to the outcomes of Homework Clubs: *English Proficiency*, *Social Inclusion* and *Academic Success*. This analysis also employs a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses - or limitations, Opportunities, Threats) framework throughout in order to analyse some of the more practical, material aspects of the program.

English Proficiency

One of the key barriers for new arrival high school students is the difficulty of speaking and working in a new language. In fact, the ability of a refugee to acquire language skills, and by extension their ability to succeed academically, have both been separately identified as key measures of overall success (Hamilton & Moore 2004; Matthews 2008, p. 35). The nature of refugees' departure from their home country means that refugees often lack the opportunity to prepare for their migration through culture and language learning, as one usually would when preparing to permanently move to another country. Some refugees may be arriving in Australia with no prior preparation (Hamilton & Moore 2004; Sidhu & Taylor 2007). Furthermore, education and language proficiency in their first language has an impact on a young person's ability to learn a second language. In Australia, we are experiencing large numbers of refugees from Africa and the Middle East who have spent many formative years in transit, or were perhaps even born in refugee camps, making their Australian schooling experience also their first schooling experience (Woods 2009). These students who have had disrupted schooling for long periods of time are at a disadvantage when learning a second language (Hamilton & Moore 2004).

The theme of English development was prominent in both student and tutor feedback for the Homework Clubs, but particularly from the students. Many reported that the assistance of tutors was instrumental in helping them to understand their assignments, and what was being asked of them, and some students also reported improvements in their English speaking and writing skills:

"[Homework Club is] helping me to understand assignments I find difficult to understand."
(Student response, 2013 or 2014)

"Homework [Club] helped me to improve my English written as well as in speaking."
(Student response, 2019)

"They seem to find it easier to complete the written/reading tasks they have been set. There is always some expansion of their vocabulary during incidental discussions." (Tutor response, 2018)

In South Australia, newly arrived school students are able to participate in the Intensive English Language Program (IELP) or the New Arrivals Program (NAP), both of which are provided by the Department of Education and Child Development (DECD). Students usually stay in these programs for twelve months, though they are able to be extended. English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EALD) programs are also available in some mainstream schools for English as a second language support (Government of South Australia 2019), and students over the age of fifteen may also be eligible for the national Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP), which can be completed anytime within five years (AMES Australia 2018; DHS 2019).

In order to identify the gaps in language knowledge for students who have already completed these programs, it is important to understand the process of second language learning. A theory of second language learning developed by Jim Cummins identifies two key levels of language proficiency: *basic interpersonal communicative skills* (BICS), which refers to the ability to conduct conversation, and *cognitive academic language proficiency* (CALP), which refers to the much more complex language understanding needed to conceptualise and express academic language and ideas (Cummins 1979). While acquiring a BICS level of English is achievable in the timespan of the available English programs, various resources suggest that a CALP level of English can take between four and eight years to master (Cummins 1979; Hamilton & Moore

2004, p.38). As Woods (2009, p. 93) states, *“these students need literacy programs, not just language programs.”* Homework Clubs are one way to give students ongoing assistance that helps to develop their CALP English skills.

English learning was also identified by the program coordinator as perhaps the most instrumental aspect of Homework Clubs, citing the shared goal of English learning as the primary motivator that attracts a wide array of young people, both male, female and students of all ages. It is also one of the reasons that the eligibility criteria of having arrived within the last five years may be a barrier to some students who are still requiring English assistance, as some students may not have achieved CALP language skills in that time frame. An opportunity for broadening the scope of the program may be to revise intake requirements to accommodate all students who may not yet have reached CALP level English.

Social Inclusion

Schools are also a key site for developing important life skills other than those which are purely academic. Socialising, understanding culture and preparing for future opportunities are a few such skills (Woods 2009). Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu famously identified how knowledge of cultural norms and social connections, among other things, afforded certain advantages in society (Sapiro 2015). One form of this phenomenon is commonly called social capital, and it refers to knowledge of social norms, knowledge of resources and services, connections through networking and many other things. Researchers have identified the development of social capital as a key factor in minimising disadvantage and fostering a successful settlement (Sidhu & Taylor 2007; Wilkinson, Santoro & Major 2017; Woods 2007). Highlighting the importance of developing social capital, Sidhu & Taylor note that, *“Early effective intervention with ‘at risk arrivals’ was necessary to reduce social and economic exclusion from mainstream Australian society”* (2007, p.288). This quote highlights the ability for social capital to transform into economic outcomes through networking. These outcomes are key in allowing refugees to contribute economically to the communities and societies in which they settle. Although the prospect of transforming social capital into work outcomes may not be immediately relevant for high school students (although some may be working to help support their families already), developing those skills will help those students to apply them later in life.

Homework Clubs help to address all of these skills by facilitating relationships with other students and with tutors, who often provide information on Australian culture and foster positive

cross-cultural relationships. This relationship goes beyond the scope of purely academic improvement, offering students access to information that is not necessarily accessible through school education alone. One tutor, for example, reported that while working with a student one day, they realised that the student did not have a textbook that they needed for the subject. The tutor was able to recommend a second-hand bookstore to the student, which in their experience often sold used textbooks at an affordable price. In another example, there was one occasion in which a number of students were working on the same project about Australian gold-medalist sprinter, Cathy Freeman. The students, being new to Australia, were not aware of her fame or achievements, nor the difficulty she faced as an indigenous Australian. Two tutors shared the thorny task of explaining complicated issues of racism in Australia, and prejudice against indigenous Australians, to these senior school students. The tutors faced the added complexity of having to use limited vocabulary to do so.

While these relationships are highly beneficial, there are also some limitations to relying on volunteer tutors in this program. Just under twenty percent of tutor responses alluded to feelings of limited helpfulness within the program, the equal most represented theme alongside “Student developmental outcomes” (Appendix 2). These came from various factors, such as being paired with different students each week, having a poor grasp of the students’ curriculum, language barriers and a sense of helplessness about the support (or lack thereof) for students outside of the Homework Clubs.

“I don’t always feel very effective in my role - I feel underprepared for some student’s needs” (Tutor response, 2017)

Volunteer tutors are a highly cost-effective solution and a great way to get community members involved in assisting refugees, yet they can be lacking in expertise on teaching and educational content. Some tutor respondents identified seminars on content directly related to curriculum (which occasionally have taken place), as well as greater levels of communication with the students’ schools, as factors that helped to remedy these feelings of limited helpfulness, where they have been present.

Academic Success

Anne Woods (2009, p.89) points out that secondary education curriculums are based on a set of assumed knowledge laid out in primary school curriculums, and within that a particular method

of learning (largely print-based) which students with a steady education acquire through years of continual exposure. Not only does largely print-based learning create a barrier for non-CALP level students, as mentioned above, but the assumed knowledge of primary school curriculums can be highly problematic for students from refugee backgrounds, who may have spent minimal time in schools, much less Australian schools, prior to entering high school education.

A tutor anecdotally mentioned to me one day how shocked she was to find that a student in year seven did not know the months of the year. She expressed frustration at her inability to determine exactly what other knowledge this child might be lacking, and how to remedy the gaps in his education. This dilemma lies at the heart of supplemental education programs for young people from refugee backgrounds. How exactly can the students be remedied for perhaps years of missing education, when each has a unique situation and highly unique needs?

However in the student survey results, explicit references to their own academic improvement were the second most frequent theme to appear, following references to the positive impact of meeting with tutors, which is of course closely related.

"Especially with maths, the best improvement is gaining confidence to tackle maths problems and losing the 'fear' associated with doing maths" (Tutor response, 2016)

Students also frequently discussed the emotional outcomes of participating in Homework Clubs, and how these translated into benefits in their school work and school participation.

"It helped me to have resilience and responsibility" (Student response, 2018)

"Helped me to ... feel less stressed" (Student response, 2012)

Emotional and psychological trauma that refugee youth may have experienced can hinder their cognitive function and participation in school (Hamilton & Moore 2004, p.36; Marsh 2012). However, emotional and social development, in particular a sense of belonging in school, impact a vast range of positive outcomes, *"including mental health, peer relationships, self-esteem and self-efficacy, and academic achievement"* (Due, Riggs & Augoustinos 2016 p.33). Extra-curricular activities can help to develop this sense of belonging through social inclusion, confidence

building and development of skills that offer a sense of value (Wilkinson, Santoro & Major 2017; Due, Riggs & Augoustinos 2016).

Perhaps the biggest opportunity to improve the efficiency of academic achievement would be the expansion of certain resources. Students from rapidly-expanding Homework Clubs reported difficulty focusing in crowded spaces and long wait times for tutor assistance (as there was a low tutor to student ratio). In these cases, the demand may be sufficient for extra sessions to be offered in these locations. Tutors also occasionally expressed the desire to have resources, such as regular seminars, as noted above. This would mean less time would be spent on students explaining this content to tutors, and more time would be spent focusing on English learning and academic help. Of the different positive outcomes of Homework Clubs, academic achievement is the most likely to be affected by resources. Where as English learning and social outcomes can still occur where homework is not being addressed (Due, Riggs, & Augoustinos 2016; Marsh 2012; Wilkinson, Santoro & Major 2017), academic outcomes are more reliant on the ability to focus and complete work in that space, and on the amount of assistance received.

Conclusion & Recommendations:

The Homework Clubs program helps to address a number of needs experienced by newly-arrived young people from refugee backgrounds. By providing free tutoring in a group setting, Homework Clubs offer both a social and educational environment for high school students. The goals set out for this program include:

- Improved study outcomes,
- Improvement of the overall highschool experience, and
- The cultivation of positive social relationships.

Based on the analysis of qualitative survey data collected over the past seven years, these outcomes are quite clearly evident. Students and tutors both reported higher grades, as well as higher levels of confidence at school overall (Appendix 1; Appendix 2), and students also frequently reported positive social outcomes, with references to these making up the fifth most prominent theme in student surveys (Appendix 1). Throughout the data from the student and tutor surveys, as well as through wider research, three key themes were identified as important outcomes of the program. Firstly, Homework Clubs are important for the development of CALP

English. Research has demonstrated the importance of English proficiency for refugee inclusion, and the ongoing need for support in mastering complicated concepts in a second language (Hamilton & Moore 2004; Matthews 2008, p. 35; Woods 2009). Secondly, Homework Clubs facilitate positive mentor relationships between students and tutors, which not only help refugee students with academic learning but also an expansion of social capital. Tutors are able to help the students develop a wider and deeper understanding of everyday life and culture in Australia. Lastly, Homework Clubs help young people to improve their academic success, not only through higher grades but also an overall increase in confidence at school. If this report were to offer any recommendations, these would be:

- A review of the intake requirements, which may be beneficial for students' ongoing English support.
- A review of some rapidly expanding Homework Club locations may call for extra sessions to be run at different times, or for relocation to a more spacious location.

Regarding the first recommendation, the current requirement is for students who have arrived within five years. However, based on the above research into CALP English, which suggests it can take up to eight years to acquire, an expansion to students having arrived within eight years may be beneficial. Regarding the second recommendation, this is based on some student reports that some of the most successful Homework Clubs are becoming too busy, and therefore hindering the overall quality of the experience. Overall however, the popularity of these Homework Clubs is a testament to the success of the outcomes listed above. They offer accessible and necessary support for refugee young people settling into Australia.

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Appendices:

The tables below outline the key themes found in the student and tutor feedback surveys distributed by the Australian Refugee Association. In both tables, the left-most column lists the different themes, sometimes including a short explanation of their meaning. The middle column shows the number of times these themes appeared in the data in each year where data was sourced, as well as a total number for all data at the bottom. Student data also separates some themes depending on whether they were mentioned in a positive or a negative context. *Resources*, for example, were mentioned forty-eight times in total, with thirty-three of these references being negative. This is important because it separates whether students were happy with resource provisions, or whether they felt they were insufficient. This offers more practical insight than merely noting that resources were mentioned. Please also note that in Appendix 1,

frequency of themes listed next to the year 2014 could be from either 2013 or 2014, as per the data error listed in this report's *Methodology*. Finally, these tables include examples of quotes that were attributed to each theme. This is to provide clarity on each theme and were possible demonstrate variation on where it may have applied.

Appendix 1: Student data

Theme	Frequency		Examples
Tutors & tutor helpfulness	POSITIVE 2012: 40 2014: 27 2018: 14 2019: 15 Total: 96	NEGATIVE 2012: 13 2014: 9 2018: 2 2019:13 Total: 37	<i>"I like the way they help me with my homework."</i> <i>"I like how the helper are friendly, cheerful, loving and understands all the students."</i> <i>"The homework club assisted me a lot."</i> <i>"It would be better if we get more tutors because sometimes I have to wait for an hour waiting for my tutor to finish helping other students."</i>
English learning outcomes	2012: 18 2014: 11 2018: 12 2019: 12 Total: 53		<i>"I can learn more English language which I can't speak much well."</i> <i>"Gives me a chance to get help editing and understanding my assignments."</i> <i>"... helped me to improve my English and understand my work."</i> <i>"They help me to develop ... especially my English skills."</i>
Academic outcomes	2012: 28 2014: 20 2018: 19 2019: 16 Total: 83		<i>"It helped me to finish my assignments."</i> <i>"Homework club has gave me more ideas of new ways of studying."</i> <i>"It helped me a lot to boost up my grades."</i> <i>"...that is very helpful for me with my PLP homework."</i>
Emotional outcomes	2012: 10 2014: 9 2018: 7 2019: 5 Total: 31		<i>"Helped me to... feel less stressed"</i> <i>"...it gave me confidence to continue."</i> <i>"It helped me to have resilience and responsibility"</i> <i>"I feel more confident."</i>

Social outcomes	POSITIVE 2012: 12 2014: 12 2018: 4 2019: 9 Total: 37	NEGATIVE 2012: 2 2014: 1 2018: 0 2019: 0 Total: 3	<i>"Some students talking loud while others are studying." "...people get along with each other and make new friends." "In this homework club we are like family." "...homework club helped me to find new friends and study buddy."</i>
Resources (Relating to what ARA is able to provide, or to the space they work in)	POSITIVE 2012: 5 2014: 6 2018: 2 2019: 2 Total: 15	NEGATIVE 2012: 6 2014: 7 2018: 4 2019: 16 Total: 33	<i>"Do it twice a week." "I really like the bus." "More students should come. More reminders for students." "More space would be best option if we want to improve homework club."</i>
Personal barriers	2012: 0 2014: 1 2018: 1 2019: 5 Total: 7		<i>"Starting earlier because ... we finish school early on Tuesdays." "...due to other responsibilities I cannot attend or else of course it helps me." "The time, go home too late. Before school would be good."</i>

Appendix 2: Tutor data

Theme	Frequency	Examples
Student developmental outcomes	2015: 11 2016: 16 2017: 11 2018: 14 Total: 52	<i>"Better grades, more confidence to complete an assignment alone" "Gained confidence" "I may have helped improve their vocabulary a little." "Sometimes you can see that the student feels that they have achieved some steps in their project or task."</i>
Feelings of limited helpfulness (inconsistency, unequipped, lacking teaching skills,	2015: 14 2016: 14 2017: 14 2018: 10	<i>"...engagement with students is constantly shifting" "I just hope my tutoring is beneficial to the student." "I don't always feel very effective in my role - I feel underprepared..."</i>

unable to overcome barriers)	Total: 52	<i>"...unusual to have the same student for two consecutive weeks."</i>
Organisation (Time, School communication)	2015: 10 2016: 19 2017: 11 2018: 12 Total: 51	<i>"I think homework clubs need to be promoted more (or more effectively) in schools, because I've noticed a decrease in the number of students attending." "Sessions are short but I realise that extending them is logistically difficult." "I enjoy being in the loop via emails..." "Staff allocate students to our strengths also."</i>
Relationship building (Student communication & difficulties)	2015: 10 2016: 6 2017: 5 2018: 23 Total: 44	<i>"Also the more students get to know me, the more they trust me." "...I believe some students don't reveal that they don't understand some words." "Other times there are students who rely on me too much to write their essays for them." "I can see tutors and students operating with mutual respect during each class"</i>
Resources	2015: 5 2016: 12 2017: 2 2018: 9 Total: 28	<i>"Overcrowded and claustrophobic conditions in the [hired space] are uncongenial..." "Periodic seminars such as the one for the research project are excellent." "It would just be nice to have a name tag with my name printed on it like I've seen some other tutors have." "Possibly more resources like paper and pen to bring to sessions."</i>
Rewarding feelings	2015: 3 2016: 5 2017: 5 2018: 9 Total: 22	<i>"I am getting much more from volunteering at the Homework club than I could have imagined..." "Enjoyable, educational and rewarding experience..." "Seeing the students succeed is the reward." "Most of the time I drive home thinking I have done alright and the student has had a successful couple of hours."</i>
Student barriers	2015: 1	<i>"[Students] are easily distracted by friends or internet."</i>

	2016: 4 2017: 4 2018: 7 Total: 16	<i>"Possibly extracurricular activities, insufficient sleep, poor diet, part time jobs."</i> <i>"Travelling long distances can mean that students leave early."</i> <i>"Students often find it hard to concentrate when they come in with a group of their friends."</i>
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