

COTA Social Inclusion Forum

Presentation by Michael Po Saw

A very good morning to everyone. It is a great honour to be here with all of you this morning, and to be given the privilege of speaking on “Workplace Participation”.

I would first like to express my gratitude to COTA and the organizers of the forum for this privilege.

I would also like to point out that I am by no means an expert in this field, and will only be talking about my personal experiences, and those of my friends and colleagues from the broader Myanmar community in Queensland.

I was 61 year old when I first arrived here in Brisbane in December 2008 on a visit visa after I had retired from my work as a lecturer in Brunei. I was deeply apprehensive about my future, as I had no assurance that I would be able to find work and settle down here in Australia.

Luckily, most probably because all my four sons had already settled here in Brisbane, my residency processing went very smoothly and quickly, and in April 2008 I was granted permanent residency in Australia.

Unfortunately, my search for employment after that did not go quite as well. Thinking that my experience as a technical instructor in Automotive Engineering for 15 years at the government Technical College in Brunei would be enough to get me a job as a TAFE trainer, I applied for a job with Melbourne TAFE and promptly received a response saying my Bachelor of Engineering degree was too high, and what they needed was a Certificate Three in Automotive.

It wasn't much better when I was put on to a job network. The coordinator told me not to look for "high level" jobs, but to go for "entry" level jobs - and kept sending job openings for boiler technicians, bicycle mechanics, body beaters, air-con technicians, etc. I didn't mind, but when I actually applied for these jobs, I was told I needed a specific trade certificate for each of them.

After a few, very frustrating months,, I attended a one-day induction course for Australia Post with Access Services Inc. in Logan, where the coordinator told me my qualification and experience as an engineer would be wasted in this kind of job. She recommended that I apply for the "Skilling Queenslanders for Work" program for Overseas Trained Professionals with Brisbane City Council. I was accepted for the program and within a week was sent for a 6-week "Certificate Four in Workplace English" course at TAFE with 10 other professionals from various countries. I completed the course and was put on as a trainee with the Infrastructure Team at the Council. At the end of the 20 weeks program, I was asked if I would like to stay on. I accepted, and have since been working there on a full time basis.

This brings me to the first point I want to make with regard to new migrants finding employment in Australia. The employment culture in Australia leans more towards trade qualification for all types of work, including jobs such as cleaners and general workers, whereas in CALD and developing countries, employment is based on being able to do the job and not necessarily on trade qualification. For instance, a newly qualified engineer would start work as a trainee engineer, but after a few years would be expected to take on the role of a workshop or department manager, with full responsibility for administration, project management, HR, finance, logistics, security, etc. - We are expected to learn the job as we go along. However, when we arrive in Australia, the first thing we are

asked is “do you have a certificate?”, without looking at our experiences.

One other question that I was frequently asked was “do you have experience in Australia?” No one seems to be interested in hearing that I had just arrived in Australia and would therefore not have been able to get that experience.

Just for example, my wife has a Masters degree in Zoology from Myanmar, and when we decided to move to Australia, she came over and successfully completed a Master in Education degree course at Griffith University. She also completed Certificate Four in Training and Assessment. However, she has never been able to register as a teacher, even though she has over ten years experience as a primary teacher in Brunei.

I also have a few doctor friends in their fifties and sixties, who are qualified consultants - some with years of work experience with international organizations such as UNICEF and UNHCR - who are not working, or working as interpreters and pharmacists, because they do not want to go through the process of getting an Australian qualification at this late age.

The second point I would like to make is about the non-skilled and unqualified job seekers. As President of the Australia Myanmar Friendship Association of Queensland, I frequently have meetings with new arrivals from the Myanmar Communities in Queensland. Most of them come predominantly from refugee camps in Thailand and Malaysia, where they have been living for the past 20 or 25 years. They have had no formal education or employment. Most of them come from ethnic minorities in Myanmar and quite a few of them speak only their ethnic language and do not even understand or speak Burmese.

When they arrive in Australia, they are immediately sent off to TAFE and other similar formal education centres where they are expected to learn English. Quite a few of them are in their fifties

and sixties and are not really attuned to sitting in a classroom, listening to someone speaking in a “foreign” language, and therefore go through the whole course, without learning anything. They finally end up staying in their homes with their children, ending up as unpaid carers and housekeepers, and not going out anywhere because of difficulties with language.

They also end up as a drain on the government financial system, as they cannot find employment and live on centrelink payments.

In my personal view, job networks, with their “production line processing, and the Australian culture of doing everything on-line, is very impersonal and does not work for most of these new migrants - especially with the older generation. They have never used computers before, let alone go on-line, and with their lack of proficiency in English, need a more personalized approach, with someone to talk them through the processes.

I have found that not-for-profit community organizations, such as the Multicultural Development Association, Multicultural Community Centre, Multi-Link and Access Community Services, are quite effective in running training courses, such as child care, aged care, hospitality, construction and self-employment courses, with a high rate of success (some as high as a 75 % employment rate), and so I would like to suggest that such organizations be given a bigger role and better funding in their support of new migrants in finding employment.

Community-based organizations also have the understanding, expertise and passion for such undertakings, but lack the finances and facilities to be really effective at the moment. One other solution would be to allow the ethnic communities to help their own people by supporting them with the necessary finances and facilities.

Government funded programs, such as the “Skilling Queenslanders for Work” Program, are also very effective in finding employment for job seekers and should be expanded, not terminated.

On behalf on my organization, and the whole Myanmar community in Queensland, I conclude this presentation by offering support for any initiatives that will alleviate these problems and enhance social inclusion and multiculturalism. Please feel free to call upon me and my organization at any time if you feel that we may be able to help in finding a solution to these problems.

Thank you.