THE PLACEMENT CIRCLE - INTERIM EVALUATION

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1. Background

WomenCAN Australia (WCA) is a membership-based charity formed to empower women at risk of financial insecurity, including homelessness, to build financial autonomy. The organisation is working to achieve this through a suite of programs including The Placement Circle which is the focus of this evaluation.

The Placement Circle (TPC) program, currently being piloted, links communities of peer supported women to place-based vocational education and employment. TPC is based on evidence that the most effective path to achieving financial autonomy for vulnerable women is to help them reengage in the workforce. WomenCAN is trialling a tripartite approach between participating women, accredited vocational training institutions and employers underpinned, by a membership-based support network to keep women engaged in the program.

WomenCAN proposes to implement a transformative program bringing together:

◆ Vocational education in sectors with high labour demand such as aged care, NDIS, traditionally male trades, cybersecurity and transport

◆ Practical placement with employers who offer a culturally safe environment and appropriate OHS and remuneration

◆ Ongoing peer support through membership of WomenCan

◆ In addition, WomenCAN will establish a hub and spoke referral model giving access to existing community and government resources and assure the quality of its work through a university conducted evaluation.[1]

To establish the TPC program WomenCAN has identified communities of women living in specific municipalities who have disconnected from the workforce and have a desire to re-qualify, find employment and/or start their own business. The TPC program provides four key elements:

◆ Community outreach to identify women living in specific municipalities who have the desire to reengage the workforce

◆ A peer support framework to keep women engaged and supported throughout their training and employment journey

◆ Place-based vocational training with partner TAFE providers in target municipalities

◆ Skills-relevant placement with organisations who offer culturally appropriate workplaces where relevant OHS and remuneration practices are enforced.

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[1] WomenCAN – 100 word Program Summary. Commercial-in-Confidence. © WomenCAN 2019

1.1 The Placement Circle pilot

WomenCan planned to conduct four TPC pilot programs, 2 metro + 2 regional, from September 2020 to November 2021 as detailed in

Figure 1: The Placement Circle Pilot Summary below. These four Victorian programs have been designed to validate and inform the program design of future scaled-up, self-funded TPC programs. Based on demographic analysis, WomenCAN identified the following pilot sites and partners:

◆ Shepparton with GO TAFE, a mid-sized regional Victorian TAFE institute

◆ Greater Dandenong with Chisholm Institute, large metropolitan and urban fringe TAFE institute with culturally diverse, and many disadvantaged, students

◆ Brimbank/Maribyrnong with Victoria University Polytechnic, large, culturally diverse metropolitan TAFE division of a dual sector university

◆ Bendigo with Bendigo Kangan Institute, multi-site, regional and urban fringe TAFE institute

In the future WomenCan intends to generate revenue from commercial activities such as high quality staff sourcing and placement service and a facilities maintenance for-purpose social enterprise. WomenCAN envisions a national expansion of the TPC program.

Figure 1: The Placement Circle Pilot Summary

The Placement Circle Pilot – 4 sites (2 metro/2 regional)

IDENTIFY WOMEN SEEKING TO RE-ENTER THE WORKFORCE

We will enrol 15 interested and study-ready women into Cert III in Individual Support .

Each women will then complete 120 hours of placement with a place based accredited Aged Care provider.

OUTCOME PILOT SITES

With 4 pilots and 60 women, the outcome will be qualified, work ready, peer supported women

Employers will have access to a place based, work ready qualified and reliable workforce
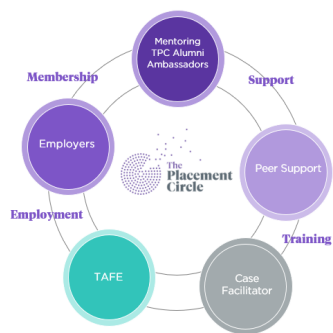
BEYOND PILOTS

Roll out model across other training programs linked to high labour demand - Dexterous Trades, Cyber, Security, Transport, NDIS

PILOT SITES

▪ Greater Dandenong with Chisholm Institute

▪ Footscray/ Brimbank/Maribyrnong with VU Poly

▪ Bendigo with Bendigo Kangan TAFE

▪ Shepperton with Shepparton GOTAFE

DURATION

▪ 6 months per pilot

EVALUATION OF PILOTS

▪ Victoria University will undertake the evaluation

▪ Placement Circles can then be replicated across Australia and the White Paper used to inform State and Federal government policies

1.2 The theory behind the TPC Model

Financially disadvantaged women come from diverse backgrounds and often encounter complex multi-layered challenges and barriers that limit their access to education and employment (Bourke-Taylor et al., 2011; Butorac, 2014; Hatoss & Huijser, 2010; McLaren, 2013). Diversity of backgrounds refers to the variety of social circumstances and identities present within any group of economically disadvantaged women. For women, gender stereotypes and lack of family-work balance can limit their access to vocational education and careers such as traditionally male trades (Jones et al. 2017; Rosa et al., 2017; Struthers & Strachan, 2019). For many migrant and refugee women limited English proficiency is another barrier to accessing education and employment (Butorac, 2014; Women Health West, 2016). Further, refugees and migrants' experiences of discrimination at TAFE and in workplaces may further restrict their access (Onsando & Billet, 2017; Udah et al., 2019). Older women may also experience barriers to continued employment and acquisition of necessary digital skills (Australian Government, 2020). Finally, gender inequalities such as the disproportionate share of caring work traditionally undertaken by women throughout their lives, restricts opportunities to participate in education and employment (Workplace Gender Equality Agency 2019). Therefore, support provided to economically disadvantaged women must address these intersecting circumstances that affect their education and employment access.

Significantly, lack of employment leads to financial vulnerability and can have an adverse impact on women's mental health and wellbeing (Abdelkerim & Grace, 2012; Bourke-Taylor et al., 2011; Myers & Douglas, 2017). Research has shown that the support currently available to assist women in succeeding in education and employment is not tailored to the identities, culture and needs of all women (Losoncz, 2015; Makwarimba et al., 2013; McLaren, 2013; McDougal et al., 2019). Many women need additional support to participate successfully in education and employment (Boddy et. al., 2012; Savelsberg et al., 2017). Therefore, there is a need for better pathways and appropriate support to assist financially vulnerable women in participating in education and employment. In particular, tailored support is needed that considers the impact of the women's intersecting identities of age, ethnicity, race and financially disadvantaged backgrounds. WomenCan Australia (WCA) acknowledges that women's needs are shaped by their intersecting identities and aims to engage women in developing appropriate support to overcome barriers and foster their engagement in education and employment.

The design of The Placement Circle pilot programs was also informed by a research project undertaken by Angela Paredes Castro as part of her Psychology Honours program at Victoria University in 2020. She undertook a critical literature review supplemented by interviews with five culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) women who had completed vocational education training in Australia. These women's experiences in seeking education and employment reinforced the need for strong, customised support identified in the academic literature. These findings helped shape The Placement Circle model

1.3 Working with the VET sector

The 10 billion dollar vocational education and training (VET) sector is Australia's largest, most diverse and complex tertiary education sector. Each year it prepares approximately four million learners for a wide range of occupations (Productivity Commission 2020). VET providers, certified as Registered Training Organisations (RTOs), include private RTOs, Technical and Further Education (TAFE) Institutes, many secondary schools and universities, enterprise and community providers.

WCA staff, like their clients, had little prior knowledge of the sector and have been on a steep learning curve to navigate its systems and processes. In this section we provide an overview of selected aspects of the VET system that we have identified during the evaluation as critical to the success of The Placement Circle.

The VET sector is (mainly) regulated nationally by the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) and most VET qualifications are developed and registered nationally. ASQA regulates the VET sector through the *Standards for RTOs 2015* legislated through the *National Vocational Education and Training Regulator Act 2011* (Australian Skills Quality Authority 2021). In the context of objectives of The Placement Circle and this evaluation, it is worth noting that these standards define the purpose of access and equity policies for the VET sector:

> ***Access and equity*** *means policies and approaches aimed at ensuring that VET is responsive to the individual needs of clients whose age, gender, cultural or ethnic background, disability, sexuality, language skills, literacy or numeracy level, unemployment, imprisonment or remote location may present a barrier to access, participation and the achievement of suitable outcomes.*

https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/F2019C00503

TPC students enrol in qualifications leading to employment or further employment-focused learning. Vocational education typically uses applied learning pedagogies with students acquiring knowledge and practical skills in real or simulated work settings. Many VET courses also require students to undertake formal work placements in order to complete their courses. Each student's theoretical knowledge and understanding and practical skills are measured through competency-based assessment.

1.3.1 Funding and eligibility to enrol

States and territories provide most VET funding, own and manage TAFEs and public community RTOs in their jurisdictions. Consequently VET funding arrangements differ amongst jurisdictions. As a generalisation funding to deliver VET qualifications to learners partially covers or subsidises the full cost of the course. From time to time jurisdictions

provide funding programs, such as Queensland's Jobtrainer[2] and Victoria's Free TAFE, that fully cover the cost of delivery to address specific workforce or equity targets:

> *Free TAFE for Priority Courses is a Victorian Government initiative that will pay a student's tuition fees, if eligible for government-subsidised training (Skills First), to study one of 42 non-apprenticeship courses and 20 apprenticeship pathway courses (sometimes called pre-apprenticeships) from 1 January in 2019. These priority courses lead to occupations that are needed most by employers in the Victorian economy.[3]*

All VET funding is subject to various eligibility requirements. For example, in Victoria eligibility to access a partly or fully subsidised place depends on criteria such as citizenship, age, prior educational history including offshore, number of courses undertaken in a year and evidence of physical presence in Victoria

In addition to funding rules and the national standards, eligibility to enrol in a VET qualification depends on an applicant meeting specific admission requirements for each course. These always include defined standards of language, literacy and numeracy (LLN), and may also specify pre-requisite study, evidence of aptitude, etc. It is also important to note that components of a course necessary for completion, such as work placement, often come with their own eligibility requirements. For example, to undertake the work placement required to complete the Certificate III in Individual Support a student must provide a National Police check.

Pre-training reviews

As will be clear in the Pilot Program discussion Pre-training reviews (PTRs) play a significant role in determining whether a student is admitted to a VET course. They are mandated by the Australian Skills Quality Authority standards and aligned with this, Victorian Government funding contracts require RTOs to conduct pre-training reviews to determine a learner's readiness for their preferred course and to enable the RTO to determine 'the support needs of individual learners and provide 'access to the educational and support services necessary for the individual learner to meet the requirements' of their course (Department of Education and Training Victoria 2021)[4]. Pre-training reviews include a language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) assessment for all applicants who cannot provide evidence of achieving the required LLN level.

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[2] https://tafeqld.edu.au/study-with-us/what-it-costs/jobtrainer.html
[3] https://www.swinburne.edu.au/courses/fees/loans-discounts-local-students/free-tafe-for-priority-courses/
[4] https://www.asqa.gov.au/standards/support-progression/clauses-1.7-5.4-6.1-to-6.6

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1.3.2 The pilot courses

A brief overview of the structure and assessment requirements for each course which is part of the pilot program follows.

The Certificate III in Individual Support (Aged Care) (CHC330150)[5]

WCA chose the Certificate III in Individual Support (Aged Care) course for its program because there is an increasingly very high demand for aged care workers. The Certificate III prepares graduates to provide entry level aged care services under supervision in residential or home-based aged care. To be admitted students are usually required to demonstrate literacy and numeracy skills at Australian Core Skills Framework level 3 and must be eligible to undertake work placement (see below).

The course is delivered as a mix of theory and practical skills development on campus and work placement. Full time students usually take 7 months to complete in non-pandemic times, attending a campus three days a week. During COVID-19 lockdowns Chisholm like many TAFE institutes requires students to undertake the theory components online using video conferencing software. Practical skills learning and assessment classes are undertaken in small classes that meet social distancing requirements when attendance on campus is permitted.

To qualify for the Certificate III students must pass all of their theoretical and practical assessment tasks and successfully complete 120 hours of work placement in an aged care service. Note that to be eligible to undertake a work placement students must produce a satisfactory current National Police Check and evidence of any required immunisations. Work placement schedules need to align with the needs of the host employer. Students may be asked to work shifts for 3-4 days a week over a month or to travel long distances to attend.

Certificate I in Spoken and Written English (10727NAT)

This course is an initial English language mainly developed for newly arrived migrants and refugees who need to develop language skills a foundation for further English language development. It is also used for international students and some longer term migrants. Students can elect to undertake some numeracy units within this program.[6] They typically undertake the Certificate I over a six month period attending campus for 16 hours per week.

Pre-vocational and pre-apprenticeship courses

These courses are designed to prepare graduates to obtain an apprenticeship or traineeship in the related trade. They are designed for school leavers and other new entrants to the workforce and give learners a taste of what it's like to work in a particular trade with hands-on live and simulated practical work as well as theory. Many traditionally male trades such

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[5] Alphanumeric codes are the codes used to identify registered national qualifications
[6] https://training.gov.au/Training/Details/10727NAT

as electrotechnology, plumbing and engineering offer excellent remuneration and sustainable careers. The few women who work in these trades love the work and the opportunities it often provides for interesting careers. Unfortunately few women take up these trades; less than 4% of apprentices in traditionally male trades are women and this proportion has not changed in the last 30 years. The most persistent barrier to female participation is stereotypically traditional beliefs about what constitutes appropriate jobs for men and women (Jones et al. 2017). In these trades the equipment and protective clothing used are designed for male bodies, the hours of work and many other aspects of workplace culture reflect traditionally male behaviours and roles.

Many apprentices obtain their apprenticeships after completing a pre-apprenticeship course. Most students who enrol in these courses are young male school leavers.

At the time of writing 7 WCA participants had enrolled in three pre-apprenticeship courses at Victoria University Polytechnic:

◆ Certificate II in Electrotechnology Studies (Pre-vocational) (22499VIC) – 3 students completed

◆ Certificate II in Building and Construction (Pre-apprenticeship) (22338VIC) – 2 students current

◆ Certificate II in Plumbing (Pre-apprenticeship) (22338VIC) – 2 enrolled.

Applicants for these courses undertake a Pre-Training Review that includes a literacy and numeracy assessment. Prospective students are advised that to succeed they need language, literacy and numeracy skills equivalent to Level 2 of the Australian Core Skill Framework (ACSF).

2. Evaluating the placement circle

Evaluations typically assess needs, processes, outcomes or impacts. The proposed TPC program is a unique and ambitious program that will grow progressively over the next three years. Longer term program outcomes and impacts, such as significant increases in sustainable employment for targeted women, will become progressively visible over time as learning and employment components and partner sites are fully established. The pilot programs will allow WomenCAN to test and refine the design and efficacy of the initial program model.

Victoria University has been commissioned to conduct an evaluation of two pilot programs. The lead evaluator, Dr Lisa Hodge is working with Dr Romana Morda and Dr Jill Bamforth. In addition a Victoria University PhD student, Angela Paredes Castro, is basing her 3-year doctoral research on the experiences of the many women from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds likely to participate in the Placement Circle program. The findings from Ms Paretes Castro's research will add considerable value to the design and quality of future TPC programs.

2.1 Evaluation purpose and scope

The proposed pilot evaluation is testing the effectiveness of the TPC model and recommending improvements to it. The evaluation is reviewing two WomenCAN pilot programs, one metropolitan and one regional, conducted in Victoria between September 2020 and November 2021.

The evaluation is focusing on program output and outcome indicators that can be measured within the short term. It is also reviewing any evidence of program impact that arises during the evaluation timeframe. The evaluation team is using evaluation methods and tools that can potentially be adapted to meet WCA's longer term evaluation needs as it grows; building a solid body of evidence to inform program improvement and demonstrate outcomes and impact.

The TPC Pilot Evaluation is assessing whether the pilot program indicators demonstrate that WomenCAN is likely to achieve its intended outcomes and impacts. It is asking these overarching questions:

◆ To what extent is the TPC model being implemented as intended?

◆ Do pilot program outcomes indicate that the TPC program design is likely to be effective?

◆ How is the TPC model impacting on participants?

◆ What are the barriers and enablers to the effective implementation of the TPC Model?

◆ How could the TPC model be improved in the future?

2.1.1 Evaluation timeframe

September 2020 – November 2021

2.1.2 Not in scope

The TPC Pilot Evaluation will not assess financial aspects of the pilot programs.

2.2 Pilot Evaluation Methodology

The evaluation is using a mixed methods approach to collecting and analysing data comprising focus groups, interviews and program document and data review. These tools have been selected to optimise use of program data that are being generated during the pilots and to provide opportunities for individual participants to have a voice.

Focus groups as a data collection method allow data to emerge from discussion of ideas and other interactions among participants (Hays & Singh, 2012; Willig, 2013). Interaction amongst multiple participants typically exposes a diverse range of experiences to the broader group's perspectives and members may validate each other's experiences (Hays & Singh, 2012; Liamputtong, 2020). Semi-structured interviews offer a confidential space where individual participants can describe experiences and express opinions on a topic through a conversation-type dialog (Willig 2013, Liamputtong 2020). Together, both methods

offer an in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences and are commonly implemented in feminist focused research (Henn et al., 2009).

2.2.1 The Pilots

COVID-19 pandemic related disruptions to education and work placements affected the implementation of the pilot programs. At the time of writing this report the status of the four proposed pilot programs was as follows:

◆ Chisholm Institute Certificate III in Individual Support (Aged Care) completed

◆ Bendigo Kangan Institute Certificate III in Individual Support (Aged Care) in progress

◆ Victoria University Polytechnic Certificate III in Individual Support (Aged Care) did not proceed

◆ Victoria University Polytechnic pre-trades programs:

   o Certificate II in Electrotechnology Studies (Pre-vocational) completed

   o Certificate II in Building and Construction (Pre-apprenticeship) in progress

   o Certificate II in Plumbing (Pre-apprenticeship) not yet commenced

◆ GOTAFE (Certificate III in Individual Support (Aged Care) not yet commenced.

In the short term, with only one pilot completed the evaluation team is drawing on limited metrics to produce this interim report. It is based on the collection and analysis of data from participant focus groups, selected staff interviews and program document and data review, mainly obtained from the Chisholm Institute and Bendigo Institute pilots.

2.2.2 Program Document and Data review

The evaluation team are collating and analysing pilot data provided by WomenCan relevant to demonstrating pilot outcomes. WCA is providing evidence of the numbers of women who:

◆ Complete the vocational training and practical placement program

◆ Obtain related employment or proceed to further study within 6 months of program completion (this outcome is the national VET sector standard and will enable comparisons with national and state data for comparable groups)

◆ Continue as members of WomenCAN 6 months after completion of training program.

2.2.3 Focus Groups with participants

Two sets of two focus groups with participating women were planned for each pilot (at the beginning and end of each TAFE course). Compared with single large focus groups the conduct of multiple, smaller focus groups ensures that each participant is able to participate effectively and allows for validation of data across groups. In this study focus group size is limited to six participants. This has been particularly important during the pandemic with focus groups conducted online (using ZOOM). Focus group sessions are audio recorded

and notes taken. Notes and audio transcripts are analysed qualitatively using NVivo software.

At the time of writing this report 3 focus groups have been conducted as detailed in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Interim Report - focus groups

TAFE	Timing	Mode fac-to-face or Zoom	Number of Participants	Notes
Chisholm Institute	At commencement of program	Zoom	6	
Chisholm Institute	At conclusion of program	Zoom	6	
Bendigo Kangan Institute	At commencement of program	Zoom	4	

2.2.4 Interviews with WCA staff

Two semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom with Asmi a WCA support worker involved with the Chisholm Institute pilot; one at the beginning and one at the conclusion of the program. Three semi-structured interviews were conducted via ZOOM with Ana a WCA support worker and Tina and Emma volunteers, supporting the Bendigo Kangan Institute pilot program.

2.3 Reporting

This interim report has been prepared to meet WomenCAN 's need for evidence to (i) demonstrate outputs to date and (ii) inform program design and improvement. The final evaluation report based on data from both pilots and some findings from Ms Paredes Castro's research, will be provided in a format agreed with WCA to meet its stakeholder communication needs.

3.0 Emerging Findings

At the time of preparation of this interim evaluation report, one pilot program has been completed and two are in progress. The interim findings are based on analysis of:

- ◆ Course and student data provided by WCA

- ◆ Transcripts of focus groups held with participants

- ◆ Transcripts of interviews with WCA staff and volunteers.

3.1 Course and student data

Unsurprisingly in a pilot program, WomenCAN and its partner TAFEs have been experiencing significant problems in recruiting, enrolling and retaining women in the pilot programs. Importantly, these problems highlighted some significant barriers to participation in education faced by many women when they engage with the vocational education sector. In addition to these longstanding challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic created multiple barriers to the recruitment of at risk women. Barriers included lack of privacy, digital literacy and English language skills and difficulties due to social distancing such as reduced access to teaching staff. These will be discussed in more detail later in this report. An outline of each course and brief histories of each of the pilot programs are provided below. This is followed by a table containing the course, enrolment and progression data for each pilot program

3.1.2 Brief history of each pilot program

Pilot One

The first pilot was implemented in the southern-east metro area of Melbourne. WomenCan gathered 37 women interested in participating in the pilot, of which 17 enrolled in the Certificate III in Individual Support. The participating women were predominantly migrants and refugees from non-English speaking backgrounds or older women. They presented with severe disadvantages including poor English language proficiency, identification as victims of domestic violence and criminal records. The WCA participants were assigned to classes as a group, with no students from the general public included. A total of 8 women continued to participate until the end of the course.

Throughout the certificate course, women found it difficult to adjust to the unfamiliar (to them) teacher-student dynamics common in Australian vocational education. In response, a WCA support worker suggested running a study group to address education system issues outside of class hours. Overall, women were able to complete the practical training aspects of the course successfully but struggled to complete and submit written assessments. One of the two teachers delivering the content was perceived to be supportive of the women's approaches to learning the course material. In contrast, the second teacher was perceived to be inflexible, frustrated and disconnected from the students when women were not completing and submitting the required written assessments. Meanwhile, a WCA worker created a social media group for women to connect outside the class and to support each other in academically and non-academically. Through this group, the women encouraged each other through difficult and confusing aspects of the course, provided emotional support during negative experiences and developed a sense of belonging. As a result, six women

passed the practical assessment, and two passed the theoretical and practical assessments. WomenCan organised and offered work placement interviews to all of these women. Two women accepted the interview opportunity, have been interviewed by an aged care provider and are waiting on a response.

Learnings from this pilot, such as incorporating a study group, were subsequently built into the WCA model. In addition, the experiences of the first pilot allowed WomenCan to comprehend the extent and complexity of the challenges disadvantaged women face in accessing education and employment.

Pilot Two

The second pilot was intended to be implemented in the western metropolitan area of Melbourne. WomenCan had recruited 14 women to enrol in the Certificate III in Individual Support. However the vocational education and training (VET) provider required a minimum of 15 women to run a dedicated WCA class. WomenCan unsuccessfully requested a variation to this minimum class size and the program did not proceed. Later, in conversations between the senior staff of WomenCan and the VET provider, the senior staff of the VET provider stated that flexibility in the number of women would have been possible in this case, and the class could have proceeded. This incident set back WomenCan six months.

Pilot Three

The third pilot is in process in regional north-west Victoria. WomenCan recruited 21 women interested in enrolling into the Certificate III in Individual Support. The women in this group were predominantly older women, carers of family members with disabilities, and migrants and refugees from non-English speaking backgrounds. Typically these women had lost work due to the pandemic, were primary carers in their families and had limited English language proficiency.

Prior to enrolment, the TAFE required women to undertake the usual Language Literacy and Numeracy assessment to determine their readiness for a Certificate III. Due to COVID-19 lockdown restrictions the assessment task was undertaken online at home, guided by the metro-Melbourne staff of the VET provider. Since the women did not have computers at home, WomenCan provided them with laptops. Among this cohort of women, Australian-born women were able to pass the test and enrol into the Certificate III in Individual Support; however, CALD women did not pass the test. The CALD women were not familiar with the computer and the online system. To assist them WomenCan staff provided technical support to CALD women, as it was known that digital literacy was a barrier for them. Nonetheless, WCA staff member Ana, and volunteers Emma and Tina, reported that VET staff were suspicious of the support and did not allow the assistance. Afterwards, WomenCan liaison with senior TAFE staff resulted in the TAFE allowing women to re-sit the test in a paper-based format. CALD women who did not meet the minimum LLN requirements for the Certificate III, were subsequently offered a place in a Certificate I in Spoken and Written

Language course to prepare them to undertake the Certificate III.

Throughout this pilot, the support WomenCan could offer was stronger and more immediate, than in previous pilots, as the organisation now had strong connections within the local community. Women in this pilot have been allocated to classes with mainstream students, and have created a social media group to support each other in academic and non-academic matters. This strong connectivity and peer support is encouraging participants to continue in their courses. In addition, WomenCan staff run a fortnightly study group and monthly session about a topic of interest for the women. Participants have reported that teachers are supportive of their learning and are encouraging them to persist with the course.

Pilot Four

The fourth pilot, also in progress, is in the western metropolitan area of Melbourne. Forty-one women responded to WCA advertisements promoting a pre-apprenticeship Certificate II in a traditionally male trade area. The women in this pilot are predominantly Australian-born, with prior university education, and strong language, literacy and numeracy skills. Women presented with diverse social circumstances such as identifying as victims of domestic violence, wanting a career change, and/or experiencing time and financial constraints to studying full-time due to caregiver responsibilities.

A total of seven women enrolled in pre-apprenticeship certificates. Of these, three have already completed the Certificate II in Electrotechnology and WomenCan has organised interviews for prospective apprenticeships. Two women are currently completing the Certificate II in Building and Construction, and two are enrolled in the Certificate II in Plumbing which has not yet commenced. These seven women were allocated to classes with non-WCA students and have created a peer-to-peer connection to encourage each other in academic and non-academic activities. WomenCan continues to support them to find ways to maintain peer support and, eventually obtain apprenticeships.

Significantly, WCA contacted the 34 women who did not enrol as expected for feedback on this choice. The majority of these women informed the organisation that the scheduling and demands of the fulltime programs prevented them from enrolling as they had other work and caring commitments.

3.1.3 Student enrolment and progression data

Student enrolment and progression data obtained from WCA are summarised below in Table 2: Student enrolment and progression data. Some additional data were provided for one of the Bendigo Kangan pilot groups. For that group WCA has recorded each student's name, age, country of birth, ethnicity, language spoken at home, prior education history, prior work history and current course. In addition WCA staff are keeping a record of each participant's progress through their system including reasons for not enrolling if that is the outcome. It will be very valuable for WCA to collect and preserve similar data for each woman who engages with TPC. It would also be useful, with participant consent, to obtain

and keep data on each woman's academic progress such as course progress and completion data. Over time, these quantitative records will be an important part of The Placement Circle story.

Table 2: Student enrolment and progression data

	Chisholm Institute	Bendigo Kangan Institute		Victoria University Polytechnic Institute		
	Certificate III in Individual Support (Aged Care) CH330150	Certificate III in Individual Support (Aged Care) CH330150	Certificate I in Spoken and Written English 10727NAT	Certificate II in Electrotechnology (pre-vocational)	Certificate II in Building and Construction (pre-apprenticeship)	Certificate II in Plumbing (Pre-apprenticeship)
No. Applicants	37	21		41		
No. Enrolments	17	6	6	3	2	2
No. Completions	8	In progress	In progress	3	In progress	Not yet commenced
Employment or further study	2 interviewed by an aged care provider			Looking for apprenticeships, interviews organised		

WCA staff have informed the evaluation team that many women have expressed interest in TPC courses but not proceeded to enrol. When followed up by phone many of these discouraged women have explained that they are hampered by limited time and financial resources, caring and homemaker responsibilities. This trend was strongest for the pre-apprenticeship courses. These gendered barriers interact with the women's migrant and refugee background.

3.2 To what extent is TPC model being implemented as intended?

The implementation of the TPC model has generally followed the original intention of connecting financially disadvantaged women from diverse backgrounds to vocational education and work experience while providing peer support. Nonetheless, the delivery of each component of the model has been shaped by interconnected factors such as COVID-19 lockdown limitations on face-to-face educational and social interaction, the complexities of the participating women's lives and incompletely understood VET institutional factors.

WomenCan has maintained a regular practice of engaging and connecting women at grassroots level throughout the pilots. The WCA staff articulate that "going around to their houses" with community representatives, "sharing afternoon tea" in a home environment and "meeting at the library" are strategies used to connect women to the TPC model and 'build up this trust' among the women and with WCA staff. The women identified by WCA have stated their readiness to participate in the TPC program to gain financial independence, have a fulfilling job, find a new career, and do something for themselves in the focus groups.

However, WCA has had issues enrolling and retaining the recruited women in the pilots. These issues have highlighted the overlapping constraints women face to engage in education, employment and support services (this will be explored in section 3.5). As a result, WCA has not been able to enrol the minimum number of students required to consistently allocate women to classes exclusively for WCA cohorts. Where women have been placed into mainstream classes, this change has sometimes had an impact on their perceptions of the program. As, Yina explains "we are not participating in the project in the same way".

The implementation of the TPC model has had to accommodate the social distancing restrictions of the pandemic. Changes from face-to-face to online education have disrupted learning, as participant Yasmine argues, that is "frustrating" and limits "getting things done" for the course during lockdown. Many participants have perceived online learning "challenging". WCA employees, Asmi and Ana, say that online mode discourages women from participating in online-support meetings with WCA and that many women decided not to study due to the challenges with online delivery mode. Thus, restrictions have continued to affect the overall implementation.

WCA plans to enrol women directly into specific vocational qualifications, especially the Certificate III in Individual Support, have been partially achieved. Several women recruited by WCA were assessed as not being at the Australian Core Skills Framework level required to succeed in this qualification.[7] These women agreed to enrol in the Certificate I in Spoken and Written English as a pathway to further learning. That this course is benefitting participants with limited digital skills and English language literacy is clear in Abigail's reflection that she now "sat at the computer like a professional" and can see "how far" she has come in this course. Although this is not the direct pathway WCA envisioned it is an important option that addresses the needs of the participants. It shows that , rather than focusing on single qualifications, WCA could work with TAFE partners to promote a range of pathways into particular occupations to accommodate participants' diverse educational backgrounds and needs.

WCA has successful implemented peer-to-peer support in every pilot. WCA staff state that participant women have created safe spaces in which they support each other. Women similarly describe experiences where peers provided "moral" support and assisted with course, online learning and assessment difficulties. WCA staff support was seen to be as

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[7] https://ala.asn.au/australian-core-skills-framework/

necessary as peer support. In the accounts of WCA staff it is clear that they have been adapting their role to respond to the participants' complex needs and provide integral support that "is more than simply supporting education and employment". As WCA volunteer Emma described that she has learned to "go with the flow" as a coping strategy to address a number of difficult situations.

Lastly, WCA's aim to connect women with employment after completion of a qualification has been challenged by the multiple barriers women encounter in completing the education component of the TPC model. At this early stage of the TPC model application, WCA has facilitated opportunities for a few women to access work placement opportunities in their areas of study. However, the complexity of the women's level of disadvantage means that getting employment is the most difficult outcome to achieve in the TPC model. Tina, a WCA volunteer, reflected:

> *"A lot of women around who that I've spoken to, I'm quite floored at their level of disadvantage…the obstacles for women it is just simply staggering. You know, how hard it is on so many levels in so many different ways for women to get into training, education and ultimately employment"*

3.3 Do pilot program outcomes indicate that TPC program design is likely to be effective?

The emerging evidence analysed for this interim report shows that the TPC model is providing usually inaccessible opportunities for financially disadvantaged women from diverse backgrounds to participate in vocational education. The goal of undertaking vocational education is to ultimately engage or reengage with the workforce. The peer-to-peer support component of the TPC model has had a positive impact on participants' engagement with education and social connections. WCA staff member Asmi explained that women "connected well over WhatsApp" with the other participants in the program and the "good friendships" that they formed through *The Placement Circle* enabled them to "actually help each other". This aligns with a body of research identifying that a lack of appropriate support is a barrier for women trying to access education and employment (Losoncz, 2015; Makwarimba et al. 2013; McLaren, 2013). Women in the focus groups similarly described their feeling of being part of a "team" that "encourages" one another with difficulties and provides a sense of "it's not just me" who is struggling. These outcomes show the importance of the TPC model's peer support component and that through supporting one another the women also become agents of change which contributes to their general wellbeing (Mehta & Bhattacherjee, 2021).

Furthermore, the program design fosters women's economic inclusion by linking existing government and organisational structures to alleviate structural barriers such as knowing how to access education (Andrew et al, 2021). WCA liaison with TAFE institutes and workplaces addresses the barriers women are experiencing at a structural level and facilitates access to education and employment. The barriers CALD women experienced in

trying to gain access to TAFE through the LLN assessment indicated a lack of cultural competence and sensitivity, which restricted women's access to education. In response, Tina, a WCA volunteer, advocated for the women, relating that *"I immediately rang a friend of mine who's director of TAFE and said, you know this process just simply isn't working. It's outrageous".* Another WCA worker, Ana, made sure that women were reassured that "it was not their fault" and that "things were happening in the background" to overcome the barrier and find them another pathway to access education. This aligns with previous research identifying the need to enact political and structural changes to allow equitable access for women to education programs for workforce development Ray et al, (2018).

Similarly, the support provided by WCA has also show the importance and need to address the overlapping factors and situations present in a women's life that impact their engagement in education and employment. Yasmine and Elsa mentioned that the "supportive environment" of the TPC has allowed them to participate in the Certificate III when both had previously sought access to the same course without success and "could not work out why" they were not accepted. Their accounts show how important is the TPC to open opportunities that are not accessible and the support to keep them engage in the program.

> *"Going above and beyond, it's not a unique support in education 'I'm here to support you in your education and that's it', no it is acknowledging the context of each woman and addressing the barriers of every aspect that's impacting education participation"* (Ana, WCA support worker)

3.4 How is TPC model impacting on participants?

Women in this pilot are single mothers, have limited financial resources, identify as victims of family violence, are traumatised from past experiences, have a criminal record, carry the impact of generational trauma, are carers of partners and children with severe disabilities and come from refugee and migrant backgrounds. Simply listing these identities and circumstances does not adequately represent the impacts of the complex interaction of individual women's backgrounds on their participation in education and employment. Rather, it provides a broad understanding of the cohort of women and highlights the importance of finding ways to foster and address their personal and social wellbeing needs while supporting them to reengage in education and employment.

Participants and WCA staff identified signs that the TPC model is fulfilling its purpose of supporting women's wellbeing while engaging them in education and employment.

> *Now it's time for me too. Yep, I can start studying and find out who I really am (Yasmine, participant)*

> *"They are better than they thought because they lost a lot of confidence which they didn't have much of anyway with language and so they did the test over time. The two teachers were wonderful*

with them, gentle and I could just see particularly my folk girls
(Emma, WCA volunteer)

The TPC model has positively influenced women's wellbeing while engaging them in education and employment. The participants' opportunities to access education and employment will potentially allow them to fulfil personal goals. For example, some women emphasised their strong desire for "find[ing] out who I really am", seeking a "sense of purpose" and a "new direction". WCA worker support has also encouraged women to adopt a range of wellbeing practices. Participant, Yina revealed that a WCA worker suggested "starting a journal" for self-reflection on topics she might want to discuss "next time" the women were together. Through the TPC model WCA has been developing safe spaces in which participant women are listened to. In focus group conversations, women explained that listening to, and connecting with, each other's' stories created a safe space for them all. WCA volunteer, Emma also said that the women "probably never had the opportunity to be listened to". Such safe spaces in which women share their experiences can allow these to be validated by other group members and assist in building the confidence of financially vulnerable women (Warren et al., 2019).

The program has also increased women's confidence in their skills and ability to complete the pilot. Women have reported that participating in education with support from TAFE teachers and WCA staff has helped them to feel confident with language and computer skills. Abigail mentioned that "get[ting] myself to know how to use the computer" was difficult in the beginning but she can see herself "getting better" in learning the skill she considers necessary to continue her studies because is "connected". WCA staff could also see the "confidence just creeping up" with the "gentle" teachers' support. This is compatible with Klenk's findings that education spaces can be places that foster refugee women's confidence (Klenk 2017). Emma, a WCA volunteer perceives the TPC model to be "building the person up, and their skills and their sense of who they are on safety and confidence".

Participating women are also showing confidence in achieving their education and employment goals. For example, Laisha states that participating in the pilot has resulted in her "feeling more confident" to gain employment and become "independent". Improving access to opportunities for career development, as the TPC model intends to do, can positively affect minority women's self-confidence (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2020). Similarly, women's ability to apply life skills in completing learning tasks can help women feel confident of success in the course. Yasmine, a carer for family members with disabilities, described herself as "thriving" on the course because the materials used in the simulation lessons were those she "has at home for my [family member], so I already knew it."

3.5 What are the barriers and enablers to the effective implementation of TPC model?

The purpose of the pilot programs is to test the Placement Circle model. Unsurprisingly, and

as we have already identified, the pilots have exposed some significant barriers to, and powerful enablers of, effective implementation. Selected barriers and enablers are discussed further below and the following Section 3.6 considers how barriers can be minimised and enablers amplified to improve the design and implementation of the program.

Barriers

The implementation of the TPC model has faced some significant barriers. As outlined in Section 1.2 disadvantaged women carry multiple barriers into their interaction with educational institutions. For example, the women engaging with the WCA pilots included those whose lack of English language proficiency, poor digital skills and caring responsibilities prevented from enrolling or from completing courses. The pilots were also impacted by operational and institutional barriers including WomenCAN Australia's lack of experience with the VET sector, insufficient communication between WCA and the TAFE partners and lack of cultural competence on the part of some TAFE staff.

From the accounts of the women and the WCA staff it is clear that there was confusion about the purpose and administration of the pre-enrolment LLN assessment. As discussed in Section 1.3.1 RTOs funded by the Victorian Government are required to conduct a Pre-Training Review including an LLN assessment. Before the pilots commenced, WCA was not aware of this requirement nor of the LLN levels of some of its chosen qualifications e.g. the Certificate III in Individual Support. Similarly TAFE staff were apparently unaware that some of TPC applicants would prove to be ineligible to enrol in the selected courses. It seems that neither partner realised that these matters needed to be communicated and understood prior to inviting participants to enrol in the pilots. At interview WCA staff reflected that they "need to be really clear on who is in the group, like their background" with TAFE, but pointed out they "thought we were, but I guess really, we didn't have that conversation. It was just a list of names". Women participating in the program were also aware of the lack of communication between TAFE and WCA, suggesting that WCA could be "more prepared" in knowing "what is coming for us" for the "next time they have the course again, they will know what has to be done".

WCA staff and several TPC participants described experiences with teaching and administrative TAFE staff that revealed a concerning lack of cultural competence. They considered that these unsupportive and discriminatory behaviours inhibited participants' motivation and engagement with the course. The lack of cultural sensitivity in one class led one woman to take the decision to "not to go anymore" to class "because I can't see any solution when you deal with someone like that". Similarly, Asmi, a WCA worker suggested that five women had similar experiences with the same teacher. WCA staffer, Ana and volunteer, Tina also identified the lack of cultural competence exhibited by some administrative staff in administering the Pre-Training Review. They described one TAFE staff member as "very rigid in her thinking" and unable to "appreciate the struggles that these women would face in a daily basis, let alone in a test like this". This staff member's behaviour towards WCA staff and participants caused volunteer, Emma to state that she "felt

like a criminal". These experiences align with Onsando and Billett's finding that refugee immigrants attending Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutes may encounter racial discrimination that adversely affects their educational participation (Onsando & Billett, 2017).

Enablers

On the other hand, the pilots have identified several factors that are building strong foundations for successful implementation of TPC. For example, WCA's grassroots initiatives have helped the organisation to develop trust among women in hard-to-reach local communities. As one WCA worker explained, building trust with refugee and migrant women is a long-term exercise that requires WCA gain the trust of respected community leaders before WCA can "get access" to the women. Although such engagement is a long-term commitment, once WCA has gained access to multiple communities, it will have the potential to effectively implement the program benefitting many disadvantaged women. Working with communities also gives WCA the ability to engage trusted gatekeepers and members of local organisations as volunteers for TPC program as has occurred in one of the pilots. This, in turn, has the potential to increase WCA's capacity to further support women whose circumstances are adversely affecting their participation in education and employment. WCA staff member, Ana described an example of a participant who was "just so appreciative" of WCA's support with a health issue provided in collaboration with a community health organisation.

Finally, the implementation of the TPC model has been enhanced by teachers who have supported the women and collaborated with WCA. Such teachers' willingness to assist the women to complete the educational component of the model has allowed them to overcome difficulties with the academic requirements of the course. Some women reported that a teacher was providing "catch up" classes on "things we might not have a chance to get through in class" and providing "very helpful feedback" on submitted drafts of assessments. Teacher encouragement assisted women's engagement in the course. For instance, participant, Abigail, reported that during her second TAFE class she said out loud "I am getting out of here" but her teacher's encouragement made her feel "comfortable in learning" and she continued in the course. Similarly, women were more likely to complete their course when teachers were flexible in their support for the women and their engagement. WCA volunteer Emma said that she will be "working together" with the TAFE teacher to address the needs of refugee and migrant women to prepare "them for any sort of assessment down the track".

3.6 How could TPC model be improved in the future?

The experiences of the WCA participants in the pilots demonstrate the many personal, community and institutional barriers very disadvantaged women face in accessing education and work opportunities. In aiming to change the economic and social futures of such women WCA has taken on a tough challenge. The implementation of the pilots to date, the

experiences and perceptions of WCA staff and volunteers and of the participant women have provide valuable insight into what has worked, what has not worked and how the TPC model can be improved in the future.

Peer support and mentoring

The perceptions of the participants in these first pilots indicate that WCA's core idea of recruiting disadvantaged women into mutually supportive and mentored (by WCA staff) peer communities will potentially change lives. At this early stage, with only one small group having completed and timelines extended by lockdowns, the numbers are not yet available to make this case conclusively, however the responses of the first participants, the staff and volunteers indicate that WCA should continue to develop and implement its model. The women in the Bendigo Kangan Institute pilot highlighted how much they value peer support when they asked to have ongoing contact with participating women in other courses. WCA could consider providing peer support across, as well as within, courses.

WCA has demonstrated capacity to adapt its peer support and staff mentoring approaches as circumstances have required. For example, the organisation used online communication when lockdowns required this and developed an out-of-class peer support program for women enrolled in several different pre-apprenticeship classes at VU Polytechnic. It is likely that WCA will need to remain agile and to continue to develop new peer support and mentoring options as its membership, partnerships and course suite grow.

Courses and pathways

WCA currently promotes specific courses and their associated occupations to prospective students. In the first pilots, particularly at Bendigo Kangan Institute, it became clear that some WCA participants require additional educational preparation before undertaking their chosen vocational course. Rather than promoting specific courses, we suggest that WCA promote pathways into occupations or industries. Such a strategy would reduce the risk of raising unrealistic expectations in, and subsequently disappointing, prospective participants.

VET sector partnerships

VET sector partnerships are necessarily integral to The Placement Circle model. The future success of TPC requires WCA to build its understanding of the VET sector. This will ensure that WCA knows what is possible in the sector and can negotiate the best possible educational solutions for its members. The pathways eventually implemented at Bendigo Kangan Institute demonstrate the value of a local WCA program officer with longstanding VET experience. WCA would benefit from including a Reference Group member with deep VET sector expertise. It is also desirable that WCA employs one or more staff members with VET sector expertise.

It is important for WomenCan staff and volunteers to know about the pre-requisites and requisites of each course to better support women. In the pilots WomenCan staff and participants have been surprised at enrolment by common VET requirements for courses

such as the LLN test, police checks, immunisation cards and extra documentation for placement. Time invested in communication between TAFE and WCA staff well before courses are advertised and enrolments scheduled will ensure that WCA staff understand VET processes and that TAFE staff are prepared for the WCA cohort.

Investment in maintaining strong, enduring partnerships will allow WCA to negotiate changes to TAFE programs to meet the needs of its members. For example, the availability of culturally competent, supportive TAFE staff and culturally safe spaces is essential to the success of TPC. In the pilots such teachers enabled women to continue in the program when they were at risk of withdrawing. Conversely, participants were deterred by the actions of at least one unsupportive, unsympathetic teacher and administrative staff member. Within a strong partnership WCA will be able to provide positive and negative feedback to its TAFE partners. It may also be possible for WCA to ask for the staff capability it needs. Finally, WCA could consider offering TAFE partners a professional development program for teachers and administrative staff involved in its programs.

Funding and viability

During implementation of the pilot programs WCA encountered difficulties with providing TAFEs with groups that met their requirements for financially viable minimum class sizes. TAFE funding produces these thresholds and it is important for WCA to understand and work them. With better understanding of the VET sector and as membership grows, WCA will be positioned to negotiate a range of flexible delivery and scheduling options for its future programs. For example, in a case such as the pre-apprenticeship program at VU Polytechnic with longer lead times and some creative thinking WCA may be able to negotiate with a TAFE to provide a part-time, weekend/evening program for women who need to work while studying.

Currently the Victorian-based TPC model relies on the availability of Vic Government Free TAFE funding and the limited range of courses available with it. This is a short term funding program and Victoria, and in the future other states/territories may not necessarily be as generous. WCA needs to keep abreast of VET funding changes and consider other options for supporting education for women who are not eligible for funded courses.

Employer partnerships

WCA aims to work with employer partners to provide access to safe, fairly remunerated work. With strong employer partnerships WCS may be able to influence its partner employers to provide work placements and employment opportunities that meet participants' needs for accessible, and perhaps, part time placement and /or employment.

Collecting data

The availability of systematic data on the characteristics and experiences of, and outcomes for, participants will become important for WCA as the program and participant numbers grow. The work commenced by the Bendigo Kangan support worker is a great start. It would

be useful for WCA to consider what data it can access itself and through TAFE partners to demonstrate the outcomes and impact of The Placement Circle program.

The TAFE voice

In preparing this interim evaluation report we note that it would be useful to understand the TAFE staff's experiences of the pilot program. Interviews with TAFE staff are not part of the evaluation however Angela Paredes Castro may be able to interview some TAFE staff as part of her doctoral research and share those findings with the team for the final evaluation report.

4. Key messages

- Continue to develop and implement The Placement Circle model by completing and evaluating current pilots and planning a scaled up program for the future.
- Continue to develop and provide a range of peer support and mentoring options as membership, partnerships and course options grow.
- Promote pathway and course options to prospective participants for each occupation targeted by WCA.
- Build understanding of the VET sector and ensure that WCA maintains some internal VET capability.
- Ensure that WomenCan supporting team/mentors are well informed about admission and enrolment processes, online platforms, assessments and other VET processes so that they can better support participants.
- Invest in developing sustained, deep relationships with TAFE partners to position WCA to negotiate a range of flexible delivery and scheduling options for its future programs.
- Keep abreast of VET funding changes and consider other options for supporting education for women who are not eligible for funded courses.
- Consider finding suitable work placements (and employment) for participants to meet their needs for accessible, and perhaps, part time work.
- Systematically collect, preserve and analyse biographical and demographic data.

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