



Williamstown
Community
and Education
Centre Inc

Project Report

20 week Financial Literacy Program - funded by Hobsons Bay Community Fund (HBCF) and Australian Community Foundation

REPORT BY PROJECT OFFICER

Introduction

The two-term project ends in April 2017 and provides Williamstown Community Education and Centre (WCEC). With comfort, students have grown in their understanding of money matters within an Australian context. Some have been helped with troublesome financial related issues. The experience should also reassure WCEC, the Centre is well-suited to provide future financial literacy programs for some of the most vulnerable in our society.

Financial Literacy

Conventional financial literacy programs focus on budgeting, saving, investing (including superannuation) and avoiding pitfalls inherent in our complex financial system. It soon became apparent, WCEC's classes needed to turn this approach on its head. Most students survived on low incomes: circumstances had taught them how to budget. Topics such as saving, investing or superannuation were irrelevant, perhaps even offensive. Nonetheless, students lacked confidence in money matters: a program focused on building greater understanding of the *nuts and bolts* of the Australian financial system and the language of everyday money matters was needed.

Williamstown Community Education Centre

WCEC was perfectly placed to offer such a program for a number of reasons:

- Trust was already established with students
- Teachers were experienced EAL practitioners who understood the needs of disadvantaged participants and problems individuals with low literacy had in dealing with our financial system

- On-hand was a comprehensive set of resources which included financial literacy material
- WCEC had ties with other community organisations and a thorough knowledge of referral points, such as financial counsellors
- WCEC computer resources including iPads, vital in dealing with modern-day money matters, could be put to good use

Sessions

Typically, sessions were negotiated with EAL teachers after discussing needs of a particular class. And, not all sessions were delivered by the Project Officer. City West Water provided a lesson on understanding (water) bills. WEstjustice provided sessions of a legal nature.

Topics included:

- Postal voting forms
- Unwanted phone calls and emails
- Shopping by unit shelf pricing
- Debit versus credit cards
- Tracking everyday expenses using Excel
- Work entitlements
- Getting work-ready

A field trip to the bank was most revealing. It was supported by educational sessions before and after the visit ensuring all students had a reasonable grasp of the discussion with the bank manager. Interestingly, three students made subsequent appointments with the bank to discuss their banking needs.

New migrants and refugees are sometimes tempted to conduct their finances - at risk - outside orthodox organisations. With the right guidance, they can be helped to interact with the conventional financial system. Even if we don't like our big banks, they conduct business with more prudence than smaller, sometimes shonky operators.

Helping participants grow in confidence dealing with mainstream financial organisations, whether Centrelink, banks, utilities, etc – in person or online – is the best way to assist the financial literacy needs of WCEC's students.

3 One-on-one problem solving

The Centre does the community an unheralded service by helping sort out student's financial/legal problems. The range of issues that may arise daily is mind-boggling. Over the course of two semesters, students have enquired about: divorce settlement, taxation advice, ATO penalties for non-compliance, filling in employee superannuation forms, citizenship application, VCAT, etc ...

Mostly, the queries are fielded by experienced permanent WCEC staff. Without this intervention, students would eventually end up at welfare agencies at a cost to the public purse.

It was hoped the Project Officer could alleviate the burden on permanent staff. However, students already had a trusted relationship with WCEC staff and for months weren't sure of the Project Officer's role. As well, he was at the Centre for only two half days a week and on a steep learning curve himself. By the end of the project, students were starting to actively seek out the Project Officer with individual issues; however, given the constraints of a short term program, it is no surprise the HBCF financial literacy program was not an entirely effective strategy to deflect student queries away from administrative staff.

Concluding remarks and recommendations:

If nothing else, the Financial Literacy Project has highlighted challenges newcomers and the disadvantaged face navigating our financial system. And the special role community centres such as WCEC play in guiding community's outsiders into mainstream Australia.

Financial literacy for middle-class Australia means creating wealth. For WCEC's students, a well-tailored program provides hope there is more than merely surviving.

WCEC has experience, connections and resources well-suited to a financial literacy program for vulnerable groups in our community.

I would like to make the following suggestions:

- WCEC seeks funding to continue the financial literacy program kickstarted by the the initial HBCF provision.
- Future financial literacy programs are targeted to building participant's confidence dealing with everyday money matters.

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- EAL teachers, in conjunction with an individual with broad financial skills, design a financial literacy curriculum.
- EAL teachers are encouraged to use readily available financial information, eg. bank promotional material, government websites, in regular classes in addition to text book exercises.
- Student's online skills are developed by greater use of WCEC's computer resources.

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April 2017