

A degree doesn't count for South Sudanese job seekers

Written by Nawal El-Gack, Assistant Professor, International Studies, University of Canberra

Despite a large proportion of South Sudanese having professional qualifications, many of them are struggling to find jobs in Australia's Capital Territory and face racism when applying for work, new research finds.

As part of the study, 72 members of the South Sudanese community living in the ACT participated in workshops about finding employment.

In this group 42% have tertiary qualifications in areas such as accounting, nursing, public health, medical science and law. However, they all failed to get employment in their chosen career. In fact 96% of the participants were job seekers, working in casual and part-time jobs.

It's estimated that more than [24,000 South Sudanese are living in Australia](#). This ethnic group is the fastest-growing migrant community. However, this community is also among the most disadvantaged, with an unemployment rate of [28.6% \(the national unemployment rate is 5.7%\)](#).

In the ACT, the total number of South Sudanese in work is 235, out of the 800 living there (500 adults). Divided up, 127 women are working in the child-care sector and 108 men are working in various sectors.

Numerous initiatives by diverse institutions in different states have tried to reduce underemployment among South Sudanese, but without significant success.

Barriers to employment

Nearly all (89%) of the participants experienced racism in the process of looking for a job. Many had applied for more than 1,000 jobs. Their experiences included being discriminated against on the basis of race, skin colour, accent, having an African background and not having a Caucasian name.

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Many of these job seekers were university graduates and, as a result of this racism, they started to question the intrinsic value and purpose of a university degree. Most felt they have been pushed into “undesirable jobs” such as cleaning. One participant said:

“I have my degree from an Australian university, but I look different and I'll never be treated fairly. I don't have many choices; I have to accept whatever is offered to me. I want to get out of the humiliation of welfare.”

Another participant confirmed:

“I researched and found what qualifications suit me and are needed by the market. I have done that and now I'm working in a labour job that requires a lot of physical work. I'm not happy and extremely exhausted. I decided to do postgraduate study on a part-time basis and this added to the existing economic and psychological pressure.”

The participants also said they received complaints about their “strong accents”. This was an added disadvantage in the job-seeking process.

Another challenge for participants was a lack of connections. One participant commented that South Sudanese need more networking opportunities, to open up to and interact with others.

Ideas for improvements

For all countries, meaningful employment and integration in the labour market are crucial factors in [migrants' and refugees' resettlement process](#) . Meaningful employment paves the way to a sufficient standard of living, positive contributions to the community, decent health and greater social interaction.

To address the challenges faced by South Sudanese, the research participants suggested some ideas for better employment opportunities. These ideas include: establishing a refugee

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and migrant employment service entity, supporting microbusiness and social enterprises, addressing the discriminatory behaviour of some employers and engaging them in this process.

For South Sudanese living in Australia, meaningful work is a way to contribute to their families, communities and their adopted country, and there is no shortage of motivation.

Our participants keenly pointed out they're ready for a fair go, to work hard and to show that, if their credentials and their abilities are properly valued, they will add value and strength to the Australian workforce.

Nawal El-Gack received funding from the ACT Government/Community Services

Gabriel Bul yak receives funding from receives funding from the ACT Government/Community Services.

Authors: Nawal El-Gack, Assistant Professor, International Studies, University of Canberra

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