

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers**

Melbourne—Wednesday, 4 September 2019

#### **MEMBERS**

Mr John Eren—Chair

Mr Gary Blackwood—Deputy Chair

Ms Juliana Addison

Ms Sarah Connolly

Mr Brad Rowswell

Ms Steph Ryan

Ms Kat Theophanous

#### **WITNESSES**

Ms Emmanuela Piath Noi, and

Mr Shadab Safa.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome to the public hearings for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers. All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent. All evidence taken by this Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore, you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you go outside and repeat the same things, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege.

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I think you are going to present for about 5 minutes each, and then we will ask a couple of questions. Thank you for being here today.

**Mr SAFA:** Sure, no worries. Thank you for having us. We are appreciative.

**The CHAIR:** Over to you.

**Mr SAFA:** Just before I start I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nations, and I do pay my respect to their elders, past, present and future. My name is Shadab Safa. I am 21 years of age. Originally I am from Afghanistan. I came to Australia in 2009, 10 years ago. I completed my high school in 2017, and I currently study part time at Monash University a Bachelor of Commerce.

My employment journey essentially comes in four phases. The first phase started at the start of 2017. It was my first year out of high school, and I wanted to study part-time and work full-time somewhere. And the reason why I wanted to do that was because—as is very common amongst immigrant families the parents usually, when they come to a new country, do not really have a lot of employability skills. And that was the case from my parents as well. My parents were teachers back in Afghanistan for 20-plus years; when they came here their qualifications were not recognised. They could not speak the language. In fact to this day my parents are still unemployed; they do not work, so that creates a lot of financial tension in the house, and that onus to earn falls on the children.

In fact I have been working as soon as I turned 14 out of high school. I was working three jobs at the same time, on top of school. But out of high school I am like, 'It would be really good to work full-time somewhere in my field'—marketing and finance—and I looked around me, and I saw a lot of other students that were the same age as me, doing the same course, and they already had jobs at really good places like the banks, financial planning firms and accountancy firms. They were entry level positions. I am like, 'Look, if these guys can do it, then surely I could do it as well'. I looked at the descriptions; I had the necessary work experience and I had the work ethic, so I just started applying like a maniac everywhere. I did about 80 applications in the space of three weeks for banks, financial planning firms, accountancy firms and real estate agencies, and had not a single interview out of those 80 applications. Most of them did not even get back to me.

So that is where, I guess, all the self-doubt comes in. I started doubting myself. I am like, 'What is wrong with me? Am I dumb? Am I stupid? Is there something that I am lacking?'. It was, I guess, hard to ignore what the obvious difference was between me and these other students. The obvious difference was, of course, our backgrounds. Most of them were born here, they lived in places like Brighton, Balwyn and Canterbury. So I felt like I was being excluded, not just on my background but even on my postcode—the fact that I am from the Cranbourne-Dandenong area. And it might not even be explicit discrimination. It might just be some sort of unconscious bias that they might have towards—they might look at my CV: Shadab Safa, Afghanistan; he might not even be able to speak English, whereas they might see someone else, like John Smith from Canterbury. Okay, he sounds more familiar, he sounds like us; maybe we should take him just because he is familiar, right?

That was phase 1. Phase 2, I was like, 'Look, I'm just getting rejection after rejection, so what I'll do is instead of applying I'll just go start my own business and I'll become self-employed'. So I started an online business, right. For about two-and-a-half months I planned it out, importing phone and laptop accessories from China,

selling them on my own website here and after about two-and-a-half months I launched it and it was a complete failure. Like, it flopped so bad. I made a few sales, but it was just a complete fail, terrible execution on my part, right. But I learned a lot. I learned about e-commerce a lot, and I tried again. This time I was selling health supplements. I had some initial success with that, but that one eventually flopped as well a few months down the line.

So phase 3, I am like, 'Look, let me just take a step back and analyse what my situation is so I can think about it rationally and get some help'. So that is when I came across CMY. They had a program called Employment Empowers where they pair you up with a mentor and you work one on one with a mentor for a period of 12 months. My mentor helped me out a lot with CV writing, professionalism and just, I guess, helping me to stand out from other candidates, like the fact that I was not even writing about the fact that I had started these two businesses—because they failed. I am not going to write that; that was a failure. But he was like, 'Look, you don't have to write that. You can write how you can demonstrate the qualities, like taking initiative, taking responsibility and all those things. And the fact that you can speak in four other languages other than English, why don't you highlight those?'. It was just simple things that had completely slipped my mind. So he helped me out a lot.

At the same time I came across another organisation called CareerSeekers. Now, CareerSeekers provides paid internships specifically for people of refugee/migrant backgrounds. I did a three-month internship in the 2018–2019 summer break at government construction projects, actually, the Level Crossing Removal Authority. I did that for three months, and it was really good. After that I started doing a bit of public speaking work for another organisation. I was going to schools doing seminars. I went to about 26 different schools over a period of a couple of months, but it just was not paying; I was not making enough from my speaking work.

So phase 4 was back to where I started. This was about a month-and-a-half ago. You know, I did the whole thing again: 80 applications for similar organisations and similar roles. But this time around I had a lot of success. A few people were calling me back. I got a couple of responses; I got a couple of interviews. In fact just this week, on Monday, I got two job offers.

**The CHAIR:** Congratulations! That is great. I was wondering when the good news was going to come.

**Mr SAFA:** Thanks. It comes around in the end, yes. There was one from CommBank and one from a life insurance company. The reason why I was successful the second time around was three reasons. One was because I had a one-on-one mentor that I was working with and helping me with professional development and things like that. The second was because I did a paid internship through CareerSeekers that was specifically designed for people of refugee background, so I was not competing with, I guess, the mainstream. The third reason was just, I guess, some of the personal development stuff that I did, like giving it a crack, starting two businesses and doing some public speaking work. That actually bulked up my CV and I actually had referees from Australia that people could contact. I think these three factors, if they were made available more broadly to other people, could really help them as well. That is all from me. Thank you very much for listening.

**The CHAIR:** Very good. Thank you very much.

**Ms CONNOLLY:** That is really fantastic.

**Ms NOI:** I would like to start by also acknowledging the traditional owners of this land. I will just introduce myself. My name is Piath Noi. I am South Sudanese. I arrived here in 2002 as a refugee with my family. I will say my path is to a professional occupation because I am currently in a paid intern position at the Centre for Multicultural Youth. Before that I guess I did not have access to a professional occupation through the multiple applications that I had sent out. It was through actually a family friend who was self-employed. She kind of took me under her wing and she mentored me and taught me a lot about office administration and things like that. In this example of mentoring and role modelling, in addition to the community organisations that provided programs for me, I was able to gain access to other opportunities, such as what I currently have.

I guess what this highlights is a need to support African women in running businesses and supporting entrepreneurship, because they do bring other people along and do also help other people to gain the skills that

they have accessed. But given the inaccessibility of jobs due to computer illiteracy and a lack of access to information, this will continue to be a challenging prospect for people from migrant and refugee backgrounds.

I will go on to talk about a young man I know. He was interested in IT, technology and social media but also had a sustained disinterest in school. He struggled quite a bit, so he enrolled in VCAL because he thought that was the best option for him. He struggled to complete assignments on time, sporadically attended school and even risked failing to graduate. One of the key reasons for him almost not graduating was that he was unable to complete the required hours of work experience. So on top of prolonged disengagement in school and not being comfortable enough to ask for help, his mother was eventually called in to meet with his teacher. His mother is someone who is unfamiliar with the language and her child's experience. She was alerted to her child's failing; not needs and consequences, not opportunities for improvement, and his deficits rather than his strengths. The result of this was increased pressure. What happened was the intergenerational, cross-cultural and now emotional rift that was already present had widened significantly.

So to meet the required hours of workplace learning his teacher said, 'Go out and distribute your résumé to local businesses and ask for work experience', which is what we have been taught to do, but he had little guidance and very little preparation and really nobody to broker such opportunities. He experienced a lot of rejection. He was a tall, dark-skinned South Sudanese boy going to local phone and computer repair businesses asking for work experience at the height of African gang violence hysteria. So at best the employers were sceptical of his intentions and at worst they were afraid of him. There was no real cultural understanding of where he was coming from and what his situation was, but he did eventually find work experience. His teacher found him a factory role where he spent the conclusion of his education stacking boxes in a factory. This young man did need more preparation before seeking work, but there is also something needing to be said about the lack of access to opportunities because of things that are beyond his control—things like the colour of his skin, where he comes from or the media perception of people from his community.

I will say that racism and discrimination are structural issues, but they are also personal. There is a lot of damage that could be done to a young person's self-esteem and confidence, and this could change the trajectory of their lives. This could hinder academic engagement, employment outcomes and mental health. These conditions are not good at all for the resilience that is required for a young person in order to navigate life and life beyond school. And I think schools need to be adequately resourced to provide opportunities that make work an environment of learning. There is also a need to resource community programs that support young people in that transition from school to employment, just as the ones like at CMY have supported me to get to where I am today. We need to address these problems in school, where we have young men who grapple with different challenges. We need to do this before they are adults who are too far behind or too far in the wrong direction to support and, more importantly, before they become another statistic, as we often refer to them. I guess to conclude, I will just say that I read somewhere that schools are a microcosm of society, but my question to you all is: what society are we preparing our young people to enter?

**The CHAIR:** Maybe just one question because we have run out of time. That was a great presentation. It is very meaningful to us, what you have presented. This is fantastic. This is the sort of stuff that we need to know. Congratulations to both of you for doing what you are doing at the moment and hopefully being an inspiration to others in relation to your persistence. The outcomes hopefully will be achieved with the help of government, and that is why we are here. Thank you.

**Mr BLACKWOOD:** I think governments need to employ both of you as ambassadors for young people across the spectrum and from migrant backgrounds in particular. But you could teach a lot of Australian young men and women a lot about what persistence means and what understanding your own current situation does mean. So well done to both of you. Fantastic.

**Ms THEOPHANOUS:** How difficult was it for you to find out about CMY and use that as an avenue to helping out your situations? Were you just sort of looking into an abyss of all of the different services that are potentially available, but then you did not really know where to go?

**Ms NOI:** In my experience actually my mother did not have the resources to help me to navigate my challenges, but she did know people in the community who were employed in the community sector, and because they are often conduits to the broader system they referred me to places where I could get help with my

résumé, to current programs such as the ones at CMY and also to leadership programs, which have also assisted me, and that has been the door for me—so bicultural workers in the industry.

**Mr SAFA:** The reason why I was involved with CMY was that I had actually done a bit of volunteering work with CMY when I was still in high school, so I was in the loop with everything that CMY was doing, and when I saw that they had launched this Employment Empowers program I was like, ‘This is exactly what I need’. But if you were not really involved with CMY, you would not really have much exposure to these sorts of services.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. Thank you for coming today.

**Witnesses withdrew.**