

## | CASE STUDY

# BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS FOR MELBOURNE'S SOMALI COMMUNITY

## LA TROBE UNIVERSITY



An initiative between La Trobe University and the Somali community in Melbourne's West Heidelberg region is serving to break down barriers for local Somali-Australian students.

Himilo Community Connect is a community-led project that exists to improve education, employment, health and social cohesion outcomes for the Somali-Australian community of West Heidelberg.

Originally conceived as a pilot project funded and aligned with the Victorian Government's 2015 Strategic Framework to Strengthen Victoria's Social Cohesion and the Resilience of its Communities, Himilo Community Connect was created through a rigorous co-design process with local community members, including elders, parents, carers and youth.

This process revealed specific needs around the culture of aspiration and

acceptance, and the need to improve education and employment outcomes for young Somali-Australians, including breaking down employer perceptions and addressing issues felt by the community when employers are not receptive to work placements or the employment of aspiring Somali-Australian students.

Underpinned by social cohesion themes of belonging, social justice, participation acceptance and worth, Himilo Community Connect fosters inclusiveness and support and – with the support of La Trobe University, which has a strong cohort of Somali-Australians – is empowering students to thrive and succeed.

La Trobe has been working with Himilo Community Connect since 2016, focusing on the establishment of bespoke industry engagement programs to help prove to employers that a diverse workforce offers the opportunity for a culture of inclusiveness and value.

Significantly, the initiative has greatly enhanced engagement with, and connections between, La Trobe University and the local Somali-Australian community.

The partnership has served to demystify higher education to an under-represented community, supported educational attainment, and sent a clear signal to the broader community that La Trobe



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values diversity and inclusiveness and is a champion of local communities in Melbourne's north.

The collaboration has also enhanced graduate outcomes and employment for La Trobe's Somali-Australian students through facilitating:

- Himilo Future Careers Expo for secondary school students to meet and engage with employers from all sectors
- An increase in brokered work experience/internships into full-time graduate employment with businesses in Melbourne's north
- La Trobe Somali student volunteer and accredited placements at Himilo Community Connect, resulting in employment opportunities with Himilo's partner organisations
- La Trobe providing the sports venue to host 2,300 Somali participants at Somali Week in December 2018 – a major

sporting week with international and local participants

- Support for Somali Medical Mission fundraisers in 2018, which enabled a team of Somali women to travel to Somalia to support a medical team deliver life-changing aid to women living with fistula
- 2,516 student attendances plus 143 enrolled at the Himilo Homework Club between January 2018 and June 2019
- 99 learning and mentor support sessions for Somali-Australian students.

The findings of a Himilo/La Trobe University joint research project undertaken during the program – examining employment barriers to Somali-Australian graduates – will also be used to design and implement future engagement and employability programs. Importantly, it will also be shared with other universities and communities facing similar challenges.

Shortlisted in the 2019 AFR Community Engagement Awards, the Himilo Community Connect project is a wonderful example of La Trobe University's Strategic Plan commitment to being the partner

of choice for industry, education and the community through the power of education and research to transform lives.

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**PHOTO**

Three of the young Somali-Australian women who were the main instigators behind the fundraising for the Somali Medical Mission. Sadia, Amina and Adna.

