

# The provision of a peer support group for unemployed immigrants

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## The provision of a peer support group for unemployed immigrants

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The purpose of this thesis project was to plan and implement a peer support group for unemployed immigrants. The need for the support group arose when my working life partner recognised a growing need from its clients for a more complete program of activities that would support their clients in their efforts to secure employment in the Finnish labour market.

The specific aims of this thesis were to garner participant evaluation of the usefulness of the peer group program within the context of participant's circumstances and status as unemployed immigrants and secondly, to determine whether participants accrued any pertinent skills, knowledge or knowhow during their participation in the peer group that may increase their chances of securing gainful employment or becoming self-employed.

From the outset, all planning, implementation and activities were grounded in anti-oppressive social work practice and theory and Implementation took place over a six week period with participants attending six, two hour meetings and one fieldtrip. Meetings aimed to broaden participant's knowledge, skills and knowhow in areas such as the creation of CV's and covering letters, establishing a business, creating a website for business and job search purposes, and familiarisation with the unemployment office and the full range of services available to unemployed immigrants. Furthermore, it was anticipated that participants would realise gains in self-efficacy and wellbeing.

The evaluations detailed in this thesis arise from qualitative data gathered from a semi-structured group discussion with eight participants as well as entry and exit questionnaires that were completed by five participants. Findings from the questionnaires indicate that participants accrued new, pertinent skills, knowledge and knowhow or saw improvement to existing ones.

The findings from the semi-structured group discussion suggest that participants found participation in the peer support group to be very useful and revealed that participants are actively exploring new paths to employment or self-employment, that they are actively sharing pertinent information, ideas and resources amongst themselves both within and without the peer support group environment and have seen a reduction in feelings of isolation and an increased awareness of the barriers to employment within the context of the Finnish labour market. The discussion also revealed minor problematic areas in the design and implementation of the peer support group as well as suggestions from participants for improvement, all of which will be utilised to inform the future development of the peer support group for unemployed immigrants.

Keywords: Unemployment, Immigrants, Peer support group, Anti-oppressive practice

Peter Byrne

## Työttömille maahanmuuttajille tarkoitetun vertaistukiryhmän järjestäminen

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Tämän opinnäytetyö projektin tarkoitus oli suunnitella ja toteuttaa vertaistukiryhmä työttömille maahanmuuttajille. Tämä tarve syntyi kun työelämäkumppanini huomasi asiakkaidensa kasvavan tarpeen monipuolisemmalle ohjelmalle joka tukisi asiakkaita heidän pyrkimyksissään työllistyä Suomessa.

Tämän opinnäytetyön päämäärä oli saada osallistujien arvio vertaistukiryhmän hyödyllisyydestä huomioiden osallistujien statuksen työttöminä maahanmuuttajina sekä määritellä karttuiko osallistujille sellaisia taitoja tai osaamista heidän osallistuessaan vertaistukiryhmään joka mahdollisesti kasvattaa heidän mahdollisuuksiaan saada työpaikka tai työllistää itsensä yrittäjänä Suomen työmarkkinoilla.

Alusta lähtien kaikki suunnittelu, toteutus ja aktiviteetit käsiteltiin antiopresseiveisen sosiaalityön periaatteella ja toteutettiin kuuden viikon aikana, jolloin osallistujat ottivat osaa kuuteen kahden tunnin tapaamiseen sekä yhteen vierailuun. Tapaamisten pyrkimys oli laajentaa osallistujien tietoja ja osaamista alueilla kuten CV:n ja työpaikkahakemuksen tekeminen, yrityksen perustaminen, internetsivujen luonti yritykselle tai työnhaun tueksi sekä tutustuminen työvoimatoimistoon sekä sen tarjoamiin palveluihin. Lisäksi pyrkimyksenä oli, että osallistujat kokisivat hyötyjä minäpystyvyydessä ja hyvinvoinnissa.

Tässä päättötyössä kuvailut arviot perustuvat kvalitatiiviseen tiedon keruuseen ryhmäkeskustelusta johon osallistui kahdeksan osallistujaa sekä alku- ja loppu kyselylomakkeeseen jotka täytti viisi osallistujaa. Kyselylomakkeiden vastauksista saadut löydökset viittaavat siihen, että osallistujat hankkivat uusia, tarpeellisia taitoja ja tietoja tai kehittivät jo olemassa olevissa taidoissa ja tiedoissa.

Ryhmäkeskustelusta saadut löydökset viittaavat siihen, että osallistujat kokivat vertaistukiryhmään osallistumisen erittäin hyödylliseksi ja toivat ilmi, että osallistujat etsivät aktiivisesti uusia tapoja löytää työpaikka tai työllistää itsensä yrittäjänä sekä että osallistujat jakavat aktiivisesti tärkeää tietoa ja ideoita toistensa kanssa sekä ryhmätapaamisissa että niiden ulkopuolella. Lisäksi ryhmäkeskustelun perusteella voidaan todeta, että osallistujat ovat kokeneet yksinäisyyden tunteen vähenemistä sekä parempaa tiedostamista haasteista jotka estävät työllistymisen Suomessa. Ryhmäkeskustelu paljasti pieniä ongelmakohtia vertaistukiryhmän suunnittelussa ja toteutuksessa sekä osallistujien ehdotuksia parannuksiin, jotka kaikki hyödynnetään työttömien maahanmuuttajien vertaistukiryhmän kehittämisessä jatkossa.

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## 1 Introduction

Unemployment for any individual comes with a number of stressors and challenges, including loss of status within society and the family, uncertainty, decreased self-confidence and negative self-perceptions. However, immigrants not only face these challenges but also the added burdens of acculturation and adaptation, learning a new language and customs, institutional, societal and perceived discrimination and perhaps most critical, social exclusion, which undoubtedly have a combined negative impact on the wellbeing of immigrants. "The mental health of immigrants does become a concern when additional risk factors, such as employment problems, language difficulties and non-recognition of qualifications, combine with the stresses of immigration" (Jayasuriya, Sang, & Fielding, 1992).

Although the Finnish state has implemented numerous initiatives and measures to improve immigrant possibilities to find work in the labour market they have been found to be inadequate and this is supported by Valtonen when she states, "State responsibility and initiatives are concentrated on the preliminary stages of the labour-market integration process. The 'soft' measures for promoting integration, such as information dissemination and tolerance-raising campaigns, have not made significant inroads into the arena of immigrant participation in the labour market" (Valtonen, 2001, p. 423). Little is being done to address the problems outlined above and it is largely third sector organisations that must take up the shortfall in the system and develop initiatives, programmes and services for immigrants when the state is unable or unwilling to do so. It is low threshold, third sector organisations such as Luckan and others that have recognised the shortfall in state provision as well as the emerging need from their client groups for a forum to address the problems, challenges and threats to wellbeing, inclusion and employment.

It is one such solution that is the focus of this project thesis. This project thesis will focus on the provision of an innovative peer support group for unemployed immigrants in the capital region which will attempt to provide participants with a safe, informal forum where participants can share experiences and knowledge, support one another, network, learn new skills from the group leader and experts in fields such as immigrant employment and entrepreneurship as well as explore alternatives to traditional employment. It is also the authors hope that participants will profit from some of the less tangible benefits of peer group participation and become empowered. Mthembu lends from Matzat's summary of research literature into the gains to be had from peer group participation "These include reduced depression, increased self-esteem, more personal contact, increased skills in conflict management, a comparative perspective on one's own problems and more selective use of the formal care system" (Mthembu, 2001).

With the objective of informing the future development, planning and implementation of the peer support group for unemployed immigrants and supporting funding applications, qualitative data collection methods will be employed to facilitate the following aims:

- To garner participant evaluation of the usefulness of the peer support group within the context of participant's circumstances and status as unemployed immigrants.
- To reveal the strengths and weaknesses of the peer group programme.
- To determine whether participants have derived any pertinent skills, knowledge or knowhow during their participation in the peer group that may improve their chances of securing employment or becoming self-employed.

The impetus for my involvement in this project stems from personal experience of being an unemployed immigrant in Finland together with a desire to cooperate with a working life partner that provides opportunities and services for immigrants that result in improved outcomes for their clients. It was also important that the working life partner offered actual working life responsibilities and involvement in activities that provide genuine utility for their clients.

## 2 Thesis background

### 2.1 Working life partner & impetus

This thesis is undertaken in cooperation with my working life partner Luckan, which is an organisation primarily focused on the promotion of the culture, language and interests of Swedish speaking Finns. Luckan is made up of sub-divisions, one of which is named Luckan Integration, which is a part of the Bridge project which has been running since 2008. The primary focus of Luckan Integration services is to provide information and support to immigrants in the capital region. Support comes in the form of one to one advisory appointments, competence building courses, educational seminars, mentorship programmes and social events. The information service provided by Luckan Integration guides immigrants on issues such as where and how to find work in the Capital region, education possibilities, language courses, finding accommodation, free time activities, volunteer work, social and cultural events.

Luckan Integration also works in close cooperation with a number of actors focused on the integration and wellbeing of immigrants. One such actor is ARBIS with whom Luckan Integration arranges events and courses mainly focused on providing Swedish language tuition on Luckan premises. Of particular success is the FIKA mentorship programme; the FIKA programme aims to work against the marginalisation of immigrants and the segregation of different groups in

Finnish society. The programme achieves this by offering clients the opportunity to be matched with an individual who is well established in Finland and who can act as a guide to Finnish society, customs and Swedish language. Mentor, mentee partnerships are initially scheduled to last for six months with a requirement that the mentor and mentee spend at least four hours a month together.

One to one guidance services at Luckan Integration offers clients the opportunity to consult a member of staff on a wide variety of issues including, education, employment, social security, housing, health issues and any number of issues that that a client may find challenging. In some cases staff can act as an intermediary or draw upon Luckan Integrations networks and contacts to assist a client but more probable is that a client is given the necessary information needed to act independently, thereby bolstering client confidence and knowhow.

During the course of operations the staff of Luckan Integration recognised a growing need from within their target group for more involved, longer term activities. The need became apparent during and after events such as CV-clinics where clients expressed a desire to stay after events had ended and share experiences and information with one another and the realisation that a forum and place for doing so, in English, did not exist in the capital region. So it was decided to provide the unemployed immigrant clients of Luckan Integration with a peer support group which would offer clients an opportunity to share experiences and information with peers and to bring about the realisation within participants that they were not alone with the challenges of unemployment. Through the provision of this sharing space, the staff of Luckan Integration hope to empower, inspire and motivate participants of the peer support group. It was also decided that the peer support group also provide participants with tools and ideas to broaden and enhance their job search and encourage investigation of alternative methods to securing meaningful employment.

When I arrived at Luckan Integration in the spring of 2014 to complete my final work placement as part condition of completing this degree the staff had already decided, on the basis of my application, that I had the maturity and life/professional experience needed to plan and implement a peer support group for unemployed immigrants. After numerous discussions and initial guidance from staff at Luckan Integration I was given a free hand to plan and implement the project as I saw fit.

## 2.2 Pilot peer groups

This particular iteration of the peer support group is preceded by two pilot peer groups which I undertook for Luckan Integration in the spring and winter of 2014. Both of these pilot groups ran for the same length of time and followed a very similar format as the current group.

The pilot groups fulfilled the role of a test bed in identifying which elements of the peer group programme were most useful for participants and which elements required modification or elimination.

A questionnaire and informal discussions were employed with the participants of the pilot groups to help identify the strengths and weaknesses of the format and develop future iterations of the peer support group.

## 3 Theoretical basis of the thesis

### 3.1 Anti-oppressive practice (AOP) and the empowerment approach

“Working with others who share the same need or experience or suffer the same oppression is an effective way of helping people become aware of their situation. Groups are therefore Empowering” (Mullender & Ward, 1991). Cited in (Howe, 2009, p. 149)

The theoretical framework for this project stems from the traditions of critical practice, in particular, anti-oppressive practice which emerged under the broad umbrella of critical practice as early as the 1960's. A standard definition of AOP agreed upon by all has remained elusive and has seen numerous modifications and changes over the years, however, in broad terms AOP can be defined as “..... a critical social work approach that draws on critical social science theories and is informed by humanistic and social justice values, taking account of the experiences and views of oppressed people” (Dalrymple & Burke, 2006, p. 7). For further elaboration Dalrymple & Burke refer to their earlier publication of 2000 “Anti-oppressive practice is based on a belief that social work should make a difference, so that those who have been oppressed may regain control of their lives and re-establish their right to be full and active members of society. To achieve this aim, practitioners have to be political, reflective, reflexive and committed to promoting change” (Dalrymple & Burke, 2006, p. 48). Whilst these definitions of AOP are not all encompassing they do provide a loose, but broad overview of what the academic establishment believes AOP embodies. It is the principles and values outlined in these definitions that lie at the heart of this project, its ethos, values, aims and objectives.

An AOP approach is essential for this project as it aims to lessen oppression, power inequalities and social/labour market exclusion for participants of the peer support group. Evidence for the oppression and exclusion of unemployed immigrants in Finland can be found from a number of sources but it is perhaps best summed up by (Valtonen , 2001, p. 421) when she points out that “immigrant job seekers in Finland routinely face rejection from employers on first contact and that “monopoly-like” practices are being employed to exclude immigrant job applicants from the labour market on the basis of language skill requirements”. Even though Finland’s government has put into action a number of initiatives to try and prepare its immigrants for the labour market including “comprehensive range of language and labour-market training courses, subsidised practice placements, and other forms of on-the-job training” (Valtonen , 2001, p. 423), it is still failing to address the issues of exclusion mentioned earlier in any meaningful manner. These issues become even further compounded when immigrants who have not been issued with a social security number, a process that can take considerable time, have no right to access the governments measures, initiatives and services designed for labour market integration.

Faced with such exclusionary practices in the Finnish labour market it can easily be imagined that immigrants trying to enter the Finnish labour market might become disheartened and frustrated, especially if faced with repeated rejection from employers which may lead to feelings of hopelessness, disempowerment, low self-esteem, self-blaming and reduced efficacy. It is the lack of will of government to address exclusionary practices that has led third sector actors to try and redress the balance caused by government inaction and provide unemployed immigrants with opportunities to come together and work through the challenges of being unemployed and an immigrant in Finland.

It is the issue of disempowerment or powerlessness of unemployed immigrants that we turn now with an observation from (Valtonen, 2008, p. 47) “In unemployment, immigrants, as newer citizens, are exposed to the risk of remaining in a socially vulnerable or powerless position, since an important source of power derives from an individual’s position in the labour market”. It is this powerlessness mentioned by Valtonen that this project will attempt to tackle through employing the principles and practices of the empowerment approach which most would argue is integral to AOP. Teater adds weight to this when she states “..... anti-oppressive practice is empowering in nature as it seeks to provide a working environment that is egalitarian where clients identify their needs and collaborate with social workers to identify clients’ strengths and resources to overcome barriers and obstacles within the environments. The end result will be that the clients are empowered and able to combat oppression, access resources and opportunities and meet needs” (Teater, 2010, p. 11).

Having reviewed numerous definitions of empowerment and discovering that each takes a slightly differing stance from the other to serve differing agendas, functions and perspectives I finally settled on a more neutral, more encompassing and personal definition that fits comfortably with the project of this thesis. The following definition was posited by (Rappaport 1985) and cited in (Gutierrez, 1990, p. 150) "... suggests a sense of control over one's life in personality, cognition and motivation. It expresses itself at the level of feelings, at the level of ideas about self-worth, at the level of being able to make a difference in the world around us. . . . We all have it as a potential. It does not need to be purchased, nor is it a scarce commodity". This definition speaks to the less tangible aspects of empowerment, its personal nature and of its abundance and availability. This definition does not purport to speak to the majority of definitions that require that empowerment lead to external social or structural change by means of collective action on the macro level because that is not the aim or objective of this project. The focus here is on empowerment that emphasises on the micro "At a micro level, empowerment is described as the development of a personal feeling of increased power or control without any change in structural arrangements" (Dalrymple & Burke, 2006, p. 113). As well as on the space between the micro and macro "...the interface of these two approaches: how individual empowerment can contribute to group empowerment and how the increase in a group's power can enhance the functioning of its individual members" (Gutierrez, 1990, p. 150).

What direct support is there for the use of support groups with unemployed immigrants as a means to enhance chances of finding employment and reducing the negative effects of unemployment on wellbeing? A compelling example is cited by (Potocky-Tripodi, 2002, p. 412) when she cites (Burke 1998) "The group context provides more opportunities for members to practice skill building and acts as a source of additional social support and contacts that can generate job leads. . . . These groups can also provide clients with companionship, encouragement, and acknowledgement for success in performing search-related behaviours. Contact with others experiencing unemployment can assist in reducing stigma and other negative feelings associated with unemployment. . . . Job search support groups also provide clients with many of the material resources needed to develop search materials and carry out search activities" and "job search assistance programs that combine targeted search behaviour training with small-group interactions have been phenomenally successful in helping clients find work" (Potocky-Tripodi, 2002, p. 412). In light of the situation that unemployed immigrants face with regard to social and labour market exclusion it is perhaps safe to conclude that small group efforts such as the one detailed in this thesis are of real utility to participants of the peer support group and offers opportunities to engage in a meaningful process leading to improved self-image, motivation, efficacy and a lessening of the negative aspects of unemployment.

With reference to the definitions of empowerment outlined in the previous paragraphs the programme of activities detailed in the section of this paper (Implementation 6-6.8) are all

aimed at fostering a sense of empowerment and efficacy within the participants of the peer support group. The initial meeting detailed in 6.1 aims to bring the group together through participation in decision making processes on issues such as ground rules for future meetings as well as the content and structure of the programme. This, together with the “getting to know you activity” should foster feelings of control and participation in the decision making process as well as enhance cohesion of group members and promote group identity.

Activities detailed in 6.2-6.3 are aimed at getting participants to look at alternatives to the traditional routes to employment and perhaps rediscover or recognise skills and competences that may be utilised to create self-employment. This offers opportunity and hope to those participants that have repeatedly found the barriers to the labour market in Finland unbreachable. Support for this kind of activity comes from a recent OECD report that states “Self-employment can be a way for immigrants to escape marginalisation on the labour market” and “...an illustration of the fact that self-employment is used to escape from structural entry barriers in the labour market” as well as “Indeed, empirical evidence from many OECD countries has shown that self-employment is used by immigrants as a means of escaping marginalisation on the labour market, and tends to be linked with previous unemployment experience” (OECD, 2007, pp. 52-53). In addition, the inclusion of the field trip to the Enterprise Helsinki information session on March the 19<sup>th</sup> aims to empower participants with the knowledge and knowhow required to seek support and financial assistance should they decide that entrepreneurship is a viable option to traditional employment. Additionally, for those participants with little knowledge in the IT arena, the video tutorial on website creation for small businesses adds an extra layer of learning and preparedness.

The “Traditional pathways to work session” 6.4, brings participants into direct contact with an expert representative from TE-toimisto who is specialised in the field of immigrant employment in Finland. This informal get together offers participants the chance to explore, in detail, the services and opportunities available to them through TE-toimisto and related government agencies and gain insights and knowledge that will assist in future dealings with government services and agencies as well as the possibility to ask and receive answers to specific issues participants have. Access to resources and knowledge such as this is essential to the empowerment approach as evidenced by Teater when she states “Empowerment is considered a process and an outcome where social workers and clients collaborate to challenge oppression and gain greater access to resources within the environment to assist the clients to better meet their needs” (Teater, 2010, p. 67) and “For example, the theory of empowerment holds that individuals who have access to resources and opportunities are able to grow, thrive and develop,....” (Teater, 2010, p. 13). More specific support comes from Lee, when she states that “Giving information that helps clients gain familiarity with how systems work and how to gain access to resources also diminishes fear and adds to feelings of competence” (Lee, 2001, pp. 85-86).

The lived experiences and wellbeing session 6.5, will utilise the expertise of a wellbeing expert from Suomen Mielenterveysseura. The intention here is to assist participants in understanding the negatives that can arise from unemployment and offer insight and guidance on how to cope with or combat these negatives that affect wellbeing. There is a slew of documented evidence to support the notion that unemployment has a negative impact on the wellbeing and psychology on immigrants. (Hayfron, 2006, p. 448) Cites (Lev-Wiesel and Kaufman, 2004) "immigration and unemployment create three sources of stressors: uncertainty about the future, financial and emotional distress due to lack of a job, and exclusion from mainstream society. They contend that incidence of unemployment would also lead to increased mortality rates, physical and mental ill-health". It is evidence such as this that adds weight to the inclusion of a wellbeing session in this projects programme, in the hope that at the very least participants can be informed that assistance and advice is available if needed and from where that assistance and advice can be sourced.

Throughout these sessions it was my intention to engage participants in a continuous dialogue about barriers to entry into the Finnish labour market and the practices, policies and structural factors that sustain these barriers. This dialogue is absolutely essential to helping participants recognise that their unemployed status is in part due to forces outside their sphere of influence which in turn should alleviate the self-blaming that can arise from continued employer rejection and unemployment. This dialogue is also critical to the empowerment approach in social work and is commonly referred to as consciousness raising. Whilst outlining the process of empowerment (Breton, 2004, p. 58), borrowing from (Freire 1970/1993) highlights the importance of consciousness raising to the empowerment approach "The process in question is one of consciousness raising or more accurately, conscientization, in which people become aware of (1) the interconnections between issues and the ways in which personal issues are linked to interpersonal and to political, social, economic, and cultural issues and (2) how the interconnections between the personal and the political manifest themselves in specific power arrangements in the world around them". This continued dialogue is supported with peer reviewed materials.

### 3.2 The definition and theoretical underpinnings of peer support

"Self-help and support groups have become an integral part of mainstream culture, expressing a social philosophy that heralds individual empowerment and citizen involvement"  
(Garvin, Guttierrez, & Galinsky, 2004, p. 139).

To meet the requirements outlined by my working life partner as well as the needs of their clients it was mutually decided that a peer support group would act as the most suitable framework within which the needs of peer group participants could be met. Whilst peer support ran

at the core of the peer support group for unemployed immigrants there were also other supplemental elements introduced into the programme, such as training in CV and website creation and interventions from external experts acting to support peer group participants in areas such as entrepreneurship preparedness and utilising the services of the unemployment office which were necessary in order to serve the specific needs of the peer group participants.

Peer support and peer support groups come in a vast array of formulations with an equal number of purposes, aims and objectives and this can lead to difficulty in defining peer support generally. Traditionally peer support has been most prevalent in helping those who face mental, physical and emotional challenges with peer support for other areas, such as the focus of this thesis project, being less prevalent. Indeed, finding literature covering the area of peer support for unemployed immigrants has proven to be challenging leaving no choice but to draw on established literature that covers those areas already mentioned which in itself is not a drawback as the same principles and definitions cover all forms of peer support.

However there are definitions that attempt to cover peer support generally and one such definition is provided by (Mead, Hilton, & Curtis, 2011), "Peer support is a system of giving and receiving help founded on key principles of respect, shared responsibility, and mutual agreement of what is helpful. It is about understanding another's situation empathically through the shared experience.... When people find affiliation with others they feel are "like" them, they feel a connection. This connection, or affiliation, is a deep, holistic understanding based on mutual experience". Whilst this definition speaks of feelings, understanding and mutual help there are other definitions that highlight the more practical elements of peer support such as the following which emanates from the social work perspective, "Social group work is a method of social work that aims, in an informed way, through purposeful group experiences, to help individuals and groups to meet individual and group need, and to influence and change personal, group, organisational and community problems" (Lindsay & Orton, 2008, p. 7). In addition, "It is also not un-common for people with similar lived experiences to offer each other practical advice and suggestions for strategies that professionals may not offer or even know about" (Mead & MacNeil, 2006).

Whilst it is difficult to reference an all-encompassing, globally accepted definition of peer support it can also be said that pinpointing a singular unifying theory for peer support is impossible because of its multifaceted nature and therefore reliance on a number of theories is required in order to gain a clearer understanding of this multifaceted nature. However, a number of efforts to highlight the underpinning theories of peer support have been posited and (Salzer 2002) attempts to identify these theories in table 1, which is taken and adapted from (Salzer, 2002, p. 360), with additions from, (Garvin, Guttierrez, & Galinsky, 2004) and (Pepper & Carter, 2010, p. 11).

Social comparison theory	<p>(Festinger, 1954), postulates that people seek out others with similar experiences (peers) to assist in the maintenance of a sense of the normalcy of their experiences.</p> <p>“Social comparison theory provides another theoretical base from which to study self-help and support groups. This theory proposes that social behaviours can be predicted as individuals seek to maintain a sense of normalcy and accuracy about their world” (Powell, 1987), cited in (Garvin, Guttierrez, &amp; Galinsky, 2004, p. 150).</p>
Reference group theory	<p>(Powell, 1987) observes “Reference group theory is another powerful conceptual tool that can be applied to both support and self-help groups”, cited in (Garvin, Guttierrez, &amp; Galinsky, 2004, p. 150). Reference group theory informs us that a person’s values, attitude, beliefs and to some extent actions are shaped by identifying oneself with a reference group.</p>
Social learning theory	<p>(Bandura 1977), suggests that behaviour change resulting from interactions with peers may be more likely because peers are perceived to be more credible role models and enhance self-efficacy.</p>
Social support theories	<p>Social support is a particularly important part of peer support. Salzer describes five types of support that might be provided: emotional, instrumental, informational, companionship and validation.</p> <p>“Social support theory postulates that individuals in crisis are partially protected from the negative effects of stress if surrounded with human supports in the form of family friendship networks, and/or fellow sufferers”, (Caplan &amp; Killilea, 1976) cited by (Garvin, Guttierrez, &amp; Galinsky, 2004, pp. 149-150).</p> <p>“When friendship and family ties are weak, support groups of fellow sufferers offer substitutes for natural support systems; they also give specialized forms of experiential knowledge about the stressful condition”, (Borkman,1999) cited by (Garvin, Guttierrez, &amp; Galinsky, 2004, p. 149).</p>

Experiential knowledge	Experience leads to an understanding and knowledge base that is different from that acquired through research and observation. Experiential knowledge promotes choice and self-determination that enhance empowerment.
Helper-therapy principle	<p>(Reissman 1965) (Skovholt 1974), Helping others is beneficial: 1) Increased sense of interpersonal competence as a result of making an impact on another's life; 2) Development of a sense of equality in giving and taking between himself/herself and others; 3) Helper gains new personally relevant knowledge while helping; and 4) Helper receives social approval from the person they help and others.</p> <p>Peer support provides opportunities for consumers to benefit from helping others through developing more reciprocal relationships, seeing the impact of mutual support and receiving approval.</p>

Table 1: Underpinning theories of peer support

As can be seen, peer support is a multifaceted phenomenon and complex in totality, which explains the applicability of so many theories that can be brought together to support the legitimacy of peer support as a valuable intervention tool.

Having established a theoretical foundation for peer support we can now turn to what peer support actually looks like in terms of benefits for participants. One of the key concepts at the heart of peer support is empowerment and groups offer fertile ground and opportunity for empowerment to take place. This is supported by (Garvin, Guttierrez, & Galinsky, 2004, p. 80) when they state, "...groups are opportunity systems that can be used in a wide variety of efforts to empower clients. ... Groups and communities provides a richer opportunity system for reducing powerlessness than do one-worker-to-one-client approaches". Furthermore, (Simon 1994), cited in (Garvin, Guttierrez, & Galinsky, 2004), states "In groups, members derive "a sense of personal and interpersonal power from the collectivity that is able, to some degree, to reduce the structural power imbalance between the social worker and his or her clients".

Peer support also offers a cathartic experience for participants in that it allows for the expression of pent up feelings and frustrations which can lead to feelings of freedom from burdens and a release of energies that had been previously employed in suppressing those negative feelings and frustrations. Another significant benefit to participants is that of universality, as participants become aware that they are not alone with the burdens they shoulder, that others share similar feelings, experiences and stories. Learning vicariously is also prevalent in peer

support with participants benefiting from experiencing other participants challenges and difficulties which can lead to insights into one's own challenges and difficulties which in turn may act as a catalyst for change. Finally, group cohesion and a sense of belonging can lead to corrective recapitulation through the uncovering of answers to questions such as; how do I come across to others in the group? Do I think in a similar way to the other group participants? (Nichols & Jenkinson, 2006, p. 29).

With particular regard for this project thesis (Thyer & Wodarski, 2001), offer the following insight into the benefits that the unemployed can accrue from participation in peer support activities, "Contact with others experiencing unemployment can assist in reducing stigma and other negative feelings associated with unemployment. . . . Job search support groups also provide clients with many of the material resources needed to develop search materials and carry out search activities. These groups can also provide clients with companionship, encouragement, and acknowledgement for success in performing search-related behaviours".

## 4 Objectives

### 4.1 Thesis objectives

In order to inform the future development, planning and implementation of the peer group for unemployed immigrants and support future funding applications the following aims have been set for this project thesis:

- To garner participant evaluation of the usefulness of the peer support group within the context of participant's circumstances and status as unemployed immigrants.
- To determine whether participants have derived any pertinent skills, knowledge or knowhow during their participation in the peer group that may improve their chances of securing employment or becoming self-employed.
- To reveal the weaknesses and strengths of the peer support programme.

### 4.2 Peer support group objectives

In broad terms the objective of the peer support group for unemployed immigrants is to empower participants in the face of the challenges and problems inherent in being unemployed. In real terms this means participants should see gains in self-sufficiency arising from shared expert knowledge from the state employment services regarding the services available and how

they are accessed. A decreased experience of isolation, exclusion and loneliness emanating from a developing group consciousness with peers who face similar challenges and experiences. A decrease in self-blaming with regard to unemployment status and a reduction in feelings of helplessness as the sharing of common experiences puts shared experiences into perspective. An increased responsibility for change and self-efficacy as participants become their own agents of change arising from acquired knowledge, consciousness raising and knowhow over the course of peer group meetings. Increased understanding and manageability of negative feelings and emotions that stem from being unemployed through the sharing of life experiences and support offered and gained from fellow group participants.

In practical terms this will be achieved through raising awareness of and exploring what avenues are open to participants with regards to gaining employment. Realising forgotten or untapped resources and skills and identifying how those resources or skills can be put to gainful use. Gaining insight from experts on how the state employment services infrastructure functions and exploring what services that are available and how to access them. Exploring the possibilities self-employment has to offer by guiding participants to expert sources for guidance on practicalities and funding, and offering clients training on how to create a small business website as well as training on how to create a CV and covering letter tailored to the Finnish labour market. These measures will be underpinned by ongoing, regular discussions and debates focusing on mutual support, openness and sharing of lived experiences.

## 5 Methods

### 5.1 Participant recruitment

Participants for the peer support group were drawn from both the existing client base of Luckan Integration and from the general population. Keeping in mind the low threshold access to Luckan Integration services and ethos of the organisation, the only stipulations placed on client recruitment were that applicants must hold immigrant status, be unemployed and reside in either Espoo, Helsinki or Vantaa. The regional stipulation mentioned here is a result of funding for the peer support group which comes from the budgets of Helsinki City, Vantaa City and Espoo City and therefore there was a requirement from those funders that peer group participants be residents in those areas.

The process of recruitment was undertaken in targeted online and traditional media with releases in publications such as Helsinki Times, Six Degrees and online at the Luckan websites, social media sites, Infopankki and a number of other online forums and websites frequented by the target group.



**D**o you feel you have done everything you can to find work in Finland? Have the negative responses from employers left you feeling you are facing an impossible challenge, leaving you feeling frustrated and isolated? If so then Luckan's peer group for unemployed immigrants may be just what you need to help you reflect on your situation and find a more empowered and positive path to employment.

Luckan Integration recently ran a pilot programme which offered immigrants in the Capital Region an opportunity to participate in a peer group for unemployed immigrants. The pilot was a great

success and feedback gathered from participants indicated that they became empowered and found new energy and optimism. Therefore the peer group is set to be expanded and extended and will run again at beginning on September.

Once again the Luckan Integration peer group for unemployed immigrants will offer participants the possibility to come together with others who share similar circumstances and experiences and address the challenges of unemployment as a group. A number of themes will be explored, including alternative pathways to work, the utilisation of informal skills and traditional pathways to employment. The group meetings will also include the opportunity to learn from experts in the fields of employment and well-being.

Perhaps most importantly, the group will be facilitated and led by an immigrant who has lived, worked and studied in Finland for the past 15 years and has experienced first-hand the

challenges and frustrations of being an unemployed, immigrant job hunter in Finland. In this context the group leader will act as an invaluable resource for participants, offering experience-based advice and guidance.

The peer group commences again from 1 September. The group will run for seven weeks and will meet every Monday between 14:30-16.30.

To apply for a place send your application to [integration@luckan.fi](mailto:integration@luckan.fi) and briefly introduce yourself, the amount of time unemployed, the area you live in, education, and so forth.

Figure 1: An example of 2014 promotional material for the winter peer support group, text and imagery by Peter Byrne

Substantial efforts were made by Luckan Integration staff members and myself during the recruitment campaign to ensure that the group would have enough participants to ensure the development a workable group dynamic. The minimum set number of participants was set at six but at commencement the group consisted of eight individuals.

Participants came from a broad range of ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds and consisted of 5 females and 3 males.

## 5.2 Conducting the study

“Evaluation is part of a spirit of enquiry that is more effective when there is a climate of trust, a willingness to be open, a genuine concern to be constructively critical and an interest in working co-operatively as part of a team” (Cowie & Wallace, 2000, p. 164).

The rationale for choosing the qualitative research methods detailed in 5.3 & 5.4, is related to the open, informal, sharing, supportive and safe environment of peer support groups. The objectives being to garner participant evaluation of the usefulness of the peer support group within the context of participant's circumstances and status as unemployed immigrants. To reveal the strengths and weaknesses of the programme and determine whether participants have derived any pertinent skills, knowledge or knowhow during their participation in the peer group that may improve their chances of securing employment or becoming self-employed. The

questionnaires aim to facilitate exposure of any pertinent skills, knowledge and knowhow derived from participation in the peer group by direct comparison between responses entered on entry and exit questionnaires and the focus group aims reveal participants evaluation of the usefulness of the peer group programme.

Both of these methods will employ open-ended and closed questioning to elicit deeper, more considered responses and a semi-structured approach will be employed for the focus group, both of which are in keeping with qualitative research tradition and practice. The method employed for recording data during the group discussion will be digital recording which obviates the need for note taking which is can hinder group leader participation in the group discussion and leads to a full and detailed account of what was said.

### 5.3 Entry & exit questionnaires

Both entry and exit questionnaires were briefly piloted on a group of friends and family from diverse ethnic backgrounds and with differing English language proficiency. Based on feedback from testers some changes were made to simplify and clarify language in the questionnaires and an estimation of fifteen minutes was made for the time needed for participants to complete an instance of the entry or exit questionnaire.

Entry and exit questionnaires were chosen for this project because this will reveal any pertinent skills, knowledge or knowhow participants have derived from participation in the peer support group over the lifetime of the project, approximately six weeks in total. Both entry and exit questionnaires were completed anonymously and in confidence to prevent, as far as possible, links between the data garnered from the questionnaires and respondents identities. Questionnaires were given to participants in the first meeting and the penultimate meeting of the peer support group programme.

On both occasions participants were informed that they would have 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire, but that the time limit could be extended if required. Participants were left in a large room by themselves to complete the questionnaires. Matching entry and exit questionnaires at the end of the project was accomplished through allocating each questionnaire paper with a number, figure or word, which was be chosen in secret by the respondent at the time of the entry questionnaire and placed on the cover sheet in an allocated space and the same number, figure or word was be reapplied to the exit questionnaire by respondents to facilitate matching of entry and exit questionnaires. Further to this, I left the room where respondents completed the questionnaires to ensure anonymity. This method of data collection has been well tested and is widely utilised in the social services field, this is attested to when (Carey, 2009, p. 124) cites (Royse, 1991), "as with the interview the questionnaire represents

one of the most common instruments that social workers utilize in their work". This commonality of use in the social work arena speaks to the validity, utility and trustworthiness of questionnaires as a method of data collection.

Questions in the exit questionnaire closely mirror those in the entry questionnaire which allows for identification of any changes in participant skills, knowledge and knowhow. Due to the qualitative nature of this project the majority of questions follow an open-ended format which encourages respondents to explore their views and opinions in greater detail and in more depth which should allow for rich data outcomes. More specifically, the open-ended format "... permits an unlimited number of possible answers. Respondents can answer in detail and can qualify and clarify responses. They can help us discover unanticipated findings. They permit adequate answers to complex issues. They permit creativity, self-expression, and richness of detail. They reveal a respondent's logic, thinking process, and frame of reference" (Neuman, 2014, p. 333).

#### 5.4 Group discussion

It should be noted here that this iteration of the peer support group for unemployed immigrants did not share the same degree of openness and sharing as the previous two pilot groups. This was apparent within the first ten minutes of the first meeting and I believe is in part due to two or three participants being reticent or unwilling to disclose more than very basic opinions, ideas or thoughts which set the tone for the rest of the participants and subsequent meetings.

The discussion was carried out in the penultimate group meeting in a relaxed and informal atmosphere. Participants were informed that they were free to speak or remain silent and that they should feel under no obligation to take part and that they were free to leave at any time if they wished to do so.

The semi-structured group discussion was aimed at garnering participant's evaluation of the usefulness of their peer group experience in the context of their particular needs, circumstances and unemployed status and to identify any weaknesses and strengths of the project. The focus group or group discussion method was chosen for this project because it is well tested and an accepted method in social research, "Focus groups are a well-respected means of gathering in-depth, qualitative information about opinions and attitudes on a wide range of issues" (Cowie & Wallace, 2000, p. 161), in addition, large amounts of data can be collected in a short period of time and focus groups are well suited to exploring people's opinions, experiences and attitudes. The focus group method also supplements the entry and exit questionnaires that were used in this project because peer group participants may have felt limited in expression by the questionnaire format but more comfortable, free and able to express themselves in a focus group environment.

There are also benefits to be garnered from using this method with pre-existing groups, “Research participants who belong to pre-existing social groups may bring to the interaction comments about shared experiences and events and may challenge any discrepancies between expressed beliefs and actual behaviour and generally promote discussion and debate” and “Pre-existing groups have the advantage of providing a more `natural' setting for discussion and tend to ease recruitment efforts” (Bloor et al, 2001, p. 22). The focus group method is also flexible enough to be combined with other methods such as the questionnaires in this project, this is attested to by (Linhorst 2002), in (Carey, 2009, p. 129) when outlining the relevance of the focus group method to social research, “the capacity of focus group research to be combined with other methods such as one-on-one interviews or questionnaires”. Linhorst also highlights the potential benefits for participants “the educational, therapeutic and empowering potential of focus group meetings for participants” (Carey, 2009, p. 129). It is this flexibility and potential inherent in the focus group method that makes it a good fit with the nature of the peer group format.

To reveal why focus groups are such a rich environment for qualitative data, (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p. 171) , explore the group dynamic “Data are generated by interaction between group participants. Participants present their own views and experience, but they also hear from other people. They listen, reflect on what is said, and in the light of this consider their own standpoint further. Additional material is thus triggered in response to what they hear. Participants ask questions of each other, seek clarification, comment on what they have heard and prompt others to reveal more. “As the discussion progresses (backwards and forwards, round and round the group), individual response becomes sharpened and refined, and moves to a deeper and more considered level” (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). It is this group dynamic that should ease my recording of this data, “In a sense, the group participants take over some of the 'interviewing' role, and the researcher is at times more in the position of listening in” (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p. 171). This listening position afforded by the group dynamic allows greater time and concentration to be spent recording the data and taking a fuller role in the group discussion process, which will result in data of superior quality for later review.

## 6 Implementation

Implementation of the peer support group took place over a six week period during March and April in 2015. There was one, two hour meeting each Monday afternoon and the meetings took place on Luckan premises at Simonkatu 8, Helsinki as well as one field trip to the premises of Enterprise Helsinki for an information seminar on entrepreneurship. Each meeting was informal and relaxed in nature and followed a basic structure: Welcome, catch up on what’s happened over the previous week, Main discussion or activity, tea break, closing discussion and feedback. I also created more than three hours of video tutorials for this peer support program covering

the creation of a CV and Covering Letter suitable for the Finnish labour market and how to create a small business website.

#### 6.1 Initial meeting, March the 9<sup>th</sup>

The initial meeting focused on getting to know each other, establishing ground rules, confidentiality and the entry questionnaire. The first task after informal introductions was reassuring participants that everything that is said and done during the lifetime of the peer support group, in any forum is confidential and should not be repeated outside of the group context. Participants were then given a list of proposed ground rules which were discussed and participants were asked if they had suggestions for additions or changes to the ground rules, which were:

1. Confidentiality
2. We do not discuss members who are absent
3. Please keep electronic devices turned off
4. Respect your fellow peers by turning up regularly & on time
5. Everyone has the right to be heard and the right to be silent
6. Respect the speaker, avoid cross-talking
7. All feelings are okay and do not require either a negative or positive judgment

Participants were then handed a copy of the schedule and activities for the remaining five meetings and asked for thoughts and suggestions on whether anything in the plan should be changed or altered in order to meet their needs or objectives more effectively.

Participants then took part in a task designed to encourage disclosure. Individuals were asked to choose three pictured cards that say something about themselves and they were then asked to pair up with a partner and describe the significance of the cards they have chosen to each other. This was then repeated as participants were again asked to choose a different partner. Participants were then asked to return to the circle and introduce what they learnt about their partners to the rest of the group.

This was followed by the introduction of the entry questionnaire and its purpose and proposed use and informed verbal consent was sought from the participants and granted by all present. Once again confidentiality and anonymity were stressed to participants verbally and all present were reassured that nothing placed on the questionnaire can or will be linked with them as individuals or with their identities. Participants were then allocated fifteen minutes to complete the questionnaire and I left the room for the duration. Finally an open discussion was held to go over what we had done during the meeting and to ask for questions, ideas, thoughts and feedback.

## 6.2 Informal skills and entrepreneurship March the 16<sup>th</sup>

The primary aim was to encourage participants to begin thinking about entrepreneurship as a possible route to employment and encourage exploration of how entrepreneurship works. The meeting was concerned with discovering informal skills and competences with the aim of using those skills competences to create self-employment. Participants were asked to take part in a brainstorming session that asked participants to think of skills and competences they might have that might be exploitable and were encouraged to be as creative as possible. Participants were handed large sheets of paper and coloured pens and brainstorming was initially undertaken as individuals and then in pairs where the partner acted a sounding board and could encourage further exploration of ideas. Further brainstorming took place as a group and the most promising ideas are shared.

Participants were then asked to take part in an exercise over the coming week which involved learning new skills or in some cases practicing old ones. Participants were directed to a well-produced video tutorial which aimed to teach participants the necessary, basic skills needed to create a small business presence on the internet using the Weebly website creation platform, there were no costs or commitments involved. Participants were asked to take their best idea from the brainstorming exercise and use it as the basis for the small business website.

Getting to know each other's situations and experiences better. Once everyone was feeling relaxed I shared something of my past, present and future plans with regard to employment, unemployment, my career experiences and hopes. This was with the aim of encouraging participants to self-disclose and share their experiences of being an unemployed immigrant in Finland.

## 6.3 Informal skills follow up, March 23<sup>rd</sup>

Meeting three began by introducing participants to an upcoming field trip to an English language information session held by Enterprise Helsinki. The two hour session offered participants insights into what is required to start a small business, what financial support is available to them from the government and where to find further help and guidance should participants want it.

Participants were then encouraged to share the websites they had created over the past week and give feedback and encouragement to one another regarding their efforts.

This meeting ended by getting participants to think about traditional pathways to employment in preparation for the guest expert from TE-toimisto in meeting four. Participants were encouraged to speak about what had or hadn't worked for them in the past and to think about what

kind of questions they might want to ask the expert. This was followed by the introduction of a further task which was designed to get participants producing suitable CV's and covering letters. Video tutorials created by me and designed for this purpose were shared with the participants and they were asked to amend existing CV's or create new ones following the guidelines in the tutorials. Participants were then asked to return them to me by email by Friday of the same week and I then gave feedback, made amendments, gave suggestions and encouragement before our next meeting.

#### 6.4 Traditional pathways to work, March 30<sup>th</sup>

An expert on immigrant employment, Kadri Lehtonen, from TE-toimisto came to inform participants about the services available to them from TE-toimisto and to hear any concerns and answer any questions participants might have. This was followed by a review and discussion of what was learnt from the expert and how participants can apply that learning in their future dealings with TE-toimisto.

A further review and discussion covering the creation of a CV or covering letter was carried out and any outstanding questions were answered.

#### 6.5 Lived experiences and wellbeing, April 8<sup>th</sup>

The original plan for this meeting was abandoned because the wellbeing expert from Suomen Mielenterveysseura was unable to attend and no substitute could be secured at short notice, therefore the original plan was replaced with a consciousness raising exercise.

In substitution, the 2001 paper by Valtonen, (Valtonen , Cracking monopoly: Immigrants and employment in Finland, 2001) was studied and discussed as a group in order to raise awareness about the barriers to the labour market commonly faced by immigrants. Both the barriers and possible solutions to circumvent those barriers were discussed in some detail.

This meeting also saw the implementation of the group evaluation discussion over a period of thirty minutes as well as the implementation of the exit questionnaire.

#### 6.6 Wrap up, April 13<sup>th</sup>

The final meeting followed the basic structure of previous meetings but included all participants and myself bringing home cooked food, traditional to country of origin, to the meeting.

The atmosphere was relaxed and discussion focused on what had been covered over the previous meetings and future plans.

Participants were also encouraged to continue participating in the private social media space that was created for them and to continue sharing information and support with one another. In addition plans were made to bring together all participants from all instances of the peer group in the summer of 2015 to catch up, extend networks and reinvigorate participants.

#### 6.7 Field-trip March 19th

Enterprise Helsinki English information session on how to start a business in Finland.

All group members attend an information seminar hosted by Enterprise Helsinki where they learnt about the prerequisites of starting a business and how to navigate the bureaucratic minefield as well as how to secure funding and advice.

#### 6.8 Social media group

From the outset of the meetings and in support of the meetings, a closed and private social media space was be created on Facebook where group members have the opportunity to continue supporting one another and share information. Participants were encouraged to continue with the support network they have created by regularly visiting the social media space that has been created for them.

### 7 Evaluation

This summative evaluation will draw on the data provided by participants in the entry and exit questionnaires and the group discussion. Summative evaluation is summed up by (Garvin, Guttierrez, & Galinsky, 2004) when they state, "Summative evaluation is conducted at the end of a program and provides a judgment about the effectiveness, worth, or merit of a program or activity". In terms of evaluating group work there are two possible perspectives that can be taken and these are highlighted by (Garvin, Guttierrez, & Galinsky, 2004), when they state, "Evaluations of group work can be quite complex; group-level interventions can be evaluated on a number of levels. For example, the evaluation can be taken from the perspective of the client, the group leader, or both". This evaluation will draw on both perspectives to offer as broad an evaluation of the peer support group program as possible.

The aims of the evaluation are to use data from the entry and exit questionnaires to reveal whether participants gained any pertinent skills, knowledge or knowhow that may improve their

chances of securing employment/self-employment as a result of participation in the peer group for unemployed immigrants. Secondly, to use data gathered from participants during the group discussion to garner participant evaluation of the usefulness of the peer support group within the context of participant's circumstances and status as unemployed immigrants as well as reveal any weaknesses and strengths of the peer group programme for unemployed immigrants.

It is anticipated that this evaluation will inform the future development, planning and implementation of the peer group for unemployed immigrants and reveal whether changes need to be made to format or content in order to provide improved experiences and outcomes for participants. It is also hoped that this evaluation will act, in part, as a support tool for my working life partner when making funding applications for future iterations of the peer support group for unemployed immigrants.

### 7.1 Group discussion

In total there were seven participants who took part in the group discussion and unfortunately there was only thirty minutes available for the discussion due to a number of limiting factors such as the presentation from TE-toimisto continuing for longer than planned.

To ensure anonymity in reporting, participant responses have been assigned a code. For the purposes of this evaluation participants will be referred to as P1 for example, where P is participant and a number to indicate which participant made a particular response. So, seven participants were involved meaning we have a range from P1 through to P7 in this instance. Further to this, when quoting responses from participants, a participant may refer to one or more of the other participants in the group within the quote, in which case those references to other participants will be indicated by a pound sign (#).

The aims of the discussion group were to garner participant opinion, evaluation, ideas and suggestions with regard to the usefulness of the program within the context of participant circumstances and status as unemployed immigrants. Additionally, to reveal the strengths and weaknesses of the peer support group for unemployed immigrants, so as to inform future development of the peer support group program. After listening to the recording of the discussion group several times and transcribing the pertinent data a number of observations can be made.

The following questions were devised for the semi-structured discussion group in order to keep discussion on track and to elicit pertinent data whilst allowing some room for the discussion to diverge into related areas:

1. Was the group experience what you had expected it to be?

2. What did you find to be most and least useful about the peer group experience?
3. Would you share with me your overall opinions of your peer group experience?

There were also numerous prompts employed during the discussion to elicit further or more specific information regarding topics raised by participants during the discussion.

With regard to question one, four of the seven participants in the group discussion stated that they had either no expectations or that they were unsure of what to expect from the peer support group. For example P1 states,

"I came here without any real expectations other than it was a group set up to help people, which in a way it has because I am looking at opportunities I wouldn't have thought of before".

It's interesting to note that in this statement P1 also indicates that participation in the peer support group has encouraged P1 to look at broader employment possibilities, a view also expressed by P6 in response to the same question when P6 states,

"I just found the group very informative and I joined just mainly to orient myself in the reality here (Finland) and erm, it was very good, I think I discovered a lot of new paths and it got me thinking about what I could do".

In response to this first question a number of important themes emerged such as the sharing of important information, resources and networking within the group. For example P2 states,

"I didn't know what to expect but I learned something that I didn't expect to learn and then more than that, it's not just me, who you know, are in this situation. I still see someone else as well and maybe even worse and we share some information like # always texts me when # finds some interesting information that might interest me. We know more people in the same position and we help each other and I think I like this point, definitely a lot".

Here P2 indicates that P2 is in regular contact with # outside of the peer group context and that they are networking and sharing important information with regard finding work. P2 also indicates that sharing and networking is occurring more broadly among peer group participants. The same viewpoints are shared by P3 and P1. P3 states,

"I agree with the others, I think even if we know there's a few resources avenues, the fact that I just heard from # that # is going through this Palkkatuki thing, this is valuable because it makes me want to go home and find out what is there for me, what I can do. While, I knew of this before but experience from others it's very valuable and especially from someone who you feel is in the same situation, who is in the same boat as you".

Here P3 has indicated that # has shared an experience that has prompted P3 to reinvestigate an opportunity that may have otherwise been forgotten or left unexplored and hence a missed

opportunity. There are indications from P1 that sharing has even evolved toward possible future collaboration with a fellow participant on a business venture when P1 states,

"Well actually as an example, remember I said to you yesterday about those Vinyl soaps, it's kind of combining two peoples ideas into a product which I've not even seen before, me and # were already talking about it earlier".

Here P1 has indicated that some degree of collaboration has taken place with a fellow participant as a result of sharing ideas and information. These three quotes clearly indicate that a significant degree of information and resource sharing is taking place and that group members are networking amongst themselves.

There were also indications that individual and shared learning had taken place from P2, P3 and other participants which is demonstrated in this response from P2,

"Maybe what I expect is like, I will learn something from you, get something from you, but actually I, I just learnt something about myself too, that OK, maybe I can do this and then also, I also learnt like, something from everyone".

So far participant responses to question 1 indicate that there is active networking, information, resource and idea sharing, learning and collaboration taking place between and amongst participants. There are also indications that there is relief in knowing that they as individuals are not alone in their circumstances and that other participants face similar challenges and burdens and the significance of this will be explored later in the evaluation.

P4 expressed dissatisfaction with the implementation of the group meeting covering the areas of CV creation and covering letter formulation in the following response to question 1,

"yeah I think that's been really valuable for me too, I think even though I never had many expectations, similar to #, I sort of thought there would be more like goal oriented, like your Finnish resume will look like this, your Finnish interview will be like this, things of that nature, but say that I found what happened or how the group unfolded much better for perspective and stuff like that, I liked how the group unfolded, how it went down, yes".

This dissatisfaction could be the result of P4's learning style being incompatible to some degree with the somewhat passive experience of learning from the video tutorials covering the subjects of CV's and covering letter's or it could indicate that the video materials were sub-standard in some way. On reflection, perhaps developing these topics to be more hands on and bringing them into the peer group meetings in a more concrete form rather than providing the learning materials to be accessed remotely outside of meeting times would see an increase in satisfaction of the presentation this particular subject.

Finally, responses made by P1 and P5 indicate that they were satisfied with the contribution made by the group leader and that group leaders should be experienced and competent with group management and implementation of plans and be able to promote a group dynamic of belonging. This is clearly illustrated in the following response from P5,

"maybe I don't have a better word for it but maybe I should say fatherly, like were your chickens and you have us under your wing, it feels, it's comforting, very comforting, so yeah, you're all my children kinda".

P1 goes on to indicate that the group leader should be able to engage participants when communicating and hold the attention of participants effectively,

"A lot of it actually has to do with you (addressing group leader), as well cos the way you're presenting it, for example when we went to that, erm, business thing (Helsinki Enterprise) when the Finnish guy was talking like this (monotone) all the time, but I mean the way you are with people, even from the first session its more positive, motivating, rather than just standing there talking about this, that and the other while everyone falls asleep".

It is perhaps made clear in these responses from P1 and P5 that they value a group leader who has experience and is comfortable in the role.

Moving on to question 2, there was a unanimous opinion shared by participants that the field trip to Enterprise Helsinki was a less than useful experience. There are a number of participant responses that could be used here to illustrate this but it will be limited to two as they are sufficient to illustrate the point. The moment the question had left my lips P3 gave the following response,

"Skip the visit to Yritys Helsinki", Laughs heartily. General agreement voiced around the group.

Which was followed by the following response from P2,

"Or maybe just because of that speaker, maybe it's just something to do with him/her, like you know before I went to him/her, I had the feeling like, Yeaah, I want to have my own business, and after that I felt like, Oi!, I don't know, I don't think he/she is good at all for me"

It is clear from these and other responses to the subject that the prolonged and formal manner in which the information was presented to participants at the Enterprise Helsinki information session was a strong negative for them. However participants continued to provide responses on this matter that suggest some innovative ways in which this topic could be developed for future iterations of the peer support group. A suggestion from P1 indicated that an abbreviated

version of the presentation of the information on entrepreneurship could be carried out by the group leader and be supported by written materials,

"To be honest if there was a booklet with all that information in there, I mean the way you are with erm, kinda speaking to people you could actually have that whole session sitting here, going over the thing and it would be probably ten times more productive than those people down there (Enterprise Helsinki)".

"Maybe a brochure and an immigrant business owner would have been better".

This suggestion from P1 that having a short presentation supported by written materials is sound and the further suggestion of inviting an immigrant business owner to speak with participants on this subject is very good and will be developed and implemented in future iterations of the peer support group. A further suggestion from P5 indicates that the information provided would serve participants better if it concentrated on sole proprietorship business model rather than including extra details from other models such as limited companies or public limited companies.

Next, participants were prompted to provide opinion on the peer group meeting that covered barriers to the Finnish labour market which was a last minute substitution for the original plan of having a visiting wellbeing and mental health expert from Suomen Mielenterveysseura join the group to look into the challenges to wellbeing and mental health during periods of unemployment. To ensure participants were oriented to the subject of barriers in the Finnish labour market they were provided with both an electronic and paper copy of (Valtonen , Cracking monopoly: Immigrants and employment in Finland, 2001) before the group meeting.

Overall, participants expressed satisfaction with this last minute substitution and found it to be a worthwhile and interesting exploration of the issues influencing access to working life.

P5 found value in verification,

"It verified what I knew, I like that verification part"

P7 went further and stated,

"Just, I think, just sort of realising that it's not just us personally, that there are these certain reasons why it's harder for immigrants to integrate and get accepted into society, you know these work places and we shouldn't take it personally, that it's just a fact you know".

The response from P7 indicates that P7 may have realised that external factors limiting active participation in the labour market are not a reflection of the personal and that there may be reasons outside the sphere of personal influence that account for repeated rejection from employers, non-response to job applications etc. This may go some way toward alleviating self-blaming in the face of these challenges.

P1 also found value in the exploration and stated,

"The difference before and after this group, I mean even now looking for a job online even with that paper before (Valtonen Paper), I know, ok well those barriers are there but Im still going to apply anyway knowing Im not the only person doing exactly this knowing that those barriers are there, it's kinda put me in a more positive.....".

This response from P1 may indicate a change in job hunting practice. P1 indicates that regardless of the barriers he will still apply for jobs and that P1 feels more positive about the whole issue.

Prompting for opinion on the peer group meetings that covered the visiting expert from TE-toimisto and the training in website building received overall positive responses. In the case of the website building it was clear from participant's exceptional efforts in creating their websites and sharing their efforts in the follow up meeting that the exercise was valuable and appreciated most by those who had had no, or little previous experience in creating websites. With great enthusiasm P2 stated,

"But I love that part though, the one where I can create my own website, yeah in fact it's the first time for me and I feel, aah, it's not that difficult why am I so stupid? I didn't know how to do this earlier, I like it".

The visiting expert from TE-toimisto had put together a presentation covering the services available to the unemployed and expressed a willingness to take questions from peer group participants. It was difficult for participants to disguise personal feelings of frustration and disappointment when asking questions from the expert but at all times the participants remained polite and respectful. This frustration was voiced by P5,

"It's so hard to get them to concentrate on your question, here's your question but they talk in a circle around it and it's like stop it".

However there was a clear expression of appreciation for the efforts of the expert representative and her efforts to inform participants and answer their questions. P3 made this clear with the following response,

"And just what she (TE-toimisto speaker) said a while ago that they don't answer because they don't have anything to tell you, that kind of can save a lot of people just knowing this can save you a lot of headaches and a lot of frustration".

Here P3 expresses relief after discovering that there are many genuine reasons outside the control of workers at TE-toimisto that can delay the need to contact their clients. P3 appreciates learning that there are genuine reasons for this and that just knowing this will prevent future frustration and headaches.

Question 3 brought a raft of positive responses and some interesting insights from participants. P7 stated,

"It's like a support group in a way, you know you're out there on your own and you feel frustrated and all that but to be able to share that with others and find out there are others in the same boat. All the new information we got which you don't get from TE office, it's been really informative. I always feel positive when I leave here".

P5 stated,

"I'd recommend it, it helped explore different areas I'd never considered, I'd thought about a small business before but now I think this could really happen".

P7 and P5 responses not only speak of their overall satisfaction with the peer group experience but highlight the important issues such as knowing you're not alone in this situation or that there are others facing the same or similar challenges and that coming together with your peers can inspire you to put ideas into action.

Next P5 attested to the sharing and safe environment afforded by the peer group with the following response,

"I was hoping that that online group ISEAF would have done that but I just see people ripping each other apart, this didn't make me feel down it made me feel more optimistic, uplifting absolutely".

Here P5 draws a direct comparison between an online group for immigrants living in Finland (ISEAF) that covers every conceivable topic that might interest immigrants living in Finland and the peer support group, indicating that the peer group promoted respect for the opinion of other participant's viewpoints, ideas and feelings and therefore a safe environment to share. P7 sees the value in the provision of services such as this peer group when referring to the services and workers of TE-toimisto. P7 indicates that initiatives such as the peer support group

could alleviate pressure at TE-toimisto which was discussed with the visiting expert when she visited the group.

"if there was some kind of project where you could have your own group (addressed to group leader) I think it would help a lot of foreigners in the same situation, as the TE-toimisto expert pointed out they are swamped with clients, overloaded and they can't give that individual guidance and information. So I think giving a seminar about integration and about these kind of things in a fun, positive, motivating environment, it would really help so many people".

In response to this statement P5 adds,

"That would be wonderful, where no one is allowed to savage another person, like if they have a question, just answer the question don't savage them. It would be great online because there are so many who can't come here, you know living in little towns all over the place and we could all build each other up instead of just pushing down".

P5 suggests broadening the availability of the peer group service online to reach unemployed immigrants that are geographically remote from major conurbations and the range of services usually found there. Whilst a fantastic idea and much needed it would require much planning and many resources which are currently beyond the scope of the peer group for unemployed immigrants.

P5 closes this participant evaluation of the peer group for unemployed immigrants and states,

"Im glad I came and if I'd recommend it to someone else, that means I think it's really very helpful. I'd like to see more of these (meaning peer groups) for people cos a lot of people feel lost, you know it's like, God I'll never get a job".

### 7.1.1 Summary

With the exception of the Enterprise Helsinki fieldtrip, all participants claim to have gained something of value from the rest of the topics and activities covered during the implementation of the peer group for unemployed immigrants. The Enterprise Helsinki fieldtrip failed to engage participants in large part due to the length of the presentation and the applicability of most of the information to the circumstances of the peer group participants. As has been indicated earlier in participant responses, there is perhaps a more engaging solution; the suggestions from P1 were excellent and inviting an established immigrant entrepreneur to share their experiences with participants sounds like a workable and engaging solution. Further suggestion that the peer group leader should present the basics of entrepreneurship and how to start a business, supported by written materials also seems very workable. Taken together, these suggestions combined will hopefully produce a more engaging and relevant experience for future participants of the peer group.

A number of themes emerged during the group discussion including participant's willingness to explore alternatives they were previously unaware of or hadn't considered before participating in the group. Participants also spoke frequently on the matter of sharing of valuable information and resources within the group as well as networking benefits. Another key theme was repeated by all participants and relates to knowing that one is not alone in this challenging circumstance and there are others who face the same challenges with valuable lessons to share on pertinent issues. All of these themes point to an overall useful, positive, valuable and rewarding experience for participants and all responses, negative and positive will be carried forward and acted upon to ensure future iterations of the peer support group for unemployed immigrants is as relevant and useful for participants as possible.

In summation, it is evident from participant responses that they each found something of use from the peer support group program that can be of use to them within the context of their circumstances and unemployed immigrant status. This indicates that participant evaluations gathered here support the initial aims of the group discussion and that those aims have, in large part, been realised.

## 7.2 Entry & exit questionnaires

In total there were five respondents for the entry/exit questionnaires out of a possible eight. This is due to the fact that during the first group meeting some participants had to leave early or were absent. To ensure anonymity in reporting, respondents have been assigned a code. For the sake of this evaluation respondents will be referred to as PA for example, where P is participant and a letter to indicate which participant made a particular response. So, five participants took part, meaning we have a range from PA through to PE in this instance. The aims of the entry and exit questionnaires were to evaluate whether participants had accrued any pertinent skills, knowledge or knowhow during their participation in the peer support group. With these aims in mind and with over 20 questions on the questionnaires, only the most informative responses will be used.

On the entry questionnaire participants were asked, "Do you feel your job seeking skills and know-how are suitable for the Finnish labour market?" and in the exit they were asked if these skills and knowhow had improved in the context of the Finnish labour market. With the exception of participant PE, whose response remained unchanged, the remaining four participants indicated that they had seen improvement in their job seeking skills and knowhow, with responses ranging from somewhat improved, to significantly improved.

Participants were also asked about their familiarity with TE-toimisto and its services. In the entry questionnaire participants indicated that they were "not at all" familiar or that they were

“unsure” about the services offered by the TE-toimisto. In comparison, upon exit all respondents indicated “yes”, that they were now familiar with the TE-toimisto and its services.

Upon entry and exit participants were asked if they felt their current CV was suitable for the Finnish labour market and with the exception of participant PE, all participants indicated upon entry that they were unsure. Upon exit, all participants indicated, yes, that their CV was now suitable for the Finnish labour market.

Upon entry and exit participants were asked if they knew how to write a covering letter that was suitable for Finnish employers and on entry three participants indicated that they did not know and two were unsure. Upon exit all participants with the exception of participant PD, who had not seen the video tutorial or taken part in the exercises or attended that particular group meeting, indicated that, yes, they now knew how to write a covering letter suitable for Finnish employers.

Upon exit and entry participants were asked if they knew how to establish a business in Finland. Upon entry all participants indicated that they did not know or that they were unsure of how to establish a business in Finland. In comparison, upon exit with the exception of participant PA who was unsure, all indicated that, yes, they now knew how to establish a business in Finland.

Participants were asked upon entry and exit, “Do you have the skills and knowledge needed to make a simple website?” Two participants indicated that they did, a further two participants indicated that they didn’t and one participant indicated maybe. Upon exit these three participants now indicated, yes, that they now possess the skills and knowledge necessary to make a simple website.

Upon entry participants were asked if unemployment was affecting their wellbeing and all participants indicated yes, that their wellbeing was being affected by unemployment. Upon exit participants were asked if participation in the peer support group had had a positive effect on their wellbeing and all respondents indicated, yes, that participation had had a positive effect on their wellbeing.

So far responses from participants of the peer group indicate real gains in pertinent skills, knowledge and knowhow. Responses indicate that participants have learnt how to produce CV’s and covering letters that are sensitive to the needs and requirements of the Finnish labour market. Participants are now also familiar with the full range of services made available to them by TE-toimisto and know how to go about taking advantage of those services. Participants have also gained the knowledge and knowhow needed to establish a business in Finland and

they have also gained the skills, knowledge and knowhow needed to create a website that can support a business start-up. Participants also expressed an overall improvement in the suitability of their job seeking skills and knowhow within the Finnish labour market context.

Some of the questions posed by the questionnaires were included in order to elicit information and opinion on the more intangible benefits of peer group participation. Taking a closer look at the responses to questions covering wellbeing, it becomes clear that participants in the peer support group have gained the greatest benefit to wellbeing from knowing that they are not alone in their circumstances,

Entry Questionnaire: <i>Contingency/Filter, follow-up question.</i>	Exit Questionnaire: <i>Contingency/Filter, follow-up question.</i>
"How is unemployment affecting your wellbeing"	"In what way has peer group participation had a positive effect on your wellbeing"
RA. "I feel useless and I'm disappointed in myself".	RA. "I learn that I am not the only one in this situation. I learn from the others and I have learned more about myself".
RB. "Too much stress, too much free time, lack of replies from companies".	RB. "New friends and knowing I'm not alone with everything".
RC. "I often cry when rejected for a job. I am becoming depressed. I am usually a happy, optimistic person, but it is tough to not work".	RC. "I feel much more hopeful and not alone".
RD. "I do feel like I'm wasting a lot of time and that I still have good working years. It's also causing problems in my relationship with my partner".	RD. "It's good to not feel alone any more in the job hunting and unemployment arenas".
RE. "Self-esteem issues".	RE. "Helped me connect with people in the same situation and learn of different avenues to pursue".

Table 2: Participant responses to questions about wellbeing

A clue as to why so many respondents speak of “no longer being alone” is illustrated by the Kansas University Workgroup for community health and development, “When someone doesn't know many - or any - other people who are going through what he is coping with, he can feel isolated and stigmatised. Support group's help people with a problem or illness feel less alone and more understood” (Kansas University, 2014). It's apparent from these responses that participants no longer feel as isolated as they did before their participation and have formed friendships and networks which will hopefully stand them in good stead as they continue in their search for gainful employment.

On the exit questionnaire participants were asked, “The first questionnaire asked you what you hoped to gain from taking part in the peer support group, have your hopes been realised/fulfilled”. Three of the five participants answered yes and the remaining two participants indicated positive responses. However, participants were allocated space to make a more detailed response, for example PA stated,

“Honestly, I didn't expect to get a lot and I'm happy to say that I learnt so much from this”.

Whilst PC stated,

“Yes, I feel more support and empowered”.

And PD adds,

“I can't quite remember what I wrote the first time (Entry questionnaire), but I did benefit, particularly from the peer group. I feel better after participating”.

Here participants speak of learning, empowerment and support all of which are indicative of the peer group experience and in line with the aims and objectives of this functional thesis.

### 7.2.1 Summary

Responses provided by participants suggest that they have made tangible gains with new skills, knowledge and knowhow in key areas, such as an increased familiarity with TE-toimisto and its services, CV and covering letter creation, how to prepare for and establish a business in Finland and how to create a website that can support their job search activities and entrepreneurial ventures. The questionnaire responses also indicate that participants accrued some tangible benefits to wellbeing, such as reduced feelings of isolation and increased feelings of empowerment.

It is hoped that these new or improved knowledge, skills and knowhow will improve participant's chances of finding employment or establishing a business in Finland. Participants' responses suggest that the aims of the entry and exit questionnaires, which were to reveal whether participation in the peer support group would result in participants accruing skills, knowledge and knowhow that may improve their chances of securing employment or becoming self-employed, have been realised.

### 7.3 Peer group leader evaluation and observations

#### 7.3.1 Pre implementation Stage

It is perhaps important to reiterate here that this instance of the peer support group for unemployed immigrants was preceded by two pilot peer groups for unemployed immigrants which I designed, planned and implemented in the spring and winter of 2014. This allowed for many of the challenges and problems related to planning and implementation to be identified early and to be dealt with accordingly.

However there are a number of issues that have continued to hinder the implementation of all three instances of the peer support group. Perhaps most important are the issues surrounding participant recruitment. Luckan Integration promotes a low threshold policy for its target groups and this in itself is admirable and just, and works to the benefit of all that need the services Luckan integration provides. However in the instance of the support group for unemployed immigrants I feel that some changes would help identify those clients most in need of participation in the peer support group. In the three groups that have taken place so far there are instances of participants who have only been unemployed for very short periods of time and on one occasion a client who was at the end of their studies. This can be tricky for group dynamics as the majority of participants have faced unemployment for lengthy periods and feel the effects of long term unemployment keenly. So, to counteract this, perhaps applying further stipulations on eligibility would better serve those most in need of this service and I would therefore recommend the stipulation of a minimum of six months unemployment to be eligible which could be incorporated into all promotional and advertising efforts.

Whilst the majority of previous group participants have come from Europe, Asia, South America, North America and the Russian Federation there has been a distinct absence of applicants and participants from the African continent in all three instances of the peer support groups. This is perplexing to me and efforts should be made to discover why this is the case and steps taken to remedy the situation and provide the service to this community. One possible approach to this could be reaching out to organisations that commonly serve this absent community and asking for help and advice in reaching out, establishing contacts and promoting the peer group.

Another limitation on recruitment has been city funding. Funding for the peer support groups comes from the cities of Vantaa, Helsinki and Espoo. However, previous iterations of the peer group have had limitations placed on recruitment due to one or more of these funding bodies withholding funds. This has had the undesirable effect of limiting the geographical area that prospective participants can be drawn from, therefore limiting the field of recruitment. However I have understood that on the occasion of this particular iteration all three cities had provided funding and therefore opening up the catchment area. I hope that the this thesis will be employed by Luckan Integration in its future funding applications in the possibility that it will strengthen their applications and move funding bodies to give greater priority to initiatives such as this one.

### 7.3.2 Implementation stage

This instance of the peer support group saw relatively few issues related to implementation, however sourcing experts in the fields of wellbeing and from TE-toimisto did present a challenge this time. I had sourced experts in these fields for the pilot groups and they had carried out a commendable service for participants and both experts had signalled their willingness to participate in this instance of the peer support group but due to unforeseen circumstances and for one reason or another they had to cancel their participation. However the expert from TE toimisto and my colleagues at Luckan Integration were able to help me with contacts and I was able to find a replacement at short notice. In the case of an expert in the field of wellbeing however, the situation was more difficult and no substitute could be arranged in time. I have previously been informed by my colleagues at Luckan integration that funding is available for experts but that it would be preferable to have experts involved in public service which would obviate any further drain on funds. Whilst this approach is understandable and most desirable from the financial standpoint, I feel that securing experts from other sources, even if costs are incurred, that can provide a more reliable commitment to the peer group program would prevent future hiccups.

An issue common to most group activities is that of dropouts and no shows. Lessons learnt from the pilot groups prompted the recruitment of more participants than needed to form a viable peer group of between 6 to 8 participants. For this group 11 applicants were invited to join the group and there were three no shows, leaving a viable group of 8. This strategy worked well and will continue to be employed. With regard to dropouts, this group only saw one dropout who had realised very early on that the group was not their kind of thing and therefore did not cause too much of a disruption. Related to these issues is attendance and participants in this group showed increased regular attendance in comparison to previous groups.

### 7.3.3 Evaluation stage

Perhaps the most pressing challenge to evaluation was time available for the implementation of discussion group. Due to the number of aims set for each group meeting and the time allocation of two hours as well as the needs of participants taking priority, time was in short supply. I had read from the literature that a least an hour should be given over to group discussions but such a long period was impossible in this instance and only thirty minutes could be allocated for this task. However, as can be seen from the discussion group participant evaluation, adequate data was collected to produce a meaningful evaluation.

Another issue to consider is my relative lack of experience in questionnaire design. I had read the literature extensively on how best to create questionnaires that would produce pertinent data, but on reflection I feel I should have spent more time in considering the kind and number of questions asked, as I felt in some instances the data gathered from the questionnaires and discussion group overlapped, in essence repeating what had already been learnt. However, this did serve to support themes that emerged from data gathered in the discussion group.

## 8 Ethical issues

I would like to state that during and throughout the lifetime of this project I adhered to Laurea University of Applied Sciences ethical guidelines and upheld the ethical principles outlined in the code of ethics of The International Federation of Social Workers, IFSW. I also maintained the highest standards of honesty and integrity and at no point during this project were participants, working life partner or other involved or interested parties, misled, lied to, duped or otherwise misinformed about the nature, aims or objectives of this project.

All possible efforts were made to maintain participant confidentiality and throughout this thesis project. I have avoided the use of personal identifiers at all points, including this thesis paper, my notes and the questionnaires issued to participants. Assurances were given to participants that no connections would be made between data expressed in this thesis and the informants identities, therefore ensuring anonymity and confidentiality and that data provided by them on questionnaires and in the digital recording of the group discussion and associated notes and paraphernalia would be destroyed on or before June the 30<sup>th</sup> 2015. Whilst confidentiality is assured it cannot be guaranteed that participants will keep sensitive information about each other confidential outside of the group environment. This is highlighted by (Garvin, et al, 2004, p. 81) when they state "In groups, confidentiality is not limited to the social worker's behavior, because members acquire information about each other. The worker cannot guarantee that members will protect each other's privacy". In this regard I endeavoured to impress upon

participants that sensitive information disclosed by fellow participants should remain within the group and not shared outside of the group environment or context.

The executive director of Luckan, Jessica Lerche, gave permission for this research to go ahead and she approved and signed the research permission document. Participants were well informed about the purpose and objectives of the thesis project and informed verbal consent was sought from all participants and freely given by all participants. Verbal consent was chosen over written consent because of the sharing, trusting and cooperative character of peer support groups and this is stressed by (Oliver, 2010, p. 31) when he states, "The two alternatives would appear to be a simple oral agreement or a written agreement. However, it may be that an undue emphasis upon technical agreements may move the entire research process away from a voluntary, cooperative ethos, perhaps to the detriment of the research. Perhaps what is more important is to ensure that the core information, provided to all potential respondents, contains an accurate summary of the contribution required of the participant, and stresses that the participant may withdraw from the research process at any time on request.... Such arrangements tend to create much more of a cooperative relationship between the researcher and the participant". All participants were made aware that their participation in activities connected with the thesis project was entirely voluntary and that they were free to withdraw their consent or leave at any time.

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## 9.1 Appendix 1: Peer group participant entry questionnaire

Peer support group entry questionnaire, spring 2015, Luckan Integration

This box contains the questionnaire reference. Please Write a word, number or figure that you can remember in this box.

The information you provide in this questionnaire is subject to complete anonymity and strict confidentiality, no connection between you and the information you provide in this questionnaire will be made at any point in time. Your questionnaire will be completely destroyed on or before 30.06.2015.

This questionnaire is the first of two questionnaires that you will be asked to complete. You will be asked to complete a follow up questionnaire before the peer group comes to an end and the same strict rules of anonymity and confidentiality will apply to the second questionnaire also.

Your participation will help improve the peer group experience for future users and I would like to thank you for making this study possible.

1. What are your reasons for joining the peer support group?

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2. What do you hope to gain from taking part in the peer support group?

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3. In your opinion what do you think are your chances of finding and securing a job in Finland at the moment?

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4. Do you feel your job seeking skills and knowhow are suitable for the Finnish job market?

1	2	3	4	5
Not at all				Completely

5. Have you ever used the services of the Finnish unemployment office/TE-toimisto?

YES  NO

6. Are you familiar with the full range of services the unemployment office/TE-toimisto offers to unemployed people?

YES  NO  NOT SURE

7. How confident are you about dealing with the unemployment office and its staff?

1	2	3	4	5
Not at all			Very	

**8.** Do you know how to access unemployment office/TE-toimisto services?

YES

NO

NOT SURE

**9.** What have been your main methods for finding work in Finland so far?

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**10.** Do you currently have a CV prepared?

YES

NO

**11.** Is your current CV suitable for the Finnish labour market?

YES

NO

NOT SURE

**12.** Do you know how to write a covering letter that is suitable for Finnish employers?

YES

NO

NOT SURE

**13.** How do you feel about the possibility of starting your own business as an alternative to traditional employment?

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**14.** Do you know how to establish a business in Finland?

YES

NO

NOT SURE

**15.** Do you have the skills and knowledge needed to make a simple website?

YES

NO

MAYBE

**16.** Have you considered making a website to help with your search for work or creating a small business presence on the World Wide Web?

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**17.** Are there any barriers preventing you from getting work in Finland?

YES

NO

**18.** If you answered yes to question 17, what in your opinion are the barriers preventing you from getting work in Finland?

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**19.** If you answered yes to question 17, are the barriers preventing you from getting work within your control or outside of your control? Please explain!

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**20.** Is unemployment affecting your wellbeing?

YES

NO

**21.** If you answered yes to question **20**, how is unemployment affecting your wellbeing?

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**22.** Do you have someone you can share your thoughts, feelings and concerns with about being unemployed?

FAMILY

FRIENDS

OTHER

NO

ONE

Thank you for taking part, your participation is very much appreciated.

## 9.2 Appendix 2: Peer group participant exit questionnaire

Peer support group exit questionnaire, spring 2015, Luckan Inte-  
gration

This box contains the question-  
naire reference. Please Write the  
word, number or figure that you  
used for the first questionnaire in  
this box.

The information you provide in this questionnaire is subject to complete anonymity and strict confidentiality, no connection between you and the information you provide will be made at any point in time. Your questionnaire will be completely destroyed on or before 30.06.2015.

This questionnaire is the second of two questionnaires that you will be asked to complete. This is the follow up questionnaire that I informed you about before completing the first questionnaire and the same strict rules of anonymity and confidentiality will apply to this questionnaire also.

Your participation will help improve the peer group experience for future users and I would like to thank you for making this study possible.

1. The first questionnaire asked you what you hoped to gain from taking part in the peer support group. Have your hopes been realised/fulfilled?

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2. In your opinion, do you think your chances of becoming employed or self-employed have improved since taking part in the support group?

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3. Have your job seeking skills and knowhow for the Finnish labour market improved since taking part in the peer group?

1	2	3	4	5
Not at all			Significantly	

4. Has your knowledge of the range of services offered to unemployed people by the unemployment office/TE-toimisto improved since taking part in the peer group?

YES                       NO

5. How confident are you about dealing with the unemployment office and its staff?

1	2	3	4	5
Not at all			Very	

6. Do you know how to access unemployment office/TE-toimisto services?

YES                       NO                       NOT SURE

**7.** Have you discovered any new or different approaches for finding work in Finland since taking part in the peer support group?

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**8.** Is your current CV suitable for the Finnish labour market?

YES

NO

**9.** Do you know how to write a covering letter that is suitable for Finnish employers?

YES

NO

**10.** Has your opinion about the possibility of starting your own business in Finland changed since taking part in the peer support group? Please explain.

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**11.** Do you know how to establish a business in Finland?

YES

NO

STILL NOT SURE

**12.** Do you have the skills and knowledge needed to make a simple website?

YES

NO

**13.** Has your opinion about making a website for business or job hunting purposes changed since taking part in the peer support group? Please explain.

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**14.** Are there any barriers preventing you from getting work in Finland?

YES

NO

**15.** If you answered yes to question 14, are the barriers preventing you from getting work within your control or outside of your control, or a combination of both? Please explain!

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**16.** Has taking part in the peer group had a positive effect on your wellbeing?

YES

NO

**17.** If you answered yes to question 16, in what way has peer group participation had a positive effect on your wellbeing?

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**18.** Do you have someone you can share your thoughts, feelings and concerns with about being unemployed?

FAMILY

FRIENDS

PEER GROUP MEMBERS

NO ONE

**19.** How would you rate your overall experience of participating in the peer group?

1	2	3	4	5
Poor				Great

**20.** Is there anything you would like to add to what you have already said in this questionnaire?

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Thank you for taking part, your participation is very much appreciated.

## 9.3 Appendix 3: Group discussion responses

## Group discussion, participant evaluation

16 April 2015

12:53

<p><b>Q1. Was the peer group experience what you expected it to be?</b></p>	
<p><b>P1:</b> "I came here without any real expectations other than it was a group set up to help people, which in a way it has because I am looking at opportunities I wouldn't have thought of before"</p>	<p>Looking at broader opportunities</p>
<p><b>P2:</b> "I didn't know what to expect but I learned something that I didn't expect to learn and then more than that it's not just me, who you know, are in this situation. I still see someone else as well and maybe even worse and we share some information like # always texts me when # finds some interesting information that might interest me. We know more people in the same position and we help each other and I think I like this point definitely a lot".</p>	<p>Learnt new things</p> <p>Sharing important resources, information and networking</p> <p>Realisation not the only one in this situation</p>
<p><b>P3:</b> I agree with the others, I think even if we know there's a few resources avenues, the fact that I just heard from # that # is going through this Palkkatuki thing, this is valuable because it makes me want to go home and find out what is there for me, what I can do. While I knew of this before, but experience from others it's very valuable and especially from</p>	<p>Sharing important resources, information and networking</p> <p>Realisation not the only one in this situation</p> <p>Learning from others experiences</p>

<p>someone who you feel is in the same situation, who is in the same boat as you".</p>	
<p><b>P4:</b> "yeah I think that's been really valuable for me too, I think even though I never had many expectations, similar to #, I sort of thought there would be more like goal oriented, like your Finnish resume will look like this, your Finnish interview will be like this, things of that nature, but say that I found what happened or how the group unfolded much better for perspective and stuff like that, I liked how the group unfolded, how it went down, yes".</p>	<p>Expected greater goal orientation and practical examples but found that the group unfolded in a way that afforded this participant perspective</p>
<p><b>P1:</b> A lot of it actually has to do with you as well cos the way you're presenting it, for example when we went to that, erm, business thing when the Finnish guy was talking like this (monotone) all the time, but I mean the way you are with people, even from the first session its more positive, motivating, rather than just standing there talking about this, that and the other while everyone falls asleep".</p>	<p>Points to a strength: Group leader should be experienced and comfortable in the role</p>
<p><b>P5:</b> "maybe I don't have a better word for it but maybe I should say fatherly, like were your chickens and you have us under your wing, it feels, it's comforting, very comforting, so yeah, you're all my children kinda feeling" (giggles)</p>	<p>Points to a strength: Group leader should be experienced and comfortable in the role</p>
<p><b>P2:</b> Maybe what I expect is like I will learn something from you, get something from you but actually I, I just learnt</p>	<p>Participant expected to learn something from group leader and group but was surprised to learn something about him or</p>

<p>something about myself too, that OK, maybe I can do this and then also I also learnt like something from everyone.</p>	<p>herself and discover that she/he has previously untapped strength</p>
<p><b>P1:</b> "Well actually as an example remember I said to you yesterday about those Vinyl soaps, it's kind of combining two peoples ideas into a product which I've not even seen before, me and # were already talking about it earlier".</p>	<p>Sharing important resources, information and networking</p>
<p><b>P6:</b> "I just found the group very informative and I joined just mainly to orient myself in the reality here And erm, it was very good, I think I discovered a lot of new paths and it got me thinking about what I could do".</p>	<p>Exploration of new possibilities Looking at broader opportunities</p>
<p><b>Q2. What did you find most and what did you find least useful about the peer group experience?</b></p>	
<p><b>P3:</b> "Skip the visit to Yrityts Helsinki", Laughs heartily, General agreement around the group.</p>	<p>Weakness: Overly formal and coming from a disconnected source YH</p>
<p><b>P1:</b> In response to another participants comment "To be honest if there was a booklet with all that information in there, I mean the way you are with erm, kinda speaking to people you could actually have that whole session sitting here going over the thing and it would be</p>	<p>Weakness: Overly formal and coming from a disconnected source YH Suggested change: A less formal presentation on entrepreneurship carried out by group leader</p>

probably ten times more productive than those people down there".	
<b>P2:</b> "Or maybe just because of that speaker, maybe it's just something to do with him, like you know before I went to him I had the feeling like, Yeaah I want to have my own business, and after that I felt like, Oi!, I don't know, I don't think he is good at all for me"	<b>Weakness:</b> Overly formal and coming from a disconnected source YH
<b>P1:</b> "Maybe a brochure and an immigrant business owner would have been better". Brochure= document containing the basics of how to start a business in Finland.	<b>Weakness:</b> Overly formal and coming from a disconnected source YH <b>Suggested change:</b> Immigrant business owner to present on entrepreneurship
<b>P5:</b> "Like an outline of sole proprietorship, that would have been awesome".	<b>Suggested change:</b> Concentrate on the sole proprietor model of starting a business
<b>P5:</b> When speaking on the subject of TE-toimisto expert. "It's so hard to get them to concentrate on your question, here's your question but they talk in a circle around it and it's like stop it.	Te-toimisto: Evasive when questioned
<b>Prompt on the Valtonen paper:</b>	
<b>P5:</b> "It verified what I knew, I like that verification part"	<b>Confirmation of suspicions, beliefs, experiences</b>

<p><b>P6:</b> "But it was actually quite useful to have that discussion that people start talking about things around the subject".</p>	<p>Exploration of external factors</p>
<p><b>P7:</b> "Just I think just sort of realising that it's not just us personally, that there are these certain reasons why it's harder for immigrants to integrate and get accepted into society, you know these work places and we shouldn't take it personally, that it's just a fact you know".</p>	<p>Realisation that other external factors at work, less self-blaming</p>
<p><b>P1:</b> "The difference before and after this group, I mean even now looking for a job online even with that paper before, I know ok well those barriers are there but Im still going to apply anyway knowing Im not the only person doing exactly this knowing that those barriers are there, it's kinda put me in a more positive".</p>	<p>Realisation that other external factors at work, less self-blaming</p> <p>Realisation not the only one in this situation</p>
<p><b>P2:</b> "But I love that part though, the one where I can create my own website, yeah in fact it's the first time for me and I feel, aah it's not that difficult why am I so stupid? I didn't know how to do this earlier, I like it".</p>	<p>Website Creation</p> <p>Very happy with website creation learning</p>
<p><b>Q3. I would like to hear your overall impressions of the peer group process.</b></p>	

<p><b>P5:</b> "I'd recommend it, it helped explore different areas I'd never considered, I'd thought about a small business before but now I think this could really happen".</p>	<p>Exploration of new possibilities</p> <p>Looking at broader opportunities</p>
<p><b>P7:</b> "It's like a support group in a way, you know you're out there on your own and you feel frustrated and all that but to be able to share that with others and find out there are others in the same boat. All the new information we got which you don't get from TE office, it's been really informative. I always feel positive when I leave here".</p>	<p>Realisation not the only one in this situation</p> <p>Sharing important resources, information and networking</p>
<p><b>P5:</b> "I was hoping that that online group ISEAF would have done that but I just see people ripping each other apart, this didn't make me feel down it made me feel more optimistic, uplifting absolutely".</p>	<p>Peer group environment promotes respect and value for others opinions and stories</p>
<p><b>P7:</b> "Back to this peer group thing, if there was some kind of project where you could have your own group I think it would help a lot of foreigners in the same situation, as the TE-toimisto expert pointed out they are swamped with clients, overloaded and they can't give that individual guidance and information. So I think giving a seminar about integration and about these kind of things in a fun, positive, motivating environment, it would really help so many people".</p>	<p>Points to inadequacy of current services and resources provided by authorities</p> <p>Need for more initiatives such as this to compensate for structural shortfall</p>

<p><b>P5:</b> In response to other participant.          "That would be wonderful where no one is allowed to savage another person, like if they have a question, just answer the question don't savage them. It would be great online because there are so many who can't come here, you know living in little towns all over the place and we could all build each other up instead of just pushing down".</p>	<p>Bring service to broader audience</p> <p>Clear that this has been a very positive experience for this participant and that the safe environment provided by peer support environment is valuable</p>
<p><b>P3:</b> "And just what she (TE speaker) said a while ago that they don't answer because they don't have anything to tell you, that kind of can save a lot of people just knowing this can save you a lot of headaches and a lot of frustration".          Speaking in reference to the fact that once registered with the TE-toimisto and signed up for integration plan it may be months before you hear from them again.</p>	<p>Information provided by TE-toimisto speaker, valuable</p>
<p><b>Prompt for feedback on covering letters and CV efforts:</b></p>	
<p><b>P3:</b> "It would be great if you had someone here who is an actual recruiter, someone who actually has experience of hiring people who can look at you and say" hey I can help you with this"</p>	<p>Suggestion: External expert in the field of recruitment</p>
<p><b>P5:</b> "Like what are the top things that make them when they are doing the sorting, doing the sorting, what makes them throw your CV in the trash and keep the others, I mean that would be</p>	<p>Suggestion: External expert in the field of recruitment</p>

good, I mean aside from your surname". LAUGHTER IN THE GROUP	
<b>P2:</b> "I always use my husband's surname now".	😊
<b>Prompt: Any closing thoughts?</b>	
<b>P1:</b> "I've been happy with everything apart from what we were saying about that Yritys Helsinki thing, it's so nice having a discussion with a group of people and hearing other people's experiences".	
<b>P5:</b> "Im glad I came and if I'd recommend it to someone else that means I think it's really very helpful. I'd like to see more of these for people cos a lot of people feel lost, you know it's like, god I'll never get a job	
<b>P7:</b> "We can all learn from each other's experiences".	
<b>P1:</b> "one option as well is, in the first meeting where people are introducing each other, maybe somebody from a previous group that now has a job, maybe just comes in for five or ten minutes and says you know, "this group is great, it's all a positive thing" you know what I mean!".	<b>Suggestion: Involvement of participants from previous groups at the start, who have found employment</b>