

▶ ADULT LITERACY RESEARCH

A fair go: Factors impacting on vocational education and training participation and completion in ethnic communities

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▶ **THIS REPORT INVESTIGATES** the participation and awareness of vocational education and training (VET) in six ethnic communities. It also looks at whether English as a second language programs provide adequate pathways to vocational education and training, and analyses English proficiency and cultural expectations in relation to course participation and completion.

Previous research indicates a low awareness and undervaluing of vocational education and training in ethnic communities. It also shows that there is dissatisfaction with the generality of English language training, and an over-representation of English as a second language students in VET multi-field courses, such as language, preparatory and access courses. In addition, there is low ethnic participation in employment based training opportunities through traineeships and apprenticeships.

The language groups selected were Arabic, Bosnian, Cantonese, Spanish, Turkish and Vietnamese. These have large proportions of working adults, while representing varying settlement experiences and English language proficiencies.

The focus was working-age adults currently or prospectively participating in vocational education and training, not including multi-field. Sixty in-depth interviews with community intermediaries were followed by language focus groups with 140 adults in New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland.

The research identified a number of factors which impact on participation in, and completion of, vocational education and training. It also highlighted a need to improve students' understanding of the range and portability of VET programs, and the different purposes they could serve.

Enrolment in vocational education and training is strengthened in programs that:

- provide clear pathways into employment
- provide language support
- acknowledge and address cultural issues
- have trainers who understand issues faced by trainees (cultural, language and settlement)
- acknowledge trainees' existing vocational skills
- include work experience in their training.

The research verified a generally low awareness and undervaluing of vocational education and training in ethnic communities (the exception in this case being Bosnian and Cantonese communities), widespread dissatisfaction with English as a second language programs, and little understanding of traineeships and apprenticeship opportunities.

The students' enrolment in vocational education and training linked strongly with an understanding of the range of programs available to them. The main purpose of their training was to get a job, and generally was not reconsidered once a job was found. Many adults were not keen for their children to attend vocational education and training. Young people and newer arrivals appeared to have greater confidence and willingness to participate.

Teachers were the most trusted sources of information on courses available to them. Local libraries and newspapers, and students' families and communities, were also preferred information sources, more than the ethnic media.



English as a second language programs disappointed many interviewees, who had not understood that the 510 hours of English instruction in the Adult Migrant English Program is insufficient for vocational proficiency. Nearly all took the view that English as a second language programs should systematically prepare students for the workforce, and criticised the inconsistent course and career advice they received.

The research highlighted the important role of VET trainers. Cross-culturally competent training and trainers were valued. These are those that manage the classroom culture sensitively, explain Australian cultural and workplace values, adapt training content for the tastes of other groups, and constructively use cultural diversity in training programs.

Most subjects believed they could successfully complete VET programs with only moderate English language skills, provided they received language support. They wanted English as a second language programs that were integrated with vocational education and training, or a 'one-stop shop' approach.

Work experience was considered vitally important, providing a practical means of gaining local vocational knowledge and an opportunity to create networks within one's profession. Research participants were keen to have their existing vocational skills acknowledged during training for, as many said, a lack of English language skills did not mean a lack of vocational competence.

Every group except the Cantonese was concerned about direct training costs and indirect costs through lost earnings. These cost pressures could be eased by proximity of training venues, access to public transport and availability of childcare.

► Messages for policy and practice

There should be 'targeted and tailored' campaigns to inform ethnic communities of the range of VET programs, providers (including private providers) and pathways.

In VET campaigns, the value of traditional print and radio media should be assessed community by community; blanket coverage with electronic media is not recommended, and liaison with community leaders and workers is important.

Apprenticeships and traineeships especially should be promoted to ethnic communities, with a related need to integrate English language support for apprentices and trainees from non-English speaking backgrounds.

The Adult Migrant English Program should include employment and pathway counselling, and more streaming and clustering of classes should occur to integrate English as a second language and vocational education and training in areas of job opportunity.

Greater flexibility at the provider level should be considered so that VET funding can address the needs of people from a language other than English background for language support, employment counselling and workplace experience.

System-wide professional development in cross-cultural competencies for VET trainers would also be useful.

A fair go: Factors impacting on vocational education and training participation and completion in ethnic communities, by Judith Miralles, can be downloaded from the NCVET website at <www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1501.html>.