NCVER

First nations and migrant learners' experiences with foundation skills courses

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HIGHLIGHTS

- First Nations learners reported that they enrol in foundation skills training to gain new skills and that they intend to complete their course. Migrants, on the other hand, enrol primarily to find employment. While some migrants enrol with a firm intention to complete the course, others cease once they achieve their personal goals.
- Both First Nations and migrant learners who do not complete their foundation skills courses still report positive experiences.
- Many from both groups face personal challenges, such as health issues and caring responsibilities, or issues with transport, scheduling and work commitments, which make it difficult to attend training.
- Based on learners' suggestions, attendance and completion rates could be improved by adopting the following:
  - supporting those with caring responsibilities by providing onsite childcare or creches or allowing young children in the class
  - training teachers to deal with issues relating to mental health, trauma, mindset and change management to enable better support of learners, especially those dealing with homesickness, culture shock or past trauma
  - reducing public transport costs in remote communities or organising minibus services for First Nations learners
  - introducing community-specific cultural induction training to help trainers to understand the local culture, preferred terminology and the community factors affecting attendance of First Nations learners
  - building culturally appropriate training facilities for First Nations learners to facilitate learning on Country
  - providing classroom support through a community support person or a First Nations translator or trainer for First Nations learners

- consulting with migrant learners before relocating a course to take their capacity to attend into account
- tailoring course placement by assigning migrant learners to courses based on their goals, education and employment background, enabling training to be pitched appropriately
- enhancing English language courses for migrants by including Australian slang, history and traditions; expanding conversation practice; integrating digital skills; accommodating student-led topics; and organising more excursions
- expanding flexible learning options with part-time, online, evening or weekend classes to assist migrants to better balance study with work and family commitments.

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

This research examines the experiences of First Nations peoples and migrants in Australia undertaking foundation skills courses — which include language, literacy, numeracy, digital skills (LLND), and employment skills — with a particular focus on those who do not complete their training. It explores their initial intentions and motivations, the factors influencing their decision to cease study, and the support mechanisms that could have helped them to continue. It also examines their training experience and their recommendations for improving foundation skills courses.

A key focus of this research is the student perspective. By giving voice to learners who have disengaged from their studies, this project offers unique insights. To achieve this, focus groups and interviews were conducted with First Nations learners across remote sites in far northern Australia and with migrant learners[1] in inner-city suburbs in Melbourne and Sydney. The First Nations participants primarily studied employment skills, including digital skills, while the migrants undertook both English language and employment skills courses, typically through the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) and the Skills for Education and Employment (SEE) Program.

Three support documents accompany this publication, providing the key research questions, links to previous research, details of the methodology, and further information on both learner cohorts.

THE LEARNER PROFILE

The case studies represent the views of two very distinct and important cohorts — First Nations and migrant learners

This research represents the perspectives of two distinct learner cohorts, both of whom were enrolled in foundation skills courses they didn't complete. While they share this common experience, this report does not compare their experiences directly, as their backgrounds and circumstances differ considerably. Instead, each cohort is treated as an important group in its own right. Although many challenges are unique to each group, some shared experiences emerge.

Figure 1 provides an overview of the participants in each cohort. It is important to note that two of the participants in one of the First Nations case studies had not undertaken foundation skills training and were enrolled in other VET training. Their insights remain relevant, however, as their perspectives on training align with those of the foundation skills learners in the other case studies. One of these participants holds both the diploma and bachelor's degree shown in figure 1, while the other holds a certificate, slightly skewing the data on prior qualifications.

Additionally, although the focus was on learners who had dropped out of their training, some focus groups included participants who were still enrolled. Their views have also been included, as they share similar experiences to those who withdrew.

1 While Australia offers a variety of migrant visa options, including both permanent and temporary visas, the research does not include this information in the participant distribution. However, the type of visa may influence migrant access to foundation skills programs and their intentions, and outcomes.

Figure 1 First Nations and migrant case study participants

First Nations participants

- Very remote regions in far northern Australia
- Three case study locations
- Local dialect mainly spoken at home and some English.

Gender	
Male	4
Female	11
Age group	
20-24 years	6
25-29 years	2
30-39 years	1
40-49 years	4
50-59 years	2

Level of previous qualifications[1]	
Cert. I to IV	4
Diploma	1
Bachelor's degree	1
Bachelor's degree with Honours	0
Graduate certificate	0
Graduate diploma	0
Master's degree	0
Doctorate	0
No qualification	8
Did not answer	2

[1] A participant could have more than one qualification

Migrant participants

- Inner-city suburbs of Melbourne and Sydney
- Six case study areas
- 27 enrolled in AMEP, 10 in SEE programs and 24 in other LLND programs[1]
- Participants born in a range of countries, including China, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, South Korea, Vietnam and Sri Lanka.

Gender	
Male	11
Female	48
Did not answer	1
Age group	
20-24 years	2
25-29 years	4
30-39 years	11
40-49 years	17
50-59 years	15
60-64 years	6
65 years and over	5

Level of previous qualifications[2]	
Cert. I to IV	19
Diploma	15
Bachelor's degree	24
Bachelor's degree with Honours	0
Graduate certificate	4
Graduate diploma	4
Master's degree	4
Doctorate	0
No qualification	15

[1] One participant was involved in more than one type of program
[2] A participant could have more than one qualification

Culture plays a central role for the participants in this research. Where aspects of culture are discussed, no assumptions or generalisations are made about individual cultural backgrounds. Instead, the research explores the interplay between shared beliefs, customs and social norms in participants' daily lives, as revealed through focus group and interview data.

MOTIVATIONS AND INTENTIONS

Foundation skills courses were often referred to as a 'stepping stone' to a great number of aspirations

The aim of this research is to ascertain from learners:

- how they became aware of their foundation skills courses
- whether they chose to enrol themselves, or whether others influenced their decision (for example, employment agencies, mutual obligations for Centrelink payments or other government requirements, family members, employers, other influencers)
- their reasons for enrolling in foundation skills courses
- their intentions regarding completion, both at the time of enrolment and after ceasing study.

Discovery of foundation skills courses

Many First Nations learners found out about the training from program coordinators, who knew them because they also lived in the small remote communities. Others heard about the course through their work, or saw poster advertisements, or by coming across the training and joining in on the day.

> When I just came in and out, just looked and I was, wow, this could be fun, yeah.

On the other hand, migrant learners heard about the courses through a broader range of sources, including friends/family, staff at community centres and job search providers. Other avenues included through visa requirements or as a pathway to citizenship and via social media and the internet.

> I saw the news from the local — like a newsletter or something. They say, AMEP will start to enrol students. So, they have an address. They have a date. You can go there go there to enquire something or enrol, so I just go there and ask everything …

The choice to study

Most First Nations learners indicated that the decision to enrol in a foundation skills course was their own. Only one participant stated that their decision was highly influenced by the program coordinator.

> I want to do it.

While many in the migrant group stated that the decision to enrol was their own, they also received encouragement from others, such as family/friends, or as part of a pathway to citizenship. Sometimes this encouragement was described by participants more as 'pressure' or 'expectation'. For example, some expressed feeling pressure from their children, who expected them to speak English at home.

> I have one kid who is [age removed] years old who is attend Year [level removed] class. He always criticise my English. He always say [inaudible], 'mum, you have to improve your English …'

> It's quite difficult to understand when my kids are talking to me in English. Even the way I communicate to them, when I say something, 'oh dad, you say that again and again'.

It is possible that autonomy over decision-making may impact on motivation and/or investment in completing foundation skills courses, a topic which could warrant further investigation, particularly for the migrant cohort.

Reasons for enrolling

Figure 2 shows that the overarching reason for First Nations learners enrolling in foundation skills courses was to learn new skills, particularly in the use of computers and those relevant to daily activities and tasks. Two other reasons given — access to free food and to get out of the house — were not related to the content of training but nevertheless provided an initial motivation to enrol.

Figure 2 First Nations learners' reasons for enrolling in foundation skills courses

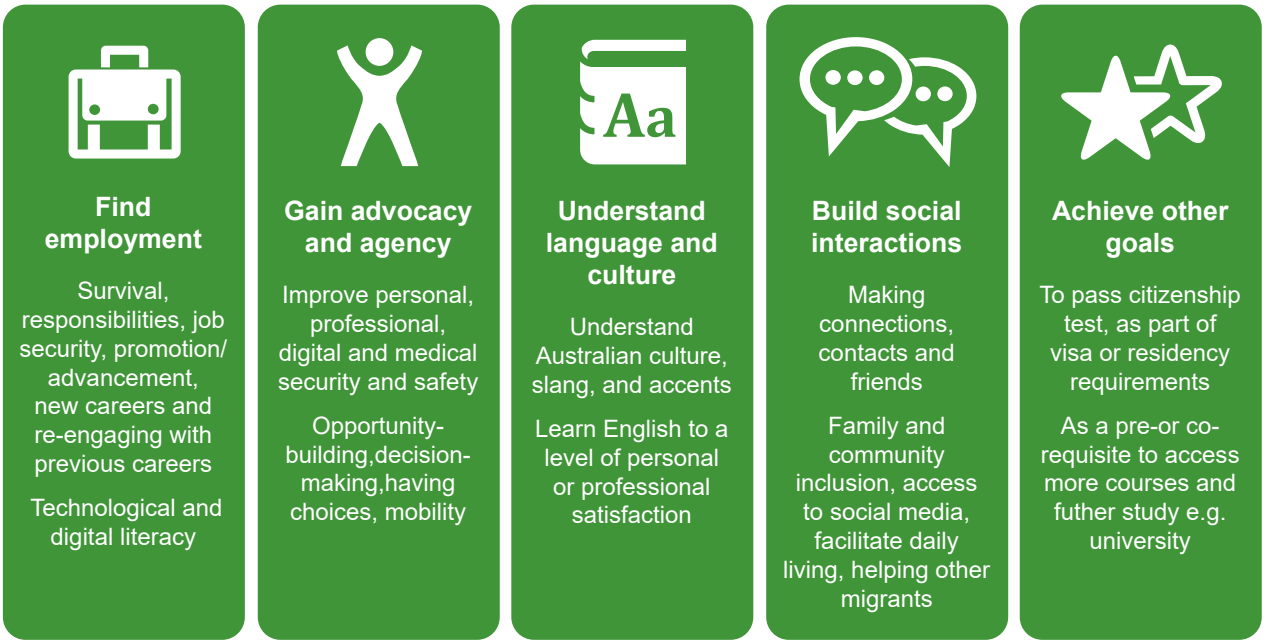
Furthermore, First Nations learners viewed foundation skills training as beneficial to their communities and believed it could be a stepping stone to more First Nations-run businesses.

> Maybe one day us as [First Nations] people could run businesses. We running it. Not white people, non-Indigenous people running it.

Figure 3 demonstrates that the fundamental reasons for migrant learners enrolling in foundation skills courses were employment-centred:

- improving English skills to gain employment
- enhancing fluency, conversations and communication in the workplace
- improving English language skills to help with computing tasks (for example, emails, writing resume etc.) and in turn to assist with gaining promotions or articulating into other work.

Figure 3 Migrant learners' reasons for enrolling in foundation skills courses



Additionally, improving English language skills was also pivotal to being able to advocate for themselves, build relationships with others, and as a way to progress their many aspirations.

Intention to complete

First Nations learners stated that they began their foundation skills training with the intention of completing and believe that completing training is important. Many learners want to return to training and complete it when next it is offered; however, it can be many months before the course becomes available again in their remote communities. Some First Nations learners also expressed a desire to pursue further education, such as additional foundation skills training, as well as occupation- or career-focused training.

> More learning English. Concrete. Fence. Driving. That's what I want to - forklift course. Yeah, ride-on mower course.

Migrant learners had more varied responses. Some aimed to continue with the course and complete it, irrespective of obstacles, prompted by a desire to feel useful, to help their family and to experience a sense of achievement.

> I want to keep going, I don't want to stop it. I don't mind my age, I want to keep going until I go through what I wish, you know, for the future of my family.

Others plan to stop once they have fulfilled their goals, such as:

- reaching an English level they are happy with
- gaining employment
- fulfilling visa or citizenship requirements, which can mean ceasing to attend the course once residency status changes
- undertaking the course as a pre- or co-requisite to reach another course.

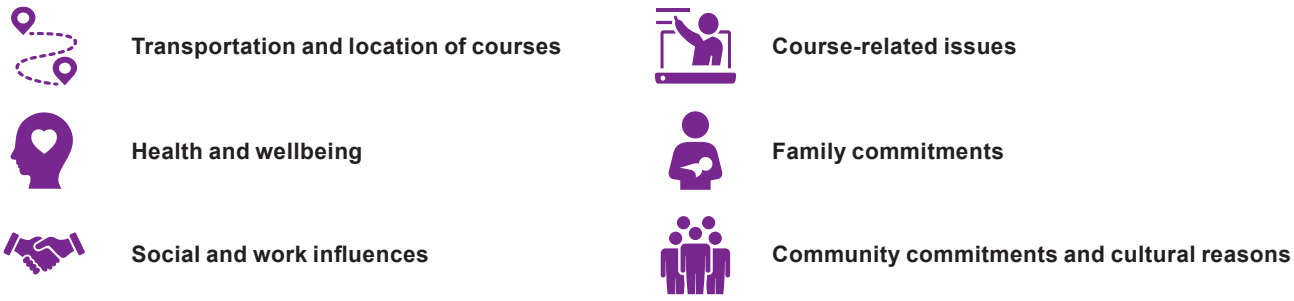
> I have come to learn English. I want to improve my English, I want to make friends and get a job, yes.

BARRIERS TO ATTENDING OR COMPLETING FOUNDATION SKILLS COURSES

Numerous factors can prevent learner engagement in the learning process and often result in their stopping altogether

Discovering the issues preventing the completion of foundation skills courses directly from First Nations and migrant learners themselves will help training organisations and policymakers to address these concerns. Figure 4 provides a snapshot of the identified barriers, with detailed information presented in the text below.

Figure 4 Main barriers to attending or completing foundation skills courses



Transportation and location of courses

Issues with transportation were repeatedly raised by First Nations learners as impacting on their ability to attend foundation skills courses. Most courses are conducted in town centres, but some First Nations learners live on the outskirts and have no transport of their own. Although program coordinators are relied upon to transport learners, they are limited by the number of seats in their vehicles. Other options, such as public transport and taxis are expensive — $20 for a return trip by bus and around $50 to $70 for a one-way trip by taxi. Some participants chose to hitchhike into town to attend training.

> If I don't pick [participant's name] up and [participant's name], then they would have to hitchhike into town as well.

For migrants, the location of courses and the travel distance from home provide barriers to attendance and therefore completion. While geographically the location may appear close, it could involve taking more than one bus or multiple forms of public transport to reach the training location. This long commute is unsustainable as it impacts on other aspects of their lives, such as work and family commitments. Those with vehicles encounter challenges with parking, for example, limited spaces, long distances from the venue and costs. An example raised by participants highlighted a course no longer being offered in a particular location due to a lack of funding, which required participants to travel to one of two other locations, causing logistical issues.

> So how many people would struggle to go to [location name] or [location name]? One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight. Most people, most people would struggle. (Migrant focus group facilitator)

Course-related issues

Migrant learners identified a number of course-related issues as barriers to training. These included:

- Some providers offered limited course options (for example, advanced courses at a different campus), and limited learning models in the courses offered (for example, one subject extending across the whole day is boring for those with experience; playing games to learn felt limiting to some).
- Large numbers of participants in courses meant there was no capacity or availability at times to enrol, and at other times too few participants meant courses did not meet the minimum requirements to run.

> … am disappointed with […] when I register the English and have no student, only me, so the course was cancelled.

- Having different learning levels in a single class was not expected and impacted on their experience (that is, the work they were doing was too easy and therefore monotonous, or it was too challenging, and they felt demotivated by this).
- Learning was repetitive for those with previous and/or unrecognised qualifications (for example, basic computer skills).
- Some learners experienced difficulty understanding English spoken with an Australian accent, even if they had learnt English previously.
- Where enrolments expired because learners were absent from the course for an extended period (due to illness, grief, caring responsibilities, employment, travelling overseas for funerals etc.), they experienced long waiting times before they could recommence.

Health and wellbeing

Health and wellbeing issues contribute to both First Nations and migrant learners disengaging or withdrawing from foundation skills courses. Some battled their own illnesses and serious medical conditions, with homesickness also an issue for migrants. For others, caring for sick relatives left them with no time to attend. Pregnancy, and the associated morning sickness and tiredness, was raised by females in both cohorts as a reason for ceasing training.

> I got pregnant.

Participants described experiencing anxiety associated with previous trauma (for example, grief, shock, family death and war), an issue unique to the migrant cohort and causing stress and demotivation to attend training. One migrant learner explained that the COVID-19 lockdowns had been retraumatising as they had experienced similar lockdowns during conflict/war in a previous country, meaning that they were too frightened to leave home, let alone attend foundation skills training.

> … worried about seeing the police on the streets, worried about seeing the army. Coming from war-torn backgrounds, to suddenly seeing the army in your face, saying why are you outside of your home.

Family commitments

Caring for children was often highlighted as a barrier to training attendance for both First Nations and migrant learners. In some instances, no childcare places are available or children have health or special needs, both of which limit options. In one remote First Nations community, participants explained that parents are expected to stay with children due to a Families as First Teachers program (see box 1 for a further exploration of childcare issues). Participants in the migrant focus groups also mentioned a lack of before- and after-school care options, limiting their capacity to attend courses conducted during standard office hours.

> Just to look after my kids. That's why it's getting hard for me to look after them. Earn enough, go work, go back home, look after kids.

> I have to sometimes stay home with my little one.

Finding time to study while juggling other family commitments was another barrier raised. Their children's extracurricular commitments, and the associated time transporting them, constrain learners' capacity to study. Participants commented on how tired they become looking after children *and* going to classes, leaving little time for anything else.

> We need to drop the kids. We need to come here and then pick up the kids and then home, work at night, very tired.

Box 1 Complexity of childcare

Currently, free pre-school age childcare is available to Adult Migrant English Program learners, which providers can help to arrange (Department of Home Affairs 2020). However, the same difficulties with accessing childcare places, such as long waitlists and limited centres, apply to AMEP participants as to the general population. For some, the solution has been to wait until their children were older to attend classes:

> *I was so busy taking care of my children but they are all growing up nearly. The first one is [age removed] and the second is Year [level removed] so I have plenty time. So I think I need to develop myself and I want to [increase] myself.*
>
> *My child is growing up now, so I have time to learn my skill.*
>
> *When I arrived here, my children were very small so I thought we stay at home. Now they are grown up and all are going in high school. So, I thought [unclear] is multicultural so we need to speak English first.*

For those outside the AMEP or in other programs such as SEE, free childcare is not always provided, meaning that not only do they face access difficulties, but high costs are also involved:

> *That's why I need to quit this course because I need to work right away. Even I have a subsidy about a childcare, but I have to work. It's only three days a week but still pay like $200 nearly $300 a week, a lot, that's why I need to go back and then quit this course.*

The children of some migrants faced separation difficulties while attending care, which meant they were forced to withdraw their children, impacting on their studies:

> *I have childcare, but my son not accept it ... He was sick – yeah. He was asthma when he crying so much, he's vomit. They're calling me, come to pick him up. So, I can't study … So, maybe if the time shorter or part-time. Yeah. It's more good for mums.*
>
> *When I was in AMEP my son was [age removed] years and he cannot accept anyone in childcare centre ... He cannot eat anything. So, when I go to the AMEP from 9:00 to 2:30, he spent all the day crying and not eating, and this is what make me stop.*

Childcare is also an issue for those First Nations learners living in remote areas of Australia. Access to childcare places can be limited, and even if places are available, children may experience separation anxiety:

> *There's not many childcares here. Most of the time they're full. At the moment, my son – he's in Year [level removed]. He's having food problems at school.*
>
> *They can't trust anyone … Wherever I go they cry. That's what makes me unhappy … I've got to be with my kids and look after my kids.*

One workshop revealed that a Families as First Teachers program operates in the area. This program requires a parent to remain in the centre with their child while education experiences for the child, along with parenting support programs, are provided. The program is important but is not designed to support parents attending other activities while their children are in care:

> *they recently brought up FaFT, Families as First Teachers. So for that position, you have to be able to attend the childcare with the child … that could be one thing that [participant's name] is struggling with. She's doing her studies, but then also – she can't just leave her son alone at childcare …*

While free childcare is an important strategy in enabling participation in foundation skills training, its effectiveness is limited by the obstacles identified above. Both migrant and First Nations participants were supportive of having childcare or creche onsite at the training venue or the capacity to bring young children to their foundation skills classes.

Social and work influences

Another potential barrier identified was simply being too busy with life and needing to find the energy to 'do it all'. Migrant participants expressed that there were not enough hours in the day to study foundation skills alongside everything else they were required to accomplish.

The need to work is also a major influence on being able to continue with foundation skills studies, with migrants having to decide whether to 'study or survive' (see box 2 below).

I stopped … for a while because my husband have full-time job. I have to three kids ... I did my [profession removed] certificate. Always I work at nighttime, everyone sleep, but during the day I'm too stuck with them.

If there's no possibility to bring the course here, I have to decide to go back to the casual [work].

The scheduling of class times and locations can make attendance difficult for those combining study with work. One migrant stated they would need to go back to casual work if a course could not be moved to a closer location.

Work was also mentioned by a First Nations learner as the reason they were unable to finish their foundation skills course. This person had been called in to work as there was no one else to provide transport that day. Courses are often run over a two-week period, so missing a day impacts on their ability to complete.

> But when — I should come here for training, but clinic called and said there's no driver, that's why it's busy.

Community commitments and cultural reasons

For First Nations peoples, fulfilling cultural obligations takes precedence over attending training and impacts on their ability to continue with foundation skills courses; for example, participants spoke about the need to undertake Sorry Business with their clans, which was sometimes held away from where they lived, resulting in them missing training.

> So doing cultural stuff would be our first priority and then to participate in study.

Similarly, church and community commitments are a factor in migrants discontinuing their foundation skills training; for example, death and grieving among family and the community may require overseas travel and extended absences from classes. Focus group participants mentioned that time limits for taking leave from the class can apply. Once these limits are reached, they need to re-enrol, which can be a lengthy and repetitive process. Classes could also be full, meaning that they may need to wait for an available space.

> So, usually when you've withdrawn, you have three months. We have three months. We keep your name with us, your file with us. If you come back within one month, two month, okay. Three months, no. Three months, one day ... the file is closed. (Migrant focus group facilitator)

Box 2 Migrants and balancing the need to 'study or survive'

The migrant cohort prioritises day-to-day survival, focusing on income, housing and providing for their families and ensuring that their children thrive. Securing a job as soon as possible is their primary goal and, for many, this takes precedence over education. The need to find employment remains the biggest barrier to completing training, highlighting the recurring theme of 'study or survive':

No one can provide, I have to provide.

I can live with my broken English, I can survive with it, but my family can't survive if I don't work.

I want to continue my career but for the moment … I need to get a job.

Working now is more important for me because everything now is hard without job.

In conversations with this cohort, the 'study or survive' dilemma was highlighted as a constant. Even with subsidies, the high cost of childcare forced some to work longer hours, further reducing the time available for study.

Family life, particularly with young children or children with special needs, and a lack of available before- and after-school care, makes it difficult for parents to attend courses conducted during office hours. Many participants suggested more flexible learning models, including online learning options, weekend classes, classes during school hours, flexible attendance policies, part-time courses that allow students to work and meet their caring responsibilities, and concurrent courses, such as combining English lessons with computing classes, to fast-track their learning:

I'm just looking for a job now. If I get a full-time job, I can't continue this course, so it is online, … I can continue this course.

Stability is important for me, because I'm the – how can I – single mum. So, I have to work. This is why I quit.

Advanced English courses are often held in locations more distant than the initial courses, potentially limiting access. Courses had sometimes been cancelled due to low enrolment numbers. Family and work commitments often leave participants with insufficient time to make long commutes to alternative courses elsewhere. Reducing work hours to commute is unsustainable economically, and in workplaces where they had asked for time off to commute, this had been denied:

When teacher say invitation to go to advance, to [location name removed], for us, for me it's very far, most of the time, because I wake up every day, I'm working full-time and two shifts, you know, I talk to my boss, say one hour less, like at a pay to maybe – and [boss] say no. Say okay, but it's difficult not to work [in order] to study advancing, the [location name removed] too far for us.

SUPPORTS

Access to courses, including transport and flexible delivery, and a variety of child-caring options are the main areas where support is needed

What supports could be provided to First Nations and migrant learners to help in maintaining their motivation to complete the foundation skills courses? The supports listed below were all raised by the learners and represent their views. These suggestions do not take into account any constraints, such as financial and other resourcing implications.

Supports from training provider

First Nations learners suggested the following supports:

- transportation to and from the training location, including by program coordinators; a minibus was suggested to accommodate more people
- onsite creche or the capacity to have children present in the classroom
- availability of food during the training, for example, lunch and snacks, given that the provision of food can be the initial motivation to attend
- financial support or incentive to attend training.

> I think the most important is transport … to change.

> Sometimes training support by childcare

> Food

> Give food or money

Suggestions by migrant learners included:

- Providing more flexibility around how courses are delivered and accessed; for example, shorter courses during school hours may work better for parents, whereas evening or weekend classes may be more suitable for those who work. Face-to-face training is preferable for those who enjoy the social aspects of class or who have low digital skills, whereas those who have trouble attending because of the location of the course or who have caring responsibilities may find online training more accessible.
- Offering childcare on site; free childcare is provided with the AMEP program, but some learners are unable to access places or are reluctant to leave their children in care (see box 1).
- Organising for a dedicated support person to guide students and assist with resume-building, accessing services and filling in forms, as well as discussing barriers etc., given that many teachers appear to fulfil this mentoring role. Participants who have experienced this type of initiative have found it very useful.
- Ensuring that students understand the benefits of completing their course. Some students indicated that it can be demotivating if they do not understand the value of what they are doing, beyond their personal goals. One student suggested it would incentivise students to understand this.

> At that time, we don't know when we finish the AMEP what we can get ... We don't know if certificate can help us work in Australia or in our future ... We don't know that ... We want to work, so we need some certificate to be in Australia, but we don't know after AMEP if we [have] a very useful certificate.

External supports

First Nations learners also mentioned supports from other sources that could assist in their attending and completing foundation skills training, specifically:

- seeking support from their employer for time off to attend and to avoid being called into work
- learning with a friend to provide additional motivation to attend
- getting help from family with looking after children.

TRAINING EXPERIENCE

First Nations and migrant learners reported positive experiences of foundation skills training overall

What did the learners think about the training they had done and did this experience contribute to their decision to withdraw?

Overall, both First Nations and migrant learners reported positive experiences with foundation skills training but there were some elements they thought could be improved, as discussed below.

> Yeah, it was exciting … Good to learn many ways, you know?

> I liked the course

> We love it. Did not waste our time when we came here, we are learning different culture. I appreciate the teacher, the way they handle us because of different culture.

> I like how they teach us to use the computer. Also, when we did the course, teaching us and showing us how to take messages and have — what kind of words the right words to use … Email or phone messages, and how to reply to phone messages.

> Instead of waiting hours, you can just go online and it's over and done with.

Course content

First Nations learners mainly participated in digital and employment skills training. They enjoyed learning about computers; for example, typing, using software and making posters. Other employment skills they learnt included communicating through email and leaving phone messages, as well as appropriate workplace behaviour. The topics covered and skills learnt during the courses also helped First Nations learners in their daily activities. They reported more confidence in filling in forms, making appointments, doing online shopping and accessing online government services, with the added benefit of no longer needing to wait in queues.

Responses from migrant learners were more varied. Participants reported enjoying:

> During this learning, speaking, conversations, reading, writing, getting familiar with Australian society, city maps, so all about the teachers were quite professional explaining for the new arrivals to get the students a bit familiar.

- excursions and outside interactions, such as practising using public transport, as it made them feel more confident doing these tasks outside of class
- learning formal English and gaining experience in writing formal and informal emails and letters
- the extra activities that teachers incorporated into the training, for example, links to online extended learning; topics suggested by students; student presentations on their cultural backgrounds to the class; role playing day-to-day interactions; employment skills such as how to present for interviews; and, especially, the inclusion of Australian slang, traditions and history.

However, there were activities they wanted more of, including:

- computing time, as well as advanced computing
- the opportunity to practise presentations
- speaking and listening practice, particularly at the speed of native speakers
- the opportunity for conversations and narratives
- game play to explain the work without simplifying it
- increasing complexity in tasks to match increasing skills.

Other feedback from migrant participants was that the workbook can be difficult for some and not others, likely due to differing levels in classes.

The trainer

Both First Nations and migrant learners had positive experiences with their foundation skills trainers. First Nations participants reported that trainers were very experienced and responsive to feedback, such as decreasing the pace when demonstrating tasks on the computer. Migrant participants found trainers to be very helpful, using the words 'motivating' and 'inspirational' to describe them. Similar to First Nations learners, they sometimes had to ask them to slow down, particularly when speaking.

> [Laughs] click here, yeah, whoa. Slow down.

> That's why my teacher help me to improve my English, because she's my inspiration to speak. English.

Migrant learners reported that differences in teaching styles could influence their experience and understanding of concepts. Trainers with flexible teaching styles were preferred as they used a variety of methods to help each student to understand. Trainers who were willing to adapt the course to the students' interests, such as learning Australian slang and idioms, were preferred over trainers who focused only on the specified course content. Trainers who created a welcoming and peaceful environment made learners feel sufficiently self-assured to ask questions without feeling embarrassed and to practise new skills confidently.

> There are some teachers who explain this — who explain very well. She — they — she — he or she elaborate the meaning of that word because there are some teachers who are not explain that word.

First Nations learners mentioned that trainers' knowledge and understanding of their local culture could be improved in some respects, a topic discussed in box 4 on page 15.

Delivery

The views and preferences of learners in relation to the delivery of foundation skills training were variable. Some migrant learners felt the courses were too short and others found them too lengthy. Online delivery was better for some learners, so they could accommodate it around caring or work responsibilities, whereas others preferred face-to-face learning, as it is easier to receive help from trainers.

> Online has also many possible benefit but still I feel struggling with the computer skill and also just sitting for like five, six hours at home still wasn't good for me.

Migrant participants highlighted that having a combination of varying skill levels or educational or employment backgrounds of learners in a single class can be an issue. This issue could relate to the pre-course screening, as some participants found their allocated level too difficult and not what they were expecting, although others found it not sufficiently challenging because they were already at that level of skill or were fast learners due to their educational backgrounds. Many felt that combined-level classes were not effective. Students' aspirations also differed and some suggested that teachers could better understand individual student needs and focuses.

First Nations participants differed over their preferred scheduling for training. Some liked the current scenario of full days for a specific period, for example, two weeks, whereas others preferred part-days, such as morning only. Face-to-face learning was also favoured, which is unsurprising as most were involved in digital and employment skills training. Living in remote locations impacted on the delivery of courses: trainers flew in to deliver courses, which is why courses often involved full days over a few weeks. With long periods between course offerings, it could be many months before the opportunity to complete the training arose again if a learner missed too many days.

> In the morning

Other experiences

Foundation skills courses provided an avenue for both First Nations and migrant learners to both build on existing social relationships and establish new ones. Forming new relationships created a sense of belonging for migrants as they navigated living in Australia. Migrants experienced a journey of personal growth during their training, as discussed in box 3.

> [Foundation skills] also improve my English and get more confident when I talk...

Foundation skills training also provided migrant learners with the opportunity to listen to English spoken with different accents, giving them more confidence when speaking English with people from diverse backgrounds, outside the class. Including more trainers from various cultural backgrounds in the delivery of foundation skills training was recommended by migrant learners.

The opportunity to gain a certificate was raised by a First Nations learner as something they appreciated, whereas some migrant learners were unsure of the benefit of the certificate in the workplace or in further education.

> We get to get a certificate for doing the course.

Box 3 The journey of personal growth for migrant learners doing foundation skills training

The mindset of migrant participants revealed itself as a central part of their self-perception as they meet new people, have new experiences, and build and change their identity in the context of a new country:

> *Another good thing to me is to create a new mindset. You know more about life, about your society. The things that you didn't know. So, from the course, that's where you started increasing your learnings, skills.*

Learning English was highlighted as playing an important role in the ongoing development of this mindset. Many reflected on starting out very shy, avoiding interaction, and feeling afraid and nervous of speaking to people even if they had been a social person before migrating to Australia. Gaining English skills increased their confidence to continue learning more, to take some risks and make mistakes, but to keep trying regardless:

> *We just need to get out there with the confidence, which is being built through this program and practise, and your accent, and my accent, and everyone else's accent is the least worry of the language acquisition.*

As they made new friends with people from diverse cultural backgrounds in their class, the broader interactions were particularly cherished by those whose previous countries of residence lacked relatively diverse societies:

> *I love to meet new people and know about their culture. So, that was the right place for me, because now I have many friends from China, Iran and Afghanistan. Many countries. So, I guess after my home, this place is my second home.*

Making friends in class is what motivated many of these participants to attend and then continue. Many also expressed their desire to communicate independently rather than having to rely on others acting as intermediaries. These aspects of social inclusion were claimed by many to reduce stress in their lives and to help their wellbeing overall:

> *Making new friends is very helpful, this is very helpful. It makes us strong.*

> *I can feel, really [feel] meet my friend and we – this is like my family because I'm living at home with only my husband and whenever he's on his work, there's nothing. So, this is the second home.*

> *There's a lot of reasons we need face-to-face [learning], this lady said, making friends, meet new people, come to a new place, learning around other people's multicultural, you can learn – sometimes we're having lunch, to bring traditional food and we taste it.*

Participants also said they help and support each other with the work:

> *when we do our course, we help each other, you know or whatever we don't understand, I have to ask, help me ask to the teacher if the word, I can't spell it, I ask to my teacher, please can you spell it that word for me, that is – and much more to me the way I really need help, I can get it from here.*

Exchanging ideas and sharing opinions, experiences and information about their time in Australia created a sense of belonging for many participants as they realised others had similar or relatable migration journeys:

> *At that time, we have no confidence to talk to the native speaker. When we go outside, I just feel, oh so scared to talk to … and that how you met the friends, you met the people and they very nice people and you say, oh, you have the same experience.*

IDEAS FROM LEARNERS TO IMPROVE FOUNDATION SKILLS COURSES

First Nations learners suggested cultural induction for trainers and more learning on Country, while migrant learners suggested assigning students to specific classes according to their goals and educational and employment history

The figures below highlight the suggestions First Nations and migrant learners have for foundation skills courses, noting that the financial and other implications associated with the suggestions are not considered. More details about these proposals, including direct quotes from participants, can be found in the support documents, *First Nations learners' experiences with foundation skills courses* and *Migrant learners' experiences with foundation skills courses*.

Figure 5 First Nations learners' ideas for improvement

Community-specific cultural induction for trainers
- Learn about unique cultural norms and commonly used terms in local community
- Learn issues in community and understand community needs

Use of yarning circles
- Understand individual learners and their needs
- Learn local culture
- Make learners more comfortable with trainer

Culturally appropriate training facilities
- Enable learning on Country
- More aligned to traditional ways of learning
- Could lead to greater engagement

Distance learning
- Learners are still in classroom but with trainer on big screen
- Potentially allow training to be scheduled more often

Two-way learning
- Involves non-Indigenous and First Nations peoples learning from each other
- Entails sharing of ideas and voices

First Nations trainer
- Want to see more trainers from similar backgrounds
- May encourage more people to attend training

First Nations translator
- Can transfer training concepts into local language
- Potential to accelerate understanding

Community support person in training room
- Build confidence of learners to interact with trainer and participate in training activities
- May only be required at beginning of course

Affordable public bus service
- Reduce cost of public transport fees, potentially via a subsidy
- Improve access to training, as cost of transport will no longer be a barrier

Figure 6 Migrant learners' ideas for improvement

Allocating students by education levels at registration
- Students will be grouped with similar peers
- Minimise repetitive content for advanced learners

Include more conversation practice in courses
- Increase listening and speaking practice, group discussions, role-playing, storytelling, and real-world interactions

Include more topics of life, traditions and history
- Learners enjoyed learning Australian slang in class
- Incorporate Australian (including First Nations) history, traditions, customs and religions

Inclusion of additional topics in classes
- Increase advanced computing, maths, research opportunities, student-led topics and excursions

Teachers from different cultural backgrounds
- Expose students to English with different accents and encourage conversations with diverse people, including those with similar migration experiences

More condensed courses
- A shorter course will allow students to find employment sooner
- Reducing time between classes and levels will minimise forgetting earlier learnings

More flexible learning models
- Part-time courses allow for working, practical application and work-life balance
- Flexible class schedules: weekends, evenings, school hours and online
- More time to study course material

Learning aids
- Visual aids improve understanding
- Reduce teaching pace when required
- Workbooks should be adapted to different learning levels

Access aids
- Childcare on site
- All class levels available on campus or online

Box 4 provides more insights into First Nations learners' opinions on the learning environment and the cultural competence of trainers.

Box 4 First Nations learners' experiences with cultural competence of trainers and learning environment

Cultural competence of trainers

First Nations culture is not homogenous across Australia, with many distinct groups across the country having their own languages, laws and culture (AIATSIS 2024). This means that there is no 'one size fits all' cultural competence training available for foundation skills trainers suitable for these differing communities. Participants in this research felt that the trainers respected their First Nations culture but that sometimes the trainers referred to the culture and/or used the language of a different community. Respondents in multiple case study locations indicated that trainers should learn about the local culture before beginning training delivery, as the quote below shows:

> *Maybe our – one of our lecturers should do their courses with cultural experiences and learn our … cultural stuff before they come in.*

First Nations learners had two suggestions for achieving this:

- *community-specific cultural induction for trainers*, whereby they spend time in the community before the course begins and learn about the local culture and language. This would also provide an opportunity for understanding other relevant factors in the community, potentially impacting on learners.
- *yarning circles* at the beginning of a course, where all learners sit down with the trainer and learn about each other and the local culture. This approach can foster rapport between the trainer and learners and build confidence in the learner, encouraging more active participation in class.

> It would be good if the course — the people who are doing the course — actually standing in front of you, if they did a course here [if] one of us showed them. That way, before they come here and — just to get the feel of what's their environment. It goes both ways.

> I always say, we Indigenous people learn differently…but when you come into a learning environment with adults, the first thing – you sit down, and you yarn. You start that yarning circle. Once you start that yarning circle, that person will open up to you. They might be quiet at the beginning but once you start talking about family and connection…

Learning environment

Some participants indicated their dislike of the current classroom-based training delivered in their remote communities and would prefer to be learning outdoors:

> *Instead of doing indoor studying, we would be more likely to do learning on Country, going outdoor… Normal people don't really like sitting down on the chair for approximately two to three hours, … – that's why we do outdoors pretty much ...*

When asked to describe this, the participant elaborated:

> *Well, when I think about learning on Country, it's more like bringing out laptops out from the country [outdoors], sitting down under a tree. Doing studies and paperwork while you're out in the fresh air.*

Other participants in the focus group enthusiastically agreed with this. So, what could learning on Country look like?

At a basic level, it involves classes held outdoors, as suggested by the participant, using laptops where necessary. The program coordinator working with these learners extended the idea and suggested the construction of more culturally appropriate training facilities, involving:

- a training facility in the bush or along the beach, surrounded by a veranda, with an empty space in the middle and a small kitchen
- the capacity to share the facility between different education providers
- the ability to move between the facility and outdoors while learning, depending on the location and amenities of the facility, for example, if by the beach, fishing while discussing some aspects of learning.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS AND TRAINING ORGANISATIONS

This research has given voice to two groups of learners: First Nations and migrant learners, both of whom started but did not complete foundation skills courses. It explored their perceived barriers to completing training and their training experiences, while suggesting appropriate supports and ideas for improvements. In the accompanying support document, *First Nations and migrant learners' experiences with foundation skills courses: background information*, these findings and their links to previous research are investigated further.

Drawing on the voices of these learners, the following issues are presented for the consideration of policymakers and training organisations to potentially improve course completion:

- The provision of free childcare does not fully solve the 'caring responsibility' problem for learners. While it may alleviate the expense of childcare for those who access it, places are limited and there can be long waiting lists. Other opportunities to support adult learners with caring responsibilities need to be explored.
- Reducing public transport costs in remote communities, potentially through subsidies, could improve attendance and completion of foundation skills courses. Additionally, the use of minibuses by local training providers may help more First Nations peoples in remote locations to get to training; however, there will be costs associated with this.
- There is a need to work with local program coordinators or training hub staff to provide cultural induction opportunities to trainers before they begin delivering in remote communities. Even when trainers are experienced in delivering in First Nations communities, community-specific induction packages are necessary to enable trainers to understand the preferred terminology in the local community, as well as the other factors potentially impacting on the active participation of learners. This was an explicit suggestion from all three First Nations case study locations.
- Partnerships between government and local VET and higher education providers to establish culturally appropriate training facilities in First Nations communities could encourage more learning on Country and greater engagement with learners.
- The location of training and the ease of transportation make a substantial difference to migrant learners' capacity to attend courses. For RTOs with multiple campuses — even if geographically close — transferring training from one campus to another can be detrimental to learners and affect their ability to attend, as suitable public transport is not always available. Greater consideration of the learners' ability to attend courses should be given before moving the location of training courses and could involve contact with learners to gauge the potential impacts on them.
- Training for foundation skills teachers in mental health support and mindset and change-management strategies would assist them to keep students engaged, particularly learners dealing with homesickness or culture shock. Trauma-informed training for teachers would also enable them to support students at risk of disengagement due to past experiences such as grief or war, issues specifically raised by the migrant cohort.
- First Nations and migrant learners made suggestions for improvements to the delivery of foundation skills training, and consideration should be given to how these can be implemented. These suggestions include:
  - First Nations learners should ideally have a community support person, First Nations translator and/or First Nations trainer in the classroom.
  - Migrant learners requested the inclusion of more aspects of the Australian way of life, conversation practice, learning aids and student-driven topics.
  - Migrant learners also expressed the desirability of learners being assigned to classes according to their knowledge, skills and goals to allow similar students to be matched. This step, which should occur during the registration process, will enable the training to be pitched at a more appropriate level for all learners in a class.

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