SUPPORT DOCUMENT

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First Nations and migrant learners' experiences with foundation skills courses: background information — support document

Bridget Wibrow
Maree Ackehurst
Daniella Trimboli
NCVER

This document was produced by the author(s) based on their research for the report *First Nations and migrant learners' experiences with foundation skills courses*, and is an added resource for further information. The report is available on NCVER's Portal: <https://www.ncver.edu.au>.

Publisher's note

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Acknowledgement of Country

NCVER acknowledges the Traditional Owners and Custodians of Country throughout Australia and their continued spiritual connection to land and water. We pay respect to Elders past and present.

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Level 5, 60 Light Square, Adelaide, SA 5000
PO Box 8288 Station Arcade, Adelaide SA 5000, Australia

Phone +61 8 8230 8400 **Email** ncver@ncver.edu.au

Web <https://www.ncver.edu.au>

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Introduction

Purpose

This support document accompanies the research publication *First Nations and migrant learners' experiences with foundation skills courses* and provides more detailed information around the gathering of information. It is divided into the following sections:

- 'Summary of key findings and snapshot of other literature' – ties the main findings of the current project with those of previous research
- 'Research questions' – provides the key research questions that guided the project
- 'Methodology' – describes the data collection method as well as any caveats and limitations.

Summary of key findings and snapshot of other literature

Presented below are two tables with the main findings from the current research project in the first columns and snapshots from the literature in the second columns. The previous research is centred more at the training organisation, program and/or trainer level, whereas the focus of our project is heavily on the student experience. The similar themes coming through the different literature adds further weight to the views and ideas expressed by the First Nations and migrant participants in our research project.

Table 1 Findings from First Nations cohort compared with examples of previous research

Our findings	Examples from previous research
Motivations and intentions	
Discovery of foundation skills courses ▪ Through other people, such as program coordinators or employers ▪ From advertisements, such as posters around town ▪ Incidental discovery where they came across training on the day and decided to join in. **The choice to study** ▪ High autonomy over the decision to enrol, with all but one participant choosing to enrol in the course on their own ▪ One participant was highly influenced by a program coordinator. **Reasons for enrolling** ▪ Learn new skills ▪ Achieve study or career goals	Earlier research by Boughton (2012) found that encouragement by local facilitators to enrol in literacy programs offers a strong feeling of support and may have been the main reason for students initially enrolling in a course. This is echoed in findings from our project, where First Nations participants originally discovered foundation skills courses through program coordinators. O'Dwyer and Mihelic (2021) also emphasised that 'word of mouth' and seeing examples of family and friends attending training encourages people in regional areas to enrol in foundation skills training. Both inwards and outwards facing reasons for enrolling in foundation skills training are highlighted in previous research, such as: "Chance to turn lives around, build confidence, play positive role in community, show other family members that anyone can do it/set good example/role model, feel better inside, stay clean and off grog too, want to gain employment or set up small enterprises" (Boughton 2012 pp.21-22). Another important goal of First Nations

Our findings	Examples from previous research
▪ Obtain a certificate ▪ Access to food ▪ Reason to get out of the house. **Intentions to complete** ▪ Enrolled with the intention of completing the course ▪ Believe that completing training is important ▪ Many learners would like to return and complete training when it is next offered ▪ Some would also like to pursue further education, including more foundation skills training.	students participating in foundation skills training raised by Boughton et al. (2014) was wanting to be able to help their children and grandchildren with schoolwork. Participants in our project indicated more inward facing goals for enrolling. They also believed that improving foundation skills would benefit the entire community and they wanted to see more First Nations people running businesses in the community.
Barriers to completion/attending training	
Transportation ▪ Some First Nations learners live on the outskirts of town and do not have their own transport ▪ Public transport and taxis are too expensive ▪ Some learners will hitchhike into town ▪ There is a heavy reliance on program coordinators to transport learners to training. **Health and wellbeing** ▪ May experience illness or other poor health ▪ Pregnancy ▪ Need to care for sick relatives.	In line with our research, consistent barriers to attendance include cultural reasons, family issues, caring responsibilities, childbirth, and ill health (Boughton 2012, Boughton et al. 2014, Guenther et al 2017, Social Compass 2021 and DEWR 2023). Transportation is also a recognised barrier with Boughton (2012) reporting that students often need to be picked up by campaign workers or must walk to class. Additional barriers raised in previous research that were not mentioned in our project include: ▪ Being jailed or other difficulties with police, court and probation/parole (Boughton 2012 and Boughton et al. 2014) ▪ Drug and alcohol complexities (Boughton et al. 2014) The precedence that cultural obligations, such as dealing with death and grief, take over training is a recurring theme in the literature. The need to be flexible with training to accommodate these events and awareness that this is not a

Our findings	Examples from previous research
Family commitments ▪ Caring responsibilities for young children is a common barrier to attendance. This can include no available childcare spaces or children not being comfortable away from parents. **Social and work influences** ▪ Too busy with life in general ▪ Called into work during course. **Community commitments and cultural reasons** ▪ Cultural obligations, such as Sorry Business, take precedence over training attendance.	reflection of a lack of interest in learning is also raised in the literature (Boughton et al. 2014 and DEWR 2023).
Supports to help with completion/attending training	
Ways training providers can offer support ▪ Transportation to and from the training location ▪ Onsite creche or ability to have children present in the classroom ▪ Availability of food during the training, for example lunch and snacks ▪ Financial support or incentive to attend training. **Support from external sources** ▪ Seeking support from their employer for time off to attend so they do not get called in to work ▪ Learning with a friend, which could provide additional motivation to attend ▪ Getting help from family with looking after children.	Our findings are in keeping with O'Dwyer and Mihelic (2021) who found that in regional areas provision of childcare (with volunteers), food, and kitchen facilities can help to support training attendance. Previously, Guenther et al (2017) highlighted the need for wraparound supports for students, such as organising transport, listening to the needs of students and helping with paperwork. Overall, creating these positive support experiences, can help students to remain in their courses, despite what is going on in their personal lives, and have been recognised more broadly in the report *Future delivery of foundation skills training in remote Australia* (DEWR, 2023). That report points to considerations needed at the training provider level, stating that, "Transport and other barriers should be considered when designing community-based projects and partnerships with organisations offering wrap-around support need to be considered" (p.9). External supports have a role to play in encouraging attendance at training.

Our findings	Examples from previous research
	Our findings indicate that First Nations participants believed learning with a friend could help to provide additional motivation to attend training. Indeed, building relationships with other students and feeling like part of a team has been reported to help increase completion (Guenther et al., 2017). While support from family members can help students to progress in their training (Guenther et al. 2017; O'Dwyer & Mihelic 2021).
Training experience	
Overall impression ▪ Overall, First Nations learners had positive experiences with foundation skills training. **Course content** ▪ Enjoyed learning about using computers, such as typing, learning about software and making posters ▪ Learnt other workplace skills like how to communicate in the workplace through email and phone messages and how to behave in the workplace ▪ Topics covered during the course and the skills they learnt helped them with their daily activities as well as work ▪ Expressed more confidence in filling in forms, making appointments, online shopping and accessing online government services. **The trainer** ▪ Reported positive experiences with trainers and found them to be experienced ▪ Trainers were responsive to feedback, such as slowing down when asked.	Positive relationships between trainers and students have been found to help learners remain in training (Guenther et al. 2017). Whilst being taught by people they know allows students to feel safe, supported and relaxed in learning environments, enhancing their experience (Boughton et al. 2014). These findings were echoed in our study. First Nations participants had concerns about the cultural awareness of trainers, similar to the findings of Waters (2019, p.12) who stated "One approach to VET will not fit the diversity of regional and remote Indigenous communities. What works for Indigenous VET learners can only be really understood in the context of their local culture and community." This is expanded further in the 'Ideas for improvement' section. Being involved in foundation skills training as an adult, enables First Nations learners, particularly those who may not have had a positive experience with school, to see that they are able to learn and believe they are able to pursue further education or employment (Boughton et al. 2014). Most importantly, it has been reiterated in previous research that even if learners do not complete the full course, they still benefit from the training they received and still improved their literacy levels (Boughton 2012; O'Dwyer & Mihelic 2021). Whilst not relating to foundation skills training specifically, Guenther et al. (2017, p.19) further illustrated the benefits to First Nations learners who do not complete courses, "Is a program unsuccessful because it has a 15% completion rate? Or, Is it successful

Our findings	Examples from previous research
Understanding of culture ▪ Learners felt trainers respected their First Nations culture but there were instances where the trainer referred to the culture and/or used the language of a different community ▪ It was voiced in more than one of the case study areas that trainers should learn about the local culture before beginning the training. **Delivery** ▪ Differed over their preferred training schedule. Some liked the current scenario where they did full days for a period, for example two weeks, whereas others would prefer to only do part days, such as only in the morning ▪ There was also a strong preference for face-to-face learning ▪ There could be long periods between when courses are offered so if a learner missed too many days, it could be many months before they had the opportunity to complete the training again. **Other experiences** ▪ Avenue to build social relationships ▪ Opportunity to receive a certificate if complete.	because non-completers leave the program with higher levels of self-confidence and positive cultural, personal and social transformation?". Our research suggests the latter to be true, in the overwhelmingly positive experiences that First Nations learners have with foundation skills training, despite not necessarily completing the course. With indications the course provided them new skills and an openness to further training. When focusing on the delivery aspects of the training, a recurring theme is the need to develop class timetables around the students and with their input to improve attendance (Boughton 2012, Boughton et al. 2014). It is also best practice to cancel classes for funerals and to continue to teach classes with only a couple of students in attendance (Boughton 2012). O'Dwyer and Mihelic (2021) have also suggested that rolling intakes, where a student is able to enrol at any time rather than a fixed date, can encourage more enrolments from First Nations peoples. Additionally, place-based programs where the trainers live in the community are more supported than those with 'fly-in and fly-out' or online models (DEWR 2023).
Ideas to improve training	
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.	Similar themes to the ideas suggested by the First Nations participants in our project, have also been raised in previous research. The need to be aware of the local community and their culture is highlighted by Waters (2019) and the Victorian Department of Education (2019). This should be additional to any cultural awareness training that trainers undertake. Boughton (2012), when reflecting on the 'Yes I can' literacy campaign in Wilcannia, reported on the

Our findings	Examples from previous research
Use of yarning circles ▪ Understand individual learners and their needs ▪ Learn local culture ▪ Make learners more comfortable with the trainer. **Culturally appropriate training facilities** ▪ Learning on Country/outdoors ▪ More aligned to traditional ways of learning. **Distance learning** ▪ Learners 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 ▪ Sharing of ideas and voices. **First Nations trainers, translators and/or community support persons** ▪ First Nations learners want to see more trainers from similar backgrounds as it may encourage more people to attend training ▪ Translators could put training concepts into local language and accelerate understanding ▪ Community support persons could build confidence of learners to interact with the trainer and participate in training activities. They may only be required at the beginning of a course. **Affordable public bus service** ▪ Reduce cost of public transport fees, potentially via a subsidy ▪ Improve access to training as expensive cost of transport will no longer be a barrier.	introduction of 'literacy and culture' sessions that would occur once a week followed by a barbeque. These sessions allowed students and facilitators to speak about their country and culture and learn about that of the instructor too. This sharing of culture is illustrated in our participant's suggestions around cultural induction for trainers and the use of yarning circles. Also raised by our participants is the opportunity to learn on Country, where learners may feel more connected to culture. This has been identified as an indicator of success of vocational education programs targeted to First Nations peoples (Guenther et al. 2017). O'Dwyer and Mihelic (2021) described community education providers in the remote Northern Territory with trainers who bring all required equipment with them and deliver the class under a tree. The concept of 'two-way learning' is also reflected in Bat and Shore (2013) who defined this as "the sharing of personal and cultural knowledge between teachers and students" (cited in Waters 2019, p.17). Page (2024) also described this in practice at Batchelor Institute where shared languages around work concepts are developed and training fits the learner instead of the other way around. Wallwork (2024) went further, suggesting that understanding how First Nations learners bring their own knowledge to training, and how this can be nurtured by trainers, should be incorporated into the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment. Including local First Nations facilitators in foundation skills courses has also been highlighted as best practice in previous research. Boughton (2012) found that it can help with attendance and enables the provision of more intense support to learners. Additionally, Boughton found that it is best to have one man and one woman First Nations facilitators for cultural reasons, and Elders are also able to bridge "the gap between traditional knowledge and more mainstream learning environments" (DEWR 2023, p.18). Furthermore, building the First Nations VET workforce has been identified as a need in the *VET Workforce Blueprint* and

Our findings	Examples from previous research
	there is an action aligned to develop strategies in partnership with First Nations peoples (Skills and Workforce Ministerial Council 2024).
Additional information	
Impact on the community ▪ Skills will be of benefit to the whole community ▪ Want more First Nations peoples to be running businesses in the community. **Role of community support** ▪ Didn't receive much support outside own family ▪ Change in views of people in the community towards training.	Foundations skills and VET programs for First Nations learners have been found to achieve greater success where there is a level of community ownership over the program along with integrated local knowledge and culture (Boughton 2012; Guenther et al. 2017). This was not reflected to this extent in our project, however, one program coordinator mentioned seeing a change in the views of the local community towards foundation skills training and that they now recognise its importance.

Table 2 Findings from migrant cohort compared with examples of previous research

Our findings	Examples of previous research
Motivations and intentions	
Discovery of foundation skills courses ▪ Through other people, including friends/family, staff at community centres and job search providers. ▪ Due to visa requirements or as a pathway to citizenship. ▪ Social media and the internet. **The choice to study** ▪ Combination of wanting to learn for themselves and receiving suggestions, or 'pressure' or 'expectation' from others.	Much of the research discusses the ways in which English proficiency leads to more opportunities for employment or the hope of gaining employment being a major motivation for enrolling in English courses (Cheng et al, 2020; Collins et al, 2019; Shamshad et al, 2017; Sherrell et al, 2020). This is in keeping with our findings, and it is interesting to note that employment is also the main reason for non-attendance or ceasing programs as evident in our study. It is understandable when you consider that migrants are coming here often to secure a better future for their children (Collins et al, 2019), so the need to assist this by working and better providing for their families is a priority. Many participants in our study discussed having to stop classes to work, even if they had wanted to continue.

Our findings	Examples of previous research
Reason for enrolling ▪ Improving their English skills to help gain employment ▪ Enhancing fluency, conversations and communication in the workplace ▪ To help with computing tasks and gaining promotion ▪ Broadening, developing, building, updating, sharing and changing skills and knowledge, appear to be the driving forces ▪ Used as a 'stepping stone' to their many aspirations ▪ Articulating into other work or courses ▪ Personal, professional, digital and medical security, safety and advocacy ▪ Wanting to understand Australian culture, slang, accents. **Intended to complete when enrolled** ▪ Some aimed to continue with the course and complete it, irrespective of obstacles, others plan to stop once they have fulfilled their goals ▪ Many stop English courses once they gain employment but that may not have been their intention, they can't manage both.	It is also important to examine the relationship between English proficiency and labour market outcomes which includes, in many cases, investigations into efficiency of systems and courses. Cheng et al (2020) examined this among humanitarian migrants, using data from the *Building a New Life in Australia* survey[1]. Their research highlighted the importance of understanding the effectiveness of English programs and gave insights into the specific types of language skills that contribute significantly to labour market integration. Interestingly, their study also found 'that self-efficacy, general health and indicative serious mental illness partially mediate the relationship between better English proficiency and the chance of getting a job' (Cheng, 2020, p. 1) which aligns to many of the responses we received. Also noted in earlier research there is a strong link between social inclusion and successful settlement (Collins et al, 2019), and particularly the need to avoid social isolation (Shamshad et al, 2017). After employment, these elements; social inclusion, successful settlement and avoiding isolation, together signal the second major motivator of enrolments into foundation courses, as indicated in our findings. This is concisely summarised in Sherrel et al,(2020), "Participation in social and economic life rests on the ability to communicate with others" (p.4).

1 Department of Social Services. (2017). Building a New Life in Australia (BNLA): The Longitudinal Study of Humanitarian Migrants - Findings from the first three waves. Canberra: Department of Social Services, <https://www.dss.gov.au/long-term-research/building-new-life-australia-longitudinal-study-humanitarian-migrants>

Our findings	Examples of previous research
Barriers to completion/attending training	
Transportation and location of courses ▪ Balancing class schedules, work, extra study, family commitments, and transport time ▪ Limited course options with some providers. **Course related Issues** ▪ Inconsistent class sizes and varied skill levels ▪ Accent differences and extended absences causing delays. **Health and wellbeing** ▪ Anxiety from trauma and stress, homesickness, and culture shock. **Family commitments** ▪ Caring for children (lack of childcare, transporting to activities, children with special needs) and others in the community ▪ Finding time for study while managing family responsibilities. **Social and work influences** ▪ Lack of time and energy for study amidst busy life and work ▪ Difficulty balancing foundation skills study with other commitments. **Community commitments and cultural reasons** ▪ Church, community, and overseas travel commitments. **'Study or Survive'** ▪ Balancing work and income often takes priority over education ▪ Employment is the biggest barrier to completing training	In 2020, in a similar vein to our study, childcare was found to be one of the biggest barriers for female migrants often due to complications with it being off-site and 'separation from children can be a jarring cultural experience for some migrants' (Sherrell, 2020, p. 23). In 2021, a discussion paper (Australia Department of Home Affairs) on the reform of the Adult Migrant English Program unpacked 'a number of options to manage high childcare costs' in recognition by The Department 'that free childcare is beneficial for AMEP student learning and retention' (p. 13) but these do not necessarily address site and separation issues. Childcare is echoed in another report by Social Equity Works (2022) on a survey of 382 adult literacy providers from all over Australia including teachers, tutors, workplace trainers, curriculum developers and managers from TAFE, not for profit community education providers, private providers and volunteers from volunteer tutoring programs. In keeping with our research, responses indicated that there are multiple barriers experienced by adult foundation course learners. The main barriers found in their study included: no transport, work demands, courses don't meet needs, and no childcare. Though that research is not specific to migrant learners many of the responses align with ours. Interestingly the most common barriers indicated in the Social Equity Works survey were not present in our responses, these were, not knowing where to ask for help and experiencing shame and embarrassment. This may be indicative of the different cohort of learners, migrant learners in our study responded that they had received information about study options from a variety of sources, and did not mention feeling shame or embarrassment about attending. Like the Social Equity Works (2022) study however, conflicts with work commitments were highlighted as a major barrier and other studies also mention this. For example, Sherrell (2020) also found that combining English study with

Our findings	Examples of previous research
▪ Combining study and work is often unfeasible for many.	full-time employment was one of the biggest barriers and cites an example of this training occurring on worksites as a major innovative modification.
Training experience	
Course Content ▪ Enjoyed excursions and learning formal and informal English ▪ Appreciated extra activities like online learning links, student-led cultural presentations, role-playing, and employment skills (e.g., interview preparation, Australian slang) ▪ Desired more computing time, advanced computing, presentations, speaking/listening at native speaker speed. **The Trainer** ▪ Positive, helpful, motivating, peaceful environment ▪ Greater individual focus on student needs and more visuals ▪ Flexible trainers most effective, may need to slow down ▪ Some focus solely on content, others adapted to student interests. **Delivery** ▪ Course duration too short for some, too long for others ▪ Online delivery better with work or caregiving commitments ▪ Face-to-face preferred due to additional help from trainers ▪ Variations in experience and skill levels posed challenges ▪ Tailor to individual needs and offer more challenging work. **Other Experiences** ▪ Built social relationships and fostered a sense of belonging	Collins et al (2019) noted in their research on refugee participants of English classes that there was a high response 'regarding overcrowding, and inflexibility in delivery including place, time of day and level of education related to language ability' (p. 7). This study also observed the push-pull between attending English classes and seeking employment. One way to alleviate this challenge, as seen in the suggestions from several of our participants in the next section on recommendations, is to provide more flexible learning options. Indeed, a discussion paper by the Department of Home Affairs (2021) found that some AMEP students engaged enthusiastically to transformed delivery methods which occurred during COVID-19, such as online learning, and wanted this to continue beyond the pandemic. Whilst increasing flexibility has also been recommended in the past, coupled with accessible funding models and 'meaningful collaboration between service providers and cutting-edge digital learning platforms' (Sherrell, 2020, p.27), it is worth considering flexibility that includes face-to-face training. The many advantages of studying in-person listed in our responses, and the fact that digital literacy, access to IT resources and independent learning skills can be challenging for some students, (Department of Home Affairs, 2021), indicates that a versatile learning framework incorporating both digital and classroom-based instruction is worth consideration. The main factor above all else is that language skills are an essential part of engaging with employment, which is apparent in our study and many others (Cheng et al, 2020; Collins et al, 2019; Shamshad et al, 2017; Sherrell et al, 2020). These studies also suggested that language skills influence refugees'

Our findings	Examples of previous research
▪ Personal growth and positive shifts in self-perception ▪ Opportunity to listen to English with diverse accents ▪ Desire for more trainers from different cultural backgrounds.	health and wellbeing. This is an important factor as it appeared prominently in our findings with migrant learners as well, with changes and growth to both mindset and wellbeing cited as major outcomes from foundation skills courses.
Ideas to improve training, including supports to help with completion/attending	
Segregation of students by education levels at registration ▪ Group students with others at a similar level ▪ Minimise repetitive content for advanced learners. **Teacher training to support student wellbeing** ▪ Trauma informed teaching to support those with past trauma ▪ Mental health support as well as mindset/change management to help students with homesickness or culture shock. **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, math, research opportunities, student-led topics, and excursions.	Reforms put forward in the discussion paper from the Australian Department of Home Affairs (2021) included many of the ideas our participants suggested particularly flexible delivery of tuition, such as online learning. For many, online learning became prominent during the COVID-19 pandemic to 'meet the needs of diverse cohorts, particularly women, people with caring responsibilities, refugees and young people' (p.10). The discussion paper forecasted a decrease in more traditional styles of distance learning as these switch to online but also included funding recommendations for community and work-based learning options which might be useful to the learners we engaged with. The Australian Department of Home Affairs (2021) discussion paper also included in its future business model a requirement for strengthened student counselling and pathway guidance which considers attendance and wellbeing. Sherrell (2020) also recommended flexible environments 'to accommodate co-located childcare and other needs of migrants' – this recommendation is for the delivery of conversational, entry-level English language support but many of our participants would find this useful for all levels of study. Sherrell's (2020) work advocated on-site language training in large construction projects, funding of local coordinators to facilitate place-based approaches, an increase in the number of eligible SLPET students, and recruitment of currently ineligible students into AMEP courses. All of which would address a number of the barriers our participants mentioned. However, many of the 'in-class' recommendations from our participants, such as additional conversation practice, more information about the Australian way of life and slang, learning aids,

Our findings	Examples of previous research
Teachers from different cultural backgrounds ▪ Expose students to English with different accents and encourage conversations with diverse people. **More condensed courses** ▪ A shorter course will allow students to find employment sooner ▪ Reducing time between classes and levels will minimise forgetting what they have learned. **More flexible learning models** ▪ Part time courses allow for work-life balance ▪ Flexible classes: weekends, evenings, school hours, and online ▪ More time to study course material. **Learning aids** ▪ Visual aids improve understanding ▪ Slow down teaching when needed ▪ Workbooks should be adapted to different learning levels. **Access aids** ▪ Childcare on site ▪ All class levels available on campus or online.	inclusion of additional topics, and particularly sorting students by education levels at registration, were not forthcoming in the literature we explored. Another area of continuing interest noted in the research is that of clarifying eligibility and accreditation reforms (Sherrell, 2020). This would assist students to better assess the value and relevancy of courses against their professional and personal goals, giving them clarity around the necessity or use of such courses.

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Research questions

For learners who did not complete a foundation skills training program[2]:

- What were their training intentions? (reasons/motivations for doing the training)
- Were those training intentions met? Why/why not?
- If they intended to complete but did not, what supports could have assisted them to complete their training?
- What were their experiences with doing their training? Here we are interested in the actual learning content as well as the learning context (the provider, the learning environment, aspects of their lives that may have impacted on their learning experience, what supports, if any, they had available to them to help them participate in the training etc).

2 Note that the original scope was to only look at accredited foundation skills training programs, however, the scope needed to be broadened to allow more options for case study locations. Information on non-accredited training is still beneficial.

Methodology

Why the focus on First Nations and migrant learners?

This research builds upon the work of Circelli et al. (2022) who found that learners whose first enrolment was in a foundation skills program were more likely to speak a language other than English at home, be born in a country other than Australia, be female, and be unemployed or not in the labour force.

Circelli et al. (2022) also reported that while the completion rate of learners who only enrolled in foundation skills programs was low at around 32%, it was even lower for the cohort of First Nations learners, at 28%. Further, the Social Equity Works and Reading Writing Hotline study (2022) noted that there are "First Nations adults from both English speaking and culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds facing substantial barriers to [foundation skills] provision. This can include lack of culturally appropriate courses and lack of English as an additional language provision" (p.6).

These insights have led to the current focus on First Nations and migrant learners.

The approach

Of most importance to this project was hearing about training experiences from First Nations and migrant learners who started foundation skills courses but did not complete them. Trying to connect with disengaged learners adds a layer of complexity to recruitment processes in comparison with those that are still studying and engaged with training organisations. The following outlines the steps and processes taken to reach these learners:

- **Establishment of a working group to build connections and tap into their networks.** Members of the working group included First Nations and migrant organisations, training organisations and other relevant bodies. The members played a role in suggesting case study locations, recommending cultural practitioners/co-facilitators to assist with elements of the research and offering advice on cultural protocols.
- **Recruitment of foundation skills learners.** Once case study locations were established, learners were recruited to participate in the research by training organisation staff and cultural practitioners from the local community. Recruitment involved a variety of contact methods, such as direct conversations and posters. The ability to successfully recruit disengaged learners was reliant upon the high levels of engagement that these training organisation staff maintain with their learners.
- **Involvement of cultural practitioners as co-facilitators for focus groups.** The cultural practitioners either came from the local communities engaged in the case studies and/or had a trusted, previously established relationship with the communities. These people helped with framing the discussion questions in language that was more clearly understood by the participants; provided advice around language in the participant questionnaires, consent forms and privacy collection notices; engaged with communities to facilitate data collection including creating an atmosphere where participants could share their voice without judgement; and reviewed the draft report.
- **Use of focus groups and interviews.** As this project aimed to hear from learners themselves and represent their voice in the final report, focus groups and interviews were deemed the most appropriate and authentic means for gathering information. A semi-structured discussion guide was developed to lead the conversations. Focus groups were held in 8 of the 9 case study locations, with the other location deeming that one-on-one interviews were more appropriate for their learners.

- **Use of participant questionnaires, consent forms and privacy collection notices.** Protocols were followed to ensure informed consent was obtained from participants with the use of a plain language privacy collection notice tailored to the specific cohorts, as well as consent forms. This included consent to participate as well as consent to use direct quotes from participants and record focus groups and interviews. Memorandums of understandings were offered for all groups involved but were deemed as not necessary, and in the case of one First Nations community, approval from local Elders was sought. Background participant questionnaires were also used to gain an understanding of some demographic information of the learners (deidentified). In the First Nations community where one-on-one interviews were held, the researcher filmed an introductory video about the research project in plain language to share before the start of interviews.
- **Undertake thematic analysis using NVivo and basic descriptive analysis of participant questionnaires.** To help understand the themes coming from the focus groups and interviews, the focus group and interview recordings were professionally transcribed, and transcripts were uploaded into NVivo. The researchers used thematic analysis to identify key words and sentences in the text. This process combined both deductive coding (based on literature and themes from the focus group discussion guide) and inductive coding (emerging naturally from the data). This approach allowed for a deeper interpretation of the data, going beyond a descriptive level, and contributed to a contextualised understanding of the evolving perspectives of the student voice, as reflected in the direct quotes from participants.
- **Provision of key findings back to participants.** During the process of organising access to learners through training organisations, it was mentioned that participants in some communities, especially First Nations, are regularly asked to participate and provide information for different projects and purposes but that they rarely see what happens with the information provided. To help close this feedback loop and acknowledge the value of participant contributions, both First Nations and migrant learners have been provided with an easy to read one page summary of the key findings arising from the focus groups and interviews.

Case study site selection

Case study sites were selected in consultation with the project sponsors and the Project Advisory Committee.

First Nations case studies

Far northern Australia, which includes Western Australia, Northern Territory and Queensland, was chosen for the case studies of First Nations learners as it encompasses the more populated site of Greater Darwin where approximately 60% of the Northern Territory live (ABS 2021) as well as regional and remote areas. The diversity within First Nations communities located in the far north is incredibly vast, but the contexts are likely more comparable than if case studies were selected from communities across Australia at large, or even from Northern, Central or Southern areas of particular jurisdictions. Having a more delineated geographical focus should therefore lead to richer case studies that allow for more in-depth learnings.

Having a regional focus also aligns with Priority Reform One of Closing the Gap, in particular "Place-based partnerships". Place-based partnerships are based on specific regions and involve partnerships between government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives from those specific regions. The intention of this approach is "to drive Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-led outcomes". (Commonwealth of Australia 2020).

Migrant case studies

For the migrant learners, the case studies were situated in New South Wales and Victoria. These jurisdictions were selected due to the significant proportions of migrants living in these areas, as indicated by the most recent Census data. These data indicated that the jurisdictions with the highest proportions of people born overseas were Western Australia (32.2%), Victoria (29.9%) and New South Wales (29.3%) (ABS 2022). Additionally, the areas with the highest proportion of their population born overseas were in urban New South Wales and Victoria (ABS 2022), with the majority of permanent migrants (56%) shown to live in Greater Sydney and Greater Melbourne (ABS 2023). The Australian Bureau of Statistics suggests the higher concentration of migrant populations in urban Victoria and New South Wales might be due to migrants wanting to settle among other migrant communities, or 'to access support services, employment or education' (ABS 2022).

New South Wales and Victoria were also chosen for the migrant case studies because of the presence of key migrant advocacy groups and related networks in these jurisdictions, which could help the project to access research participants for the focus groups, as well as recruit suitable cultural practitioners as co-facilitators. New South Wales and Victoria also have significant numbers of Adult and Community Education providers, which service significant proportions of learners from non-English speaking backgrounds and play an important role in delivering foundation skills training (CCA 2023).

Positioning as researchers

The researchers acknowledge their Australian-born status, distinguishing them from the migrant cohort, and recognise their non-Indigenous heritage. As such, they are aware of the potential for bias that could influence findings. To mitigate this, the researchers have made a conscious effort to remain reflexive, impartial, and objective throughout the research process, with a primary focus on the wealth of diverse experiences of the participants. Furthermore, the results of the thematic analysis, draft report and case study accounts were provided to the cultural practitioners to review and ensure the findings accurately reflected the discussions with the First Nations and migrant learners.

Caveats and limitations

- Gaining access to the target group of foundation skills learners could only be achieved with the help of training organisations. Their level of involvement in the recruitment could be seen as a limitation if they were selective of who they included in the research. However, the methodical approaches they used for recruitment alleviated this concern.
- Due to the networks that were in place for these cohorts and communities, snowball sampling was included in the recruitment process. This facilitated the sharing of information necessary for access to community spaces being granted to outsiders. Snowball sampling is also a possible factor in the recruitment of participants that did not match our target group (i.e. they were still actively participating in their foundation skills course).
- The presence of trainers in some focus groups and interviews must be acknowledged as a potential influencer of participant response. Although it appeared to the researchers that the presence of trainers added comfort to the process for participants, we cannot know with certainty whether participants were self-censoring or not.
- A degree of ambiguity is present in some responses from participants regarding the exact name of the course/s involved, or if a course was part of a program, such as AMEP or SEE. We acknowledge this may be due to participants being unsure of these details themselves.

- The difficulty of recruitment requires acknowledgment, in particular for the First Nations cohort. An additional four case study locations were confirmed to be involved but they withdrew at late stages for various reasons. Also, focusing on remote regions meant that there are smaller populations with fewer people to draw from. Whilst we would have liked to have included the views of more learners, the findings of qualitative research are not validated by sample size. The goal is to obtain deep and meaningful data based on individual perspectives and experiences and this was achieved.
- Being a student centric study, this project is limited to the information that students provided and as such may not encapsulate all that training organisations do to support, retain or reengage students. Furthermore, these students may not be aware of all the supports the training organisations or the specific programs they are enrolled in offer.
- This project was designed to explore the experiences of two distinct groups – First Nations learners in far northern Australia and migrants in the inner-city suburbs of Melbourne and Sydney. It was not designed to segment these groups any further, i.e. looking at differences by age, visa type or location. Thus, it is unable to look at training needs or motivations by different characteristics.

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