A fair go

Factors impacting on vocational education and training participation and completion in selected ethnic communities

Judith Miralles

NCVER

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Publisher's note

Additional information relating to this research is available in *A fair go: Factors impacting on vocational education and training participation and completion in selected ethnic communities—support document*, which can be accessed from NCVER's website <http://www.ncver.edu.au>.

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Key messages

- The research verified a generally low awareness and valuing of vocational education and training amongst the participants for the six language groups taking part in the research, widespread dissatisfaction with English as a second language programs, and little understanding of traineeship and apprenticeship opportunities.
- The main purpose of training, from the perspective of the participants in this study, is to get a job; undertaking training is generally not reconsidered once a job is found.
- The primary preference is for vocational programs with integrated English language support.
- Enrolment and completion in vocational education and training are strengthened in programs that:
  - provide clear pathways into employment
  - provide language support
  - acknowledge and address cultural issues
  - have teachers who understand issues faced by trainees (cultural, language and settlement), and who have, in turn, the ability to explain cultural and professional values and practices to trainees
  - acknowledge trainees' existing vocational skills
  - include work experience in their training.

Executive summary

This research project sought to examine key factors which may influence participation and completion rates in vocational education and training (VET) for six ethnic communities. Four general areas of investigation were selected:

- ✧ the levels of awareness, understanding and perception of vocational education and training
- ✧ the role played by English as a second language programs in providing pathways and linkages to vocational education and training
- ✧ the perceived role of English language proficiency in participation and module/course completion outcomes
- ✧ the role of cultural expectations and norms in participation and module/course completion outcomes.

During the research these general questions were further refined in an attempt to understand the various relationships between the areas being examined. The researchers set out to determine whether there were any clusters of factors which together would intensify obstacles to participation, and whether a hierarchy of factors existed.

For the purposes of this research, vocational education and training was defined to exclude language, preparatory and access courses, known as multi-field study. Data indicate that students born in countries where the first language is not English are well, if not over-represented, in lower-skill-level preparatory courses. The main objective of the research was to explore the factors which lead to the lower representation of these people in the higher credentialled VET programs designed to lead to employment.

The six language groups examined in the study—Arabic, Bosnian, Cantonese, Spanish, Turkish and Vietnamese—represent a broad cross-section of settlement experiences. Their demographic characteristics show a large proportion of working-age adults, including people in the 18 to 25-years age range. The English language proficiency of the groups is variable. A total of 200 people participated in the study through in-depth interviews and focus groups.

It is hoped that the experiences and opinions of this sample can serve to provide a more detailed understanding of the critical issues which may impact on people from culturally diverse backgrounds in relation to their participation in vocational education and training. There is a clear danger in continuing to define ethnic communities as homogenous, and ignoring differences within communities. The research identified differences between and within language groups; for example, different experiences of settlement between groups. The research also found, within language groups, differences between newer arrivals and older established members. By analysing the experiences of these six distinct groups, the study sought to create a more nuanced snapshot of VET participation and completion outcomes among ethnic communities.

The research identified a number of factors considered to affect whether people from the six language groups enrol in and/or complete vocational education and training.

Enrolment was strongly linked to an understanding of the diversity of training outcomes and range of programs available. As the key concern was to secure a job, training programs were expected to

lead to employment. The research verified a generally low awareness and undervaluing of vocational training pathways, including apprenticeships and traineeships.

Linked to the high expectation that training should lead to employment was the importance placed on work experience. This was universally valued as a way of attaining a realistic understanding of the Australian workplace and work culture.

A strong theme in the research was the importance of integrated language support. Participants (except Vietnamese speakers) were strongly of the view that, even with only moderate English language proficiency, it was possible to complete training programs if language support was available as an integral part of the training program.

The research findings emphasise the critical role of the VET teacher. Participants were of the view that VET teachers were instrumental in supporting trainees to achieve successful outcomes. Support from VET teachers during the normal course of training was preferred over additional and specialised English as a second language support. The important role played by VET teachers was also underlined by the often-expressed concern about the lack of intercultural competence demonstrated by some VET teachers. Respondents drew attention to the importance of having sympathetic and interculturally competent trainers, with an understanding of and empathy for, the hurdles facing migrants and refugees.

Cultural issues were seen to prevent some from enrolling; for example, the more informal Australian adult education environment, the reliance on discussion and group work, the greater autonomy expected and the greater interaction between males and females were all seen to create potential obstacles to participation. This was particularly the case for people who spoke Arabic, Turkish and Vietnamese. While it was stated that, once enrolled in a course, trainees would persevere to achieve a qualification, the general view was that, if cultural issues were not addressed, the quality of the training experience suffered. Culture was therefore seen as a second-order factor by some respondents. The potential obstacles identified above would not prevent some people from enrolling and attempting to complete their course. However, if the trainee was struggling because of other factors, such as transport or difficulties with English, these additional obstacles could lead to withdrawal from the training course.

Adult participants in the research wanted existing vocational skills acknowledged during training. It was reinforced many times that adults come to Australia with pre-existing vocations, qualifications and experience. Adult migrants and refugees lack English competency, not necessarily vocational competency. Participants spoke about the frustration and diminishing confidence during training because of what they felt was a discounting or rejection of their existing skills. This lack of recognition of vocational competence was sometimes felt to be an impediment to completing training.

Settlement issues played a major role in participation and completion outcomes of the participants (except for Cantonese speakers). For the majority of participants in the other five language groups, the research highlights that settlement is an ongoing and long-term process. Consequently, training costs—either directly through fees or indirectly through lost earnings—were significant obstacles. There was heavy reliance on public transport; again, settlement factors impacted on a family's ability to own a car. The lack of an extended family network and associated difficulties with finding childcare were noted as factors influencing women's access to training.

The research also highlights differences between, and amongst people from the six language groups. Communities are different and unique. It is not very useful to speak generically of 'people from a language other than English background'. Different waves of migration create differences within the same language group. For example, there were significant differences between recently arrived and longer settled members of some language groups. There are pockets of multiple disadvantage within some communities. Some groups of people are seen to face greater difficulties in relation to participation and completion of VET programs. These include: some young people, women, workers who went straight into the Australian workforce without access to any training, people coming from rural backgrounds in their original countries, and people with low educational qualifications.

Context

Background

This research is framed against the following background information:

- a significantly low level of understanding of the vocational education and training system both amongst established and new arrival ethnic communities (NSW TAFE 1995; McDermott, Baylis & Brown 1998; Department of Premier and Cabinet, Victoria 2001)
- an undervaluing of the domestic VET system (NSW TAFE 1995; McDermott, Baylis & Brown 1998; Department of Premier and Cabinet, Victoria 2001)
- dissatisfaction with the generalist nature of English language training and the lack of vocational pathways from English language programs (Department of Premier and Cabinet, Victoria 1996; Victorian Multicultural Commission 2001)
- an over-representation (over one-third) of students who report speaking a language other than English at home enrolled in the vocational education and training (VET) multi-field of study (language, preparatory and access courses). In other words, students born in a country where the first language is not English are more likely to enrol in lower-skill-level preparatory courses and less likely to undertake vocationally specific or high-skill courses (NCVER 2001b)
- low participation by members of culturally diverse communities in the New Apprenticeship system (NCVER 2001a).

Focus of the research

The overarching research question was:

- What are critical success factors facilitating the participation in and completion of vocational education and training for people from a language background other than English?

The areas of investigation during the research were:

- the levels of awareness, understanding and perception of vocational education and training
- the role played by English as a second language programs in providing pathways and linkages to vocational education and training
- the perceived role of English language proficiency in participation and module/course completion outcomes
- the role of cultural expectations and norms in participation and module/course completion outcomes.

Summary of the literature

A sizeable number of the research reports into participation and outcomes in vocational education and training are general in nature, exploring access and training outcomes of the general populations in the different sectors comprising post-compulsory education (Harris et al. 2001; Grant 2002; Marks et al. 2000; Watson et al. 2000; O'Neill & Gish 2001). Grant, for example,

treated the student population as a homogenous group and did not consider how characteristics such as culture or language background may influence course completion. Demeduik, Holden and Martino (2001), looked at the experiences of apprentices in the western suburbs of Melbourne and found low levels of understanding and perception of apprenticeships and traineeships amongst young people and their families, but again did not explore how culture and language impacted on the views and experiences of their respondents.

Local research specifically focusing on workers from diverse language and cultural backgrounds is far less established. The work of Mawer and Field (1995) and Bertone (1995), was significant in opening up debate on the impact of competency-based training and the National Training Reform Agenda on people from a language other than English background. Volkoff and Golding (1998a) returned to their findings in their review of the literature.

More recently, some studies have begun to focus on specific needs within culturally diverse communities. Tabet and Homolova (2001), examining the participation of rural and isolated women from a language background other than English in distance education found an under-representation of the group due to lack of information about the range and type of VET programs, as well as poor perceptions and barriers created by settlement needs. Achren (1998) explored the views of people from a language background other than English enrolled in VET courses with respect to delivery methods and resources. Hannah (2000) has written about barriers faced by refugees in the adult education system in the United Kingdom and Australia. Her review of the literature identified the barriers created by settlement issues, including the aftermath of trauma, as well as the lack of coherent course advice and support.

It is the work of McGivney (1990, 1996, 2000) in the United Kingdom that stands out due to her close enquiry, over a number of years and publications, of the education and training experiences of minority ethnic groups. It seemed timely to apply McGivney's close scrutiny to particular language groups with distinct life and settlement experiences in Australia.

When we turn to research into participation and training outcomes for people from a language other than English background, the major themes threading their way through the research can be categorised into two broad headings—the effect of English language skills, and to a lesser extent, the effect of cross-cultural factors. These issues have preoccupied practitioners as well as researchers over the past few decades, and have been taken up in the current study.

In addition, this study set out to explore the role of English as a second language programs in providing pathways and linkages to vocational education and training and the levels of awareness and perceptions of this sector.

Role of language

Within Australia, most work dealing with participation and completion outcomes for people from culturally diverse backgrounds has been in the area of language. As mentioned previously, the introduction of competency-based training and the policy changes brought about by the National Training Reform Agenda galvanised interest in the impact of these changes on workers from a language other than English background. Bertone (1995) and Mawer and Field (1995), were amongst the first to explore the impact of the changes on the training outcomes of people from diverse language and cultural backgrounds.

Many reports have addressed the perceived obstacles which low English language proficiency creates for workers seeking to access training, and have promoted in their work the benefits of an integrated approach to workplace training (Sefton, Waterhouse & Deakin 1994; Fenley 1995; Frain 1997; Achren 1998). The introduction of competency-based training and training packages also saw a relatively large number of guides and reference works produced (Courtenay & Mawer 1995; Office of Training and Further Education, Victoria 1997; Wignall 1998). Participants surveyed by Achren (1998) were strongly in favour of VET programs integrating additional language support.

Despite the work in this area, the report, *Review of research: Vocational education and training literacy and numeracy*, concluded that:

> The impact of low levels of literacy and numeracy on participation in VET is largely unmeasured and based on anecdotal evidence. A lack of clear measures or measurement systems limits the ability to quantify this impact. Current systems do not readily flag literacy and numeracy issues, with difficulties often being masked by absence, attrition or failure. In the absence of reliable data there appears to be a loose coupling between perceptions of problems and possible solutions. While the presence of a solution intimates some barrier to success, it is unclear as to the exact nature of the barrier and therefore the effectiveness of solutioning mechanisms. (Watson, Nicholson & Sharplin 2001, p.1)

The report also noted that 'qualitative research into participant perceptions is also needed' (p.2).

Cultural factors

One strand of the discussion of the role of culture as a barrier to training concentrates on the differences across cultures in perceptions of education, the role of students and teachers (Office of Training and Further Education, Victoria 1997), differences in belief systems in relation to who participates in education, and the different roles ascribed to each gender (McGivney 1990, 2000; Hannah 2000).

The second strand looks at reducing the obstacles created by the assumption that all trainees are white, young, English speaking background males. This body of work has examined the way that resources which assume native-speaker proficiency in English and an understanding of the language and routines of the workplace continue to lead to high failure and attrition rates in vocational education and training (Bertone 1995; Frain 1997; Achren 1998).

This project sought to further explore the idea that learners may continue to be excluded even when language issues are addressed and the culture of the workplace explained. An additional aspect of cultural barriers encountered by those whose backgrounds are other than English explored in this study is the way that the cultural norms assumed as 'normal' and 'correct' by the mainstream may serve to alienate workers and trainees from other cultures. Earlier research has shown that the localised culture-bound values of much professional practice remains unquestioned (Miralles 2002). This is apparent in sectors such as health and community services, but is relevant to all industries. Even something as apparently value-neutral as making a phone call, a communications skills competency required across many training packages, is full of cultural norms and values which are often left unstated and unquestioned.

Christie and Shaw (1998) have begun to more critically address the issue of cultural assumptions, but their article did not discuss the impact of these professional cultural assumptions on participation. McIntyre et al. (n.d.) addressed the question of 'cross-cultural education' understood as 'cultural accommodation' and proposed a greater level of negotiation with and input from Indigenous learners and their communities. McIntyre et al. (n.d.) and Nakata (2002) also warn against inadvertently using 'cultural difference' to shift responsibility for failure away from institutional or systems practices onto 'those that are different'. In a complex analysis of participation, McIntyre et al. (n.d.), make the point that 'participation is at every step a cultural process' (p.137) and that training provision involves:

> … systems or processes [that] are not mechanical, but human and interactive. However, their very institutionalisation in formal education and training makes it difficult to see that they reflect cultural choices. Formal systems select and value one sort of knowledge rather than another, 'transmit' certain skills and knowledge and assess outcomes through processes that are social and cultural. (McIntyre et al. n.d., pp.137–8)

Pathways

The issue of pathways has not been a major focus of deliberation. The work of McIntyre and Kennedy (1998), a substantial piece of work in the area of pathways between adult community education and vocational education and training, synthesised much of the previous work but, while highlighting good practice initiatives for Indigenous women, had little to say about improving pathways for learners from a language background other than English from adult community education programs (where English as a second language classes are found) to vocational education and training. A recent English study, Schellekens (2001), touched upon progression from English as a second language programs to mainstream courses and found that people from a language other than English background are routinely screened out of mainstream courses 'simply because English is not their mother-tongue' (p.28). Schellekens also found that information and careers advice was sketchy and erratic.

There appears to be no Australian research specifically looking at pathways between English as a second language programs and vocational education and training. This area thus seemed ripe for attention. One of the conclusions reached by McIntyre and Kennedy (1998) was that 'pathway planning is facilitated where it is an integral part of community-based practice' (p.viii) developed in a holistic way by providers fully cognisant of the needs of their learners. Their research also suggested that 'basic conditions to promote pathway development are lacking or poorly developed' (p.53). Their findings were of interest to this project because a significant proportion of English as a second language programs are delivered in community-based settings.

The work by Saunders (2001) explored pathways between adult community education settings providing vocational programs and further education (that is, access and preparatory programs). Saunders noted that 5% of respondents were from a language other than English background but did not explore further whether their language or cultural background affected outcomes.

In Victoria, the Victorian Multicultural Commission (2001) continues to document high levels of concern about the lack of progression from English as a second language programs. In reports such as the *Multicultural Victoria Inquiry: Literature review* (Alder & Sawer 1995), *Government response to the Multicultural Victoria Inquiry* (Department of Premier and Cabinet, Victoria 1996) and through information gathered through its annual community consultation program, the commission has drawn the Victorian Government's attention to this issue.

Awareness and perceptions

There is a similar paucity of published local research into the issue of awareness and the perceived value of vocational education and training. The study by Saunders (2001) looked generally at the adult community education sector's delivery of vocational education and training and did not explore particular perceptions within various target groups.

The 1995 report by the NSW TAFE Multicultural Education Unit, *Vocational education and training issues for people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-English speaking background*, found a low awareness and opinion of vocational education and training amongst potential students and their parents. The report noted:

> … the research findings indicate a link between poor perception and lack of inadequate knowledge of VET by the target communities derived from friends and relatives … lower representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and overseas-born NESB youth is a reflection of this poor perception. (NSW TAFE 1995, p.xiv)

Like Wapshere (1996) and Bertone (1995), the authors proposed wider use of the ethnic media and bilingual promotional materials.

The unpublished study by McDermott, Baylis and Brown (1998) into attitudes which may act as barriers to the participation in apprenticeships and traineeships by Vietnamese, Turkish and Arabic speaking youth living in south-western Sydney, again found low levels of knowledge in the target

communities. The project also suggested greater encouragement for ethnic businesses to take on apprentices and trainees. One recommendation resulting from the report is an increase in the number of apprenticeship and traineeship positions for youth from diverse language and cultural backgrounds.

The 2001 Department of Premier and Cabinet survey also noted the higher value attached to university education in some ethnic communities, especially amongst people from the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe. The study examined access to government information among 20 language groups. Findings (Worthington, Miralles & Jensen 2001) of interest to this project are the generally low levels of awareness of government services. The research also identified that:

> … a strong sub-text running through the focus groups was the strong desire to become a part of the community. Information about services and an understanding of government and its structures was seen as pivotal to being able to become a 'good' citizen; one who is a contributing member of the community. (Worthington, Miralles & Jensen 2001, p.27)

These findings seemed to align with those of Hedoux (1981 cited in McGivney 1990) that a lack of involvement in communal life results in tenuous access to information networks and directly impacts on participation in education. However, Hedoux also made the point that knowing does not directly translate into participation.

Some of the apparent contradictions in the research noted by McGivney (1996) appear in the context of identifying effective channels of communication. McGivney (1990, 1996, 2000), supported the use of community networks and community leaders as information channels. The research by Schellekens (2001) on the other hand, found a significantly lower level of use of community organisations for information provision. (77% of the 135 respondents surveyed had not used their community organisations for advice on courses.)

Rather than being seen as contradictory, these findings point to the fact that information consumption may vary within different communities and subgroups. As argued by the Department of Premier and Cabinet study (2001), it is important not to apply a 'blanket template' but to understand the specific information needs of each ethnic community and to develop integrated and customised information campaigns. For some language groups, community leaders do act as information brokers. For other fractured or small and emerging communities lacking community infrastructure, other information channels may need to be used by agencies wishing to disseminate information. The present research further explored the information consumption preferences within the six language groups.

Problems with the term 'language other than English background'

Golding and Volkoff (1998, 1999), Volkoff and Golding (1998a, 1998b), Watson and Pope (2000) have identified the problem created by such a broad term as 'people from a language other than English background'. The Department of Premier and Cabinet commissioned research (2001) also identified the different levels of disadvantage with respect to access to information and the danger of viewing ethnic communities as homogenous. Subgroups of disadvantage clearly exist within culturally diverse communities. Membership of 'multiple groups' (Golding & Volkoff 1998, 1999; Volkoff & Golding 1998a, 1998b; McGivney 1996) add additional layers of complexity when exploring access and outcomes in vocational education and training for people from a language other than English background.

> One of the limitations of a group targeting approach is that it takes little account of the diversity within targeted groups and fails to acknowledge membership of multiple, overlapping groups. (Volkoff & Golding 1998, p.61)

Summary of the statistics

The following tables, generated from data in the 1996 and 2001 Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard collections and the Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) 2001 Census of Population and Housing provide a snapshot of relevant demographic data for the six language groups.

Table 1 shows a rise in the VET participation figures for students speaking English as the main language at home (from 7.9% in 1996 to 12.6% in 2001 [NCVER 1999]). However, participation rates for people from a language other than English background have dropped slightly (from 9.1% in 1996 to 8.5% [NCVER 1999]). Although the drop is small, in view of the rise achieved in the population speaking English as the main language at home, the inertia in the participation rates of people from a language other than English background should be of concern.

The percentage of VET clients who do not report that the language spoken at home is high at 18.9%. However, it is heartening to see that this problem is becoming less severe, 28.4% in the 1996 collection and 18.9% in 2001 (NCVER 1999). Nonetheless, identifying the 'not knowns' remains a problem which needs addressing as it impacts on our understanding of the characteristics of the VET population.

Table 1: Participation in VET, number of people by language spoken at home, 15–64 age group

Language	VET clients	% of VET clients	Census 2001	% of population	Participation rate (%)
English only	1 253 970	71.4	9 966 330	79.8	12.6
Languages other than English	170 621	9.7	2 015 544	16.1	8.5
Not known	332 178	18.9	504 014	4.0	
Total	**1 756 769**	**100.0**	**12 485 888**	**100.0**	**14.1**

Source: Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard 2001; ABS census 2001

Notes:
1 Data include VET multi-field education.
2 English is defined to mean people who reported English as the main language spoken at home.
3 Languages other than English is defined to mean people who reported a language other than English as the main language spoken at home.
4 ABS 'not known' is defined differently from the Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard.

The data in table 2 show that the participation rates range from above average for Bosnian speakers to well below average for Arabic, Cantonese and Turkish speakers. Spokespeople within the Arabic community have, over a number of years, expressed concern at the low participation rates of their community across all education sectors (Victorian Multicultural Commission 2001). The data given in table 2 support the views expressed in community forums. Since the Arabic community is relatively young, the low take-up of VET is of additional concern.

The statistics also point to the fact that there may be no close correlation between participation in vocational education and training and a community's length of settlement in Australia. What is of interest for further investigation is the participation rate of people from the Bosnian community, a small community which received a large influx of members in the aftermath of the ethnic conflict in the Former Yugoslav Republic. In contrast to this community's experience is the low participation of Turkish speakers, a community with a longer history of settlement in Australia.

The analysis of course enrolments (table 3) by language spoken at home reveals that approximately 12% of those speaking English as the main language enrol in the VET multi-field of study (access and preparatory programs, English as a second language, literacy and numeracy). These courses do not generally result in recognised vocational qualifications. This figure is very much lower than the percentages observed for the six target groups. Moreover, apart from the Cantonese speakers, the highest percentage of course enrolments occurs in the VET multi-field of study for the remaining

five target groups. Along with English speakers, the Cantonese speakers have their highest concentration in the business field of study.

Table 2: Participation in VET, number of people by target groups, 15–64 age group

Language	VET clients	% of VET clients	Census 2001	% of population	Participation rate (%)
Arabic (including Lebanese)	13 291	0.8	144 036	1.2	9.2
Bosnian	1796	0.1	11 557	0.1	15.5
Cantonese	12 739	0.7	167 180	1.3	7.6
Spanish	9504	0.5	72 266	0.6	13.2
Turkish	3585	0.2	36 362	0.3	9.9
Vietnamese	14 440	0.8	124 370	1.0	11.6
English	1 253 970	71.4	9 966 330	79.8	12.6
Other languages	115 266	6.6	1 459 773	11.7	7.9
Not known	332 178	18.9	504 014	4.0	
Total	**1 756 769**	**100.0**	**12 485 888**	**100.0**	**14.1**

Source: Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard 2001; ABS census 2001

Notes: 1 Data include VET multi-field education.
2 ABS 'not known' is defined differently from that used by the Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard.

Table 3: VET course enrolments by field of study, percentage

Field of study	VET course enrolments by field of study by language spoken at home 2001									
	Arabic	Bosnian	Canton-ese	Spanish	Turkish	Vietnam-ese	English	Other	Unknown	**Total**
01 Land & marine resources, animal husbandry	0.4	0.4	2.6	0.6	0.6	0.9	6.2	1.8	6.0	**5.6**
02 Architecture, building	4.4	2.2	6.0	3.2	2.5	2.2	5.4	2.2	5.7	**5.1**
03 Arts, humanities & social sciences	4.9	19.7	5.9	9.6	3.9	6.7	7.1	9.9	7.5	**7.3**
04 Business, administration, economics	20.1	17.2	23.0	18.9	19.7	19.1	20.5	20.4	17.0	**19.9**
05 Education	0.8	0.8	1.3	1.2	0.8	0.8	3.0	1.6	3.9	**3.0**
06 Engineering, surveying	9.5	7.5	12.2	8.8	7.1	9.7	11.9	8.2	12.8	**11.7**
07 Health, community services	4.2	4.6	6.9	7.9	4.9	4.2	9.8	5.4	10.0	**9.4**
08 Law, legal studies	0.2	0.2	0.5	0.4	0.1	0.1	0.8	0.3	0.6	**0.7**
09 Science	8.5	6.1	5.5	8.9	6.7	9.0	9.3	9.4	8.2	**9.1**
10 Veterinary science, animal care	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.3	0.1	0.3	**0.3**
11 Services, hospitality, transportation	10.4	7.8	15.3	10.6	11.1	8.5	14.1	9.3	13.0	**13.5**
12 VET multi-field education	36.5	33.5	20.6	29.9	42.7	38.6	11.7	31.6	15.0	**14.4**
All	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**

Source: Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard 2001

Table 4 reveals that the Cantonese speakers have the highest percentage of successful assessment outcomes (including those speaking English as the main language at home). The remaining five target groups have successful assessment outcomes which are lower than the overall average of 63.2%. The poorest performing target group by this criterion is the Vietnamese cohort (57.2%).

Unsuccessful assessment outcomes are higher for all six target groups compared with those speaking English as the main language at home. The percentage of unsuccessful assessment outcomes for both the Arabic and Turkish communities is 44% above the average.

With the exception of the Cantonese speakers, withdrawals are also higher for the other five target groups, Turkish and Vietnamese speakers being 60% and 65% respectively above the average.

Cantonese speakers present an interesting snapshot. Firstly, they enjoy the lowest withdrawal rate of all groups, including those speaking English as the main language at home. Secondly, this community's relatively low participation in vocational education and training (see table 2) is counterbalanced by the greater diversity of enrolments (see table 3) and higher-than-average successful assessment outcomes.

Table 4: VET module outcomes, percentage

Module outcome	VET module enrolments by module outcome by language spoken at home, 2001									
	Arabic	Bosnian	Canton-ese	Spanish	Turkish	Vietnam-ese	English	Other	Unknown	Total
01 Assessed—successful	59.5	59.6	64.5	59.1	58.3	57.2	64.0	63.0	59.6	**63.2**
02 Assessed—unsuccessful	15.1	14.6	12.2	12.8	15.1	13.1	10.6	11.3	8.2	**10.5**
03 Non-assessed—not completed	0.5	0.3	0.3	0.5	0.4	0.4	0.3	0.4	0.6	**0.4**
04 Non-assessed—completed	5.9	8.8	4.9	5.5	5.4	7.3	3.9	6.2	7.1	**4.6**
05 Continuing studies	1.6	1.6	5.7	2.7	3.1	1.9	6.1	2.9	4.4	**5.5**
06 Recognition of prior learning	1.2	1.3	2.2	2.1	1.3	1.6	2.2	1.6	4.5	**2.5**
09 Credit transfer	3.2	3.6	2.6	4.8	2.6	4.3	3.5	4.3	5.1	**3.8**
10 Withdrawn	12.7	9.7	7.1	12.1	13.5	13.9	8.1	9.7	8.4	**8.4**
90 Not stated	0.3	0.4	0.5	0.4	0.4	0.3	1.2	0.5	2.1	**1.3**
All	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**

Source: Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard 2001

Note: Data include VET multi-field education.

Methodology

Research sample

Two hundred people took part in the study. The research focused exclusively on working-age adults from the following language groups:

- ✧ Arabic
- ✧ Bosnian
- ✧ Cantonese
- ✧ Spanish
- ✧ Turkish
- ✧ Vietnamese.

The selection of these groups was based on an analysis of customised reports obtained from the ABS *2001 Census of Population and Housing*. Key reasons for their inclusion are:

- ✧ *Broad cross-section of settlement experiences:* the grouping comprises people from communities with a longer established period of settlement and with strong community infrastructure—Vietnamese and Cantonese. The Arabic, Turkish and Spanish speaking communities have a medium-term period of settlement and a less-developed community support structure. Finally, an emerging community with limited support networks is also included. As recent research for the Victorian Department of Premier and Cabinet (*Access to information about government services among*

culturally and linguistically diverse audiences, 2001) discovered the VET system among people from the former socialist regimes of Eastern Europe is undervalued; the Bosnian community was included in this research.

- *Demographic characteristics:* the demographic characteristics show a large proportion of working-age adults, including people in the 18 to 25-age range.
- *English language proficiency:* proficiency in English between the groups is variable. Some, such as the Vietnamese and Cantonese speakers show a large number speaking English not well or not at all (38% and 28% respectively). The percentage in other groups, such as the Arabic (16%) and Spanish speakers (15%), is lower.

Table 5: Age, qualifications and English language proficiency of language groups, percentage

Language	Prime working age		Post-school qualifications[2]	Low English proficiency
	(18–24)[1]	(18–44)		
Arabic	13	51	33	16
Bosnian	10	53	41	26
Cantonese	14	50	42	28
Spanish	12	49	46	15
Turkish	12	53	25	24
Vietnamese	12	60	24	38

Notes: 1 9% of total Australian population is in the 18–24-age range (ABS census 2001).
2 35% of all Australians have post-school qualifications (ABS census 2001).

Table 6: Data collection across the six language groups

Interviews and focus groups	Arabic	Bosnian	Canton-ese	Spanish	Turkish	Vietnam-ese	Total
Number of in-depth interviews	10	10	10	10	10	10	**60**
Number of focus group participants	22	24	24	24	24	22	**140**
State							
NSW	3	4	28	5	3	0	**43**
Qld	1	26	1	2	0	27	**57**
Vic	28	4	5	27	31	5	**100**
Focus group segmentation							
Youth group (18–24 age group mixed gender)	12					11	**23**
Women only group (18–64 age group)	10				12		**22**
General group (mixed gender 18–64 age group)		24	24	24	12	11	**95**
Enrolment details							
Enrolled & completed	7	11	10	9	11	7	**55**
Enrolled & not completed	8	8	5	7	7	8	**43**
Never enrolled	7	5	9	8	6	7	**42**
Period of settlement							
Less than 5 years	8	15	5	2	6	4	**40**
5–10 years	4	9	6	10	7	6	**42**
0ver 10 years	10	0	13	12	11	12	**58**

Focus group segmentation

It was decided that mixed gender youth groups would be conducted for the Vietnamese and Arabic speaking communities in order to elicit the views of young people. The community intermediaries for these groups agreed that young people should be surveyed on their own. Reasons underpinning this decision were:

- ✧ The Arabic-speaking community is a relatively young community. (The 2001 census shows that 45% are under 25 years of age.)
- ✧ A relatively large proportion of Australia-born young people from a Vietnamese background report low English language proficiency (12% as compared to about 6% amongst all young people born in Australia who speak a language other than English at home).
- ✧ In the Arabic and Vietnamese speaking communities status issues may come into play in public forums. Younger participants may be less likely to contradict an older member of the group or to offer a different point of view.

In addition, two women-only groups, comprised of women in the 18 to 64-age range were conducted in the Arabic and Turkish speaking communities. The value of this exercise was also canvassed during the in-depth interview stage with community intermediaries. The main reason for this decision was that, in these two communities, gender roles may prevail and female participants may be less likely to take an active part in the discussion or contest the views of a male member of the group.

Research sites

New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria were selected as research sites because they have sizeable communities of the language groups. New South Wales has the largest concentration of Cantonese speakers in Australia. (54% of the Cantonese community live there.) Queensland has the third largest concentration of both Bosnian and Vietnamese speakers in Australia (14% and 8% respectively). Victoria has the second largest concentration of Arabic speakers, the second largest concentration of Spanish speakers and the largest concentration of Turkish speakers in Australia (22%, 25% and 56% respectively). The differing concentrations of language communities were selected for a clear reason—to ensure a diversity of community size; that is, not necessarily selecting the states with the largest concentration of each language group. The locations provided a range of community sizes for each language grouping, from the largest to the third largest. The relative size of a community affects how well the community can organise itself in terms of support infrastructure, such as community organisations, bilingual professionals, businesses, religious and spiritual support and media. Thus it was important to select communities of differing sizes for our sample. Moreover, a range of community sizes provided a diversity of settlement experiences.

Research design

The qualitative research methodology comprised two stages:

In-depth interviews

Sixty in-depth, face-to-face or telephone interviews were conducted in English using a survey instrument consisting of both open and closed questions. Community intermediaries who participated in the interviews included key staff and members of committees of management from migrant resource centres, ethnic community councils and peak ethnic organisations in urban, regional and rural locations. (A full listing is given in appendix 1.)

Initial contact for the in-depth interview phase was made using an existing database of key multicultural organisations. Follow-up contact was also made with the Community Relations Commission of New South Wales; the Multicultural Programs Unit, Department of Education and Training (New South Wales); Multicultural Affairs Queensland; and the Victorian Multicultural Commission, to ensure currency of contacts and to identify additional key participants. The

research also targeted organisations conducting education and training programs. A number of ethnic and community organisations are registered training organisations and as such, have a close working understanding of training programs and pathways. This working knowledge, coupled with their extensive understanding of their communities, provided valuable insights into present obstacles and possible remedies.

Those interviewed were advised that they could be contacted later to seek permission to use quotes from their interviews from this stage. A copy of the draft report was provided at the time written permission was sought. With respect to language used in the quotes, the in-depth interviews were in English and quotes are written as spoken. It is essential to give voice to the community intermediaries who took part in the study as their insights are fundamental to the research. More importantly, key people within ethnic communities are often consulted but not often acknowledged in published reports. This is of concern to people from diverse cultural backgrounds and in this report their expertise and contribution are documented.

In-depth interviews provided a source of indicative data from which focus group discussion questions were developed. Community intermediaries were asked to suggest possible focus group participants.

In-language focus groups

Focus groups were held with working-age people who were past, current or potential participants in vocational education and training (a total of 20 to 24 participants for each of the six language groups, two focus groups per community). As mentioned previously, the participants with previous experience of vocational education and training who were recruited were those who had studied or were studying in all of the VET fields of study (except multi-field). However, there were specific questions relating to people's experiences of English as a second language programs. Attendance at English as a second language classes was noted during the discussion and served to inform the exploration of the effectiveness of pathways between English as a second language programs and VET programs. Both employed and unemployed people were recruited. People with no previous experience of vocational education and training (except in some cases, English as a second language programs), were also recruited.

Focus groups were held in Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney by professional bilingual and bicultural facilitators. Briefing sessions for the facilitators in each state were conducted prior to commencing the focus group stage. A focus group guide was developed to direct the discussion. Focus groups were held in the specific language, audio-taped and transcribed, and summary reports produced in English.

Existing networks with culturally diverse communities were used to recruit focus group participants. As mentioned previously, ethnic community stakeholders were asked to suggest possible focus group participants. The bilingual facilitators used these initial listings of possible focus group participants and approached each individual by phone to explain the project and seek their participation. The facilitators expanded the listing through their own networks.

Previous experience and this study itself suggest that respondents from diverse language backgrounds are more likely to participate and to be more open during discussion if they are involved in research methods conducted:

- ✧ in their own language
- ✧ by someone known and respected in the community
- ✧ in their own community environment.

Permission was also obtained to use quotes from this stage. However, anonymity is maintained in this report with quotes not ascribed to individuals but to the specific language group. Focus groups participants were advised that some of the discussion may be directly quoted and attributed to the focus group rather than to an individual. All groups agreed to have parts of the discussion quoted. Quotes are as they appear in the facilitators' reports.

Data collected during the in-depth interview stage were further explored and tested in the focus group discussions.

Every effort was made to ensure that focus group composition reflected the demographic characteristics of each language group in relation to gender, age, history of settlement and previous workforce experience in Australia and overseas. Notwithstanding, this is a modest sample and the conclusions drawn from it can only be tentative.

An interim report summarising issues and outlining factors affecting VET participation and completion within each of the six language groups was distributed to the community intermediaries for comment and for validation of the findings.

During the analysis phase, the data were dissected to examine possible trends according to:

- ✧ age
- ✧ gender
- ✧ language background
- ✧ proficiency in English
- ✧ length of residency
- ✧ size of community.

The appendices provide more details on the methodology, participant demographic data and survey documents. The appendices are available in *A fair go: Factors impacting on vocational education and training participation and completion in selected ethnic communities—support document,* which can be accessed from NCVER's website <http://www.ncver.edu.au>.

Findings

Summary of findings

This section analyses the information collected during the in-depth interviews and focus group stages.

The in-depth interviews began to point to a number of factors which were further explored during the focus groups stage. The in-depth interviews also attempted to determine how important these were and whether other factors not covered in the initial research design impacted on participation and completion. Once the data were analysed, a number of factors emerged which, it is considered, affect whether people from the six language groups enrol in and/or complete vocational education and training.

The factors identified as key to affecting participation in and completion of vocational education and training were:

- ✧ system-wide issues
  - ♦ understanding of demands, range and portability of VET programs and multiplicity of purposes for training
- ✧ training issues
  - ♦ clear pathway into employment provided
  - ♦ language support provided
  - ♦ cultural issues acknowledged and addressed
  - ♦ trainers show understanding of issues faced by trainees (cultural, language and settlement)
  - ♦ trainees' existing vocational skills acknowledged
  - ♦ work experience included in training
- ✧ settlement issues
  - ♦ cost
  - ♦ proximity to home and ease of access via public transport, availability of childcare.

Before discussion of the findings, it is important to reiterate that the overwhelming tendency among the respondents is to see vocational education and training as a pre-employment activity. The respondents from the six communities studied largely perceived the value of vocational education and training as a direct pathway to employment. Once in a job, vocational education and training was generally not considered as a means of self-development, maintaining one's employability or improving prospects of promotion. This applies equally to working-age adults aged 25 onwards, as well as young people of ages 18 to 24. The research again found that those operating their own businesses rarely make use of vocational education and training.

Examples of best practice identified by participants; for example, VET programs offering language support, culturally inclusive materials and organised work experience, tended in the main to have been provided by multicultural organisations registered to provide vocational education and training.

The low VET participation rates were strongly linked, throughout both the in-depth interview and focus groups stages, to the lack of access to information. The relationship between access to information networks and involvement in civic life has been documented previously (McGivney 1990; Worthington, Miralles & Jensen 2001). However, as McGivney (1990) pointed out in

reference to research undertaken by Hedoux in 1981, knowing does not always lead to participation in education. The Cantonese speakers highlighted the complexity of the relationship between awareness, participation and completion. The Cantonese speakers showed the highest level of awareness of the six groups. However, Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard data show that Cantonese speakers have well below average participation in vocational education and training. At the same time, their low participation rate is counterbalanced by a greater diversity of enrolments, higher-than-average successful assessment outcomes, and lowest withdrawal of all groups, including those speaking English as the main language at home (tables 2, 3 and 4).

It is clear that most of the factors identified as central to supporting greater participation and successful outcomes are external factors: institutional factors related to the system, and provider and situational factors related to cost and location. Dispositional or personal factors such as nervousness about English skills and low self-confidence amongst some sub-groups (older adults, longer settled community members, those originally from rural backgrounds), were identified, but were not strongly linked by the respondents to non-participation or non-completion. Harris et al. (2001) made the point in discussing retention that:

> … retention is a complex, interactive process that includes a range of factors (industry, workplace and training factors as well as personal) rather than a simple cause and effect relationship. (Harris et al. 2001, p.34)

The same can be said for the factors influencing the participation and completion outcomes of the people from the six language groups who took part in this study. No simple ranking of factors is given. Nonetheless, the important role of direct employment outcomes is noted, as is the subsidiary role played by culture. The primacy of language support over English language proficiency is discussed.

The following sections present the findings in detail. Each factor is discussed at length and issues common to all language groups are presented first. Issues particular to individual language groups follow in boxes. This approach seeks to highlight differences in experiences and views within the six language groups.

The sequence in which each factor is discussed follows the order of the areas of investigation initially developed to guide the research: awareness, understanding and perceptions of VET; pathways from English as a second language to vocational education and training; the role of English language skills; and the role of cultural expectations. Additional factors; namely, training and settlement matters identified as important by participants during the research stages, are included.

Understanding of demands, range and portability of VET programs and multiplicity of purposes for training

Awareness and perceptions

The research again verified a generally low understanding and an undervaluing of vocational education and training, with the exception of the Bosnian and Cantonese speaking language groups. In this respect the findings within the Bosnian community did not tally with findings arising from the Department of Premier and Cabinet (2001) research which identified a low regard for vocational education and training within communities from the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe. The difference in findings may be due to the fact that, on this occasion, research questions allowed a wider exploration of the benefits of vocational education and training and did not set up a duality between vocational education and training and higher education. This was important, for while the majority of Bosnian speaking respondents expressed a preference for higher education, focus group discussions also explored the benefits of vocational education and training. Greater awareness and valuing of vocational education and training were also discernible amongst more recently arrived participants in the Bosnian, Spanish, Turkish and Vietnamese language focus groups.

The trend across the six language groups was for respondents to define knowledge of the three education sectors as moderate to low. On the whole, focus group participants, when asked what types of VET courses they had attempted or may wish to attempt, provided a somewhat limited range. Courses tended to be in the business, health and community services sectors, and for younger participants, in tourism and hospitality. These are traditionally courses where many people from a language other than English background have enrolled.

When specifically asked if people in their communities understood what was involved in vocational education and training, participants in the in-depth interview stage felt that their communities had a narrow and partial understanding.

- Respondents from the Cantonese and Bosnian communities were of the view that there was a sizeable minority within their communities who had quite a good understanding of the purpose and breadth of vocational education and training. When we asked why, it became clear that it was felt to be due to people's strong commitment to education and personal previous experience of post-compulsory education. Focus group discussions were consistent with the views expressed by community intermediaries, participants generally identifying a broader range of VET courses. The Cantonese focus groups for example, spoke of the range of opportunities available through vocational education and training—not just as a means of getting a job:

  > … VET helps people to keep informed of changes in the new technology/upgrades. It also helps to improve and develop new skills e.g. conflict resolution, time and stress management. (Cantonese language focus group)

  Some Cantonese and Bosnian speakers also saw the benefits of vocational education and training as being different but not inferior to university. They were clearer in articulating the idea that vocational education and training and higher education provided different pathways. In addition, for Bosnian youth, there was also a wider range of reasons, including using VET as a pathway to university, using the time to 'sort out what to do next' and generally to improve skills:

  > People who are confused and do not know what to do take this sort of courses [VET]: It is better to do something rather than nothing. (Bosnian language focus group)

- Focus group discussions identified a very low level of understanding of vocational education and training in the Vietnamese and Arabic speaking groups, especially those comprised of young people:

  > Young people who have not attended training would not have a clue of what areas of trade are involved. (Vietnamese language youth focus group)

  The low-level understanding of the scope of program choices in vocational education and training amongst the Vietnamese speaking participants is of concern, given the well-developed community networks and ethnic media which support this community. The Vietnamese speakers in the focus groups held their community organisations and media in high regard and did turn to them for information about government services. The findings therefore seem to underscore the fact that VET information campaigns are not generally moving outside the traditional English language channels of information dissemination.

Because the benefits of vocational education and training were, on the whole, perceived to be limited to securing immediate employment, and possibly also due to the limited understanding of vocational education and training, many adults would not be happy for their children to undertake vocational education and training as they saw it as second rate.

> We have had very bad experiences with Australian education system—they did not accept degrees so we want our kids to have a university degree which is recognised in the whole world. (Bosnian language focus group)

> TAFE [technical and further education] seems to be a lower grade education. A student stays at a certain level at TAFE whereas at university, a student can reach greater heights for their future. University provides more opportunity. A university seems more prestigious to prospective employers. (Turkish language women's focus group)

Consequently, when some participants did mention positive aspects of a VET credential, it was related to VET's potential to provide a pathway to higher education and not because of the inherent worth of the VET qualification:

> Maybe for younger people it is a stepping stone for university. (Bosnian language focus group)

At the same time, during the discussion on the potential benefits of vocational education and training, many of the responses highlighted the nurturing, supportive environment, the practical and experiential nature of the learning, and the fact that, for many adults, VET is the last chance to 're-invent their qualifications' (Golding & Volkoff 1998, p.17) (and sometimes also themselves).

> VET provides opportunities and a fair go to everyone to acquire skills and training (Cantonese language focus group)

> [VET] gives everyone a chance for education. (Bosnian language focus group)

> It is good especially for younger people because it is more democratic system and gives everyone an equal chance in completing some sort of degree. (Bosnian language focus group)

> TAFE for mature-aged women is more appropriate and relevant than university studies because at TAFE there is a variety of age range, but at university you find the majority are young people. (Arabic language women's focus group)

> TAFE is more flexible and has flexible timetable even on weekend. Although universities can offer distance learning, it is not very successful, not everybody can study at home. (Arabic language women's focus group)

> A VET course is short, economical, easy, and easier to secure a place within when compared to university. A person has to be at a certain level to be accepted into university whereas VET can take anyone. (Turkish language women's focus group)

> TAFE may be a better option for those who have language difficulties. It is a quick means of getting into the workforce. (Turkish language women's focus group)

When the Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard statistics on participation are consulted, it is interesting to note that the association between lack of knowledge, poor perception and low participation does not hold true across all language groups. As mentioned previously, Cantonese speakers have the lowest (7.6% as opposed to 14.1% for those speaking English as their main language at home) participation rate in vocational education and training of the six language groups. The connection between these three variables (knowledge, poor perception and low participation) certainly seems to hold true for the Arabic speaking participants, who did demonstrate a lack of awareness of vocational education and training, limited understanding and poor perception of its benefits, and whose participation rates as recorded by the Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard are also low (9.2%).

Of concern was the fact that the young people's focus group for this community showed a very limited understanding of vocational education and training and an accompanying undervaluing of the outcomes, as well as an under-estimation of the skills required to succeed in vocational education and training. A more complex picture emerged for the Spanish, Turkish and Vietnamese speaking language groups (also with low participation, 13.2% 9.9% and 11.6% respectively). The Vietnamese speaking youth taking part in the survey also had a restricted understanding, undervalued the benefits and under-estimated the demands of VET. However, more recently settled

Vietnamese speakers, as well as those from the Spanish and Turkish language groups, highlighted a previously undocumented circumstance—a far greater level of awareness and positive regard for the benefits of vocational education and training amongst newer arrivals from these communities. Focus group discussions point to the fact that these participants shared many of the characteristics of the Bosnian and Cantonese speakers—they had post-compulsory qualifications, valued education per se and had a longer-term view of the benefits of study.

Previous research findings, most notably research commissioned in 1997 by the then Department of Social Security through the Open Mind Research Group have shed light on the way that personal characteristics result in different experiences of settlement for individuals in the same ethnic group. In its report, the consultants suggest that while high English language proficiency and high educational qualifications assist the individual with the settlement process, people with low English language proficiency and high educational qualifications found the settlement process far less traumatic than people with high English language proficiency and low educational qualifications. Richardson et al.'s (2002) analysis of data from the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Australia again identified significant variations in the settlement experiences of migrants emanating from differences in their personal characteristics. Migrants arriving in 1999–2000 were found to be more highly educated and proficient in English than migrants who had arrived in Australia during 1993–4. Both these attributes were found to have eased their settlement process according to a number of social indicators, including employment, housing, labour market experience and access to information.

The need to consider the impact of the changing pattern of migration on the VET experiences of people from a language other than English background was raised by Golding and Volkoff in their 1998 review of participation in vocational education and training. This present study has begun to unravel the layers of difference within the descriptor 'people from a language other than English' background. Future research further testing the influence of English language proficiency and education levels on VET participation and completion outcomes would be valuable.

Demands of training

Participants were also questioned about their perceptions of the demands of training programs. The major differences within focus groups were between longer established and newer arrivals, in particular within the Spanish, Turkish and Bosnian/Former Yugoslav Republic language groups. Again, this research supports the view that it may not be community per se but individual conditions of settlement which define attitudes to vocational education and training. As mentioned above, recent arrivals in the study also tended to have higher levels of post-compulsory qualifications.

Focus group participants tended to be apprehensive about the demands of study in the Australian context. Bertone (1995) explored the attitudes to training amongst women from diverse language and cultural backgrounds and found that perceived difficulties were sometimes the result of low confidence levels rather than language or other deficiencies. This lack of confidence had been raised by community intermediaries interviewed during the in-depth stage, who commented on the general tendency for people to under-estimate their skills and knowledge. In spite of this, there were some key differences, noteworthy because they also highlight the differences within language groups:

- ✧ Youth—in all communities—appeared to be more confident. Arabic youth were felt to be overly confident and this was seen to cause problems. This seemed an issue also for Vietnamese youth, but to a lesser extent.
- ✧ Women were considered to be more willing than men to take risks and in some communities were seen to have overcome significant social barriers to be able to obtain an education. Consequently, those who had enrolled were observed to be more likely to persevere despite anxiety about the demands of training.
- ✧ Newer arrivals were considered to have greater confidence and willingness to participate:

> They are nervous but eager to get on with life.
>
> (Estrella Gonzales, community worker, Lavington, New South Wales)

- A number of issues were identified for older established members of the Spanish speaking, Turkish communities and people from the Former Yugoslav Republic. Because settlement issues continue to press heavily on their longer settled members, access to training has never been an easy option for these communities. Many believed they would go back home and did not see the need to train. Community intermediaries interviewed gave an insight into the settlement histories of their communities. Many people arriving in the 1970s and 1980s went straight into the workforce. Many Spanish speaking migrants and refugees from Central and South America felt they would go back to their country of birth once social and political conditions improved. The same applied to Turkish migrants who felt they would amass sufficient savings to return home. The incentive was therefore to work hard. Recently settled Spanish and Turkish speakers were seen to arrive with different expectations. They see vocational education and training as an entry point to employment by providing validation of existing skills or helping to make their existing skills marketable.
- Differences were also perceived between people from rural backgrounds and their compatriots from metropolitan areas. Community intermediaries highlighted a far greater sense of dislocation in people who had lived in rural areas in their country of origin. An additional factor considered important in making settlement more difficult was the accompanying lower educational levels of those with rural backgrounds.
- A number of participants from larger communities with well-established infrastructure, such as the Vietnamese and Cantonese, had undertaken training through ethno-specific community organisations registered to provide training. This was not readily available to participants from the other groups.

Some of the specific differences amongst the participants in this study were:

- The over-confidence of Arabic speaking youth and to a lesser extent of Vietnamese youth were noted by many of the in-depth interviewees. Vietnamese youth have high levels of reported low English language skills. Arabic youth may have high spoken English skills but often also demonstrate low written literacy skills (but these low levels are not well documented or reported). Thus the combination of over-confidence plus lack of understanding and low regard of vocational education and training is translated into the perception that successful outcomes in vocational education and training are possible with minimum intellectual and personal commitment.

  > Some Arabic speaking youth think that TAFE takes everyone and they are ill-prepared for the demands facing them. (Michael Mawal, Australian Lebanese Welfare, Victoria)

- The majority of Bosnian speakers in this survey tended to exhibit a realistic view of the demands of study. Their previous experience of education led them to neither under-estimate nor become unduly nervous about the rigours of learning.
- Cantonese speakers, while well aware of the demands of study, showed a degree of nervousness comparable to the remaining four language groups. Many focus group participants, especially males, were concerned about appearing inexpert and ignorant. They were afraid of 'losing face'.

Apprenticeships and traineeships

There was almost no understanding of the workings of the apprenticeship and traineeship system, neither amongst older adults nor amongst the younger people in this study. Even though Bosnian and Cantonese speakers did have a wider understanding of vocational education and training, they also demonstrated little knowledge of the benefits available through apprenticeships and traineeships. Only one focus group participant, a Spanish speaker, had attempted to secure a traineeship, so far unsuccessfully. McDermott, Baylis and Brown (1998) found a similarly low level of awareness and take-up of apprenticeships and traineeships (especially traineeships) among the Arabic, Turkish and Vietnamese participants in their study.

Providers

TAFE institutes emerged as the preferred provider and setting for the respondents in this study. This was often due to personal experience. Reasons for its dominance were linked to the perception that TAFE offers committed and caring teachers, equality of access, is focused on people rather than outcomes, and is amenable to a slower learning style. TAFE credentials were seen to have more currency in the job market place. TAFE was also seen as financially more accessible. In actual fact, to all intents and purposes, during both the focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, participants often replaced 'VET' with 'TAFE'.

> We receive great benefit [from TAFE] resource materials, gain more knowledge on variety of community careers, have an opportunity to practise English while on the training and the certificate granted after the training will provide more chance for job application.
>
> (Vietnamese language women's focus group)

A sizeable number of Cantonese and Spanish speakers had experience with private providers (nine and eleven respectively), and were also more open to considering a diversity of providers, and of viewing private providers as an equal alternative to TAFE institutes. This was due to their belief that private providers offered clearer outcomes and guaranteed successful outcomes.

> Private providers are more professionally represented by highly qualified presenters. They give attention to individuals … A private provider would have better facilities (especially latest technology and equipment) than TAFE. The courses are tailor made for the required workforce. It is direct, specific and short, thus saves time … The participants are from the same career group with common interests and speak the same language.
>
> (Cantonese language focus group)

Notwithstanding the lack of awareness and disinclination amongst participants from the other four language groups to consider training outside the TAFE system, focus group discussions did document some positive views. Discussion around the question: *What are the benefits in your view about doing training in a private provider?* revealed characteristics similar to those raised by the Cantonese focus group:

> With private providers you pay your money so they have to provide good results … A private provider, is organised, fast results. There's something guaranteed.
>
> (Arabic language youth focus group)

Workplace training was seen to be narrowly focused on the needs of the particular workplace. There was little understanding of the Australian Qualifications Framework and other changes implemented during the last decade. The great majority of participants were not aware of the portability of industry credentials. In any case, only a very small number had been offered training by their employer. An even smaller number had taken it up. For example, the bilingual facilitator of the Turkish language focus groups wrote in her summary report that '… the majority of participants … were not aware that the employer can also provide training to improve their skills' (Hulya Akguner). In addition to the perception that any training sponsored by the employer would provide a narrow set of skills, some respondents were also concerned about being obligated to stay on at the workplace after the training.

> Factory or workplace only provide training in-service related to that workforce, it does not provide other career apprenticeship. (Vietnamese language youth focus group)
>
> Pressure to succeed in the course taken [is a negative]. It could reflect badly on a person if they do not perform in class. (Turkish language general focus group)

A sizeable number of Cantonese speakers had undertaken training in the workplace (11 people) and were able to speak at length about the benefits as they saw them. Nonetheless, despite the perceived benefits of workplace training, neither apprenticeships, traineeships nor the portability of competencies were raised in the discussion.

> Doing training at the workplace helps the trainee learn quicker because the trainee gets a feel of the workplace environment. The courses are specific and relevant to the area of work. Employer usually has input into the training program and it thus has relevance to work. It is more practical and 'hands on' … The other participants are from the same workplace therefore more at ease with one another and we speak the same jargon.
>
> (Cantonese language focus group)

Information channels

The general consensus from both the in-depth interviews and focus groups was that a range of strategies would be needed to make sure everyone had access to information. The research has shown that communities are diverse. Some communities which are more established than others, such as the Vietnamese and Cantonese, have set up media and community organisations to serve groups such as women, youth or religious sectors. Others such as the Bosnian, who may be further divided along religious lines, have as yet limited media and community organisations to represent the diversity of the community.

However, as previously mentioned, the lack of knowledge of vocational education and training amongst Vietnamese speakers pointed to the possible deficiency of current information strategies. Vietnamese speakers are served by a strong network of community organisations and media. In spite of this, the participants in this research demonstrated a narrow understanding of vocational education and training and spoke of the lack of knowledge within their community of the possibilities afforded by the VET sector.

Teachers (either English as a second language or school) were the most often cited means of finding out about vocational education and training. They were also cited as the most trusted sources of information. This finding runs counter to other research recommending the use of community organisations and ethnic media as the primary means of promoting vocational education and training. It does however, reflect the findings of McDermott, Baylis and Brown (1998) who argue that schools 'play a critical role in leading young people into apprenticeships and traineeships' (p.4) and who subsequently recommend the development of information packs for distribution to schools as one component in a multifaceted promotional strategy.

Ethnic community organisations, many participants felt, were not fully informed about the complexity of courses and providers. Furthermore, ethnic media was seen not to have the capacity to provide the detailed information required; their role was more as a conduit to the information. On the other hand, participants from those communities with a strong infrastructure, such as the Cantonese and Vietnamese, viewed ethnic community organisations and media more positively.

Participants were more sanguine about organisations and resources at the local community level, in particular, local libraries and local papers. The research revealed that local papers were widely read, particularly by those focus group respondents with better English language skills.

Radio was preferred over written media. Two key limitations of ethnic papers were noted across all groups—the cost of purchase may act as a disincentive, and younger people do not tend to read ethnic papers.

When asked who would be most likely to seek information, the majority of participants felt that anyone who had need of information would seek it.

A difference amongst the groups was that the Cantonese and Vietnamese speakers emphasised that parents would seek information on behalf of their families.

When asked about information dissemination, the growing reach of the internet became apparent.

Vietnamese speakers were the only group who had reservations about the value of information on the internet for their community.

Face-to-face information sessions were seen to be extremely valuable. Across all language groups, many women attended women's groups and saw these as useful settings for information giving.

Written brochures were considered vital. Brochures in plain English were accepted as more cost-efficient than specific language brochures, but the value of these as a way of initially promoting vocational education and training was also emphasised. Plain English information about courses was seen as the preferable option.

Community events such as festivals were seen to be a valuable way of connecting with the community and raising awareness.

Clear pathways into employment

A powerful theme running through the in-depth interviews and focus groups was the view of the role of vocational education and training as a pre-employment tool. Respondents generally saw vocational education and training as a gateway to the workforce in Australia. An extension of this was the view that:

> VET is the last chance to retrieve social position. In Australia, qualification is very important, without it people could not get a job. And TAFE or VET is the last resource for qualification.
>
> (Vietnamese language general focus group)

Unfortunately for many participants, the lack of synchronicity between training programs and employment outcomes had resulted in disenchantment with the VET system. Community intermediaries and focus group participants spoke of how people they knew or they themselves, had entered training programs with high hopes of subsequent employment. When this had not eventuated, vocational education and training was seen as sub-standard for not leading to a job. Participants' experiences of poor employment outcomes are supported by research contained within the report, *Equity in vocational education and training: Research readings*, which found that:

> Employment outcomes for people from non-English speaking backgrounds regularly do not reflect their educational achievement. (Bowman forthcoming)

As the main purpose for enrolling was to get a job—not to achieve promotion or, for small business owners, to improve business skills and profitability—once in a job, few people saw a further need to take up other training programs. The most compelling explanation for this attitude was felt to be the settlement issues facing people from a language other than English background—the need to feed, clothe and house a family and establish a foothold in Australian society. Other research has identified the pressing need to work and the lack of time faced by workers as significantly impacting on the low take-up of English as a second language programs.

Participants recognised however, that their approach to course selection may be ad hoc and based on a superficial understanding of labour market needs. Community intermediaries and focus group participants commented that, because of the low level of awareness of vocational education and training, decisions were sometimes based on limited personal knowledge. If a friend or a 'friend of a friend' had completed a course and secured a job, this would be seen to indicate that there were

labour market shortages in that particular sector. People would immediately believe that undertaking a training program for that particular industry sector would lead them into employment.

- ✧ While Bosnian focus group participants had, on the whole, a view of vocational education and training as a pathway to employment, they did, along with the Cantonese speaking respondents, identify a wider range of reasons for undertaking vocational education and training, including testing the educational and training 'waters' and orienting themselves to the Australian education and training systems. This broader view of vocational education and training may lead to the higher-than-average enrolments of Bosnian speakers, but it does not translate into successful completion outcomes. Bosnian speakers share lower-than-average successful completion outcomes with all the other language groups except the Cantonese speakers. Bosnian speakers identified the trauma in the aftermath of the conflict in their homeland as an invisible disability carried by many in the community. This, accompanied by the cost of training (also identified by the Arabic, Spanish, Turkish and Vietnamese speakers), may mean that the broader view of vocational education and training is not sufficient to withstand the settlement pressures faced by this group.
- ✧ On the other hand, the broader expectations of vocational education and training found amongst the Cantonese speakers in the study may be a factor in the higher-than-average completion outcomes for this group. Cantonese speakers did not identify cost of training as an obstacle to participation.

If people had their own businesses, they tended to see no need for training. A negligible number of focus group participants (only one person out of 13) with their own businesses had, or would, consider training either for themselves or their employees. These findings are consistent with those in the report *Training for ethnic small business* (TAFE NSW 1996), which found that only 18% of the 1000 small businesses surveyed had committed money to training.

> People have a narrow understanding about what is involved in running a business in Australia. They often open a business without any skills.
>
> (Cuc Lam, Centrelink, Footscray, Victoria)

> I am self-employed but do not see any relevance in any VET course for my business.
>
> (Cantonese language focus group)

Focus group discussions identified that, in many instances, people start their own business as a way out of unemployment, or as protection from cultural conflict in the workplace, not necessarily as a result of a considered plan. For some women participants in the focus group discussions, self-employment meant a way of circumventing issues related to age, problems with access to childcare, and lack of local work experience. Susan Chou Allender (2001) has also documented the labour market difficulties experienced by women from diverse language and cultural backgrounds and how they bypass the labour market in favour of setting up their own small businesses. As one focus group participant noted:

> Age would not be a deterrent [to finding employment] if the course led to opening own business … Furthermore, if training provides a certificate or a diploma, this could lead to being able to manage own business and employing others regardless of age.
>
> (Arabic language women's focus group)

English as a second language programs

Many of the respondents expect English as a second language programs to be all-encompassing, believing that these programs should provide an introduction to Australian life, lead to employment and allow participation in civic life. This attitude may subsequently cause frustration as people do not initially understand that the 510 hours of available English as a second language tuition through the Adult Migrant English Program will not always be sufficient to achieve vocational English proficiency. Many participants had personal experience of classes of mixed-level English as a

second language. For some, the differences in English language skills were exacerbated by the diversity as well as the at times conflicting objectives of the students. This, in tandem with the perceived lack of progression caused by the disparity in English language skills of students in the one class made some respondents dismissive of the programs and their outcomes.

However, it was the generalist nature of many classes that came under more serious criticism. The participants in this study were adamant in their view that English as a second language classes should be far more closely aligned to vocational objectives. In other words, they felt that English as a second language programs should be far more strategically and systematically focused on preparing them to enter the workforce. A number of community intermediaries mentioned that, in their experience, it was common for people to blame themselves for poor outcomes. Focus group participants across all language groups also spoke of how people continue to enrol in these programs because they misunderstand their objectives and expect the program to provide access to employment. The disappointment resulting from the conflict in expectations was seen as an unequivocal factor in course withdrawals.

The potential for access and preparatory programs to provide formal admission into the VET system was not well understood. The idea of programs or courses as 'pathways' into other fields of study or qualifications seemed to remain a mystery. One of the community intermediaries interviewed captured the prevalent view.

> People have a limited view of what is possible. But it is critical that after 510 hours, they straightaway get pathways advice. They should be helped to see things in the short term, for the here and now, for example getting a job and then for the longer term. For immediate survival and for further study later on.
>
> (Inaam Barakat, Overseas Qualifications Unit, Victoria)

Participants agreed that career advice was vital in ensuring valid pathways between English as a second language and vocational education and training programs. However, in their experience, course advice was frequently erratic and dependent on the personal initiative of individual teachers. When asked to consider the optimal means of obtaining information about vocational education and training, formal counselling in English as a second language classes was the most frequently offered response. A number of scenarios were provided by the participants, but what they all had in common was their emphasis on a formal, integrated process to replace the unplanned approach most of them had experienced.

- ✧ Bosnian speakers were particularly frustrated, for they believed that participation in an English as a second language program would lead to a job. Many believed that what they needed in order to make the move into employment was English language proficiency since they already possessed the vocational skills. On the whole, English as a second language programs did not lead to employment and for them, the process was seen as too slow.
- ✧ Cantonese speaking focus group participants showed a greater facility to understand and use pathways from English as a second language programs to vocational education and training.
- ✧ Young Cantonese and Bosnians speakers saw a natural progression from English as a second language programs, to vocational education and training, to higher education.

The information and personal observations shared by the research participants seem to match the experiences documented by McIntyre and Kennedy (1998) in relation to the lack of integrated pathways planning and counselling from further education to vocational education and training. Similar experiences with inconsistent course advice have been documented by Schellekens (2001) and Hannah (2000). The participant responses in this study add another dimension to the conclusions drawn by these researchers about the overall system-wide lack of holistic pathways.

Provision of language support

In-depth interviewees and focus groups participants were broadly of the opinion that people could successfully complete VET programs with moderate English skills if they received language support during training. Discussion on this question indicated that, in their estimation and experience, high-level English skills were not vital, and with support, people felt they could successfully complete training programs.

In order to maximise their use of training time, the overwhelming majority of respondents preferred VET programs with integrated language support.

> People are prepared to train so as to familiarise themselves with the Australian workplace but do resent the automatic connection between English skills and vocational competence.
>
> (Turkish language general focus group)

The participant response is in line with Batten et al.'s (1998) argument that successful teachers are those who provide literacy support to all students. Achren (1998) also found that participants in her study preferred VET programs which provided integrated language support. The trend emerging from interview and focus group data has resonance with policy changes emanating from the National Training Reform Agenda which stipulate that all registered training organisations include English language, literacy and numeracy as an integral part of training. It seems that, quite independently of policy decisions made by bureaucrats and politicians, workers from diverse language and cultural backgrounds are well aware of the common, good sense of integrating English language skills development into VET programs.

There was some debate over the availability of pre-enrolment information relating to the English skills requirements of specific VET courses. There was agreement however, about the lack of consistency in the accuracy of the available information given to prospective trainees. Research participants were of the view that pre-course information about English language requirements and the difficulty of vocational content would be useful in giving them a realistic understanding of the rigours of the training program and helping them to prepare for the course. In addition, information would overcome much of the nervousness experienced by training participants, since it was agreed that many people under-estimate their English language skills.

Once in training, the majority of respondents felt that support for those struggling with the English language demands of the course is inconsistent and patchy. Practical support was only provided if the trainee took the initiative of asking for help him/herself. For those who had received assistance, as well as for the majority of those who had not, the optimal method of support was seen to be that provided by individual VET teachers. This means of support was in fact that most commonly experienced. The VET teacher's content knowledge was valued. Those participants who had received support from their VET teachers described low-key and informal approaches—staying behind after the training to spend time going over notes, being able to speak privately to the trainer to clarify content not understood, the trainer progressing slowly through the content.

What the overwhelming majority of the participants seemed to be looking for was a type of 'one stop shop', providing English language and vocational education and training. While, as has also been previously mentioned, participants were anxious about their ability to enter a training environment and participate on an equal footing, the message from this project appears to be that working-age adults from a language other than English background may prefer to be supported to undertake vocational training to enable them to update or gain new skills, mix in a training environment with their peers and maximise their chances of securing employment.

A greater proportion of Vietnamese speakers was concerned about the language demands of vocational education and training. Focus group participants believed that low English language skills were deterrents to both participation and completion. In the 2001 census, 38% of the Vietnamese community reported speaking English 'not well or not at all'. The Vietnamese community, in other words, has the highest proportion of people with low English language proficiency of the six language groups taking part in this research. For the respondents in this study, English language skills (together with cultural differences) were seen to create obstacles to participation and completion. Table 4 shows that Vietnamese speakers have the highest withdrawal rates (13.9%) of the six language groups.

Cultural issues

The importance of addressing cultural issues was singled out as another factor influencing participation and completion. The research was refined to query a number of aspects of cultural signifiers:

- ✧ culture of the classroom (role of student, role of teacher, classroom interaction, gender roles)
- ✧ cultural values reflected in courses (culturally inclusive materials, explanation of workplace routines and professional jargon)
- ✧ adaptability of training content (for example, clothes manufacture, cooking and hairdressing courses adapted to cater for particular groups)
- ✧ attitude to other values and cultural norms (Are only mainstream values upheld? Are mainstream practices open to critique?)

There was unanimity of agreement across all language groups that cultural issues play an important role. All language groups identified varying levels of difference in classroom interaction. In particular, the Australian adult education and training sector was seen to be far more informal. This could either be seen as a positive or a negative, depending on the language group. However, even those who were concerned about the negative impact of the cultural differences also believed that as:

> … the environment is more open and friendly, it has the potential to be attractive to prospective students (Keysar Trad, Lebanese Muslim Association, New South Wales)

- ✧ On the whole, for Cantonese and Bosnian speakers, the greater informality and student participation in the learning process was seen as refreshing and positive. Respondents particularly highlighted the benefits of a comparatively open and relaxed relationship between trainers and trainees.
- ✧ The Spanish speakers were more ambivalent in their response. While it was felt that the greater informality may deter some from participating in the classroom, most of the respondents felt that any differences could be understood and overcome.
- ✧ For the Arabic, Turkish and Vietnamese speaking participants, the more informal structure, the reliance on discussion and group work, the greater autonomy expected of students, and the greater interaction between males and females were all seen to potentially create obstacles to participation. These three groups have the highest module withdrawals of the six language groups (12.7%, 13.5% and 13.9% respectively):

  > Lack of confidence stops Vietnamese people from speaking up and participating in the classroom. (Nga Hayden, Vietnamese Community in Australia, Queensland Chapter)

Respondents in both in-depth interviews and focus groups also raised another inhibitor to free and open involvement in training activities—sensitivity about one's status and personal standing. The

fear of 'losing face' is compounded when one has left behind social props such as language, occupation and networks:

> People think, 'I'm a manager and if I speak up and am wrong I'll lose face'.
> (Julia Poon, Chinese Community Social Services, Victoria)

The provision of culturally inclusive materials was seen to be important since it was an indicator of respect for Australia's cultural diversity, the role played by workers from many cultures, and a recognition of the benefits accruing from cultural diversity. Nonetheless, the inclusion of such materials was not identified as a factor directly impacting on course completion and participation, and while their value was appreciated, it was the opportunity to gain direct experience of the Australian workplace that was seen as far more practically useful and more directly linked to trainees' successful completion outcomes.

That the value of vocational education and training is seen to be as a pathway to a job should come as no surprise. For the same reason, respondents also spoke at length about the importance for training programs of including an explanation of workplace routines and professional jargon. Running as a subtext through the research was people's desire to become a part of Australian life, to feel part of the mainstream.

> People want to fit in and become part of a team and share jokes and not be an outsider.
> (Senada Ljukovac, Bosnian Information and Welfare Centre, Victoria)

> An understanding of workplace culture is often the only thing people need; they already have the vocational skills. (Ivana Csar, Lalor Living and Learning Centre, Victoria)

> Newly arrived skilled migrants use TAFE to enter the Australian workforce and life as quickly as possible. (Turkish language women's focus group)

Vocational education and training was seen to be slow to recognise the financial potential of tailor-made courses in providing credentialled outcomes for people wishing to start businesses catering to the particular dietary habits, dress codes and business practices of their communities. Participants in the Vietnamese and Arabic speaking groups made the point that, in many instances, people in their community will start up a business if they are not successful in finding employment. For these risk-takers starting a business targeting their community, the training opportunities in vocational education and training are mostly limited to generic programs. While people recognise the transferability of skills, the point was made that attending such programs can make one feel invisible. Keysar Trad (Lebanese Muslim Association, New South Wales), gave an example of Arabic speaking women wanting to begin a clothing manufacturing business making traditional garments. They enrolled in a course where the options for the design and make-up of clothes were crop tops, mini skirts and low-slung trousers. The women understood that many of the principles of design, pattern-making, and manufacture were generalisable, but also felt alienated and did complete the training.

In addition to the various aspects of culture explored, respondents identified racism (both experienced or the fear of) as a factor impeding attendance in training.

- The experience and fear of racism and religious intolerance by Muslim people was raised by both focus group participants and community intermediaries as a factor associated with low participation and high withdrawal from courses. Young males were felt to be particularly vulnerable due to pernicious stereotypes which saw them as sexist and with a propensity to violence.

> It is true that sometimes, Arabic boys travel in groups in some TAFE colleges. They tell us they are in groups because they feel safe. If they are in groups what is happening to make them feel unsafe? (Leila Alloush, Victorian Arabic Social Services)

Arabic and Turkish speaking participants made the point that:

> Some trainers value and validate other cultures they are more aware of. There can be feelings of discomfort from others when we have stated where we are from or simply because of our accent … Certain people, including teachers, judged us on it and behaved differently around us. (Turkish language women's focus group)

- Participants in one of the Spanish language focus groups also identified another more benign manifestation of racism, that:

> Staff can be sympathetic to the point of condescension.

- Participants in the Turkish women's group made a similar point, speaking about what they felt was the unwarranted and to them embarrassing attention paid to differences in food brought to class. Breaking the ice by discussing food is not universally embraced. The point being made was that, within a training situation, students expect a more sophisticated approach to cultural diversity.

Another significant cultural issue affecting participation is the openness of trainers to other values and cultural and professional norms, and the ability to critique mainstream values. For some groups this was a critical issue which was perceived to have the potential to lead directly to withdrawal.

Arabic-speakers and Turkish respondents felt this very strongly:

> I didn't speak in the classroom. It was so daunting. I felt the conversation was one way only. It had a huge impact. I felt really isolated and felt indoctrinated. My previous experience was not valued. Life began here. What happened before did not matter to my teachers. At the end of the course (community development) I had to regain my previous knowledge. I felt I had forgotten so much that was valuable but that during the course even I must have agreed I should discard. When I went and worked with my community I had to start from zero. (Iman Riman, Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues, Victoria)

While not seen as a direct inhibitor to the participants in the remaining language groups—Bosnian, Cantonese, Spanish and Vietnamese—the additional hurdle created by the inability to find a space for one's views was nonetheless discussed as being important. When aggregated with other concerns, such as problems of settlement, lack of perceived employment pathways or language difficulties, the lack of respect for the experiences and values of trainees from a language other than English background was felt to be a factor that would contribute to, at worst, course withdrawal, at best, a sense of disengagement.

> Teachers sometimes pay lip service but other students don't accept and they become isolated socially. (Marina Castellanos, Centre for Multicultural Pastoral Care, Queensland)

> Some students from cultures where the teacher is the expert and final authority will not be able to question the teacher even if their values are conflicted.
>
> (Cantonese language focus group)

> Students keep quiet but they are struggling inside.
>
> (Julia Poon, Chinese Community Social Services, Victoria)

Participants firmly believed that trainers should understand that theirs is not the only acceptable world view.

Understanding of issues faced by trainees

Over and above an understanding of the way in which culture influences behaviour and the ability to competently negotiate the cultural diversity in our society, research participants also valued trainers who had an in-depth understanding of the settlement experiences they faced. Time and again, it was felt that the issues faced by people from diverse language and cultural backgrounds are reduced to language difficulties. A low level of English language skills was acknowledged to be a serious obstacle to settlement, but it was nonetheless defined as one factor in a complex web of experiences. These include:

- ✧ the sense of cultural, social and economic dislocation
- ✧ the fracture of the extended family and friendship networks
- ✧ the loss of social and vocational status
- ✧ the need to learn new ways of interacting socially and vocationally
- ✧ the difficulty of parenting in a new cultural context
- ✧ the need to quickly become economically self-sufficient.

All these were described as significant components in the long-term process of settlement.

The 1997 report commissioned by the then Department of Social Security highlighted the importance of positioning English language skills in their proper context and seeing the totality of factors which influence the settlement experience. The report identified a number of key contributors framing migrants' and refugees' settlement experiences:

- ✧ size of the language/cultural groups
- ✧ recency of arrival
- ✧ settlement history
- ✧ changes within the language/cultural groups over time
- ✧ age and gender profile
- ✧ English proficiency
- ✧ educational background.

The report concluded that these are all important variables and the relationship between them is complex. For example, the relationship between English language proficiency and educational background is not one-dimensional. As mentioned previously, high English language proficiency and high educational qualifications assist the individual with the settlement process. However, of the two variables, it is high educational qualifications which appear, from the evidence in this research, to support more effectively the settlement process of individuals.

The qualitative research conducted for this project also identified educational background, age, gender, recency of arrival and the rural versus urban divide as factors to be considered when exploring perceptions of and participation in vocational education and training.

The Bosnian participants identified as an obstacle to participation and completion, trainers' lack of understanding of some refugees' struggle to recover in the aftermath of the trauma arising from war. The focus group discussions and in-depth interviews showed that the Bosnian speakers were quite resilient to factors such as cost, culture and language proficiency. However, the feeling that the experience of torture and trauma make others uncomfortable and thus have to be kept 'under wraps' (Slavia Ilich, Victorian Multi-Ethnic Slavic Welfare Association) was cited as a major reason for not completing training programs.

Acknowledgement of trainees' existing vocational skills

Adult participants with previous work experience in their homelands expressed concern about the lack of recognition in the classroom—not in the sense of the formal recognition of competencies, but in the informal sense of being able to make space in the classroom for their lived experience and know-how. This lack of acknowledgement of their existing skills and in a sense, their vocational identity, was cited as a compelling explanation for withdrawals from training. Coupled with other factors, such as the growing perception that employment was not going to be immediate, this lack of validation was seen to negatively impact on trainees' commitment to completing training.

The wish to have vocational skills and experience acknowledged seems to be an attempt to claim an identity beyond the usual signifiers of linguistic and cultural background. This is in line with the theme inherent in the research; namely, that language by itself is not the sole factor impacting upon participation and completion.

> It is not fair to fail because of English when you have passion [for subject].
>
> (Turkish language general focus group)

The importance placed on the recognition of pre-existing expertise is also in line with the strong identification of the people themselves as workers, able to use their skills to become productive participants in the workforce and breadwinners for their families.

Provision of work experience

The integration of work experience into pre-employment courses was universally valued. It was also consistently raised as a vital factor leading to successful completion of courses. Work experience was felt to provide a number of essential outcomes, a practical awareness of the expectations of the workplace, of cross-cultural communication, and an increased vocational vocabulary.

> People find it difficult to 'read' how to behave unless they have prior experience before getting a job. Work experience gives them a very practical and gentle introduction to the Australian workplace. (Slavia Illich, Victorian Multi-Ethnic Slavic Welfare Association)

> It is important for people to understand workplace interaction and language so as to feel comfortable and stay in the job.
>
> (Margaret Riordan, Wagga Ethnic Communities Council, New South Wales)

> People know the subject matter, it is the jargon and context they do not understand.
>
> (Audrey Lay, Centrelink, Fairfield, New South Wales)

> Workplace experience is important to increase confidence, to become part of a team; for example, sometimes someone does not understand the jokes and feels an outsider.
>
> (Senada Ljukovac, Bosnian Information and Welfare Centre, Victoria)

Virgona et al. (2003), examining the development of generic skills, assert that the workplace is the most important influence on the development of these skills and recommend that teachers and trainers in formal education settings create opportunities for skill development through experiential learning in workplaces. While this research project has a broader frame of reference, it seems plausible to also infer that the workplace is a similarly seminal context where trainees from a

language other than English background seeking employment are able to develop the 'work-ready' competencies they need to find fruitful and relevant employment.

Cost

Every language group, except for Cantonese speakers, identified the cost of attending vocational education and training either directly through enrolment fees, or indirectly through lost earnings as a major barrier. Cost was seen as a significant barrier to those language groups identified by Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard data as having lower-than-average participation (Arabic, Spanish, Turkish and Vietnamese). However, even for the Bosnians, a group with a higher-than-average level of participation and a perceived high level of commitment to vocational education and training, the pressing responsibilities of settlement and the provision of financial and emotional security to families were seen, in many instances, by respondents to prevent participation in vocational education and training.

> Cantonese speakers in this study did not identify settlement pressures as obstacles to participation in VET. Research participants made a strong and clear connection between education, personal achievement, and financial security and prosperity. Cultural beliefs about the importance of education as a foundation for financial and moral prosperity were also seen to be crucial in forging a strong commitment to training. It was felt that, for Cantonese speakers, this strong commitment may overwrite the difficulties encountered by new arrivals trying to settle their families while also attempting to undergo training. Many recently arrived Cantonese speakers have migrated through the Independent and Business Skills/Employer Nomination Scheme program. For this group, the economic pressures are usually less severe than for those arriving in Australia through the Humanitarian migration program. However, the Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard data show lower-than-average participation in vocational education and training for Cantonese speakers. The challenge seems to be to extend the positive perception and outcomes of those currently participating into the wider Cantonese community.

Noteworthy also is that, despite a greater valuing and participation in vocational education and training amongst newer arrivals within the Arabic, Turkish Spanish and Vietnamese language groups, settlement issues were raised as continuing barriers. While more recently arrived members demonstrated a strong commitment to enrolling in and completing training programs, they, in line with their fellow community members, identified the drain on emotional and physical reserves of juggling training and caring for families, often on their own, without support from extended family or other networks.

Ease of access and availability of childcare

Cost of training, transport and childcare were not initially given prominence during the hypothesis-setting phase. However, they were identified as being significant during the first stage—the in-depth interviews when questions about what may be reasons for high/low participation were being asked. Training costs, transport and access to childcare were considered of consequence and linked to settlement issues, and were also factors influencing participation and completion. This supported Hannah's (2000) and Tabet and Homolova's (2001) research identifying settlement issues as impacting on participation.

Access to public transport and proximity of training venues were considered to be key factors influencing participation. This was, not surprisingly, a major issue for those living in regional and rural locations. It was also identified as a crucial issue for young Arabic speakers. Recent instances of racial taunts and abuse following in the wake of September 11 and Bali bombings were provided as

further instances of situations when some Arabic speakers would prefer to attend training close to home and familiar environments.

> We know about women being nervous to be in public spaces, but parents are worried about their children too, there is high absenteeism in schools and also in VET courses.
>
> (Leila Alloush, Victorian Arabic Social Services)

Access to affordable childcare was identified as a key factor by both intermediaries and focus group participants. Family networks are in many cases limited; the only tenable solution for parents of young children seeking to enter both training and paid employment is access to formal childcare.

Childcare was of special concern to Arabic, Vietnamese and Turkish speaking women.

Implications for policy and practice

Key issues

This research has identified a number of key issues which should be taken into account in future policy and program development in this area.

Diversity of communities

Each community is different and unique, and within each is displayed a substantial variety of experience, lifestyles and value systems. 'Blanket' policy solutions are therefore bound to be inappropriate as well as ineffective. Thus findings from this research may be applicable to some sub-groups and some situations, but not to others. For example, the low level of knowledge of the VET system amongst Vietnamese speakers by comparison with the higher understanding of VET amongst Bosnian speakers in the study indicates that, in this instance, the size of a community's support infrastructure may not be a good indicator of access to information.

Waves of migration within the same language group

The period during which specific cohorts of a particular ethnic community migrated largely determines the different levels of awareness of, and access to, government services within that group. Participants in the Bosnian focus group who had migrated more recently, for example, spoke of their greater awareness of services, rights and responsibilities than that of the older established members of their community. This recent wave of migration from the Former Republic of Yugoslavia tends to be better educated, more computer-literate and have better information-seeking resources. The same was the case for recently arrived Spanish and Turkish speaking participants.

Multiple disadvantage within sub-groups

A number of sub-groups within individual communities demonstrated greater difficulties in relation to their ability to overcome existing barriers to participation and module/course completion. These sub-groups included:

- ✧ some young people
- ✧ women
- ✧ adults who went straight into the Australian workplace
- ✧ people from a rural background in their original countries
- ✧ people with low educational qualifications.

For example, young Arabic and Vietnamese speaking participants displayed a lack of awareness of vocational education and training which was cause for concern, particularly since it was accompanied by an unrealistic understanding of the demands of training. Women participants from the Arabic, Turkish and Vietnamese language groups identified cultural and childcare issues as obstacles to participation and completion.

Strategic policy responses

Issues such as those identified above underline how people from diverse language and cultural backgrounds may be vulnerable to non-participation and non-completion in the VET system. A number of strategic policy responses or interventions are proposed to address the factors identified in this research as impacting on participation and completion. To ensure that the approach in the policy response generated by this research is coherent and holistic, only key interventions are proposed, those which broadly encompass a number of issues and which seek to bring about improved outcomes by addressing, in a integrated way, the factors identified by research participants as impacting on participation and completion outcomes in VET.

Related issues are presented within a single box and are followed by a number of proposed actions to address identified areas of concern.

These are:

- ✧ understanding of demands, range and portability of VET programs and multiplicity of purposes for training
- ✧ proximity to home and ease of access via public transport, availability of childcare.

This research has identified a greater awareness of and higher regard for vocational education and training within more recently arrived members of a number of the six language groups. Ways of harnessing this greater awareness and interest to increase the knowledge amongst the rest of the community should be explored by the state and territory recognition authorities and the Commonwealth Government.

The strong desire to make a new start, to be an independent and fully equal member of society has been a strong minor theme throughout this research. Training is a key enabler of full civic participation.

Suggested action: Targeted campaign

The research has highlighted the importance of targeted and tailored campaigns to inform communities of the range of programs, providers and pathways—especially apprenticeships and traineeships—available within the VET sector. Information about the range of providers would be particularly apposite, given that the research identified, amongst some of the participants, an acceptance of private providers.

The campaign to promote a range of providers would also potentially increase the likelihood of prospective participants accessing training in their local communities. Consequently, community members may be able to access training programs and childcare closer to home.

The established means of communicating with people from a language other than English background is through traditional media. However, the position of community media is a function of period of settlement and community size. The availability of own-language print media is seen to signal a community's 'coming of age'. For these reasons, any attempt to better inform communities about vocational education and training will need to take into account the following:

- ✧ A combination of traditional and community media is important.
- ✧ The local context remains a valuable resource.
- ✧ The value of traditional print and radio media should be assessed on a community-by-community basis.

- A blanket approach to using electronic media and the internet would be dangerous as resistance to these forms was discovered in some of the language groups.
- Irrespective of the medium used, plain English is vital.
- The value of liaison with community leaders/spokespersons was shown to vary amongst the language groups. For those groups where community intermediaries play a gate-keeping role, the key players are not always, however, the elected officials of community organisations. Bilingual workers at the 'coal face' often have a greater understanding of current issues affecting community members. They may also be more familiar and respected because of their daily interaction with community members who are seeking their help.
- Parents, in some language groups, retain an important role in decision-making in relation to their children's post-compulsory education. Any information campaign for apprenticeships and traineeships would need to speak directly to them about the following issues.

The other factors influencing participation and completion are:

- provision of clear pathway into employment
- acknowledgement of trainees' existing vocational skills
- inclusion of work experience in training
- costs incurred in vocational education and training.

The research found that, for the six language groups studied, vocational education and training is seen principally as a pre-employment tool—to provide a direct pathway to a job. This view of vocational education and training was clearly allied to the considerable settlement issues facing people from a language other than English background, in particular the wish to continue, with the minimum disruption, a productive work life. For this very reason, it was felt that it was important that the VET system actively recognises existing vocational skills and the valuable opportunity to further refine these through work experience.

Suggested action: Greater flexibility in apprenticeships and other programs

There is a need to review apprenticeships and traineeships to ensure greater flexibility in their delivery, a possible response being programs with integrated English language support. A second response could be direct targeting of apprenticeships and traineeships specifically to people from a language other than English background. These responses would address a number of issues faced by people from a language other than English background—the necessity to improve their English skills, gain work experience and find paid employment.

It is suggested that the Adult Migrant English Program be reviewed so that it has the capacity to:

- provide integrated employment and pathway counselling in all courses for people from a language other than English background. The effectiveness of the counselling should be assessed through performance indicators.
- encourage greater structured choices, for example, streamed classes or a clustering of classes integrating English as a second language programs with particular vocational areas where employment opportunities are available.

The VET funding formula should be reviewed to facilitate the development of flexible training models which include:

- explicit language support
- additional hours for module completion

- employment counselling
- workplace experience.

Other important issues are:

- provision of language support
- acknowledgement of the importance of cultural issues
- demonstration by trainers of an understanding of issues faced by trainees (cultural, language and settlement)

This research project has illuminated the vital role played by VET teachers and trainers. Because of their industrial experience and their understanding of the culture and demands of the workplace, students from a language other than English background perceive that VET teachers play a significant role in their vocational education and training. The most frequent, and at the same time, the preferred way of obtaining support for their study was during VET training programs and provided by the teachers conducting the training. VET teachers' content knowledge was highly valued. Similarly, the research revealed the positive influence exercised by trainers who understood the settlement pressures faced by their trainees and who, by developing culturally inclusive resources and pedagogies, provided a road map to the Australian workplace.

The research also uncovered the impact on participation and completion outcomes of training which overlooks or discounts these factors. The experience of the participants showed that, on the whole, this support is not structured nor is it a specific program of support, but dependent on the skills and commitment of particular VET teachers. Moreover, it is generally constrained by lack of time. The role of the VET trainer should explicitly recognise the responsibility for teaching all trainees, irrespective of linguistic or cultural background.

In addition, it would appear that current VET practice marginalises the language and cross-cultural expertise of English as a second language teachers. It is likely that the creation of more formal professional relationships between these teachers and vocational teachers would deliver results far beyond the budget costs involved.

Suggested action: Professional development for VET teachers

- Implement a system-wide professional development program for VET teachers via workshops and flexible learning materials.
- At provider level, formally implement language and cross-cultural consultancy services by English as a second language teachers. This would provide practical support to VET trainers conducting programs in which trainees from a language other than English background are enrolled.

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