

Migrant learners and foundation skills courses: motivations and experiences

Foundation skills courses equip learners with essential language, literacy, numeracy, digital and employability skills, enabling them to participate more fully in the workforce, further education, and the broader community.

These programs have consistently low completion rates. While not all students aim to complete a full program, it raises questions about what supports could help more students continue and complete their training.

This research insight draws on focus groups with migrant learners who had commenced but not completed a foundation skills course.

Why do migrant learners enrol in foundation skills courses?



To improve English and increase confidence for work and everyday life



As a stepping-stone to aspirations such as employment or further education



To better understand Australian culture and way of life



To assist with personal, digital and medical security, safety and advocacy

What were learners' experiences?

What learners valued:

- Real-world learning, including excursions and both formal and informal English
- Social connections, a sense of belonging, personal growth and shared experiences
- Supportive, positive, and motivating trainers who had a flexible approach.

Challenges:

- Differing experience and skill levels among students in the same class
- Course durations are too short for some learners and too long for others
- Generalised materials and workbooks are unable to address individual learning needs of students.

What stopped learners from continuing or completing?



Difficulties in balancing work and family responsibilities with class schedules and study time.



Course availability, location, delivery methods, and childcare limitations caused practical issues.



Anxiety, stress, past trauma, homesickness and culture shock impacted learning.



Church, community, and overseas travel for family commitments resulted in time away from courses.

What changes do migrant learners suggest?



Flexible learning options to fit around work and family commitments

- Part-time or condensed courses
- Online delivery options
- Classes offered during evenings, weekends, or school hours
- Onsite childcare to support learners with young children.



Engaging, real-world learning

- More visual aids, storytelling, excursions, conversation practice, group discussions, student-led content, and Australian-based content.



Tailored learning support

- Grouping learners by skill level
- Adapted workbooks and materials with less repetition of content
- Course pacing aligned with learners' needs
- Trainers with diverse cultural backgrounds.



Wellbeing aware instructors

- Trauma-informed teaching approaches
- Instructors trained in mental health, change management, mindset and wellbeing management



Improved course continuity

- All levels are available on campus/online, shorter gaps between levels and more time to engage with course material between classes

This research insight is produced from content available in the research summary *First Nations and migrant learners' experiences with foundation skills courses* (Wibrow, Ackehurst & Trimboli 2025).