



# Responding to CALD Learners:

## *Cultural Diversity in Action*

**Action research reports:** First hand accounts by Learn Local practitioners

# Learn Local action research

These action research reports support and complement the Adult, Community and Further Education (ACFE) publication *Responding to CALD Learners: Cultural Diversity in Action* (Achren et al. 2012).

The collaborative action research was conducted by Learn Local practitioners participating in the *Responding to CALD Learners* initiative funded by the ACFE Board and managed by AMES.

The reports were written by the Learn Local practitioners who conducted the research in their Learn Local organisations:

## **Paddocks to pathways: Connecting with new CALD communities**

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Diamond Valley Learning Centre

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*Names of participants have been changed in the reports.*

# Paddocks to pathways: Connecting with new CALD communities



## Diamond Valley Learning Centre

Sue Paull: *ESL Coordinator and teacher*

Julie Johnston: *(Former) Business Manager*

## Research context

The Diamond Valley Learning Centre (DVLC) nestles near the Plenty River and a grassy cricket ground, and is just a short walk to the Greensborough town centre. This suburb in Melbourne's north is a regional hub for retail and business, well-connected by major roads and public transport. It has the leafy calmness of an established community.

Not so many years ago, a short drive north of Greensborough would have taken you into orchards and farmland. Today the fruit and cows are a memory and the area has become one of the fastest growing in Victoria, with a population predicted to almost double in the next fifteen years. Thousands of new homes dot the paddocks, and oversized billboards promise a dream lifestyle. This dream, and relatively cheaper housing, have attracted thousands of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) families to what is now commonly referred to as 'the growth corridor'.



Over the past three years, DVLC has put considerable effort into raising its profile in this northern corridor. Flyers have been inserted into newspapers and letterboxes, and pressed into the hands of residents at community festivals. DVLC has even organised two such festivals. Eventually, a 28-week floristry course attracted enough students, and ran in a local centre. However, none of these students were from a CALD background. A variety of other courses were also advertised, but failed to spark sufficient interest among CALD clients. It was this lack of success which led us to apply to do a research project related to the good practice principle of Engagement (see Achren et al. 2012).

Marketing to CALD communities has always been a challenge for DVLC. Unlike many Learn Local organisations, DVLC does not have a predominant cultural group. In 2011, for example, our sixty CALD learners came from thirty different countries. We have enjoyed the richness of this diversity, but how do we reach new learners? To whom do we target our marketing? What are their particular learning needs? And exactly where in the growth area are these learners?

We believe DVLC has much to offer the emerging CALD communities to our north. While the houses may have settled comfortably over the paddocks, the 'dream lifestyle' remains just that—roads are inadequate, public transport and community facilities are limited. New residents find themselves isolated and disconnected. DVLC is well positioned to provide a bridge into a strong, established community. Here, students can enrol not only in English as a Second Language (ESL), but also Vocational Education and Training (VET) qualifications and general interest courses. Under one roof we offer a smooth pathway from pre-accredited to

accredited training, from VET to further education and employment. At our social events, all ages and cultures can rub shoulders and share that happy mix of food, music, conversation and laughter.

To sit on our hands and do nothing about reaching out to these emerging communities could have negative consequences. As a Learn Local organisation we have a responsibility to be proactive and inform people of the educational choices available to them locally. We need to become known in the growth corridor as a welcoming and accessible entry point to education. Furthermore, it would be financially foolish not to tap into this market. Such inaction could lead to a reduction in enrolments across all course areas and perhaps threaten the financial viability of the centre. Finally, and importantly, the inclusion of these new students would be of benefit to all, enriching the cultural mix and adding to the spirit and energy of the centre.

## First research cycle

With this motivation, we embarked on the research project. We were novices in the field of research and somewhat tentative. However, at the first workshop we were reassured by the clear research guidelines and the supportive and positive approach of the AMES research mentors. After much discussion we clarified goals and developed research questions. Our first focus question was:

*How can we attract CALD learners from growth areas and offer them what they need?*

Following this, the question to guide the first cycle of our research was:

*If we consult our CALD students, community leaders and other Learn Local providers, how will the information gained influence our marketing approach?*

Our consultation would include interviews, focus groups and a survey:

- Interviews with community leaders would allow us to hear first-hand what was happening in the growth areas. Who were the new CALD communities? What were the key issues for these people? Was there a role for DVLC and if so, what would it be?
- Focus groups with current and past CALD students would help us learn more about what had attracted them to DVLC and to hear their ideas about how to promote DVLC. These groups were potentially a rich source of data. The group dynamic could stimulate discussion and follow-up questions could allow us to delve deeper into issues.
- A survey of our current CALD students would build a wider and more precise picture of our existing student group. The survey questionnaire was to be completed

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by all students at DVLC over a period of a week and the CALD student responses were to be collated for this project. This would be an efficient method of gathering information from a large number of students.

## Interviews with community leaders

We drove out into the growth corridor along pot-holed roads to meet community leaders. The rapid growth to the north of Greensborough has to be seen to be believed—Whittlesea is growing at an astonishing rate of 10,000 people per year (Director of Community Services, City of Whittlesea). It is referred to as an 'interface municipality', where rural meets urban. Lower prices for houses on the numerous new estates are a magnet. In our interviews we learnt that although many people are attracted by the country feel, the rolling hills and open spaces, they also expect the convenience of urban facilities. However, while the removal vans roll in, loaded with the furniture and dreams of 180 people every week, the services and facilities remain mere words on the billboards.



The snapshot of the area we captured from our interviews was grim. Service providers in the City of Whittlesea are stretched to the limit and finding it difficult to cope. Some of the major concerns expressed were:

- a significant increase in reported family violence—the area has the highest incidence of first offence violence in Victoria
- a high and growing incidence of problem gambling
- new school populations doubling each year.

As well as dealing with the rapid population growth, the council and many service providers were still heavily involved in the bushfire recovery process. Two years after Black Saturday, services continued to assist people in rebuilding their lives, homes and communities.

We met workers operating in isolation, mirroring the isolation of the new residents. Yet there were other examples of cooperation, such as the Whittlesea Community Futures Partnership. This partnership of more than forty community service organisations has been working on four priority areas, one of which focuses on CALD communities. The issues of family violence, racism, community relations and employment are on the top of their list.

Our goal had been to gather some accurate data about the CALD communities in these areas, but we were to be disappointed. The rate of growth has made all statistics slippery. Service providers could give us only 'guesstimates', and were themselves eagerly awaiting the 2011 census results. However, considering the rate of growth, by the time these are released in 2012, they too will be out of date. Anecdotal evidence, however, suggested that there was no stand-out cultural group in the target area—a story familiar to us.

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## Focus groups

Back at DVLC, we ran three focus groups with current and former students, with a total of twenty-six students participating. Having two facilitators was invaluable in recording these sessions and over lunch we teased out some valuable information.

What students liked about DVLC:

- close to home (the most important reason)
- interesting range of classes offered, including weekend classes
- relevant curriculum
- small classes and individual attention
- friendly and patient teachers
- individual pre-training assessments
- good facilities
- warm, friendly atmosphere
- multicultural mix
- flexibility to change classes
- opportunities to make friends
- social events.

Practical and new suggestions for advertising:

- DVLC business cards available for students to distribute to potential students
- an advertising sign on the DVLC roof
- a large billboard at the railway station
- a directional sign to DVLC at the railway station
- [www.gumtree.com.au](http://www.gumtree.com.au) for free classified advertising
- adapt DVLC website information to include key phrases that students are most likely to use in Google searches. For example: 'English course Greensborough'.

## The survey

We surveyed thirty-three students, about two-thirds of our CALD cohort. Among this group were twenty-two nationalities, with women outnumbering men 3:1. Two-thirds had an educational background equivalent to Year 11 or above. Almost all students had a home

computer with internet access, and two-thirds rated themselves as beginner computer users. The availability of the internet in students' homes clearly showed that we should be making better use of our website and improve our search engine optimisation techniques.

The results of the survey did not completely support the results from the focus groups. Only one person in the survey said they had found out about DVLC via our brochure, while a number of participants in the focus groups reported finding out about DVLC in this way. The majority found out from Centrelink.

A key omission in our survey was our failure to ask the question we had asked our focus groups: 'What do you like about DVLC?' Getting a better picture of what we were doing well would have clarified the qualities we needed to highlight in our promotional material. In retrospect, our research procedure was back-to-front. Had we saved the survey till last, we could have used the information gained from the focus groups and interviews to inform its design and perhaps reap richer results. The data nevertheless was interesting and we gained a better insight into our CALD students' perspectives. The students too were pleased to be part of the research process and for their ideas to be listened to seriously.



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## A new direction

In the first cycle of our research we had recorded anecdotes in our journals and collected some statistics. However, we were somewhat disappointed with our results and puzzled about the way forward. We had driven out and returned home with no clear answers or connections with the CALD communities in the growth corridor.

So, where to next? At this low point, we met with an AMES research mentor. During the course of the discussion, we realised that we did in fact have some answers and a direction. In our journals we had noted that:

- Maternal child health centres, kindergartens and primary schools were the first buildings to appear after the construction of houses.
- Community spaces were usually reserved by playgroups and families for parties.
- The limited community services were mainly child-related.

We had been focusing on the adults, but now realised it was *children* who were the key to making connections in these growth areas. With this new direction we formulated the question for the next cycle of our research:



*If we build relationships with organisations in the target area, will we be able to connect with CALD Learners?*

We identified the schools closest to DVLC in the target area and considered our tactics before picking up the phone. Sympathetic to the workload of school principals and the impatience of most people towards phone canvassing, we prepared a brief and to the point script outlining the background to the project and our involvement; our long experience at DVLC offering ESL classes; and our interest in offering adult classes in their area. And then came the critical question: *Is there a need for English classes in your school?*

We were heartened by the response of the seven schools we rang. All listened to our briefing and three expressed interest. But our spirits really lifted when one principal responded to our critical question with, 'I'd love that!' Her response inspired us—a way forward at last. Wasting not a minute, a meeting was organised at the school with the principal and specialist coordinators.

The principal predicted that at least two rooms would be vacant in 2012 to run classes for the parents of the school's CALD children. By the following week, a proposal had been written, submitted and approved by the school council, and in the words of the principal we were 'ready to rock-and-roll'.

As we write, the organisational wheels are turning: a memorandum of understanding (MOU) is being drawn up by the school, a morning tea at the school is being arranged for CALD parents to meet DVLC teachers and we are planning a pre-accredited curriculum with a focus on primary school issues. In the new year, classes will be publicised via the school's website and newsletters, and at an information

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evening and welcome barbeque. The prospects look extremely good for making real connections with CALD learners in the growth corridor in 2012.

The English language program in the primary school ticks the same boxes our students ticked when asked what they liked about DVLC:

- ✓ close to home
- ✓ small class size
- ✓ friendly environment
- ✓ relevant curriculum
- ✓ opportunity to build friendships
- ✓ a chance to develop a sense of belonging and community.

By setting up and implementing a program in one school, we hope to create a model for future outreach programs for both DVLC and other providers. The program model should be easily transferable and we propose to share with others:

- proposals and MOUs
- invitations and information sheets for parents
- ways of communicating with staff and parents at the school
- the set up, delivery and evaluation of the program.

Such a language program could be the springboard to other courses—both pre-accredited and accredited—with DVLC or with other providers. It has the potential to connect people in these new communities, decrease isolation, develop essential language skills and open up new pathways.

## Some reflections

Our research has reminded us that our students are a willing and rich source of information. Taking the time to have a relaxed discussion over lunch is rewarding in so many ways. Students' perspectives can throw a fresh light on marketing and potentially improve future strategies.

We learnt that working in growth areas takes patience and operating alone would have been very difficult. The cliché that two heads are better than one rang true. Having a co-researcher meant we could support each other over the dull flat stretches, build on ideas together and more happily enjoy the high points.

To be involved in a funded and well-organised research project was an invaluable experience. We were given the time and opportunity to explore our issue and follow it through in a structured way. Regular deadlines provided sufficient pressure to keep us on track, and the meetings and workshops throughout the year kept us motivated. The latter gave us a forum in which to test our ideas in a wider collegiate group.

Presenting our research at a conference gave us an opportunity to refine and share our research findings with other educators and receive some helpful feedback.

Finally, population growth will invariably lead to the construction of further housing developments, which, in their turn, will present similar challenges for community organisations. Through our research, we believe we have found a useful way for both well-established and new Learn Local providers to connect with CALD learners in growth areas. We hope that both providers and CALD learners will benefit from our methods and our findings.

# Partnering for engagement



## Coonara Community House and Mulgrave Neighbourhood House

Leanne Fitzgerald: *Team Leader (Coonara)*  
Debbie Whitehead: *VET Coordinator (Coonara)*

### Research context

Dynamic changes in the demographics of the eastern suburbs of Melbourne are demanding that we think about how we engage and support CALD learners along pathways to employment. With established communities of skilled migrants, the eastern metropolitan region of Melbourne is rapidly diversifying both culturally and linguistically through the recent movement into the region of former refugees. As a result, it is becoming imperative to change or adapt our practice to meet the diverse needs of our new learner groups. The question of *how* to do that and what constitutes good practice focused our attention in this action research project.

The research was implemented in a partnership between two Learn Local providers: Mulgrave Neighbourhood House and Coonara Community House.

Mulgrave Neighbourhood House is located in the City of Monash, twenty kilometres south-east of the Melbourne central business district and in one of Melbourne's fastest growing population corridors. Monash is a cosmopolitan city with 39.7% of its residents coming from more than thirty countries. Of these, 34% are from non-English speaking backgrounds (Monash City Council 2011). Mulgrave Neighbourhood House is a medium-sized Learn Local organisation delivering ACFE-funded pre-accredited courses mainly in English language and computer skills, as well as a range of leisure and hobby courses.

Coonara Community House is located in the City of Knox on the fringes of the Dandenong

Ranges. Its demographics are a stark contrast to those of Mulgrave—only 25% of Knox residents were born overseas and only 17% of these are from non-English speaking backgrounds (Knox City Council 2011). Coonara is also a medium-sized Learn Local organisation with the status of being a Registered Training Organisation (RTO). Two-thirds of its delivery is accredited training.

Coonara and Mulgrave established a partnership arrangement in late 2010 with the expressed aim of providing the Mulgrave community with locally based vocational training. The arrangement was for Coonara to provide the RTO status and fully manage every aspect of the accredited training, and for Mulgrave to provide the venue and significant numbers of students from its existing student population.

The first full VET qualification to be delivered at Mulgrave was the Certificate III in Children's Services, which commenced in March 2011. On the assumption that we had a strong base of potential VET students in the existing ESL classes, we decided that the first cycle of our research should focus on meeting the needs of the learners who aspired to further training.

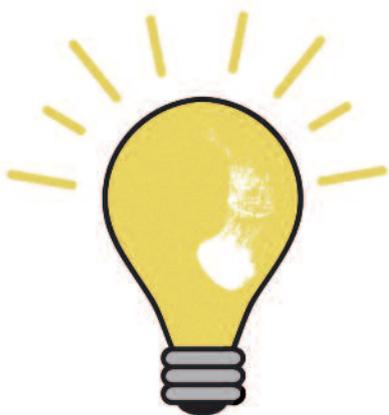
# Partnering for engagement

## First research cycle

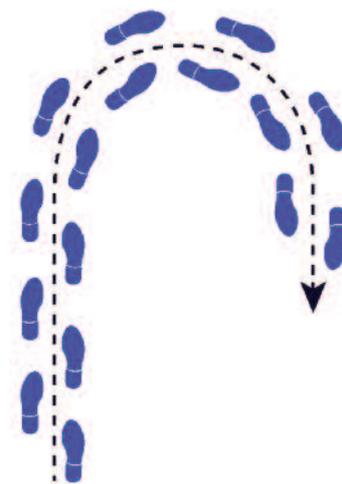
The research team decided that the first cycle of research should focus on the question:

*How can we best support CALD learners to choose vocational training as a successful pathway to employment?*

To launch our project and gain the participation of ESL learners we organised a lunch for the various stakeholders. There was an overwhelming response with many more students and trainers turning up than we had anticipated—some, we realised, with wrong expectations about what was being proposed.



We also realised that the forum participants were not the demographic that we had expected. Instead of job-seeking, non-English speaking migrants they were mostly spouses of skilled migrants and others seeking social engagement rather than employment.



So we made a U-turn and decided that we needed to find out exactly who our learners were and which of them were interested in employment pathways. We reshaped our guiding question to ask:

*How can we best identify and meet the needs of the CALD learners currently enrolled at Mulgrave, especially the needs of those interested in moving into further training and possibly employment?*

We set about answering this question by conducting two focus groups, developing a simple questionnaire and keeping reflective journals that drew on observations and conversations with students during classroom interactions.

The focus groups were:

- The CALD learners in our Certificate III in Children's Services course. All the students were new to Mulgrave Neighbourhood House.
- The CALD learners in some of the pre-accredited ESL classes. The majority of these students have been coming to Mulgrave for some time.

We found that the CALD learners in the accredited Certificate III in Children's Services class were very keen to develop skills for employment and, while some lacked confidence, a significant number had already decided to continue onto their Diploma after completing the certificate course. Several were also interested in further study to improve their technology skills. They felt well supported by the trainers and by each other as a group but they also gave us some great insights into ways to further support them:

- providing an extended orientation to the VET course
- incorporating technologies into class work
- providing additional support for work placements
- decoding the 'Australian way' of communicating and dealing with issues of conflict.

Interestingly, the 'Australian way' was what they found the most challenging. They considered that support in gaining an understanding in this area would be most useful.



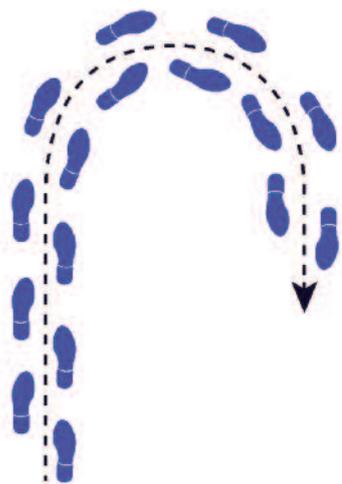
In contrast to this, the majority of the pre-accredited ESL learners reported that they were not interested in training pathways as they were mostly there for personal and social reasons. Most of those who were learning English for

employment-related reasons did not identify any need to undertake vocational training as they had skills and qualifications from overseas and many were already employed. It was apparent that while earlier surveys had revealed that many of the pre-accredited ESL students were studying English for employment reasons, we had been wrong in assuming that this would make them candidates for vocational training.

We had made an assumption about the CALD learners that proved to be false. The old adage came to mind: 'When you ASSUME you make an ASS out of U and ME'.

On the positive side, while one of our major assumptions was incorrect (i.e. what we thought we knew—we didn't!), our research had assisted us in identifying what we didn't know.

The results of our first cycle of research had very serious consequences for our partnership arrangement. Discovering that many of the existing ESL learners were not candidates for transition into vocational training meant that we did not have access to a core group of potential students. Without this pool of already engaged learners in the pre-accredited courses, getting viable enrolments for accredited courses became a much more difficult, time-consuming and expensive task for both of the partner organisations. In addition, it made the development of pathways for existing learners problematic.



It was a matter of some urgency that we changed direction with the second cycle of research to look primarily at the issue of engagement. The reasons for this change in direction were:

- the need to meet funding requirements for target learners to ensure organisational viability
- our desire to actually engage with and meet the needs of local CALD learners who aspire to develop vocational skills. This is not just an educational issue but one of social justice
- the future sustainability of the partnership between Coonara (an RTO) and Mulgrave (a non-RTO) because without a certain level of enrolment in VET courses it was not financially viable for either partner.

To move forward, we needed to extend the research brief from 'how to develop supported pathways' to 'how to *engage with* those who *want* pathways to employment'.

## Second research cycle

After this illuminating first round of research, our appetite for gaining more knowledge was whetted. We had had several 'light bulb' moments and now felt that we had at least identified what we didn't know and, therefore, what we needed to find out with our second cycle of research.

THERE ARE KNOWN KNOWNS  
THERE ARE THINGS THAT WE KNOW THAT WE KNOW, THERE ARE  
**KNOWN UNKNOWNNS**  
THAT IS TO SAY, THERE ARE  
THINGS THAT WE NOW KNOW WE DON'T KNOW  
BUT THERE ARE ALSO  
**UNKNOWN UNKNOWNNS**  
THERE ARE THINGS  
**WE DO NOT KNOW**  
**WE DON'T KNOW**  
AND EACH YEAR WE DISCOVER  
A FEW MORE OF THOSE  
**UNKNOWN**  
**UNKNOWNNS**

*Artwork courtesy of Ami Clarke*

Having identified that our issue was predominantly lack of engagement with the target group, our guiding question for the next research cycle was:

*How can we best identify and meet the needs of the CALD learners in the local community who are interested in moving into further training and possibly employment?*

We decided on three ways to approach this question:

1. We identified some key organisations and individuals in the Mulgrave community and chose two or three for each of the five-member research team to interview. We devised a simple list of questions to generate a discussion but agreed to explore the responses of the interviewees rather than slavishly follow the set questions.

# Partnering for engagement



2. As well as researching the non-engaged, we decided to conduct another focus group with the students in the Certificate III in Children's Services class at Mulgrave. We felt that they could provide us with useful information about their own experiences and reasons for engaging in training at Mulgrave Neighbourhood House.
3. We investigated what innovative programs were being delivered by other Learn Local organisations to engage CALD learners. Those interviewed included staff from Chisholm and Holmesglen TAFEs, Waverley Adult Literacy Program, the Outer Eastern Literacy Program, The Avenue Neighbourhood House, AMES in Noble Park and Springvale, and a Community Development Worker from Monash City Council.

One of the most interesting results of the interviews with other organisations was the realisation that many other Learn Local organisations in the Eastern Metropolitan Region were experiencing the same engagement issues as Mulgrave, i.e. most were very successfully engaging with the established CALD communities but were finding it very difficult to engage with the more recently arrived migrants and refugees. The established communities were predominantly skilled migrants with a need for English language skills but not always with a need for vocational skills for employment. As at Mulgrave, other providers had experienced the same demand from the spouses of skilled migrants for English language classes with a strong social focus. These women were neither jobseekers nor potential VET students.

We also found out through these interviews with other organisations that the employment opportunities were mostly with small to medium businesses including retail and wholesale. One

ESL provider reported that a significant number of the recently arrived men aspired to own a takeaway food outlet.

Those service providers that had had some success in engaging with newly arrived migrants found the following strategies had worked for them:

- engaging initially through children (playgroups, childcare and schools)
- forming partnerships or networks with community health organisations and churches had been far more effective than attempting the same with other education providers
- patience, i.e. taking the time to slowly and carefully build up contacts and networks with local CALD communities, sometimes through one person, so as to gain credibility and trust
- The Avenue Neighbourhood House formed a Community Learning Partnership project that targeted local small retailers, many of whom are from CALD backgrounds. A comprehensive needs assessment was conducted that resulted in the collaborative development of special programs to meet small business needs. Strong relationships were built during this planning phase and it proved to be a successful way of engaging the retailers rather than trying to get them into the organisation to access services that they had no part in developing.

The focus group session with the current students in the Certificate III in Children's Services was made up of ten students from eight different nations. Almost all the women were professionals in their countries of origin including a midwife from China, a doctor from China, a primary school teacher from Mexico, a Ministry of Health nutrition study secretary from India, a microbiologist from India, a receptionist from

Malta, and a manager from Hong Kong. Probably due to their previous education, most of the women found the course content relatively easy. The main issues they identified were regarding their confidence to undertake placements in the Australian workplace, difficulties with the specialist terminology and with computing skills. They all indicated that they had enrolled in the course because it was close to home, easily accessible and allowed them to study part-time to balance family commitments.

Our investigation into innovative programs offered by other organisations that focused on engaging CALD learners gave us some very good ideas for new programs at Mulgrave. These included a range of pre-accredited short courses with a strong focus on pathways into particular forms of employment including hospitality, horticulture, aged care, child care and working with children, welfare work, business and administration. Some organisations have developed pre-accredited courses designed to demystify the Australian workplace and the Australian job search system. The provision of resumé services and volunteer ESL tutors was also considered to be effective in many cases.

## A proposed third cycle

The Mulgrave Neighbourhood House/Coonara Community House partnership plans to continue into a third cycle of research by observing the outcomes of a number of actions we will implement to increase engagement and provide pathways for CALD learners:

*Develop relationships and partnerships to better engage new CALD learners*

- Work with the Monash Council to operate a homework club for local school children (with a strong focus on newly arrived migrants). As the trust builds, investigate the needs of their parents and how Mulgrave Neighbourhood House could meet these needs.
- Contact the local community health services to see if they have established links with newly arrived migrants and if they would be willing to look at meeting their needs via partnerships.
- Contact the local Baptist Church, which has strong links with the Indonesian community, to investigate unmet needs.

*Develop and deliver new pre-accredited courses to support CALD learners' pathways into VET classes*

- 'Navigating' the Australian employment system (including computers)
- Introduction to working in horticulture (using new community food garden)
- Introduction to working in hospitality (using commercial kitchen on premises)
- Introduction to working with children
- Introduction to working in aged care
- Introduction to starting a small business in Australia.

These would take the place of current lengthy ESL classes with no clearly defined vocational pathways.

## *Provide support for CALD learners in VET courses*

- Deliver the Working with Children course, including industry terminology and pathways, in Term 1 for students commencing Certificate III in Children's Services in Term 2.
- Integrate Information Technology support into classroom delivery by using laptops.
- Provide a longer introduction to work placements including not only employability skills but also simulated workplace interaction with children.
- Where individually relevant, suggest exiting students enrol in the pre-accredited course on 'navigating' the Australian employment system.

## *Deliver a Diploma in Children's Services*

- Provide a pathway for the existing students in the Certificate III course.
- Timetable it on the same day as the existing Certificate course in the same venue to make it easier for those who have already planned their week around attending training on a particular day.

## Lessons we have learned

Researchers need to be careful in communicating the goals and purposes of the research activities to all stakeholders.

Focus groups work well with a team of two researchers to assist with conversations and to capture the information. It also makes debriefing and reflection easier.

Know your community. Maintaining current community profiles is vital.

Understand the learning needs as well as the reasons for participation by existing students.

Partnerships are a great strategy for both support and engagement but they require shared expectations and regular review for success.

Research is not easy and one of the key reasons for doing it is to test your assumptions and to find out what you don't know!

# Church, choir and kava: Consulting Pacific Islander communities



## Robinvale Network House

Andrea Manna: *Trainer and Assessor*

### Research context

Friday afternoon in Robinvale. The many faces of Australia's cultural diversity are going about their weekly routine of shopping, banking and paying the bills. A sea of colour as Asians, Europeans, Indigenous Australians and Pacific Islanders, many in their traditional dress of *lava-lava*, bright floral prints or Vietnamese conical hats (*non la*), wander up and down the street, calling and chatting to each other, perhaps discussing the grape or almond harvests, their plans for the week ahead or their church service on Sunday.

These are just some of the 37% of Robinvale's population who were born overseas and 40% who speak a language other than English at home (ABS 2007). It is a scene repeated each week during the busy seasons and it tells us how unique this small, Mallee country town really is.

Boasting a Mediterranean climate, Robinvale has attracted migrants from all corners of the globe, beginning with the Chaffey brothers in nearby Mildura who saw the potential to turn this dry, desert country into an irrigated oasis.

Much of the local agricultural industry is labour intensive—the reason many of today's communities have chosen to make Robinvale their home. Returned servicemen or their descendants, and older migrants from humble European origins, now employ workers from Asia, the Middle East, Pacific Islands and Africa. Unfortunately much of the available work is seasonal, with low, irregular wages and poor working conditions, which causes financial stress and increases the risk of exploitation.

Robinvale Network House is a Neighbourhood House and Learn Local Centre that delivers pre-accredited and accredited training. We are actively engaged in community development, advocacy and community English language classes. We work in collaboration with various organisations in the region to address the issues of social cohesion and inclusion, and the impact of social injustice on our CALD communities.

A high proportion of the learners at Robinvale Network House are from CALD communities but we have low retention rates and irregular attendance. Both may be caused by recognised barriers to engagement such as low English language and literacy proficiency, cultural differences or inappropriateness of the courses, in addition to local housing issues. For example, we know that large Pacific Islander families are living in relatively small houses where space is at a premium and a quiet place to study is difficult to find. We know too that family and church commitments are very strong in our Islander communities, leaving them little time for additional activities.

However, through our research as part of the ACFE *Responding to CALD Learners* initiative, we hoped to find ways of providing a more supportive and culturally respectful learning environment to improve our existing educational service delivery. Through our investigation, we hoped to develop sustainable, long-term strategies that would improve the language, literacy and employability skills of our communities, and, in turn, provide pathways to accredited training or better employment prospects.

## Plans and action

For the first cycle of our research we wanted to gain an insight into the perception of adult education amongst the Fijian and Tongan communities. Anecdotal evidence suggested that adult education was frowned upon and discouraged amongst these communities. We also wanted to look at the strengths and weaknesses of our Introductory Computer Program to see how we could adapt it to provide more meaningful content, and, in turn, improve the retention and completion rates of our CALD learners. To do that we knew that we needed to listen to and consult with the communities to develop courses that specifically address their needs.

Our methods of gathering this information included a survey, a review of past learners' evaluation forms, a series of meetings with the communities, and in some cases, one-on-one interviews which we felt might facilitate a more honest disclosure of true feelings, being mindful that both communities have strong patriarchal traditions.

We considered that we had an existing level of trust because of prior community contact by our researchers. Despite this, we felt it was important to meet with the two communities at times and places where they felt most comfortable. Besides, our conventional methods of promoting our courses weren't reaching the Islander communities so we needed to try a more innovative approach. For the Tongan community, this meant a meeting at the Uniting Church following their evening worship. The Fijians invited us to join them in their evening choir practice which was held in a local home decorated in a traditional Fijian style. Our discussions took place over soup and kava following the singing.

These informal consultations involved ten Tongan and twenty-two Fijian adults. Among the Tongan community most of the participants had a working knowledge of English but few, if any, would have had a standard consistent with an Australian Year 11 or 12. Few had excellent English skills despite English being one of the official languages of Tonga (CIA 2011). The Fijians, on the contrary, had excellent spoken and written English skills due to their schooling in Fiji being conducted in English, one of the country's two official languages (CIA 2011). About one-third had permanent residency or citizenship, but all exhibited reserve and some anxiety about how well they are accepted in Australian society. Many believe they are viewed as lower class and should be accepting of sub-standard living and working conditions. They are often blamed, usually without foundation, for criminal or undesirable behavior and some have experienced racism whereby they are only served in some local shops after 'white' Australians have been served. A few had experienced intimidation in the workplace even though they had worked legitimately in Australia for some years.

**I tried to learn once but it was too hard. I had to look after my grand-kids and I couldn't go to all the classes.**

Sieni from Tonga

Our consultations showed that, for many, further education was not part of their experience. For some who had embarked on any training, the time commitment had proved to be too great. In addition, several people believed that training did not lead to better employment for Islander

people. We found that advancement in the workplace does not work quite the same way in Islander communities, especially where they are accustomed to being mentored by a friend or relation. In small village communities, allies and supporters can be found in ways not often available in the horticulture industry. Most of the respondents had much experience of working on contract or piecework rates for a variety of employers, and had come to appreciate supportive relationships, avoiding the many businesses which maintain the lowest possible contract prices for work. This perhaps explains why promoting the benefits of adult education, and how it can improve their workplace experiences, has proven difficult in the past. However, some did recognise the value of training they had received in their place of employment, for example, gaining a bus licence, chainsaw licence or computer familiarity.

## You need to teach us things that will help us in our everyday lives.

Pasi from Fiji

Moreover, no-one thought that adult education was frowned upon or discouraged, which we had thought to be the case. In fact, our consultations revealed that there was interest in the main areas of computer and business skills with many expressing particular enthusiasm to enrol in our next computer program, although not solely for employment purposes. When we asked what they wanted to learn or achieve from our program, they gave a variety of reasons that covered both employment and social needs:

- for their own pleasure or gain
- to help their children
- to monitor their children's activities

- to learn email so they can keep in touch with friends and family, both in Australia and overseas
- to be able to write a letter
- to play their music
- to book bus and plane tickets
- to practise Learner Permit tests.

## I just want to help my kids with their homework.

Ailini from Tonga

Our discussions also looked at issues that might prevent participants from being able to enrol or maintain attendance in the course. Responses included:

- cost—many were concerned that the cost of the program could be prohibitive
- timing—current start times were thought to be too early for evening classes
- social or family activities—looking after children, having to wait for their husband to come home from work or church activities.

The discussion of cost and time underlined the reality that the Islanders are paid poorly and often work very long hours, as well as often having to travel some distance to and from the workplace. An hourly rate without penalty can be \$15 but at times the earnings can be as low as \$60 or \$70 a day because of the contract middlemen and oversupply of labour.

## More plans

Having gained these insights into the perceptions of adult education amongst the Fijian and Tongan communities, and knowing that a number of people were enthusiastic about enrolling in a computer course that met their needs, our collaborative team met to discuss what to do next. We decided on three main strategies:

*Strategy 1:* Modify organisational practices:

- Introduce a payment plan to spread the cost of the program over a five-week period, reducing the financial impact of an up-front fee.
- Timetable a later start to enable learners to get home from work and arrive at Robinvale Network House in time for their course.
- Encourage learners to access Robinvale Network House between formal lessons to practise their newly acquired skills.

*Strategy 2:* Adapt our training manual:

Robinvale Network House attracts its learners from a hugely diverse community, and they may have come from any one of around fifty countries in various regions around the world. Literacy and language skills vary enormously so we were mindful that our learning materials must meet the needs of those with poor literacy skills as well as those who read English very well. We looked at the learning materials from other providers and realised ours could be daunting or too hard for some learners to follow, especially if they wanted to practise in their own time. We decided to make our training manual more user-friendly by including only the most common internet terminology, omitting some of the written content and more complex exercises, simplifying the language and rearranging the content to create a better flow of ideas. However, we kept the

content that provided further information based on commonly asked questions for those keen enough or brave enough to explore other features and functions of a computer. This information could be read at their leisure.

*Strategy 3:* Adapt the content of our Introduction to Computers course:

Initially this course was written with the intention of teaching learners how to use Microsoft Word, Internet Explorer and email, with the intended outcome that learners have some good basic skills to help them in the workplace. We considered a number of ways of adapting this in order to incorporate more strategies to foster interest and involvement in the learning process. We considered such things as including more games, how to make content more relevant, what to leave in, what to take out and what to add. Our thoughts and plans are summarised in the following table.

# Church, choir and kava: Consulting Pacific Islander communities



Researchers' suggestions	Feedback from trainers & coordinator	Action
Increase the content that focuses on mouse practice and control	This could be beneficial for beginners	Include mouse practice games. This not only improves mouse control but reinforces with learners how to use the menu system
Remove the activity on Input and Output devices	Learners enjoy this activity and it provides a good opportunity to learn computer terminology	Leave the activity in the program
The lesson on Tables is too hard	Some learners are competent enough to complete this lesson	Leave the lesson as an enrichment activity only for those able to cope with its complexity
Adapt the lesson on Tables to something more meaningful, such as a timetable or budget	Some people prepare rosters for church or community events. Tables can do this well	Adapt the content to a more relevant topic, such as a small budget or roster
Include activities that show the learner how to book a bus ticket and access the Vic Roads practice Learner Permit Tests	This activity could be useful and more relevant than the current activity	Amend current activity, designed to teach learners about hypertext and hyperlinks, to accessing Vic Roads practice Learner Permit Tests and booking a V/Line bus ticket
Introduce learners to textweek.com that provides quick resources for lay preachers	Current amount of content is sufficient	Include textweek.com as a search option in the activity where learners choose their desired websites to surf
Include more fun activities	Learners already have plenty of 'fun' internet search options to choose from	Include mouse practice games (as above)

We anticipated that these strategies would help us to provide a more supportive learning environment that resulted in better retention of learners in this course, and hopefully, a more positive perception amongst learners of the value of educational courses.

## Second research cycle: Trialling the course



Our second cycle of research focused on trialling our remodelled course with its modified organisational procedures, the adapted course content and the adapted training manual. We contacted our research participants and invited them to be part of the trial program. Each community group was allocated three places. Unfortunately, the response was poor considering the enthusiasm shown during the consultation process. However, we later found out that many in the Fijian community had temporarily moved to the Northern Territory and Western Australia to work on the mango harvests.

### Modified organisational procedures

The research participants were offered the course at a reduced cost. Initially we considered inviting them to attend at no cost but decided this might reinforce the assumption that adult education courses at Network House are free—we have noticed in the past that there is an expectation that services, including education, should be free. As it turned out, we were unable to trial the payment plan because the learners paid the full fee at the beginning of the first lesson. We will, however, continue to trial this option with future classes.

The start time was put back by half an hour in response to concerns that learners would not be able to juggle their family and work commitments to suit the earlier start. This appeared to work well although one of the learners was, at first, consistently late. The trainer offered to text her a reminder an hour before class, for which the learner was grateful. Her punctuality improved and she even began to arrive early!

Learners were given ample opportunity to practise what they had been taught and the trainer allowed them to choose which activities they wished to pursue or spend more time on. No learners accessed Network House during non-class times but this was probably because they had access to other computers at home.

### Adapted training manual

All the learners commented that the training manual was easy to follow when they used it for practice in their own time. Sometimes this was at home and occasionally when they arrived early for their class, where they found they could start the computer and access the programs they wanted to use without asking for assistance. Where possible we kept the written content to a minimum and used screen shots in a step-by-step process. We wanted the learner to be able to match their manual to what they could see on their monitor. This is particularly helpful for those with lower literacy skills.

### Adapted course content

The learners completed surveys prior to commencing the course, and upon conclusion. Their reasons for enrolling in the course included 'to learn a new skill' and 'help find work, improve my skill'. They had some computer knowledge but this was limited to playing a few games, using email at a basic level, accessing eBay and looking at photos. Being shown how to do something and making/doing things themselves were the learning strategies preferred.

## Before I just play games. Now I can write a proper letter.

Sera from Fiji

Learners' mouse skills were good so the trainer omitted the lesson in the manual that encourages mouse practice and instead demonstrated how to access other programs on the computer, which the learners found particularly useful. Learning how to play the games received a mixed reaction. One said it was boring and would like more challenging activities while one said it was fun. Given that this particular group did not need extensive mouse skills practice, on reflection, it would probably have been better to focus on other aspects rather than games.

Learners confirmed that the activity on input and output devices—where the learners must decide which peripheral is an input device and which is an output device—provided an opportunity to learn computer terminology in context. It also created interaction between learners as they helped each other and they found it interesting.

As the learners in our trial class had some computer experience, the trainer considered them advanced enough to attempt to make a table, which they did more easily than she expected. The learners commented that they could see themselves using a table in a variety of situations, particularly for coordinating family activities.

## I thought it would be like school.

'Ana from Tonga

Learners found the internet and email activities to be the most beneficial and engaging. During the initial consultations members from both the Tongan and Fijian communities wanted activities to meet their social needs, including being able to book airfares, bus tickets and taking online practice Learner Permit tests. When asked which lesson had been the most useful all learners said 'booking a bus ticket' because they would no longer need to rely on their children to do it for them. The Tongan women said they now felt more empowered to use the computer on their own without having to continuously ask their children, who are often impatient and consider their mothers too old to need a computer, for help. The trainer offered the *textweek.com* website as an option for browsing (see table) but the learners were more interested in sites about Tonga and Fiji, particularly holiday sites. Such sites were already included as search options before adaptation, because we know from experience that learners are always fascinated to see their own country, town or house appear on the monitor in front of them.

At the conclusion of the course the employability skills of the learners, by their own assessment, had improved by between 'a little change' and 'a great improvement', with the greatest improvement being in the learning and technology categories. The course was highly rated by learners who indicated that they wanted to enrol in another course at Robinvale Network House and to study towards a qualification. The trainer's course evaluation reflected this improvement, although her assessment also identified improvement in punctuality, teamwork ('they helped each other'), and problem-solving ('were able to experiment to correct errors').

The trainer also documented that individual demonstration, which is made possible by our small classes, was more successful than data

projection. The learners appeared to have difficulty in transferring the information from the overhead demonstration to their own monitors, especially when following a step-by-step sequence, for example, when learning to print a document.

As a further evaluation we asked the learners to participate in a short, informal discussion, which learners agreed to do either by telephone or in their own home.

One benefit we had not considered was that we had helped our learners to save money. They no longer needed to pay for expensive overseas telephone calls because they could now communicate by email and Facebook. Eventually they hope to install Skype. 'Ana said she had been searching the internet for cultural artefacts and found that she could buy them online far cheaper than by sending money to Tonga. She searches for special offers on the products she wants and now knows how much she should be paying for her goods.

**It's the first contact I've had with my family in the US and Tonga for 20 years. I cried when I saw her picture on Facebook. I'm happy I'm more connected with my family.**

'Ana from Tonga

says she would like to come to Australia to visit the learner's family. Perhaps if we include more e-communication content in our programs that can be transferred to employment environments, our learners will be more engaged and more likely to continue their education or have better employment opportunities.

The learners were very enthusiastic about their newly acquired skills and proud that they had achieved some independence. They will, they said, be recommending the course to their friends.

Overwhelmingly, however, the learners expressed their joy at being able to be in contact with their families. We believe this is an important factor in the morale and emotional well-being of our CALD communities. One learner has been contacted by her aunty in New Zealand who

## Concluding reflection

Clearly we need to keep a closer ear to the ground about the movements of our potential CALD learners. In our rapidly changing community, where itinerant workers, friends and relations come and go monthly with the cycle of horticulture, it is evident that the delivery of educational services needs more intensive monitoring of learners and their availability. One learner suggested that two evenings a week during the harvest season could be difficult to commit to and that one session would be more manageable. Currently our classes are held on two afternoons or two evenings per week. It has also been suggested that one of our strategies could be to hold classes over a shorter timeframe, perhaps within a two-week period, which would allow learners to participate between seasons. They would then be able to complete the program rather than only attending for five or six lessons before they leave the area in search of work.

We need to continue to listen to and consult with our CALD communities to develop other courses that specifically address their needs. Our Committee of Management has already endorsed a more consultative approach and we want to continue to build on our new and enhanced relationships. We value their opinions and have established an increased level of trust from both CALD communities, but particularly with the Fijians.

We intend to follow the advice of one learner who suggested that we talk to the Minister of the Tongan Fellowship or the Ministers of the various Tongan churches in Robinvale if we want to build our relationship with the Tongan community. 'We trust them', she said, 'and we believe what they tell us.' These comments confirm that one of our strategies to communicate with and engage our communities must be through the church leaders.

Through this project we have learnt a great deal both on a personal and an organisational level. We have seen how important it is to begin to engage our hard to reach Islander communities by reaching out to them, by going to where they are, and by talking to them about what is important to them. In this way—in showing that we are interested in them and their lives—we can begin to build relationships and trust. We have learnt the value of flexibility at the individual and the organisational level and we have learnt that small things—like texting learners to remind them that class is on—can make a big difference. Lastly, but very importantly, we have a greater cultural awareness of the communities that we are trying to engage but at the same time we are aware of how much more there is to learn ... and we realise our journey is only just beginning!

# Team teaching for language and culture



## Preston Reservoir Adult Community Education

Tina Vlahos: *ESL Teacher*

### Research context

In 2010, we added the Certificate II in Asset Maintenance (Cleaning Operations) to the Preston Reservoir Adult Community Education (PRACE) Scope of Registration. Soon after, we were approached by Darebin African Resource Centre about delivering the course to ten members of local African communities. Through the enrolment process it was decided that the ten women did not as yet have sufficient language skills to understand the course content and complete the assessments successfully. So unfortunately the women were not enrolled.

This was not a new occurrence at PRACE and, given the demographics of the local community in comparison with PRACE's student demographics, it was becoming apparent that strategies were needed to support CALD learners to successfully participate in PRACE VET programs.

PRACE is located in Reservoir, and is nestled amongst suburban homes in the north of Melbourne, in the municipality of Darebin. The City of Darebin has a highly diverse community, with more than 30% of residents born overseas and almost 40% who speak a language other than English at home (Darebin City Council 2011).

In 2010, 34% of PRACE learners enrolled in VET programs were from a CALD background. While on the surface it appears that our VET enrolment demographics are consistent with local community demographics, they are not in line with overall PRACE enrolment data. In fact, 57%

of all PRACE enrolments are people from a CALD background, owing to the organisation's extensive ESL programs.

In this action research project, PRACE focused on strategies to improve its capacity to meet the needs and goals of CALD learners who want to enrol in the PRACE Cleaning Operations course. We wanted to find out how we could best support them and whether a close working relationship between an ESL teacher and the VET trainer could be fostered to achieve this. We wanted to know what this relationship would involve in practice.

We set up a collaborative team of six people: the Education Coordinator, the Cleaning Operations VET Trainer (John), the ESL Coordinator, the Further Education Coordinator, the ESL Flexible Learning Coordinator, and an ESL teacher (me) as principal researcher. Our team decided that the guiding question for our first cycle of research was:

*If we document the participation and support needs of CALD learners in a Cleaning Operations class, how will this increase our understanding of the language and cultural needs of such learners?*

# Team teaching for language and culture



## First research cycle

### The plan

We had our question, we had our team and we had *The Plan*: I would be enrolled in the Cleaning Operations course to gain an understanding of what the course involved. We envisaged that, as an ESL teacher, I would support the CALD trainees as the need arose. I would also focus on the language of the course in the course delivery, materials and assessments so we could think about possible ways of structuring support in the future. Finally, as the principal researcher, I would be keeping a journal of my observations and reflections. Many hats to wear!

To recruit CALD learners for the course we went back to the Darebin African Resource Centre, to our centre's playgroups, ESL classes, and even to a local church service. We found that there was now a big interest in aged care and all our potential trainees wanted to work in that sector—not in cleaning. Interest in different sectors, especially in close-knit CALD communities, seems to come in waves and, clearly, at that time in our search we were possibly not going to catch a wave. Anxious moments in terms of our research! But then they came—within a week we had four CALD learners enrolled in the course.

### The learners

We now had two members of the African community: Grace, a Sudanese community leader, and Andrew, who is also a leader in his community from Sierra Leone, plus Giao from Vietnam and Lote from Fiji. The motivation for our CALD learners in doing the course was primarily to find employment. Our African participants also had a larger goal in mind—they had been selected by their communities to do the course in order to pave the way for other 'less learned' members of their community to follow. They were seeking proactive ways to create employment

for their communities, with the plan being that, in time, they would set up cleaning companies of their own. They approached the course and its content with dedication as they were not there simply for the expansion of their own learning and future potential employment—they had a responsibility to their communities. Andrew in particular took meticulous notes and asked many questions.



### The course, the VET trainer and the ESL teacher

John is a highly skilled trainer with decades of experience in the cleaning industry. His training style is clear, direct, explicit and very supportive. It left me wondering what my role really was. My research journal at this time reflects this. It's full of lamentations with a little sad face beside the text.

### Journal entry:

Given John's style of training: practical hands-on, demonstration, repetition, asking non-intimidating questions of all students along the way, constantly 'checking in', writing key words and phrases on the board, never writing anything superfluous or extra, only key phrases to discuss and remember, providing a vast sample of anecdotal examples ... I cannot think but that a CALD learner would thrive.

The English language levels of the CALD students added to my dilemma. I had assumed that we would have learners whose English language skills were low. This was what I was used to as an ESL teacher and I did not think I would be of any use to a CALD learner unless I could offer help with language. As it turned out, I had a lot to learn.

## Language

*Glossary: mould, sluice trough, volatile, bio infectious, saliva, sweat, semen*

Every day in class, I collected words to create a glossary of vocabulary I was seeing anew due to my position as a trainee and not a teacher—words I had never had to explain before in a teaching situation. One day, one of our female CALD learners asked, ‘What is semen?’ In a split second, John responded with, ‘Men who work on boats’. This, of course, brought laughter into the room and a chance for another female learner to whisper something into Grace’s ear. John had his own way of dealing with certain language issues and it worked well because of the language levels of the current trainees and because they had developed good relationships with the other trainees. But it would be less effective with trainees with lower levels of English. I had the possible future CALD trainees in mind as I added ‘semen’ to my vocabulary list for the glossary.

I was also called on from time to time to give impromptu grammar lessons as John and I developed our ‘tag teaching’ style and an awareness of how I could contribute my language and literacy teaching skills to this vocational course. I was intrigued to find that it wasn’t just the CALD learners who found these grammar sessions useful.

But my eureka moment came during a training sessions on how to clean a bathroom, when

## Journal entry:

We worked in the restrooms today and all had a shot at cleaning different parts and fixtures. Grace was cleaning in the cubicle and called out for someone to ‘Give me cloth’. Interestingly the trainee who passed it to her didn’t bat an eyelid. The thing is, we all know Grace by now, know how gentle she is. A woman whose name describes her well. But I registered the concerned look on John’s face and later, during our debriefing, we discussed it. To be honest ... I am really nervous ... how is John going to explain this? Our want and need for a plethora of pleases and thank yous? I understand this from both perspectives—from the CALD learner’s and the native speaker’s. When I was a child and first went to Greece, family members would laugh at my brother and I because we were too polite! They thought it superfluous and unnecessary—actually, after a while, even irritating.

(Next class) John brought it up today. I thought he was so brave to do it and he did it diplomatically! Grace was grateful and we had a discussion about it. Makes me think of all the times when I was teaching, when something similarly awkward happened between students, I always took the coward’s option! I would try to diffuse situations with humour or by changing the subject. Why did I do that?

Grace, engrossed in the task she was doing, called out for someone to, ‘Give me cloth’. The cloth was supplied but in the next session John determined that we ‘had to tell Grace’. And from there ensued a discussion on how this style of communication might be received in an actual cleaning environment. It was concluded that another cleaner might think she was being rude and very likely say something offensive back to her.

While this sounds like a straight language learning issue—about Grace needing to say ‘please’ and use softeners such as ‘Could you ...’ so that her request didn’t sound like a demand—I realised that it was actually much more than

# Team teaching for language and culture



this. There was ‘something cultural’ involved. This time my journal entry had a smiley face next to the text!

I realised I needed to go back to the books; I needed to find out more about the relationship of language, culture and employability skills. Here was a way that I could perhaps make a significant contribution to CALD trainees’ success in the course and in their future employment!

## Culture in the workplace

Yates (2008) talks about how employability skills are fundamentally culture-specific. She particularly focuses on communication skills, which in turn are fundamental to other employability skills such as teamwork. She points out that language ‘softeners’ are an integral part of the way we communicate in the Australian workplace. We need them for requesting, negotiating (e.g. work tasks, days off), persuading and being assertive without being too pushy. They include such phrases as ‘I just need ...’ ‘I was hoping ...’ ‘Maybe I could ...’ ‘Perhaps you could ...’ Even an instruction from the boss is likely to be phrased as a request ‘Would you do ... when you have time’. This is not the way things are done in less egalitarian cultures. They are what Yates (2008:32) calls the ‘secret rules’ of communicating in the Australian culture.

She tells us that while most ‘native speakers’ might not be able to articulate these ‘secret rules’, they do know (to a greater or lesser extent) how to *use* them. CALD trainees, who have been brought up in cultures with different communication rules, do not. For our CALD trainees, the rules—the norms and expectations of communication—need to be made explicit and trainees need opportunities to practise them during training if he or she is going to manage them successfully in the workplace after the course. Here then was an important role for me.

While John had handled this well with this trainee group, other trainees, particularly those with lower levels of language skills, could need a great deal more support to internalise the ‘secret rules’ in order to use them effectively in the workplace.

Other cultural aspects of the Australian workplace also need to be made explicit during training. In particular, our workplaces are often less hierarchical than those our CALD trainees may be used to in their culture, and teamwork and initiative are highly prized here. But how a team operates might be quite different in another culture, and initiative frowned upon as not showing enough respect for the hierarchy and/or interfering with the operation of a team. John sets up his classroom as a microcosm of an actual cleaning industry environment. Trainees come to class and are assigned tasks and team positions. These are rotated and everyone is given the responsibility of being a worker, supervisor and area manager. Then the work begins, with emphasis placed on the expectation of the time the work will be finished in and the group’s individual and combined

## Journal entry:

At first some of John’s jokes would fly over the heads of the CALD learners. ‘Normally, I’d give you thirty minutes for lunch but today you can have half an hour’. It didn’t take too long though before we had a class full of comedians. As evidenced by the following exchange:

Andrew: John, there is a cockroach in this dustpan. What do you want me to do?

John: Ah, I don’t know Andrew, do you wanna take it home?

Andrew: No, I believe it is the property of PRACE.

Immersion, explicit, egalitarian and fair dinkum is all I have to say.

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responsibilities to maintain high occupational health and safety (OHS) practices. After each session, feedback is garnered from the group and John's observations are discussed. This goes a long way towards Yates's concept of the learning being a cycle of 'observation, analysis, reflection and tentative rehearsal' with CALD learners needing opportunities for 'noticing' cultural differences (Yates 2008:31). 'Noticing' opportunities (e.g. discussions of cultural differences in ways of doing things such as working in teams) and additional opportunities to practise may be something that could become a strong feature of my support for future learners.

Humour is another aspect of communication that is very cultural. It is also a big part of the Australian workplace. To 'acclimatise' his trainees to Australian humour, jokes and a sense of fun are an integral part of John's training style. At first, jokes were often met by puzzled CALD faces but this changed over time. For example: Andrew and Grace told us that in some African cultures it is offensive for a male to try to impinge on the woman's principle domain, the kitchen. John's response, 'Luckily my wife knows who the boss is—it's her', produced raucous laughter.

## Assessment

One might assume that a Cleaning Operations course would be easy to pass. Mention the course to anyone you know and see their response. Perhaps even consider your own feelings of what such a course might entail. 'Gee, it isn't rocket science!' and 'What do you have to do? Learn to push a broom around?' were just two responses I heard. But, in fact, cleaning operations involve the use of potent chemicals and intensely physical work that require a thorough understanding if potentially fatal workplace accidents are to be avoided and the job completed satisfactorily. The work requires reasonable oral communication skills. But it doesn't require high literacy skills.

**I estimate that about 50% of employees working in cleaning cannot read or write in English.**

John: Trainer

Trainees need to achieve competency in eleven modules. Some of the assessments were done through practical demonstration and some were oral. But there were also written assessments. Most of the CALD learners, indeed almost *all* the learners, were rather worried about this and especially concerned about their spelling. I also wondered how it would go, given that the literacy levels of many of the learners weren't very high. But John was very supportive: we had many practice runs before the actual assessments and John emphasised that we were not being assessed on our writing skills but rather on our knowledge of the course content. He also explained that if anyone was stuck with spelling, he would assist: 'I will never *give* you the answer but I will ask you to give it to me and I will write it down for you.'

## Journal entry:

Humour, irony in practice assessment ... could see Grace and Giau frowning in concentration, the looks on their faces saying, 'What the ...?' I realised something really important today. We include stuff for fun but sometimes students just don't get it, as they don't expect irony etc. in a test. We did a couple today and by the second one, they started to get it ... to look for it, like a challenge in a puzzle.

# Team teaching for language and culture



I was still left wondering though whether there would be a way of cutting down on the written assessments. The practice runs took up a fair amount of course time and the literacy levels of the assessments themselves were higher than the literacy required for the job.

The written assessments also gave rise to another cultural eureka moment for me when I noticed the responses of some of the CALD learners to what I had assumed was the obvious humour in the multiple choice questions. I had used this 'easy' way of eliminating incorrect answers many times in the past. It was fun and it was obvious. Right? Answer: Wrong. Not obvious to some of these CALD learners who sometimes ticked the humorous and 'obviously' wrong answer. It brought home to me again how culture-specific humour is.

We discussed the fairness of including humour in multiple choice questions at the next meeting of our collaborative team. Was it fair and legitimate because it was an authentic representation of what the learners would find in the workplace and in our culture? Or was it, in fact, assessing the learners' ability to spot humour rather than what it was supposed to be assessing? If so, was it discriminatory as an assessment task?

## More plans

Our first action research cycle had revealed so much—to me as a language specialist and to both John and me about how a collaborative team teaching approach can help our learners develop the skills and knowledge to pass the course and gain the necessary employability skills. We also now knew that the course resources—module books and assessment tasks—needed to be made much more CALD learner-friendly and accessible. The existing module books contain highly useful and important material. They address OHS issues for

every level of Cleaning Operations, they explore the numeracy skills necessary for safe and correct mixing of chemicals, and they include a comprehensive overview of the cleaning industry. But there is simply not enough time during the course to practically and verbally cover all the material in the course module books. The trainees are strongly encouraged to read them at home and to devote some time each day to studying them. I have observed though, that most of the trainees do not find the time, or are not engaged enough by the written material, to do this homework.

We decided that our second cycle of action research would continue to explore ways of enhancing our support for CALD trainees so that they received this essential course information in ways that were not overwhelming or intimidating. We would continue to explore our approach to planning and teaching collaboratively as a team. We would also take a fresh look at the written materials we were offering our trainees. This would involve updating the existing resources and changing the written assessment tasks to make them more accessible to our CALD learners.

## Second research cycle

### Team teaching

In contrast to the learner group in our first cycle, the new group of trainees is made up of mostly CALD learners. This has created a very rich learning environment for both John and me, allowing us to consolidate and extend our understanding of how to cater for the cultural needs of our CALD learners and, in so doing, build the intercultural communication skills of *all* our learners. I continue to assist all trainees with literacy and numeracy where needed. John continues to deliver the course information in a real, practical and relevant form, repeating and refreshing the information regularly. In this way we are perfecting a 'tag-teaching' approach in which we take turns as the main instructor each contributing our specialist knowledge, while nevertheless, 'the industry lecturer is clearly in charge and is the subject specialist' (McHugh 2011:12).

As well as being available during course delivery, my role as language and literacy support person is very much appreciated when there are written assessments to do. During this time we both sit with the trainees and discuss the questions they may be stuck on. We further explain, sometimes reword the questions, place them in practical work-based contexts and then ask the trainees to provide the answers verbally. We provide assistance with spelling when necessary. The integrity of the assessment process is maintained, as it is the CALD learners who provide all the answers. Through discussion the questions become more relevant, concrete and real.

### Creating new course materials

We took a good look at the course material and also canvassed the opinions of both ESL teachers and CALD trainees. The feedback was that:

- pictures were not clear enough and somewhat faded, due to repeated photocopying
- writing was often too dense
- more sub-headings were needed to break up the text and make it easier to read
- language was often unnecessarily difficult but could easily be simplified without losing meaning. For example, 'It is of the utmost importance to keep your cleaning storage area clean' could be changed to, 'It is very important ...'

Initially we were going to create a stand-alone 'Cleaner's Language Book' with pictures and a glossary of the most commonly used terms in the module books and assessment tasks. We then realised this might take the terms out of context and so we decided to incorporate the glossary into the new module books and create a worksheet to accompany each one. This would help when the trainees did their home study. The worksheets also closely resemble the written assessment tasks in order help familiarise the learners with the type of tasks (e.g. multiple choice, tick the box) and their layout.

We are still in the process of developing the new resources for the eleven modules, but the feedback from the CALD trainees on the work completed so far has been very positive. They particularly like the pictures, which were chosen to complement and enhance the text. We also received great feedback on the glossary, which has space underneath each word for a translation into a first or other language. (Although I must say that, to my surprise, the current CALD trainees were not interested in writing in the translations, saying they preferred to learn the word in English and to stick to English only.) It was through the CALD trainees' feedback that the idea for accompanying worksheets was born, as the trainees said they

wanted questions to go with the books so that they would know what information to look out for specifically. From a trainer's and ESL teacher's perspective, it also helps to structure homework, to know how a learner is progressing and if they need extra help. For the trainees, the worksheets are an incentive to read the module books, knowing they will receive feedback on completion.

## Assessment tasks

As we had done with the course content, we canvassed the opinions of ESL and literacy teachers and CALD trainees. The feedback was that:

- grammar was often unnecessarily complex
- vocabulary was often unnecessarily complex
- some of the answers were culturally exclusive and could be confusing for a CALD learner
- some of the layout could cause confusion to people with limited literacy.

These linguistic, cultural and design aspects make the assessment discriminatory. I am currently redeveloping the tasks to simplify the language and remove assumed knowledge and culture-specific humour. I am also attempting to simplify the layout to minimise confusion over what is required.

## Reflection: Organisational and personal change

As an organisation, we appreciate the opportunity to have been a part of this highly supportive *Responding to CALD Learners* initiative. We feel that it has set in motion real and lasting organisational change which will benefit future CALD learners in all the VET courses at PRACE. It has been an incredibly eye-opening journey, with lots of learning.

Our consultative team has explored possibilities for funding the support model we trialled, i.e. a VET trainer and an ESL teacher working together in the training room to integrate the development of the vocational communication skills (oral, written and cultural) into the training. As a result, PRACE has decided to put the accredited Course in Applied Vocational Study Skills (CAVSS) on our Scope of Registration for next year. This will allow me, as literacy/ESL teacher, to support the needs of *all* the trainees—both the CALD learners and those of English speaking background—during course delivery time. Through team teaching, the CAVSS model 'centralises the need for specialist and explicit teaching of complex cognitive and communication skills as an integral component of all or any vocational training course' (McHugh 2011:13). It ensures that literacy support is seen as a normal part of VET training' and the support delivered is 'wholly relevant to the VET training taking place' (WA Department of Training 2011:1).

We will be sharing the findings of this action research project and the new ideas that came out of it with all our staff so that PRACE can apply what we have learned across the organisation.

On a personal level, I have learned a great deal from being involved in this research. My

## Team teaching for language and culture



experience from working with CALD learners is that the bulk of the time I feel I am learning more from them than they ever could from me. This time in particular, working with learners as a support person in a VET course, my eyes were opened to the essential obligation we all have as teachers and trainers to share with CALD learners much more than simply language. We sometimes choose the safe option because we do not wish to offend or to appear 'culturally imperialistic' (see Yates 2008:2). But if we do this, we are withholding an opportunity for CALD learners to be privy to the cultural knowledge and nuances of language we, as native speakers, know inherently and take for granted.

# Cultural hurdles in aged care work



## Diversitat

Lizzy Bilogrevic: *Aged Care Trainer*

## Research context

Since the 1970s, Diversitat has been the leading Learn Local provider of services to CALD communities in the Greater Geelong area and surrounds. Diversitat offers settlement and community support programs as well as delivering accredited training courses and traineeships. In 2010, we had over 2,000 CALD clients. The most recent community arrivals include Liberian, Afghan, Karen and Karenni.

In our region there is an escalating need for aged care workers, with nearly 25% of the population expected to be over 65 years old by 2021 (Barwon Health 2010). However, we knew from previous consultations with the aged care industry that, despite the demand for aged care workers, some facilities did not readily employ CALD workers because of employer perceptions that they did not have sufficient oral communication and aged care literacy.

As an aged care trainer and work placement supervisor, this greatly concerned me. It meant that some of our theoretically competent CALD learners would be disadvantaged in finding work

in the sector by not being offered work by their host employers after their work placement—this being a common employment pathway amongst our learners in general.

Consequently, for this action research project we wanted to investigate how we could further improve our support for CALD learners enrolled in our Certificate III in Aged Care and Home and Community Care (HACC) courses. This seemed the right path to tread as we had already seen improved placement and employment outcomes amongst some of the CALD attendees who had attended our existing study support group. To improve our current support offerings we considered it important to foster effective collaboration between our VET and ESL departments. Our collaborative research team shared a passion for finding new ways to strengthen employment outcomes for our CALD aged care learners and support their dreams of new beginnings.



# Cultural hurdles in aged care work



## Plans and action

The question guiding us for our first action research cycle was:

*If we seek feedback from employers, our CALD learners and our aged care trainers, what support strategies will be revealed?*

To investigate this, we conducted face-to-face interviews with aged care trainers, former Certificate III in Aged Care and HACC learners, and employers.

### Eager participants

The fourteen former CALD learners we interviewed came from a range of countries—North Africa, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Thailand, Peru, Lebanon, Indonesia, Hong Kong, the Philippines and Tibet. Most had completed their course in the last twelve months. Now already employed in aged care or undertaking further studies, our former learners eagerly participated in our one-on-one in-depth interviews. The incentives—Kooka biscuits and bracing coffee. The participants showed keen interest in this project and the idea of contributing to other CALD learners' success. They were also keen to reconnect with us and tell us about their progress in their career paths.

Most participants had a previous qualification, had worked in a professional capacity in their country of origin and had proficiency in general oral English. When doing our course, they demonstrated sheer tenacity to succeed, burning the midnight oil to reach their goals. They reported that in class they benefited from the interpersonal communication in small peer groups and from having accessible, friendly trainers. They believed that they coped well with the course materials. Many viewed their aged care work as a move forward—the threshold to higher qualifications and improved job prospects. For instance, one former learner, with



university qualifications from his country of origin, envisaged moving into HACC management in the future after gaining industry experience in HACC service delivery.

The former learners considered that success in work placement influenced subsequent employment in aged care. From our placement preparation class, students had learnt that placement was the stage where competencies and employability skills were auditioned under the host employer's gaze. However, 70% of our interviewees considered that their communication skills, especially verbal, required more work. Half reported particular difficulties with medical terms and some of the aged care literacy, e.g. progress notes and care plans.

The notion of 'culture shock' during placement leapt out from some responses. It differed from the jolt many learners experience in the first week of placement as they adapt to the frenetic 'hard slog' in a facility. For our CALD learners, their classroom-based competencies did not prepare them for the harsh realities of communication in the aged care workplace. One learner described problems with having to dealing with the direct, truncated directives given 'on the run' by fellow workers, for example, 'Do Lucy Jones today' or 'Jack, same as yesterday'—without explanation of what that 'doing' meant, or instructions to locate the resident. Another

factor was the blistering pace of care routines and short interaction times that thwarted the clarification of co-workers' instructions and client needs. Then there was the rapid and somewhat scientific handover reporting at shift changeover to deal with. These realities contrast with theory that refers to thorough observance of procedures such as consulting a care plan, and seamless teamwork.

Another cultural hurdle encountered by our CALD learners was the 'hidden hierarchy' of the aged care workplace—a hierarchy obscured by workplace communication that has an aura of equality about it. Workers, and even the manager or director of nursing, call each other by a first name or nickname in a friendly fashion. This caused confusion in determining the line of command for some CALD learners. For example, a CALD learner reported that when instructed by a workplace 'buddy' to clean up the dining room tables, she thought, 'Why should I do that? I am the just same as her.' Yet when she questioned her about the fairness of the instruction, the buddy turned into a (not very pleased) superior!

We asked our research participants how they thought our course could better prepare learners for work placement. Most suggested that they would benefit from extra time during the course, especially for hands-on practice of manual handling of elderly clients and personal care, plus technical tasks such as unfolding a wheel chair. They suggested that more role-play activities would help. Over half thought the course would be enhanced by a greater emphasis on cultural awareness of the workplace, so they would have better understanding of what to expect in terms of cultural differences between their own countries and Australia.

## Circumspect employers

In order to compare learner perceptions with employer perceptions, we interviewed five former host employers separately in five organisations:

- a large facility of 130 beds with a high percentage of CALD clients and 50% CALD workers
- a small high-care facility of 40 beds and 45% CALD workers
- two medium-sized facilities of 90 beds each with 10% CALD workers
- a HACC community centre with 140 CALD clients and 70% CALD workers.

We found a number of common issues among the employers. Like most of the CALD learners, all employers saw oral and written communication skills as an issue. They considered the oral communication skill of being able to take instruction to be crucial in aged care work as it relates to duty of care and to teamwork. Employers were also concerned about CALD learners' abilities to perform literacy tasks such as documentation, charting and understanding policy and procedures as set out in manuals or on computers.

Unprompted, employers in the two facilities that only employed small numbers of CALD workers also touched on cultural differences as they saw them. One believed that CALD learners held the romantic idea that working with the elderly mostly involves socialising. In reality, the job involves effectively performing tasks to a deadline. In relation to a number of tasks, one small, CALD-friendly facility and one of the medium-sized facilities referred to cultural differences in ways of attending to, and understandings of, hygiene, grooming, dental and oral care, skin care, nutrition, hydration needs and infection control.

# Cultural hurdles in aged care work



Several employers commented on what they saw as CALD learners' inability to observe professional boundaries, citing 'overfamiliarity' with the residents, not giving due respect to superiors, and attempts to 'take over' supervising staff. Almost all the employers suggested that more CALD orientation to the Australian workplace and pre-placement preparation would be beneficial.

## Touching base with Aged Care trainers

All four of our aged care trainers agreed that more English language and aged care literacy support was needed. Most learners, including those from English speaking backgrounds, struggle with medical terms and aged care literacy—specific documentation and terminology in incident reports,

personal care charts, progress notes and medication charts, let alone anatomical terms, require learning a whole new language in itself. Trainers also spoke of individual learner's needs, such as a Sudanese learner who could not interpret a timetable or the twenty-four hour clock configurations.

Three trainers blamed the 'culture shock' on the culture-specific nature of the Western approach to aged care—caring for aging populations often being vastly different in CALD learners' countries of origin. Trainers claimed this contributed to comprehension difficulties in the classroom for 60% of their CALD learners, irrespective of the learners' language skills.

Summary of learning needs raised in the research

Former and current Learners	Employers	Trainers
Oral communication, e.g. reporting, clarification strategies	Oral communication, e.g. taking instruction	General English support
Specific language, e.g. medical terms		Specific language e.g. medical terms/ anatomical terms
Specific literacy, e.g. progress notes, care plans, incident reports, legal requirements	Specific literacy, e.g. charting, understanding policies & procedures, documents	Specific literacy, e.g. incident reports, progress notes, medication charts
More cultural awareness of the workplace, e.g. rapid pace, working in teams, understanding roles in the hierarchy, teamwork	More pre-placement preparation, e.g. realistic expectation of the work role, understanding roles in the hierarchy, observing professional boundaries	Culture-specific nature of aged care
Hands-on practice needed, e.g. manual handling of elderly residents, unfolding wheel chairs, personal care tasks	Basic tasks, e.g. brushing teeth, performing tasks to deadlines	

## More plans

Our first cycle of action research unmistakably revealed where we could improve on preparing our CALD learners for active participation in the workplace. Most challenging for us was tussling with some of the communication issues raised by both former learners and by employers, and the ‘professional boundary’ issues raised by some employers. On the suggestion of the AMES research mentors, we explored Yates’s (2008) study on the culture-specific nature of employability skills in general, communication and teamwork in particular. From what had initially seemed broad and amorphous, we came to understand that the ‘professional boundary’ concerns could also be seen specifically as cultural issues. What the employers saw as ‘over familiarity’ may have resulted from culturally different ways of viewing aged care, especially in light of the employer’s remark about CALD learners’ perceptions of the job as primarily socialising. ‘Due respect’ and ‘taking over’ could relate directly to the issue the CALD learners raised about not understanding the hierarchy or team structures because of culturally different ways of communicating with superiors and colleagues.

Yates explains that:

... the nuts and bolts of successful and appropriate communication may look very different in different cultures ... New arrivals entering the job market face the challenge of not only having English language and literacy skills commensurate with a technical demands of the job, but also of understanding how to operate in a new work culture where the norms and expectations relating to good communication and how teams work together may be very different (Yates 2008:13).

She calls the norms and expectations the ‘secret rules of communication’:

These ‘secret rules’ relate not to grammar or the more obvious aspects of language acquisition, but to the less visible realms of how speakers in communities tend to conduct interactions, what communicative styles are favoured, what speaker rights and obligations are, and so on. They draw on deeply held, and largely unconscious, assumptions, preferences and socio-cultural values that speakers within a community share but are frequently left inexplicit and unexamined (Yates 2008:14).

This sharpened our focus for the next cycle of research. We realised that, as well as raising awareness of the reality of work in Australian aged care facilities, industry-specific terminology and literacy tasks, much of the communication needs we had uncovered could, perhaps, be addressed by ‘unpacking’ these ‘secret rules’. Consequently, we decided to focus on the cultural and communicative needs by implementing and monitoring four main strategies:

### *1. Initiate a team teaching trial*

The trial would involve an ESL teacher working together with me, a VET trainer, in the same classroom. Our reading about the Course in Applied Vocational Study Skills (CAVSS) model of team teaching (see McHugh 2011:12-15) had inspired us. However, rather than team teaching in the main VET classroom as required by CAVSS, our trial would be a modified version in a small support class.

### *2. Concentrate on workplace documents and terminology*

We would develop a glossary of key aged care terms and provide more practice with various workplace documents.

#### *4. Increase workplace orientation*

To raise cultural awareness of the aged care environment, we would add two more on-site excursions to aged care facilities so that there would be a total of four visits before work placement. We would also develop a booklet outlining employer expectations in relation to employability skills.

#### *5. Focus on culture-specific workplace communication*

To explore cultural hurdles in aged care communication, we wanted to trial support options relating to the 'secret rules' of communication so well articulated by Yates. She maintains that these rules need to be made explicit and that CALD learners need time to 'practise' them. As we have seen, hierarchal protocols and workplace constraints, such as tight timeframes for tasks, impact on communication in aged care workplaces.

## The second research cycle

Our collaborative team hoped that by increasing the focus in this second action research cycle on developing our CALD learners' employability skills and workplace understandings, learners would be less 'culture shocked' by the workplace. We also hoped that the support strategies we were trialling would lead to improved work placement outcomes. Apart from the team teaching, I worked on the other aspects of the trial alone, with approximately half of my entire time spent on the 'secret rules'.

### Team teaching

Our team teaching trial ran over six sessions in our existing small support group for Community Services learners. A challenge for the research was that, unlike the previous year, we had only four CALD learners—two aged care learners (Korean and Congolese) and two community services learners (Iranian and Bosnian). There was also an Australian learner. It was an intimate learning environment in which we could readily interact with the learners and address individual needs.

After conferring with each other, the ESL teacher established our CALD learners' language, literacy and numeracy skills, and together we mapped these across the course requirements. Our Congolese learner, who had attempted an aged care course elsewhere, had home tutoring arrangements swiftly arranged by the ESL teacher. I worked with him on texts to set up improved understanding of aged care course requirements. Together, we mentored the other learners in comprehending their latest training session, understanding assessment tasks and special key terms in the glossary such as 'mobility', 'hazard' and 'dignity of risk'.

Being in a smaller, non-threatening environment, they freely expressed the fears and anxieties they suffered in relation to the main classroom.

The learners were, in fact, extremely self-conscious about their English abilities, and preferred to be far away from ‘competing’ with non-CALD learners.

Working in tandem was also an excellent learning process for both of us, with the ESL teacher’s increasing understanding of VET areas, and my growing awareness of ESL learning processes and approaches. However, due to the irregular support because of the non-compulsory attendance of the learners, there could be no real prior planning. It was, however, evident in our trial that lack of planning could lead to a blurring of ESL and VET specialisations with the potential risk of imparting inaccurate information.

### **Workplace documentation**

We adapted training and materials to further embed language and literacy support into the course through the development and trial of the aged care glossary. Definitions of core terms had space for individual translations and context of meaning. All learners agreed that the glossary was helpful but they required proactive encouragement to use it.

I worked one-on-one with a learner to practise different reporting documentations: progress notes, incident forms and hazard reports. These can be a stumbling block for CALD learners as the documentation requires precise, clear, accurate professional language with no slang. The learner who attended the last placement round said the extra ‘hands on’ learning gave her the competence she needed.

### **Workplace orientation**

For work placement preparation, I developed a booklet for CALD learners that outlined the specific employability skills identified by the employers who took part in our research. Our Korean aged care learner and another learner

from an English-speaking background worked with it. Both agreed that it gave them a ‘heads up’ on workplace expectations in the identified areas, in particular: communication, teamwork, professional boundaries and problem-solving. From the booklet, the CALD learner was able to identify her own areas of skill shortfalls, including interpreting specific documentation, her assertiveness and her level of English.

One strategy to help tackle the ‘culture shock’ was to organise two extra pre-placement orientations to two vastly different aged care facilities. A medium-sized facility of eighty-five beds was technologically futuristic with a computerised falls-monitoring system, a sophisticated medication system and automated chemical dispensing equipment. Here, our Korean learner, who had never set foot in an aged care facility before, felt distinctly uneasy. Aged care provision in her country revolved around the family and she baulked at the ‘hospitalised’ and ‘clinical’ Western model.

On the other hand, the small facility of forty beds appealed. There were no stretches of passageways labelled ‘Hibiscus Ave’ or a sign of a green man endlessly running overhead showing an exit. Here, residents ate in a modest dining area with an ancient pianola. They read newspapers and played scrabble. The CALD learner requested to do her placement in this facility. She told me that orientation to both facilities gave her a lot of confidence and now she could easily visualise the workplace environment and her place in it. As it turned out, she excelled in her work placement—the employer invited her to apply for work there.

### **Secret rules of communication**

Our research responses in the first cycle demonstrated that our CALD learners were unaware of what Yates (2008) refers to as the ‘secret rules’ of communication. By unpacking

these culture-specific ‘rules’, we hoped to help our learners build the intercultural skills they would need for the aged care sector with its patterns of communication vacillating between formal and informal, direct and indirect. Without knowing the right way to express themselves, CALD learners can come across as hesitant and as not showing initiative. Alternatively, without the appropriate language ‘softeners’, they can be perceived as brusque or crossing a boundary in the sense of ‘rising above one’s station’. Adding ‘please’ to what is otherwise a demand (‘Sign my time sheet’) is simply not enough. CALD learners need to know how to use phrases that ‘soften’, i.e. how to apply a ‘secret rule’, such as, ‘*When you have time, could you sign my timesheet, please?*’ or ‘*I was wondering if I could observe the resident of the day?*’

To put such communicative tasks into practice, I worked with a wide variety of unscripted role-plays contextualised in aged care. Examples included:

- communicating with busy co-workers when you need to know where the gloves are so you don’t breach OHS standards
- negotiating situations such as getting paperwork signed off
- clarifying instructions with a busy supervisor
- communicating with an uncooperative client who refuses to shower or eat.

One learner reported that the role-play practice and the ‘secret rules’ of communication were the most beneficial support of all. In fact, she kept begging for more of these. After this particular learner attended placement, she confirmed that she found the specific socio-pragmatic negotiation practice most valuable, particularly as she encountered some of the exact situations we had rehearsed and felt better equipped to deal with them.

## What was achieved?

Although we only had one CALD learner going on placement during this cycle of action research, her reaction to the different facilities, followed by her successful outcomes suggest that more extensive workplace orientation visits could also better prepare other CALD learners for the realities of the Australian aged care industry.

Our short team teaching trial indicated its potential to enhance the support that can be offered to CALD learners. Significantly, the trial showed us the importance of developing a working relationship with clearly defined separation of the VET trainer’s and the ESL teacher’s specialist roles. Planning time, at least initially, to develop a greater understanding of our roles would be highly beneficial.

However, when viewed in conjunction with the other strategies, the trials suggest that a more extensive team teaching situation, drawing on the separate and specialist skills of the VET trainer and the ESL teacher could indeed be beneficial. Our research indicated that explicit explanation of the ‘secret rules of communication’ and the opportunity to practise them through relevant scenarios is worthwhile. Prior to this, all our CALD learners had only informally learned the rules by exposure to the workplace when on their placements. The specific scenarios require a specialist in aged care ‘culture’ but it would be advantageous to have the additional expertise of a language specialist in a planned team teaching situation.

In terms of the documentation, working with aged care literacy in a small support group may be ideal for CALD learners. For our VET teachers, there is little time to persist with this in the main VET class and even for protracted periods after class. This is another area in which

the specialist expertise of the VET trainer and ESL teacher could complement each other well in a team teaching situation. The VET specialist could then focus on the specifics of industry standards and the ESL teacher on language and literacy aspects.

However, our collaborative team agreed that team teaching, such as that outlined in the CAVSS model, could also work well in the main VET classroom for the support it would provide all learners (see VETinfoNet 2011). One reason for this is the immediacy that team teaching provides for addressing issues as they arise. With careful planning, ESL specialist skills in oral communication and intercultural communication could also benefit all learners. As the trainers pointed out in our first cycle of research, not only CALD learners struggled with aged care literacy. As Yates (2008:32) writes:

The Employability Skills Framework acknowledges that communication is a two-way process, so we all need to share some of its success or failure and we all need to develop skills in understanding the role of cultural and linguistic practices in workplace communication ... This means it will be important to develop in all of us the ability to communicate sensitively and successfully with people from another language and cultural background. We therefore need a more sensitive cross-cultural and intercultural approach to the skilling of the *whole* workforce.

Team teaching in the main VET classroom could, perhaps, be investigated by our organisation in the future. For now, this teaching model in our aged care preparation course is under consideration by our management. Additionally, management has approved further development of the glossary and the employability skills booklet as well as offering increased orientation

time to facilities for CALD learners. Importantly for our organisation, this project provided a structure that promoted not only interaction between our ESL and VET teams, but also opened our eyes to how we can work effectively side by side. As our RTO is so large and we cater for many CALD learners, it is essential that we keep improving the teamwork and communication between our various departments in order to enhance the success of work placement and employment outcomes for our CALD learners.

# Working with cultural and linguistic diversity in Portland



## Portland WorkSkills

Anne Mountford: *VET Trainer & Assessor*

## Research context

Located on the south-west coast of Victoria, not far from the border with South Australia, Portland is a city of over 10,000 people. Its major industries include the Port of Portland complex, the Portland Aluminium Smelter, diversified engineering (including manufacture of wind farm components), aged care and childcare facilities, a hospital, transport (rail and road), and tourism. There is a thriving retail and small business sector, and an array of government agencies and services. Agriculture, grazing and horticulture take place in the hinterland.

Portland WorkSkills is a not-for-profit, community-based Learn Local organisation guided by a representative board of management and led by an executive team committed to continuous improvement through considered change. As a substantial RTO, we deliver education and training qualifications including, Disability, Home and Community Care, Community Services, Information Technology, Retail, Hospitality, Business, Health, and the Certificates in General Education for Adults. Qualification levels range from Certificates I to IV. An array of industry-accredited and non-accredited training is also delivered.

A few months before this project began, we at Portland WorkSkills were experiencing growth in our enrolments of CALD learners. In 2011 enrolments included learners from twelve different nations, with approximately half of these learners speaking a first language other than English. Clearly we were doing a good job of catering for this client group, since we knew that word-of-mouth recommendation had played a significant role in promoting our courses (and staff) to this group of learners. However, we

## Policy extract

Portland WorkSkills is committed to ensuring that equality of opportunity and respect for diversity is manifest and developed across all programs and practices. Diversity will be valued and promoted.

Managing Diversity Policy

wanted to enhance the way we serviced our CALD communities and dealt with cultural and linguistic difference. We were prepared to make sweeping program delivery changes if necessary in order to develop a seamless whole of organisation approach to serving CALD learners.

Engaging and catering for these learners in training at WorkSkills is underpinned by the WorkSkills Managing Diversity Policy. As a collaborative team we were proud of how we had put this policy into practice. However, we believed we could do better. We decided that a major focus in our strategic planning for 2012 would be on our delivery to CALD learners. However, we didn't want to base this planning on assumptions about what worked and what was needed—we wanted to build a reliable picture of our current situation.

Fortuitously, information about the ACFE *Responding to CALD Learners* initiative came our way and our application to do an action research project was successful. This project would, we decided, assist us to make plans about future offerings and practices in an informed way. We believed that at the conclusion of this project we would be in a position to better cater for the CALD clients in our community, not only because we could tailor our offerings to their needs, but because our staff would be supported in enhancing their skills for interacting with those clients.

## Research in action

We began by asking ourselves the question:

*How can we create appropriate and supportive training environments for CALD learners that will maximise successful participation and completion?*

The research team decided that consultations with staff, CALD learners (past, present and potential) and other stakeholders would build understanding and create ownership of the findings and actions that came out of them.

We decided to interview:

- WorkSkills managers, trainers and the administrative officer to ascertain their perceptions of the challenges of catering for our CALD learners, and Workskills strengths in meeting the needs of these learners. This would reveal staff perceptions about our current interactions with, and delivery to, CALD learners
- staff at the Mount Gambier Campus of TAFE South Australia, so that we could explore the experiences of trainers who were dealing with larger numbers of CALD learners whose English skills were spread across a wider range of ability than those for whom our trainers were currently catering
- current and past CALD learners who had undertaken our courses in Aged Care, Safe Food Handling, Child Care, First Aid, Café Skills and Information Technology
- representatives from key stakeholders, namely Centrelink, Job Services Australia (JSA) providers and a sample of employers.

I chose the focused interview technique because of its flexibility and responsiveness. The interviews were focused around a set of questions (a 'game plan') to make sure that data were collected across the desired range of

issues/topics. However, though I initiated interviews with a prompt question—and also used these at times during the interviews—I basically had conversations with my interviewees that proceeded in different ways with different people. I followed up points they raised with probe questions to further explore each issue/idea. Sometimes this led into areas I had previously decided to explore and sometimes into other interesting areas of data.

The focused interview technique, while allowing for reasonably free-ranging conversations and not excluding the collection of unexpected data, relied on my 'game plan' of prompt questions to make sure that the required information was collected. Particular points of congruence and dissonance in data would highlight areas requiring attention in our strategic planning for 2012.

At the completion of each set of interviews I collated the data for that group under emerging themes, and identified representative and explanatory quotations for possible inclusion in this final report. I then compared what the various groups (and individuals within those groups) had to say about each theme.

## Findings

The findings are presented in sections that approximate the stages of the journey our learners and trainers take together through their courses at WorkSkills.

### How CALD learners found out about our courses

The interviews with the five past and seven current CALD learners revealed that the reasons they had participated in work-related training at WorkSkills were: to increase their chances of gaining employment; to get a job in a field preferred over their current situation; or as part of training in their current job.

They chose WorkSkills as their training provider for a range of reasons: the timetabling fitted in with current work commitments; a recommendation (agency referral or word-of-mouth); or previous unsatisfactory training experiences elsewhere.

Most of the CALD learners cited our brochure as a source of information about available training, highlighting that it was easy to understand and very useful. They had also obtained information from: local newspaper advertisements; the sandwich board outside our office; Glenelg Shire Council; JSA providers; ongoing contact with WorkSkills (having completed a previous course); and word-of-mouth. For example, learners reported, 'While I was looking after an elderly woman, the homecare person suggested that I do the course. I also found out through Filipino friends who had already done it' and 'Once you do a course, they [staff] let you know there's more coming, and I drop in here every now and then to see'.

Our stakeholders reported being well-informed about WorkSkills' courses through regular, hand-delivered brochures, newspaper advertisements, and emails directed to them.

They refer clients who are interested in training if we offer the relevant courses.

The Administrative Officer noted that more CALD learners were coming in to the office and suggested, 'Perhaps it's word-of-mouth—they know of others who've completed successfully and this gives them confidence'.

We were disappointed to have identified no potential CALD learners to interview. While past and present CALD learners had recommended our courses to friends and acquaintances, some of these lived elsewhere (where they would study with a local provider), and others had already followed their friends' recommendations and undertaken a course with us.

We had also hoped to interview a wider range of stakeholders, for example, leaders of community organisations associated either with CALD groups in general, or with specific cultural groups in the Portland community. However, no such organisations existed, though cultural groups (in particular the Indian and Filipino communities) would socialise together from time to time, and some groups regularly attended particular churches.

### Getting enrolled

Universally, the WorkSkills Training Manager and the Administrative Officer were praised by CALD learners for being friendly and helpful, and for providing clear information. For example, on the issue of paying by instalments a learner reported that 'When it comes to payment, too, they're very flexible. You have time to pay it off as long as you do it in twelve months'. When asked about the provision of course information at enrolment, one learner said, 'WorkSkills people very helpful to you—very honest and open if you ask what will happen if you go into a job ... You'll have more knowledge and skills, but they say it is up to you' [whether you decide to enrol or not].

None of the CALD learners interviewed had encountered any difficulty with the enrolment form. Nor had the Pre-training Review (used before longer courses) troubled them, although some had approached it with trepidation, having not studied for a number of years.

## **Catering for CALD learners in the classroom**

The Executive Officer had noticed that, in their monthly reports, trainers did not report facing challenges in catering for CALD learners. He was surprised by this and speculated, 'Are trainers catering well? Are they not aware? Perhaps they think CALD learners just need to fit in'.

However, data from trainers indicated their awareness of cultural diversity. When asked about the strengths CALD learners brought to their classes, as well as the challenges they faced in catering for these learners' needs, trainers explained that along with their enthusiasm, CALD learners—especially those from a Filipino background—brought fun and laughter to the classroom, thereby 'lifting the atmosphere of the whole group'. They also brought a strong work ethic, were 'hungry for knowledge', 'put the work in', valued education, were committed to working in their field of future employment, and were driven towards success, thus setting an example for others. Trainers also noted that CALD learners contributed different experiences and cultural perspectives to classroom discussions.

## **My own level of understanding of their cultures is lacking.**

Trainer

This openness to cultural diversity was a consistent theme in the data from trainers. However, trainers also made comments such as, 'My own level of understanding of their cultures is lacking'. Most would like professional development about the cultures and languages of the learners in their classes to ensure they weren't offending learners unwittingly, and to acknowledge the challenges of learning a new language. They felt this would show a willingness to meet their learners part way.

When asked what challenges CALD learners faced, trainers mostly listed course content, e.g. concepts, legislation, policies and procedures. Language skills were also mentioned: work-specific vocabulary, reading manuals and course materials; writing assignments; and communication skills in the classroom and workplace, e.g. understanding and following instructions and explanations.

Managers identified challenges that were not mentioned by trainers, e.g. 'the subtleties of English language, including inflections and slang' (such as 'meds' instead of 'medications') and the need for this group of learners to develop an understanding of Australian workplace culture.

Learners, however, cited a wider range of communication problems that occurred in the classroom. Not being understood particularly concerned one learner who explained, 'The way we pronounce it, you cannot understand it. Sometimes it's embarrassing to say it again—especially when it's three times'. The trainer's speed of delivery was sometimes an issue; a trainer would slow down when requested, but then gradually speed up again. The use of slang presented another barrier to comprehension, and classroom jokes could leave CALD learners feeling isolated. As one CALD learner explained,

'Sometimes you feel out of place if they talk very fast and then laugh. We wonder what they are laughing about, but we laugh too. Sometimes we figure it out or ask, but sometimes we don't'.

The Training Manager reported that in the past WorkSkills had explored the possibility of offering ESL classes to facilitate transition to accredited courses by preparing CALD learners for the content and methods used in VET training, while also focusing on colloquial, conversational English. Such a course would also foster peer group relationships, and would convey organisational commitment to CALD learners and their training. However, interest at any one time had never been great enough to make this initiative viable. One CALD learner noted this as a potential need for some who, he thought, would 'need to do some English learning first—couldn't do the course straight away'.

Stakeholders reported having only heard positive comments about CALD learners' interactions with staff, including trainers, at WorkSkills. However, they did note factors in the lives of CALD clients which potentially impacted negatively on their ability to participate effectively in training. These included: the availability and quality of a personal support network; length of time away from study; mental health, especially where there was a lack of confidence and self-esteem and/or a fear of authority; availability of time (e.g. juggling training with work and family commitments); and access to transport to get to training, as most CALD clients did not have driving licences. Small class sizes were seen as a plus, as was the availability of extra support for those learners who needed it supplied both in and out of class time by trainers, and on an individual basis by the Training Manager.

One trainer highlighted a significant complicating factor when he noted that 'CALD learners,

like all others, are a diverse group, for example with respect to aptitude for learning. This compounds the challenges for both trainer and trainee'. This insight provided a salutary reminder that we were not looking for *the* way to work with CALD learners, but *multiple ways to address their multiple needs*.

## Course content

As trainers had also noticed, the course content related to laws and legislation were cited by CALD learners as the hardest. They checked word meanings and technical terminology by asking the trainer or fellow classmates for explanations, but also by using hard-copy and online translation dictionaries. One learner said, 'I know how to do it, but I don't know what it's called'. Another learner noted the course was 'hard at the start ... You don't really understand it until you do the placement, but [the trainer] doesn't mind explaining one-on-one'.

## Teaching/learning strategies

The informal relationship between trainer and learners (and between younger people and the elderly) in Australian society was confronting for our CALD learners. They initially struggled to feel comfortable with this apparent lack of respect. However, all reported having adapted and had come to value the relaxed relationship with the trainer, noting how it lowered feelings of anxiety and thus assisted learning.

Some CALD learners enjoyed 'listening to the teacher and group talking, to hear different opinions and expressions ... new ways of thinking and to share our problems with our homework'. They especially valued anecdotal stories from trainers' own work experiences and all commented positively on the use of DVDs, which provided visuals as a backup to the verbal input. The use of demonstrations, hands-on practice and charts were similarly popular.

## Placement is the best part. You learn to know them and the challenging work you have to do for them. You're just falling in love with the job.

CALD learner

Difficulties were caused by lengthy handouts read in class—even with the aid of translating dictionaries, there was not time to look up all the necessary words for the achievement of full comprehension and thus for successful participation in follow-up classroom activities. Classroom use of computers and the internet were valued, but not having a computer at home was a source of frustration for some learners.

Work placements, for those courses requiring them, were universally appreciated by learners. For example, one learner said, 'Placement is the best part. You learn to know them and the challenging work you have to do for them. You're just falling in love with the job'.

### Training resources

One trainer pointed out, 'All the resources are English-based, but then they need to be able to use English in the jobs they are training for'. Trainers were keen to locate resources developed specifically for CALD learners. When asked about the ramifications of training classes containing a greater number and diversity of CALD learners, one trainer thought that, 'Training two or three cultural groups [at once] might be easier ... because we would have to redevelop everything'. It's possible that not all trainers would see this as easier.

### Fairness & flexibility of assessments

In general, trainers believed that our face-to-face delivery mode enabled them to tailor

assessments to learners' needs; they could use direct observation as their learners demonstrated skills and could ask oral questions either in place of, or supplementary to, written assessments.

However, a manager predicted 'problems with assessment and feedback if we attract more and a wider diversity of CALD learners as we're constrained by VET requirements, and we can only be flexible to the extent made possible by trainer-trainee numbers'.

Learners generally reported feeling successful with respect to assessments, providing reasons such as: 'a good teacher'; 'we learn the skills and knowledge to do the job'; 'very educational'; 'very interesting'; 'helps with learning English words'. In addition, trainers' feedback on assignment work was understood and valued.

## The way it was worded, I misunderstood—it needed more simple language or some example.

CALD learner on assessment

One learner had found some of the assessments challenging because 'the way it was worded, I misunderstood—it needed more simple language or some examples'. However, others said such things as, 'If you don't understand, you ask [and the trainer] explains' and 'I started to understand by the middle of the assignment'.

One group of learners understood the course content, but low English literacy skills had caused difficulty in reading the test and writing the answers. In line with the language, literacy and numeracy requirements of the course, they

were assessed orally. Their work supervisor suggested one way for them to complete the written test would be to 'Give them more time—maybe overnight—so they have time to think how to answer the questions'. The learners said that this extra time would also enable them to use a translation dictionary to check word meanings. However, under these circumstances trainers would not be able to guarantee authenticity (i.e. that each learner had completed their own test, and independently).

## **Student satisfaction surveys**

Managers reported that student satisfaction surveys had brought no issues to light. In fact, because they were anonymous, managers had no idea which ones were submitted by CALD learners. Moreover, if a CALD learner had dropped out before the end of their course—which happens very infrequently—we would not have the benefit of their feedback via a survey.

## **Professional development for trainers**

Trainers cited a range of strategies they had found effective in catering for the needs of CALD learners. Of significance in the data was that when asked what professional development they would benefit from, trainers did not identify teaching/learning strategies as a need. The reason for this was probably articulated by one trainer who said, comment: 'I haven't seen the need for ESL strategies, but then I don't know them so I don't know what it might be useful to know'.

**I haven't seen the need for ESL strategies, but then I don't know them so I don't know what it might be useful to know.**

VET Trainer

While professional development would enable them to access a wider range of teaching/learning strategies, trainers appeared to be making considered and effective efforts to cater for difference, drawing on their own training and upon experience built up over time in this or previous jobs. One trainer would value opportunities to 'network with someone who works [in the same field] with CALD learners, or a contact in a Melbourne-based cultural group who may be able to put you in touch with a qualified worker from the same cultural group'.

Managers were concerned about the demands on our trainers if the number and range of CALD learners increased, and suggested that there might be a need to 'build more support into the induction phase and current staff training'. They also acknowledged that trainers would need time to locate and/or prepare alternative resources and assessment tasks.

Interviews with the Mount Gambier Campus of TAFE South Australia lecturers who were delivering courses to such cohorts revealed a wide range of useful teaching/learning strategies and some specially designed training resources. However, they also highlighted TAFE trainers' access to in-class support from Learning Support and/or ESL Lecturers. In addition, individual learners could book extra sessions (out of class time) with Learning Support Lecturers.

## **Potential new course offerings**

In addition to those already mentioned in the above findings, a comment from one group of employers is worthy of note. Those involved in the tourism industry were keen to see us offer Asset Maintenance courses as cleaning jobs in the sector are increasingly filled by people from CALD communities who may not be familiar with Australian workplace procedures, particularly OHS requirements.

## Recommendations

This research project has enabled us at Portland WorkSkills to review how our organisation as a whole has been catering for CALD learners. It confirmed many good practices. However, it also provided pointers for ways we could work towards improved service delivery for CALD learners. Some of the recommendations that have emerged from the research relate to the good practice principle of Engagement, as set out in the Framework of Good Practice, but most relate to the principle of Supportive Learning Environments (see Achren et al. 2012). The Framework identifies a number of strategies to achieve good practice in these key areas and the recommendations for our organisation are grouped here under those strategies. A final section identifies potential course offerings that would be worth exploring.

### Engagement

*Strategy 1:* Identify the changing demographics of your local community

- Research the ABS website for the census results.

*Strategy 2:* Understand the cultures and backgrounds of new communities

- Learn about the cultures and languages of the CALD learners in our classes.

*Strategy 4:* Consult with communities about their needs

- Build relationships with informal contact groups to identify potential CALD learners and build mutual understandings about their training needs and our course offerings.
- Make individual follow-up contact at management level with CALD learners who 'drop out' before completing end-of-course Student Satisfaction Surveys.

## Supportive Learning Environments

*Strategy 6:* Develop the intercultural skills of staff

- Identify and use multi-modal approaches so that visual and kinaesthetic information can complement auditory input.
- Research ways to cater for multiple needs (within CALD groups and across whole classes).
- Constantly monitor speed of delivery.
- Avoid classroom activities that require extended pre-reading in class.
- Include awareness of training for CALD learners in WorkSkills' Trainer Induction Program.
- Train trainers in ESL teaching/learning strategies and support their implementation of these.
- Set up networks with other trainers of CALD learners and/or with CALD workers in the field.
- Provide training in communication strategies, e.g. ways to clarify learners' meanings without causing embarrassment.
- Provide time for the professional development of trainers and for them to develop/research appropriate resources.

*Strategy 7:* Acknowledge the cultural nature of education and training

- Teach slang terms alongside formal terminology used in workplaces.
- Investigate and trial strategies for increasing CALD learners' understandings of 'Aussie' humour in preparation for the workplace.
- Explore what other RTOs do to develop understandings of workplace culture and communications.

*Strategy 8:* Establish support programs for CALD learners in VET

- Enlist and arrange for the training of volunteer ESL tutors to work with CALD learners.
- Consider establishing a support course to run concurrently with VET programs to develop understandings of workplace culture and communications (see above).
- Investigate possibilities of collaboration between VET trainers and ESL teachers/literacy teachers on VET courses.
- Revisit the idea of summer holiday/term-time ESL 'bridging' classes.

*Strategy 9:* Re-evaluate training and assessment practices

- Balance CALD learners' assessment needs with VET requirements.
- Monitor wording of assessments for clarity and simplicity.
- Adapt/modify use of existing training resources.
- Investigate training resources specifically designed for use with CALD learners.

Potential new course offerings:

- Add to Scope of Registration Certificates II and III in Asset Maintenance.
- Offer Pre-driver Education to assist CALD learners in gaining transport independence.
- Promote courses in basic IT skills to CALD learners enrolling in other certificate courses.

## Concluding reflection

This research project was both satisfying and useful for us here at WorkSkills. It confirmed that initiatives we had already acted upon in our yearly cycles of continuous improvement had been effective and were valued by our CALD learners. However, analyses of interview data also led to the formulation of the above recommendations for whole of organisation change.

These insights will feed into the development of WorkSkills' 2012 Strategic Plan, thus enabling us to proactively manage increased CALD participation in our programs. We have, therefore, achieved the planned objectives of our project and look forward to continued improvement of services and outcomes for this group of learners.

## North Melbourne Language and Learning

Kat Sullivan: *Further Education Coordinator*

### Research context

Alima is a single mother and former refugee from Eritrea. She has been living in Australia for ten years. She has a Certificate III in Aged Care, Certificate III in Children's Services and Certificate III in Health Services Assistance, and yet she is unemployed. Alima has lost confidence in joining the workforce as she has been turned down by prospective employers several times in the past. She continues to study Certificate II in ESL (Access) at North Melbourne Language & Learning (NMLL). She doesn't know where to go from here.

CALD learners: we know how to attract them, we know how to keep them, but how can we provide meaningful support to help them move beyond the comfort and security of our doors into further education and meaningful employment?

For more than twenty-one years, NMLL has played a key role in assisting CALD people to settle in the North Melbourne community and acquire the skills they need to make the fullest possible contribution to their new country. Ideally located on the North Melbourne public housing estate, NMLL delivers a range of ESL, basic information technology and vocational preparation courses. Our learners are migrants and refugees who come from over seventeen countries, including Ethiopia, Somalia, Vietnam, China, Eritrea and Sudan.

**In my dream I be like that ... She has four kids and she does that job. She's very strong. When she speaks to me she says, 'Alima, keep going'. She gives me a power.**

Alima

Our 'Positive Pathways' research focused on CALD women, particularly those from the Horn of Africa, who often face additional barriers to successful training outcomes because of low levels of education and low literacy. We wanted to change the way that we provided further study and career support to our CALD learners—from something that was spontaneous, reactive and irregular—to a new approach that was consultative, planned and well resourced. In the past our pathways support consisted of generic information giving, as opposed to tailored, monitored plans and connections for individuals.

We had known for some time that there was a gap in our service delivery: we didn't have a system for tracking where students went once they left NMLL. When they left, where did they go? Did they succeed there? We have seen many 'boomerang' learners who, after obtaining VET qualifications at other organisations, end up bouncing back to us to complete their Foundation Level ESL studies. More often than not, CALD learners are attracted by the low contact hours and short time frame of the course. However, these turn out to be insufficient to provide the support they need to acquire the cultural and language skills necessary for employment. In a learner-entitlement training market, we are seeing private providers of such short courses door-knocking the North Melbourne housing estate and even entering our

centre to sign up our students on the spot. With their funding eligibility profile, CALD learners have never been so attractive. How can we ensure our learners are informed and discerning enough to choose quality education providers for their future studies?

What we wanted to learn from our action research was:

*How can we best support our learners to achieve their learning and employment goals?*

From the outset, this raised many other questions: Did they have goals? Did they want to plan for the future? Did their cultures value individual pathways in the way that ours did? The change in practice informed by this action research project aimed to empower individuals to make successful life choices. Part of this change was planning for how this service could be funded to ensure it was a sustainable and systematic component of our learner services. NMLL is well placed to empower our CALD students to make informed choices about their future. And more importantly, if we don't do this, who will?

### First research cycle: Cultural perceptions of pathways

To guide our first cycle of action research, we asked the question:

*If we investigate the cultural perceptions of pathways in the CALD community, how will it affect NMLL's ability to provide meaningful pathways support?*

Firstly, to turn the cultural mirror (Verghese 2006:21–34) on ourselves we surveyed teachers about their experiences of their own pathways, and their perceptions of learner attitudes to pathways. Next, we facilitated a student focus group with nine current learners from Certificate II and III in ESL to find out about their attitudes to work, taking the next step on a study/employment pathway, planning and goals, aspirations and role models. We steered clear of the 'P' word at all costs, after all what we really mean by pathways is how you get to where you want to go in life. We followed up the focus group by interviewing two current learners, Amira and Zahara, two young mothers from Ethiopia, about their aspirations and attitudes to work.

This research cycle provided us with a valuable opportunity to check our perceptions. It uncovered some stark points of difference between our attitudes and perceptions, and those of our learners. It revealed five key findings.

#### **One: Teachers' and learners' perceptions of pathways differ.**

We found that there was a contrast between our learners' perceptions of pathways and what our teachers thought their learners' perceptions were. Overall, teachers felt that learners' perceptions varied greatly from their own. Teachers said that it was different for each

learner, but that most viewed their learning as a ‘class-by-class, skill-by-skill’ phenomenon and did not make the connection between language, skills development and employment. Conversely, teachers perceived themselves as tending to look more at the bigger picture of students’ learning and development.

If we look at how teachers rated factors affecting their own ability to achieve their goals, ‘personal motivation’ came out as the number one factor, followed by ‘language’ and ‘family’ in equal second place. In contrast, when teachers were asked to rate their perceptions of factors affecting learners’ ability to succeed, they considered ‘family’ to be the most important. Personal motivation was chosen by the fewest teachers as having a high impact on learner success. It is interesting to note that teachers perceived learners’ motivation to be not as high as their own, though this may be due to a perception that other factors affecting CALD learners have a higher priority.

Teachers’ ranking of factors affecting chances of success

Ranking	Themselves	Their learners
1.	Personal motivation	Family
2.	Language/Family	Language
3.	Culture/Community	Community/gender/ Culture
	Gender	Personal motivation

The survey revealed that teachers felt most learners think little about their next step after English classes, though those that have were more likely to be in the upper level classes (Certificate II or III in ESL). Teachers thought that even learners who *had* thought about it had trouble identifying how they would get there.

One teacher commented that some students had unrealistic goals compared with their vocational and academic achievements. Another said that cultural expectations and approaches to planning may hinder learners’ approach to pathway planning.

Teachers considered that the few learners who envisaged themselves in employment:

- tended to envisage themselves in unskilled work
- were studying English while their children were young and did not envisage studying for employment purposes until their children were older.

Teachers considered that those learners who they believed did not envisage themselves in employment:

- felt limited by cultural and language factors, as well as family commitments
- had little ambition to enter the workforce if they were older learners with low first-language literacy.

In contrast, when we asked learners, their responses showed that overwhelmingly they had thought about what their next step would be. However, as identified in the teacher survey, knowing how to get there was another thing. One learner said ‘I want to work childcare. If you do a course then problem is you can’t find a job—they can’t accept everyone’.

However, another learner had clearly thought about ways to get into meaningful employment. She said:

I like to work when I finish. You need to start volunteering or work experience. Some people give up. If I find volunteering in the area of my studies I’ll do it and maybe after they’ll give me a chance.

## **Two: Our learners, including Horn of African women, have strong work aspirations.**

When we asked the learners about their attitudes to work it was clear that, despite other factors affecting their pathways, they were motivated and could envision themselves in the workforce. We asked learners to close their eyes and see if they could picture themselves working. Among other things, they said:

I see myself going from down to up.

I've got my own business—a little shop selling knitting and embroidery.

I saw myself wearing a uniform, like a doctor uniform. I see myself helping people. I'm seeing the patient.

**I want to work. Even if it only pays for childcare, I don't care. I [would] feel good. I [would be] happy. I came here—all women are working. It's a free country.**

Amira

Furthermore, take the case of Amira and Zahara: they said that work would be a 'freedom' for them because they would not have to feel bad asking their husbands for money when parents back home fell sick, or something was needed for the house.

However, some of the resounding concerns about joining the workforce were:

- External pressure (e.g. from Centrelink) versus impracticalities of full-time work (e.g. school-unfriendly hours, pressure to work overtime). One student explained 'Single parent families can't work full-time ...

Families without children should go to work. Before I had kids I worked lots of overtime on weekends'.

- 'What about the children?' There was concern over childcare, including issues such as securing a place, expense and limited operating hours.
- Fears of what unsupervised teenage children would get up to.

One student told us:

We have a lot of people we are supporting back home, but we're not working. More than 80% of people I know have been here for ten years or more. They're not working, they don't drive ... This is hopeless.

**In my country some women have internet in their homes, and set up an internet café.**

Zeina

**My mum had a little shop at home in Khartoum where she prepared tea and coffee and sold it.**

Achan

To find out more about the future aspirations of these learners, we wanted to learn about the women they looked up to, what they thought about women going to work, and how it was in their country of birth. We found that work options available to women in Australia are very different from those in learners' countries of origin. Learners described some of the different ways women in their country of origin work from home while raising a family. The work they spoke of

included making and selling handcrafts, running a cafe or shop, hairdressing, and family day care.

Every learner could describe a woman they knew in Australia who was doing the kind of work they would like to do. One learner said:

The nurse where I take my son, she said it's hard but not as hard as you think ... She told me when you go to your break you can have coffee and do your homework, and a little after work before you go home to the children. She went through this with kids. She's Malaysian.

### **Three: Pathways planning support must be ongoing.**

We found that skills for pathways re-planning and re-visioning goals will be just as important for learners as the initial planning and goal-setting itself. An important area of our first cycle of research was to find out about the cultural appropriateness of the idea that one can, or would even attempt to, control one's future.

The teacher survey showed that planning had been useful for teachers in their own pathways, with 86% saying planning had a great effect on their ability to succeed. However, when asked to describe their pathway into their current employment, they responded using words such as 'unplanned', 'unpredictable', 'organic' and 'torturous'. If this is the typical experience of people in professional level employment, this says a lot.

Teachers thought that although goal-setting and planning could be useful for upper levels and fast track learners, much support is needed for it to be meaningful. One teacher commented that in the past it has been more of a theoretical exercise, where learner plans are completed and filed away without further review. Another teacher commented that the current model hasn't engaged learners, as too many other

basic needs come first. When asked what proportion of learners follow plans to achieve their goals, 43% of teachers answered 'none', 43% responded 'some' and 14% responded 'few'.

We asked ourselves, if this is an accurate reflection of learner attitudes is this then clear evidence that we've never really succeeded in the past with making planning and goal-setting a reality for learners? Is the failure in the content or the method, or both? The focus group with students helped us to answer some of these questions.

### **Four: Support must be integrated with community, family, faith and personal values.**

In order to determine how useful pathways planning support would be, we asked learners about whether they felt they had control over their futures. The majority felt that they had 'little' to 'some' control. For example, one learner said:

A lot of things I can't control. Sometimes I need people's advice for the future. Good friends or family help me.

In determining what sort of support would be most useful to our learners the following results were useful: 78% of learners said they like to have a plan for their future. However, only 55% said that having goals and plans can help you get what you want.

This was framed against the alternative question '... Or is there a better way?' One of the 'better ways' learners most commonly identified was using plans in combination with other things, such as living in accordance with a religious faith. This suggests that our support must be integrated with the reality of peoples' lives. Most importantly, 100% of learners said they believe they can shape their future. This finding will pave the way for NMLL to provide meaningful pathways support.

## **Five: Teachers don't feel they have the skills to provide careers advice.**

The survey revealed that teachers felt their role in learner pathways was important but would be more pivotal if there was a formalised process. They believe that their role is to foster confidence and a sense of purpose in learners, and to give them the tools they need, including basic skills development and literacy. Teachers believed that more meaningful pathways support would potentially require interpreters and career counselling professionals.

## **Second research cycle: Trialling a pathways process**

Our second cycle of action research was guided by the question:

*If we implement an embedded pathways planning process with a targeted group, how will this affect these learners?*

Our approach was to trial two different counselling approaches with six learners (which dwindled to three learners due to absences during Ramadan) from ESL III. Each learner took part in a one-to-one meeting with their teacher, and another one-to-one meeting with a professional careers counsellor who visited them at NMLL. We gathered feedback through a survey that invited the learner participants to comment on each of the meetings and to rate the potential usefulness of seven other strategies. Further feedback was gathered from an interview with the careers professional and an interview with an ex-NMLL learner—a mother of five children under the age of twelve, from the Horn of Africa, who is now working in her chosen profession. Cycle two revealed a further five key findings that NMLL has already started to act upon.

## **Six: Learners prefer to plan with someone they know and trust.**

Student survey data shows that students would like to meet every three months with their teacher, rating it as a 'very useful' to 'extremely useful' strategy. This is what two learners had to say about meeting with their teacher:

'I know her for a while and feel comfortable talking to her.'

'She gave me good clear ideas for future plans.'

As a result of this finding, we are now working to upskill and appoint a teacher to a dedicated internal pathways counselling role at NMLL.

When surveyed about the experience of meeting with the careers professional, the results were not as positive: learners rated this strategy 'moderately useful' to 'not useful at all'. Although one of the learners said that you get good ideas from different people, meeting the unknown careers professional was stressful for the other two learners. One said, 'First meeting with new people is worrying' and the other learner said 'It made me more stressed'.

Learners indicated that they might find it useful to see a professional every six to twelve months. But on the whole they preferred to talk with their teacher—a person they know and trust—rather than a professional careers counsellor who does not know them.

### **Seven: Concrete strategies are the most useful.**

Feedback from the student survey showed the most useful strategies were those that were practical in nature and would acquaint them with the real world of work. A workplace visit and work placement were both rated 'extremely useful' or 'very useful' by all participants. The next most popular strategies were: meeting with a teacher; a practical tool they could use to plan their future with their family; and meeting with a peer mentor. This finding has shown us that we need to re-frame the way we have traditionally thought of pathways support as a two-dimensional learner plan.

### **Eight: Partnerships provide appropriate pathways.**

If we want learners to choose well-supported, quality VET courses through reputable VET providers we need to provide direct pathways by partnering with those providers. Our learners not only trust us, but need us to provide this service. Instead of saying to learners, 'DON'T go there', we can say, 'DO go here'. VET partnerships should have an embedded ESL component that

NMLL would deliver to underscore the VET studies. From what we've seen of the 'boomerang learners' who bounce back to their ESL courses after completing VET qualifications, we know that maintaining the safety net of NMLL would give current learners the added confidence to try something new. For lower level CALD learners, being able to interact with VET learners at NMLL would give them a tangible goal to aspire to: 'A couple of years ago she was just like me. If she can do it, so can I'.

### **Nine: Personal motivation is the key to success.**

Personal motivation: some CALD learners ooze it, others lose it. How can we foster personal motivation for those who seem to have 'lost' it? Touching on what we found in our first cycle of research, personal motivation is probably even more powerful for those facing additional barriers, such as women from the Horn of Africa. Overcoming language, literacy and family factors is going to require courage and determination.

**My cousins are accountants and my sister works, but no women [worked] in generations before. If my education is high, maybe one day.**

Khadija

Let's consider the case of Layla, the ex-student: she was motivated by her desire to support her family and the challenge of being told it was impossible to work in Australia in the field she'd already qualified in overseas. These 'barriers' themselves actually became the motivational drivers, the springboard, for her success. For

Layla the best things about working are that you have something important to do; you learn something; you earn money; and it's part of a happy life. When we asked her to rank the following three factors contributing to her success, it was clear that personal motivation was a winning ingredient:

1. Personal motivation
2. Support and advice from people you know
3. Planning and goal-setting.

## You need to free yourself ... Have a good one-year commitment to go from scratch to advanced. Have the will.

Layla

Layla's advice to CALD learners at NMLL is: 'You need to free yourself ... Have a good one-year commitment to go from scratch to advanced (English). Have the will.' Layla told us about how important momentum is. Unlike Layla, most of our CALD learners do not hold overseas qualifications, and many have never worked before. This finding has shown us that at NMLL we can create better momentum, motivation and a sense of achievement by changing the way we deliver our ESL courses. Our current offering of accredited ESL courses should have the option of a fast-track, one-year 'burst' mode of delivery. With supported momentum, coupled with powerful partnerships, NMLL can help drive learners towards their goals, step-by-step.

### Ten: Many CALD learners aren't sure which path to choose.

Learners seem to feel that the first choice of career is also the final choice. When we think of it that way, were any of us sure what we wanted

to do before we'd actually been in the workforce? Don't the jobs and study you do help you realise what you do and don't like? Take the case of Thu, a current ESL III learner: for at least the last year she had been telling us that she wanted to become a receptionist, but had not moved any closer to reaching this goal. However, an informal chat with her revealed that she had just picked reception work as a goal because she felt she had to choose *something*. This is a woman who had been highly active as a classroom volunteer at the primary school her children attend. When we told Thu that NMLL would like to form a partnership to deliver a Certificate in Education Support (Teacher's Aide) she was thrilled that she could study something she was passionate about with NMLL and continue to improve her English.

Thu is not our only learner experiencing 'analysis paralysis'—it is particularly common when learners' goals are unrealistic or seem too far out of reach. Even if learners don't know where to begin or where they want to end up, they could start out with a Certificate I or II level VET qualification, e.g. in Retail, Hospitality, Education Support (Teacher's Aide), Aged Care, Information Technology or Asset Maintenance (Cleaning). This would give them hands-on work experience, the opportunity to use their English in the workplace and could potentially lead to paid work. As their confidence, experience, employability skills and real-world English grow they can then seek to advance their career in line with their passions and skills.

## Reflection

When NMLL embarked on this action research project we set out to better understand how we could support our learners, especially women from the Horn of Africa, to achieve their learning and employment goals. When we turned the cultural mirror on ourselves we discovered that our existing pathways support mechanisms, with a heavy reliance on learner plans but no opportunities for hand-on experience, were out of touch with our CALD learners' needs. We found out from our current learners that despite concerns about unknowns, they have aspirations to work. They want access to practical tools and experiences, supported by people they know and trust, such as teachers, peers, friends and family members. What has surprised us throughout the journey of this project is the immediate and real organisational change this action research has sparked. In 2012 NMLL will implement its first ever pathways program in the hope that people like Alima will get the best possible chance of achieving personal and professional fulfilment.

# Bridging the employment gap in Bendigo



## On Track Training and Employment

Chris Moore: *Manager*

### Research context

Bendigo, the city in the heartland of Central Victoria, boasts a booming population, a semi-rural lifestyle with all the benefits of city living, plus a regional area that caters to every industry, interest and living aspiration. It is a viable and liveable alternative to city dwelling, and as such is presenting itself more and more as a desirable place to settle and start a new life. This is particularly true for many of our CALD refugees, who have come from rural areas in their own countries, and prefer the country to city life.

Fleeing conflict in Burma, Karen people began settling in Bendigo in 2007. Since then many more have arrived either directly from refugee camps in Thailand or through relocating from elsewhere in Australia (KBDDF 2011). The official figures on Karen refugee settlement in the Bendigo region now exceed 300; but there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that this figure is much understated. It is difficult to track the exact number of people who move here from their places of initial settlement in the larger Victorian

Working with cultural and linguistic Employment is a cornerstone issue for Australia's culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, as employment is intertwined with not only financial stability but also social cohesion, self-esteem, independence, the ability to gain stable housing, opportunities to build and maintain English language skills, greater systems knowledge and, overall, a greater sense of community belonging and well-being.

FECCA (2011:1)

Karen communities of Geelong and Werribee, and therefore we are left with only an estimation of actual figures. It is without doubt, however, that the Karen are poorly represented in both training and employment in this region.

Whilst we see training in such fields as aged care and children's services as equitable, empowering and inclusive, we understand that the Karen feel a greater need for rapid movement into sustainable employment, so that they can stop accepting Centrelink payments, and can support their families. The reality of the situation is this—many in the Karen community have had little or no formal schooling, and are unable to read and write in their own language. This means that there is a long path of training and general education that must be completed before certificate training can even commence.

The most obvious need for the Karen community is the mastery of the English language, a need we address here at On Track with ESL training, but this is only the tip of the iceberg. Employment, transport, accommodation and social inclusion into mainstream society are of paramount importance to ensure the successful integration into Australian society without an ongoing dependence on welfare and social security.

We are aware that at this point in time, the Karen community's wish to gain sustainable incomes and support their community has a higher priority than ongoing certificate level study, and with the number of settlers increasing all the time, there needs to be a focus on training and employment, and on making those first inroads into the local business communities.

It is our contention, then, that training in ESL is not enough to enable the Karen to become self-sufficient, and able to meet the needs of the employers in the area. With this in mind, we

wished to research these needs in relation to the employability skills, firstly to discover what learning is needed for the Karen to become attractive as potential employees; and secondly, to discover the best means of tailoring a course to enable the Karen to develop the necessary skills and knowledge to succeed in gaining and keeping a job.

We currently run an Employment Skills program (called ES21) which we wrote and designed for the general public. We also run a tailored version for youth at risk. This program has elements from Certificates in Retail, Business and Community Services, and is funded by government. The information garnered from the research would be used to develop a similar program specifically to run alongside the ESL program and tailored for each industry.

## Where do we start?

The first major decision was, as in everything, 'Where do we start?' This was not as obvious or easy as expected. After much deliberation, we settled on the following question to focus our first cycle of research:

*If we investigate the perceptions of employers of our Karen community, and the perceptions of the Karen community towards finding employment with local employers, how will it assist us to provide meaningful pre-employment assistance and training?*

As we already have an established employment team, with regular contacts and networks, we considered that one good way to gather data would be to talk individually with our contacts in the course of normal communications. In order to reach as many employers as possible, we also held an employer forum and distributed a series of questionnaires. However, much of the information collated came from the forum discussions, as we had a fairly poor response to the questionnaires.

The Karen people are very aware of their circumstances, and many feel obliged to do whatever is asked of them without complaint or criticism, as they often consider themselves indebted to Australia for giving them opportunities. This has, in fact, become somewhat of a problem, where some organisations use this willingness to cooperate without question to somewhat dubious advantage—we discovered one employer paying cash in hand wages that were far below award rates, and getting the Karen employees to work excessive hours without breaks. With much trial and deliberation, we discovered that the best way to gather information and real opinions from the Karen was informally. Through many a discussion with both employed and unemployed groups and

individuals, and in the presence of community leaders (including a Buddhist monk), we managed to elicit the attitudes and opinions that really mattered.

However, there were some basic issues and questions that needed to be recognised and taken into consideration before we even began to collect information. We needed to be aware of preconceptions—both ours and those of people being interviewed. It is important to remember that at the time of these discussions, the issue of the so-called ‘boat people’ was very prominent, and suggestions of linkages to crime, terrorism and questionable character were very much the order of the day. Consequently, in formulating our questions and our approaches we were careful to take into consideration such things as:

- How can we make sure the findings aren't affected by preconceived ideas and generalities?
- How do we word each question to minimise the impact of preconceptions?
- How do we ensure discussions truly reflect honest opinions and viewpoints, i.e. how do we make sure we don't just get statements that reflect what they believe we want to hear?
- What influence will popular opinion and media reporting have on the outcome, and will this distort the truth? How can we counter this?
- How can we make sure the findings don't just reflect our own assumptions?

These are all important questions, and we spent untold hours discussing and formulating strategies to address them to the best of our abilities. There can be no guarantee that what we achieved is not tainted by prejudice, preconceptions or misconceptions, but in being aware of the possibilities, we believe we have minimised the impact on our findings.

## Our findings:

### **Stats on communication**

*45% of employers expressed concern over CALD people's English.*

*60% of On Track CALD clients believe their English communication is not workplace functional.*

### **Stats on problem solving**

*70% of employers believe that the cultural difference inhibits accurate problem-solving abilities.*

*55% of CALD clients believe they have good problem-solving skills.*

## Employers

There were a number of common issues that emerged from data collected from the employer focus groups and surveys. These were:

### *1. Communication*

Many employers saw the communication issue as an insurmountable problem. They would not consider the Karen people for any job entailing customer service/contact, telephone operations or inter-staff communications. Whilst many were sympathetic to the Karen needs, and the need to find sustainable employment for them, they were largely unwilling to take on what they saw as a ‘burden’—people who would need extra assistance and close scrutiny.

### *2. IT skills*

As with communication skills, it was assumed that refugees would not be able to use email, word processing programs and so on, which are often a prerequisite for employment.

### *3. Workplace expectations*

Discussions with employers identified cultural issues relating to workplace expectations and employability skills that needed to be addressed. One of these, for example, is the

propensity of the Karen people to leave work without notification when they need to carry out a personal errand, such as taking a sick child to the doctor. This is a cultural issue, because as subsistence farmers in their own country and after having spent years in a refugee camp, and so not having had an employer before, they are unaware of what employers expect in Australia.

#### *4. OHS policies and procedures*

Many employers were concerned about OHS procedures, and all the compliance issues with Worksafe that this entails. They were worried that, given the background of the Karen, along with their limited English-language skills, they would not have much understanding of such processes or their responsibilities in following policy and procedures.

#### *5. Prejudice of customers/staff*

Some employers stated that they had no objections to employing refugees, but were worried about their customers or their existing staff having objections. It is conceivable that this was used as a mask for their own misgivings.

#### *6. Religion*

Many employers were showing unease at the prospect of employing Muslims. This was not necessarily due to prejudice or fear, but was mostly a worry about prayer times, and having to pay wages for these times. They also seemed to believe that the workers need to stop for prayer four or five times per day, which the employers saw as disruptive. They also worried that the non-Muslim workers would demand equal amounts of time off in response to this.

This concern is completely unfounded, apart from being a generalisation and apart from whether or not prayer times are more disruptive than other work practices such as 'smoko' or toilet breaks. It is unfounded because the Karen settlers are

either Buddhist or Christian. Clearly, then this is an area in which employers need educating.

At our forum, the notion was raised that the Karen people should put their religion on their resume in order to reassure the prospective employer that there would not be a prayer-time issue. There is no requirement in Australian law that a person should have to state his/her religion, either directly or through inference to an employer as part of a recruitment application. Yet the problem remains that employers may assume the person's religion, and not employ that person because of their incorrect information and assumptions.

#### *7. Height*

As strange as this may seem, the issue of physical height was brought up. The Karen people tend to be smaller in stature than the average 'Anglo' Australian, and some employers raised concerns about their physical ability, and their ability to reach and carry. We could advise the Karen to write 'I'm taller than I look' on their resumes!

### **Karen**

In our discussions with the Karen people, we found that they are very reticent to openly voice their concerns, or to criticise anyone. Nevertheless, with persistence and patience we found a couple of prevalent misgivings:

#### *1. Isolation*

The larger employers in this area who are actively employing the Karen have unofficially adopted a model of group training and interaction. They employ CALD people in groups, and delegate the most accomplished speakers of English to leadership roles, so that instructions and directives can be dispersed efficiently. Unfortunately, this has the effect of segregating the group from other workers. From

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their comments, we understood that feelings of 'belonging', of being social included and accepted, were undermined by this practice of keeping them separate from the mainstream workforce. We realised that we needed to devise training that would enable them to take their places in the workforce as full and equal members of the existing team.

## 2. Communication

Just as the employers expressed concerns about language and communication, so did the Karen themselves. They told us that potential employers often speak too fast, or use words that they do not know, and this leaves them unable to satisfactorily answer the questions, and as such do not obtain the job. The Karen people also have difficulty understanding the fast and imprecise nature of workplace banter, and instructions that are heavily loaded with colloquialisms, abbreviations and word misuse. This is something that can be addressed in training by concentrating on everyday conversational English language, and understanding language and its verbal and non-verbal aspects. Also our training needs to focus on teaching clarification techniques to the Karen—how to ask questions to clarify points that are unclear, or seem to be nonsensical.

From this first cycle of research we came to the realisation that while we have taken on the challenge of adapting our training to address the needs of the Karen people, there is an equal need for education amongst employers about the Karen people. Moreover, our training has to not only equip the Karen to succeed in the workplace, but also how to deal with misconceptions, misrepresentation and potential hostility.

## Our challenges

Our next challenge was to use this information to formulate changes to our training which would accommodate the needs of the Karen, as highlighted by our findings. Our next cycle, therefore, was based around the following question:

*How do we develop our employment skills program in response to the issues?*

Now the work really began!

## The training

As the teaching continues, so does our learning. We are discovering how much more there is to accomplish, and how much more there is to do. Teaching employability skills, workplace language and conversational language is only one small part of the picture. The issue of employability skills in the context of language is closely intertwined with cultural issues and attitudes. Whilst the 'soft' skills that are needed to gain employment are of paramount importance, so are the skills required to maintain the employment.

We decided that our OHS sessions needed to be extended to cover what could perhaps be better described as induction, i.e. to include such things as management hierarchy, use of facilities and meal breaks. In any workplace



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there is a hierarchy of management and supervision which should be followed, for example, to whom do you speak when you have a complaint, and is it the same person if you have a query or a request for time off? This even entails some procedures that we take for granted, such as do we need to ask permission to go to the toilet? Can we go and get a glass of water if we are thirsty? And of course, what should we do if we need to take time off work? In the course we integrate all these functional processes into general OHS to ensure that the employee has a full understanding of their responsibilities and processes when they start work.

We are also finding that such training cannot be linear—it has to take a more holistic approach. A linear approach does not take into account the matters that arise everyday. Nor does it allow for fluidity—new people starting at different levels and with varying degrees of knowledge. The training has to be developed and maintained by a variety of interested parties so that health, community awareness, social inclusion and workplace inclusion are catered for throughout.

## **A cyclical process**

Alongside the training, we instigated a 'road show' to take to employers to help them understand the Karen people's lives, culture, experiences and understandings. The response from other community and employer groups has been incredibly positive, and has resulted in the formation of the Bendigo Employment Working Group. This group comprises members of the local Settlement Committee, Bendigo Regional Institute of TAFE, Hazeldene's Chicken Farm and the DEEWR Local Employment Coordinator. We also have expressions of interest from other employers from a range of occupations including recycling, mining, horticulture, and property services. We are approaching the Jobs

Services Australia providers in order to sign up representatives of their organisations.

It is important that our training be in line with the culture of specific workplaces, and it is with this in mind that we developed the Bendigo Employment Working Group—so that we can ascertain the needs of each employer. The CALD learners need to understand the way the workplace functions, and the processes and procedures involved, and this functionality is determined by consultation with the employers. In this way, problems can be solved before they become issues, and understanding can take the place of recrimination.

The training and the Bendigo Employment Working Group feed into each other in a cyclical process. The employment group has, in fact, become part of the holistic approach to the training. Not only does it enable us to more easily consult employers in order to focus our training, but the formation of the group has opened up opportunities for orientation visits so that what we teach our Karen learners can be experienced directly, not just in abstract. These orientation visits are invaluable in providing greater relevance for the training, and in increasing the Karen's understanding of the Australian workplace and workplace expectations. We are hoping that, in time, the group will also provide opportunities for work experience as part of our training. It has already enabled us to provide post-employment support to Karen people who are already working and we are confident that with more employers on board, it will open up new employment opportunities for the Karen.

What has become apparent through our discussions with the Bendigo Employment Working Group and others is the crucial need of business in Bendigo to maintain and strengthen



productivity. The training of both employees and people managers will open up employment pathways leading to up-skilling and increased productivity. This in turn responds to the community need for long-term sustainable employment opportunities for CALD workers and job seekers. The investment of time and training will strengthen the local labour market and underpin prosperity in this region.

## Enrichment

There can be no doubt that Bendigo is undergoing a cultural and social change, unlike anything it has ever known before. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics census data (ABS 2006), since the gold rush Central Victoria has been the most Anglo-Saxon region in Australia. But this is no longer the case. The arrival of so many CALD people in the area has caused a change in identity, a change in attitude and a change in perceptions. Those who have embraced this change—have taken this vibrant new inflow of people and allowed their ideas, cultures and experiences flavour the everyday life of Bendigo—have been rewarded with new optimism, new directions and new hope. This isn't just about the CALD people. This is about all of us. We often talk about what we can do for the refugees and new migrants with the diverse cultures that they bring—but we don't talk about what these people can do for us. They bring new blood, new life and a whole new world into our sometimes stagnant communities. They have as much to teach us as we do them and it is those of us who have realised this that have benefited the most.

This whole process has been one of ongoing learning and adjustment. If the lessons we have learned can be summed up in one short phrase, it could be:

Diversity equals Enrichment

The Bendigo region has certainly become enriched with its new communities, and day by day it is becoming a better place to live.

On Track တာ်ဆာ်ကတီ် တနံ်အံ်န, သု တာ်ဘျုး ဂ ကွ်  
မၤစၢ်, တီစၢ်မၤစၢ်န(တၢ်), သု(တၢ်) တာ်လဲၤတာ်ကွၢ်  
နီၤဟ့ၣ်တၢ်နူတၢ်အုကွၢ်ဆၢၣ်မံၣ် တာ်ဟ့ၣ်ဖံးဟ့ၣ်မၤ, တာ်န့ၣ်ဖံးန့ၣ်မၤ

On Track thanks you for your time today we look forward to assisting you in your journey towards employment.

# Glossary

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACFE	Adult, Community and Further Education
CALD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
CAVSS	Course in Applied Vocational Study Skills
DEEWR	Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
DVLC	Diamond Valley Learning Centre
ESL	English as a Second Language
FECCA	Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia
HACC	Home and Community Care
JSA	Job Services Australia
KBDDF	Karen Buddhist Dhamma Dhutta Foundation
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
NMLL	North Melbourne Language and Learning
OHS	Occupational Health and Safety
PRACE	Preston Reservoir Adult Community Education
RTO	Registered Training Organisation
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
VET	Vocational Education and Training



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