

Language on the Move Research Group
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Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Migration Inquiry into ‘Migration, Pathway to Nation Building’

The *Language on the Move* Research Group is a team of applied sociolinguists conducting research related to linguistic diversity and social participation in the context of migration. Individually and collectively, over the course of more than two decades, we have made significant contributions to language education, multilingualism, and intercultural communication in Australia.

Distinguished Professor Ingrid Piller is an internationally recognized research leader in the field and former Executive Director of the Adult Migrant English Program Research Centre (AMEP RC).

Our research¹ has documented substantial levels of social exclusion experienced by migrants from non-English-speaking backgrounds (NESB). NESB migrants experience economic inequality, social and cultural domination, and imparity of political participation.

The problem of systemic migrant exclusion must be addressed for migration to work as a strategic enabler of vibrant economies and socially sustainable communities.

In the following, we respond to each of the Terms of Reference and provide relevant recommendations. We would be happy to further expand on our responses and recommendations if needed.

Yours sincerely,

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¹ List of references available on request.

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1. The role of permanent migration in nation building, cultural diversity, and social cohesion

Migrant settlement in Australia is hindered by the ‘deficit’ lenses through which NESB migrants are often framed. This means, for instance:

- The language skills of migrants are viewed as *deficient* English rather than them being able to speak multiple languages and thus having a multilingual repertoire.
- Their lack of local experience is highlighted as an obstacle while their international experience remains unrecognised.
- Their qualifications are demoted without due consideration to minimal pathways that could effectively and efficiently bridge any gaps between requirements.

Racist invalidations, insults, or worse, may rub these deficit perspectives in to maintain even long-ago arrivals as ‘forever foreigners.’ Migrants’ courage, resilience, and perseverance remain underappreciated.

Our research suggests that the desired benefits of migration for the Australian economy and community can only be realized through a **broader and more holistic concentration on migrants’ lived experience**, including an understanding of migrants as part of families and a clearer focus on the fundamental role of communication in establishing social relationships.

Communication: contrary to expectations, most NESB migrants today arrive with relatively high levels of English language proficiency, due to visa requirements. Although English language learning has thus been frontloaded into the pre-migration period for most new arrivals, significant gaps remain between English learned in the classroom and communicating in English while going about one’s daily life.

This is because there is an overreliance on language testing, even though the relationship between passing a (commercial, academic) language test and being able to perform in real life through the tested language is highly tenuous.

Most NESB migrants initially struggle with everyday communication, due to lack of familiarity with Australian English and/or interactional skills in the new language. This can make mundane tasks fraught with difficulties and dangers, as consequential actions need to be undertaken in the new language soon after arrival, such as signing up for a mobile phone plan, committing to a lease on a house, or entering an employment contract.

Communication insecurities and lack of familiarity with the new society result in new migrants sometimes being taken advantage of. Any misunderstandings may go on to reverberate through future interactions as each misunderstanding leads to a loss of confidence that needs to be reclaimed over time.

Family: migration usually involves families and migration decisions are rarely made by individuals alone. Parents, in particular, are motivated by the (future) interests and wellbeing of their children.

Unfortunately, Australian schools are generally poorly equipped to support the parental aspirations of migrants for their children. For instance, most NESB migrant parents desire high levels of English proficiency for their children, as critical to their academic success, and they equally desire for their children to maintain and expand proficiency in the heritage language. Too often, these two aspirations conflict.

We recommend:

- Design and implement a holistic evidence-based settlement and inclusion strategy, where migration policy is no longer cordoned off from education, family, public communication, health, welfare, or anti-racism policy.
- Set up a national research centre or consortium to coordinate a concerted research effort into the lived experience of migration, to ensure that research is policy-relevant and impactful, and to develop resources for institutions to enhance migrant inclusion at all levels.
- Review language testing requirements, and design and implement a coordinated national language and communication strategy to ensure a whole-of-society effort to achieve competence in English for all, maintenance and development of languages other than English, provision of services in languages other than English as needed, and opportunities for learning additional languages.

2. Immigration as a strategic enabler of vibrant economies and socially sustainable communities in our cities and regional hubs

As highlighted above, the problem of migrants' lived experience of exclusion must be addressed for migration to work as a strategic enabler. NESB migrants experience high levels of un- and underemployment, compared to the Australia-born and those from other Anglophone countries. Employment in jobs for which they are overqualified constitutes a significant skills wastage, both for the individual and the wider society.

Particularly problematic is mismatched skills recognition, where visas are issued based on a particular qualification, but that qualification is then not recognized as a licence to practice in Australia.

Most NESB migrants take years to re-establish their careers in Australia; many never do. In the process, migrant exclusion from full and equal social participation becomes a barrier to effective transfer of knowledge and skills.

We recommend:

- Design and implement transitional 'on-boarding' support programs for all new arrivals to facilitate effective initial settlement, located in workplaces and all social institutions, ranging from mentoring and buddy schemes to development support programs.
- Ensure alignment of skills and qualifications assessments across national, state and professional bodies.

- Support all migrants, including independent skilled migrants, with any training programs required to close gaps between pre-migration qualifications and post-migration requirements.

3. Attraction and retention strategies for working migrants to Australia

NESB migrants experience the initial settlement period as particularly difficult, when they may be struggling to come to grips with the new communication environment, to find adequate work, and to establish new social networks. How these problems are solved in the early settlement period is crucial for long-term outcomes as path-dependency sets in.

We recommend:

- Design and implement targeted settlement support services for the initial settlement phase related not only to employment, but also to language and network building.

4. Policy settings to strengthen skilled migrant pathways to permanent residency

Temporary skilled migrants and international students widely experience pathways to permanent residency as overly complex, confusing, and unreliable. For instance, during one of our research projects² with meat workers on a temporary skilled visa, English language requirements for achieving permanent residency changed after their arrival in the country, leaving them feeling betrayed, stressed, and fearful.

International students, similarly, often find themselves in a Kafkaesque labyrinth that has become unnavigable without legal expertise and the support of migration lawyers. The attendant inability to plan is disruptive of careers, families, and all aspects of settlement.

Definitions of family in migration legislation are often ethnocentric and ignore, for instance, the fact that adult children and older parents are considered immediate family in many parts of the world.

We recommend:

- Simplify and streamline visas and migration pathways, including ensuring that the required legal documents and processes are accessible to and manageable for migrants themselves.
- Adjust family visas so that definitions of family are more flexible to avoid family separation and to make it easier for close family members – however defined – to stay together.

5. Strengthening labour market participation and the economic and social contribution of migrants, including family and humanitarian migrants and the partners of working migrants

In our research, many family and humanitarian migrants reported experiences of sexist and racist discrimination, alongside all the other settlement challenges faced by all NESB migrants. For instance,

² Piller, I., & Lising, L. (2014). Language, employment and settlement: temporary meat workers in Australia. *Multilingua*, 33(1/2), 35-59. <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/multi-2014-0003/html>

African migrants in one of our research projects³ experienced heavy stereotyping as detrimental to their labour market participation, as their existing skills and qualifications were devalued and targeted bridges to close any gaps were not available to them. Their existing economic and social contributions were obscured, and future contributions were minimized through lack of bridging programs.

Those with high levels of English language proficiency, education, and qualifications were often under-assessed and sent to English language training or enrolled in educational training that did not provide pathways to bridge gaps between their existing and required qualifications. Those with low levels of English language proficiency and low levels of education were often sent to unsuitable training courses and not given opportunities to prove themselves.

We recommend:

- Ensure that considerations of gender and racial equality are incorporated into all levels of policy making, program design and implementation, and service provision.
- Ensure that NESB migrants are included and represented in all relevant equity legislation and public education campaigns.

6. The role of settlement services and vocational training in utilising migrant experiences, knowledge, and opportunities

The Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) is a globally renowned English language teaching program for new arrivals. However, it is only available to migrants with low levels of English language proficiency and those arriving in certain visa groups, mostly family and humanitarian entrants. As a result, most migrants are nowadays excluded from any language or settlement support. This can have pernicious consequences as many new arrivals are floundering in the early settlement phase.

There is a need for short-term targeted interventions that give new arrivals ‘the confidence to join the new society,’ as one of our research participants put it.

This would involve a small investment into bridging programs, onboarding schemes, mentoring efforts, or similar, which is likely to secure inestimable long-term benefits.

We recommend:

- Extend language learning and settlement support to all new arrivals.
- Scope, design, and implement short-term transition support schemes for the early settlement phase.

³ Williams Tetteh, V. (2015). *Language, education and settlement: A sociolinguistic ethnography on, with, and for Africans in Australia*. Macquarie University. Sydney. http://www.languageonthemove.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Final-PhD-thesis_Vera-Williams-Tetteh.pdf