https://studentsuccessjournal.org/
Advance online publication https://doi.org/10.63608/ssj.4191

# Co-Designing for Equity and Cultural Responsiveness: Creating a Graduate Capitals Employability Resource for Culturally and Linguistically Marginalised (CALM) Students

**Sally Baker**
Refugee Education Australia and University of New South Wales, Australia
**Tim McLennan**
University of New South Wales, Australia
**Stefan Alexander**
Australian National University, Australia
**Joshua James**
University of Technology Sydney, Australia
**Melissa Tham**
Victoria University, Australia

## Abstract

'Non-English Speaking Background' students, especially those who are first generation refugees or migrants to Australia, have some of the worst graduate outcomes of all Australian equity cohorts. Like broader patterns of discrimination in the job market, refugees and migrants experience additional employability challenges compared with the Australian-born population because of unfamiliarity with hiring practices, still-developing networks, and inexperience with Australian workplace norms. Underwhelming graduate outcomes demonstrate the need for targeted employability resources that recognise and valorise migration experiences, languages, perspectives, and skills. This article explores a tailored online employability resource which was co-designed with and for refugee students, community organisations, careers advisors and association representatives, and higher education equity researchers. Drawing on user experience data from migrant students, we explore how effective they perceived the resource to be, particularly in how well it responds to diverse cultures. We then examine tensions between cultural responsiveness at the level of values, practice, and discourse, and discuss both the tacit racialisation and discrimination and the overt racism that refugees and migrants experience in Australia.

***Keywords**:* Co-design; employability resource; higher education; Culturally and Linguistically Marginalised (CALM) migrants and refugees; Australia.

## Introduction

Graduate employability is an important area of focus for universities around the world, particularly in the context of an increasingly unpredictable job market. In addition to supporting students to be employable following a program of study, measurement of graduate outcomes is also a powerful mechanism to assess the (perceived) effectiveness of a university

Except where otherwise noted, content in this journal is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence. As an open access journal, articles are free to use with proper attribution. ISSN: 2205-0795


© The Author/s 2026

(Jackson & Dean, 2023), with employment outcomes playing a key role in international rankings. While the Universities Accord did not identify Non-English Speaking Background students as a target equity group, it did acknowledge that students in this cohort "experience significantly lower higher education participation and attainment outcomes" (O'Kane et al., 2024, p. 117). In this article, we have deliberately eschewed the more common labels of 'Non-English Speaking Background' (NESB) and 'Culturally and Linguistically Diverse' (CALD) people, and have instead adopted the term Culturally and Linguistically Marginalised (CALM).[1] This decision pushes against problematic assumptions that lie behind a notion of 'difference' being set against normative/colonial ideas of who is 'diverse' (e.g., non-Indigenous, Australian-born, English-speaking, of European heritage; see Dakka, 2020).

Although there is strong evidence that equity cohorts experience disproportionate levels of post-graduation un(der)employment compared with non-equity groups (Carroll & Li, 2022; Pitman et al., 2019; Tomaszewski et al., 2019), few universities deliver tailored employability supports for specific equity cohorts. Scholars such as Andrewartha and Harvey (2017) have argued this results from career advisors being unable to provide targeted supports because of inadequate resourcing and training. Existing literature also highlights how graduate outcomes are disproportionately low among refugee and migrant graduates (Carroll & Li, 2022; Pitman et al., 2019). The disappointing graduate outcomes for this group align with those of the general CALM migrant and refugee population, who face discrimination and uneven employability in the Australian workplace (Lee et al., 2020). Scholars argue that refugees are especially disadvantaged when it comes to workforce integration, as evocatively captured in the metaphor of the 'canvas ceiling' (Lee et al., 2020). As Lee et al. (2020) explain, the metaphor of the canvas ceiling illustrates "the challenging nature of finding and sustaining rewarding employment with advancement opportunities, and the prolonged extreme conditions that refugees face, even after leaving their temporary shelters" (p. 206).

The low relative graduate outcomes for CALM students are symptomatic of intersecting cultural, institutional, and social factors. We outline some of these key factors in detail below, but this paper focuses on CALM students and employability as related to and shaped by experiences of forced migration. Forced migration involves dislocation and unsettling of cultural frames, networks, and local knowledge: processes and experiences which create barriers to employability (Arthur et al., 2025; Lee et al., 2020), especially in university settings where the transposal of employability practice is often designed for Australian-born students (Baker et al., 2023; Dunwoodie et al., 2022; Pham et al., 2018). Rather than viewing employability as the single cause of low graduate outcomes, we contend that it is one of the multiple contributors to the relatively poor graduate outcomes of CALM students.

Taking this supposition as our starting point, we set out to co-design and implement an employability resource for and with CALM refugee students which would specifically recognise and respond to the kinds of information that might not transpose between migration contexts. We wanted to ensure that this resource was culturally sensitive and included representation and stories from other CALM graduates who had already navigated the Australian university-to-workplace journey. Co-designing the resource was an essential part of this project, so as to ensure that the resource was also responsive to an identified need and was developed in dialogue with the lived experience of its intended users: CALM migrant/refugee students. This article offers an account of the ambition of the co-design process of the *Capital Advantage* tailored employability resource. It also provides insights from CALM students into its cultural responsiveness, and its utility for assisting the development of graduate capitals (Tomlinson, 2017) and increasing their awareness of employability and their career planning and job-seeking strategies. Specifically, this article responds to these guiding questions:

- How can Tomlinson's model of graduate capitals be utilised to co-design a culturally responsive employability resource for CALM university students?
- How do currently enrolled CALM students perceive the cultural responsiveness of the *Capital Advantage* resource?

[1] We define the CALM cohort as students who were born overseas, who speak a language other than English at home, and who migrated to Australia within the last 10 years.

## Literature Review

### *CALM Students in Higher Education*

In 2021, over a quarter (27.6%) of people living in Australia were born overseas, with 22% speaking a language other than English at home (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Census data indicate that Australia's cultural and linguistic diversity is increasing (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022) which likely has implications for university demographics. In the context of Australian higher education, domestic students who were born overseas, who speak a language other than English at home, and who commenced their studies within 10 years of arriving in Australia have been categorised as NESB students. Initially identified as an equity group by Dawkins (1988), the Federal Government has continued to collect data on this cohort since the early 1990s, although they are no longer considered a priority group in policy or funding. According to recent data, there were 33,818 NESB students attending higher education institutions in 2024 (Australian Government Department of Education, 2025a). A sizeable minority of this cohort are refugees, with 4,553 students on permanent humanitarian visas enrolled at a higher education institution in 2024 (Australian Government Department of Education, 2025b).

Students from refugee backgrounds represent an acutely disadvantaged CALM cohort in Australian higher education, with language barriers compounded by disrupted prior education and experiences of trauma (Molla, 2022). Participation and attainment rates for students from refugee backgrounds in higher education are far below parity (Naylor et al., 2021). For example, Molla (2022) found that only one in 10 refugee-background African youth aged 18–30 transitioned to higher education within five years of arrival, leaving fewer than 20% of them continuing to complete their studies. The low completion rates among students from refugee backgrounds have implications for their employment prospects and future earning potential, illustrating the importance of targeted participation initiatives alongside attainment and further transition support.

### *CALM Students' Employability*

Research situated in Australia consistently shows that CALM students experience poor employment outcomes after graduation. Pitman et al. (2019) found that NESB graduates were less likely to be in secure work and had lower median salaries for full- and part-time employment than students belonging to other equity groups. Similarly, Carroll and Li (2022) reported lower earnings and lower levels of full-time employment among NESB graduates, who were also more likely to be employed in a career that did not match their field of study. While there are limited disaggregated data on post-graduation employment outcomes for CALM sub-categories such as refugees, research shows that humanitarian migrants are 51% less likely than non-humanitarian migrants to be employed five years after arrival in Australia (Guo & Tani, 2026). Many refugees also experience an occupational downgrade after arriving in Australia, with this downgrade more pronounced for refugee women (van Kooy et al., 2025).

The persistent unemployment and underemployment trends observed for CALM cohorts reflect multiple employment challenges. Some of these challenges include language barriers (Dunwoodie et al., 2022); unfamiliarity with professional systems and workplace cultural conventions (Baker et al., 2023); developing social networks (Dunwoodie et al., 2022); misrecognition of overseas skills, qualifications, and experience (Lee et al., 2020); and racialised discrimination (such as accentism and bias against people with non-Anglo names; Dryden & Dovchin, 2024; Pham et al., 2018). These challenges are systemic and multi-level (Lee et al., 2020) and therefore cannot be alleviated through initiatives in the higher education sector alone, although universities have a critical role to play in redressing the employment disadvantage that CALM students experience.

### *Targeted Careers and Employability Support for CALM Students*

Relatively few Australian universities offer targeted careers and employability support for CALM students (Dunwoodie et al., 2022). At many Australian universities, CALM students may access generic careers support available for all students; however, these initiatives seldom account for experiences of (forced) migration or cultural and linguistic diversity (Dunwoodie et al., 2022). While tailored careers support is available for international students at many universities, these initiatives are typically not extended to domestic CALM students and overlook critical differences between the cohorts (Dunwoodie et al., 2022). Key challenges to implementing targeted support for domestic CALM students include a lack of policy recognition, resource (staffing and financial) constraints, training, difficulties identifying CALM students, and reluctance from employers to consider CALM students for Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) experiences (Arthur et al., 2025; Dunwoodie et al., 2022).

With limited empirical evidence to draw from, identifying 'best practices' in careers and employability support for CALM students is a challenge. In this void, the perspectives of CALM students and careers practitioners form a crucial source of information on how universities can best facilitate CALM students' transitions into employment. Research undertaken with these stakeholder groups suggests that targeted support for CALM cohorts should include strategies to build their social capital; enhance their English and professional language; and increase their familiarity with the Australian labour market, workplace culture, and expectations (Baker et al., 2023; Dunwoodie et al., 2022). Dedicated careers counsellors and targeted internship and WIL opportunities have also been identified as key employability initiatives for CALM students (Arthur et al., 2025). Increasing CALM students' awareness about what career services can offer them is also essential to enhancing employability outcomes for this cohort, with these services often underutilised by CALM students (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2017; Arthur et al., 2025).

### *'Be Who You Can See': Issues of Representation of CALM Students in Higher Education*

Representation and visibility of other students are key enablers of success for CALM students in higher education, contributing to their motivation and aspirational confidence (Kindon et al., 2024). Linguistic visibility is considered a key contributor to the richness of the university environment and to students' sense of belonging (Dobinson & Mercieca, 2020). However, although students want to "see themselves and their languages reflected on campus" (Dobinson & Mercieca, 2020, p. 799), few universities refer to language or linguistic diversity in their webpages on inclusion (Baker et al., 2021) or in documents pertaining to teaching and learning practices (Dobinson & Mercieca, 2020). This linguistic invisibility combined with the linguistic privilege afforded to English by Australian universities has implications for students' developing identities and their learning experience, contributing to linguistic racism (Dobinson & Mercieca, 2020).

Issues of representation are especially pertinent to CALM cohorts such as students with forced migration backgrounds, who are not recognised as an equity cohort in Australia. The lack of specific targeting for this cohort may contribute to a perception from these students that support services or equity initiatives are not 'for them' (Baker et al., 2018). Baker et al. (2021) found a distinct lack of reference to refugees or people seeking asylum in university policies and practices, arguing that institutional narratives surrounding equity were guilty of creating 'imagined worlds' where university is accessible to all marginalised students. A further concerning observation is that some universities regularly engage in 'motivation porn' (Stevenson & Baker, 2024) by (unethically) representing students with forced migration backgrounds as 'poster children' by sharing 'student success stories' despite providing minimal targeted support for the cohort (Baker et al., 2021). In these instances, representation may reflect institutions attempting to gain 'reputational currency' for their altruism rather than showcasing students' hard work to succeed despite structural barriers (Baker et al., 2021).

## Conceptual Framework: Tomlinson's Graduate Capital Model (GCM)

In this study, Tomlinson's Graduate Capital Model (GCM) of employability development was chosen to inform the development of our *Capital Advantage* resource (Tomlinson, 2017). The GCM provides a broad view of employability development, beyond a focus on employability *skills* development that is still popular today, instead conceptualising employability as a developmental process of a broader set of employability capitals, or 'resources', that provide graduates with advantages to help them navigate the competitive graduate jobs market. In addition, of relevance to the unique experience of CALM students, these capitals are stated to be acquired through engagement with a range of activities in diverse contexts in and beyond university. Through development of the resources of the five graduate capitals, students gain advantages that support their ability to secure meaningful work and create careers after graduation:

- *Human Capital*: the knowledge, specialist and transferable skills that enable graduates to perform specific work tasks. It also includes the knowledge, skills, and competencies to find, analyse, and use labour market information, employ job search strategies, and navigate recruitment processes.
- *Social Capital*: the ability to identify appropriate live and online networks and contacts, and to establish and maintain professional relationships to gain industry information and access the 'hidden' jobs market.
- *Cultural Capital*: the ability to understand, acquire, and put into practice the explicit and implicit organisational cultural norms and values around appropriate professional conduct.
- *Identity Capital*: the investment in developing a professional self-concept, and the ability to create and articulate a professional narrative aligned to preferred industries. It prompts active, self-directed career development, and testing and crafting of a professional self-perception around the kind of professional students would like to be.

- *Psychological Capital*: the psycho-social resource that focuses on having resilience, managing career setbacks, being adaptable to changing circumstances, and having tolerance for uncertainty.

The capitals include interconnected knowledge and capabilities gained through formal and informal experience and relate to a range of educational, social, cultural, and psycho-social dimensions, with reasonably fluid boundaries existing between them. For example, professional networks (Social Capital) in a mid-degree internship or vocational placement may inform a student about appropriate workplace behaviours (Cultural Capital), enabling that student to refine their professional self-concept (Identity Capital). Of relevance for CALM students' employability development are the Social and Cultural Capitals (Dunwoodie et al., 2022; Pham et al., 2018), although we contend that migrants/migration have not been strongly considered in the development of the GCM (or other models of employability). Refugees may not have the professional networks to access information and opportunities in the world of work or have a good understanding of Australian cultural norms and expectations. Due to the disruption of migration, CALM students may significantly increase their employability through engagement with this content.

## Methodology

This project is part of a broader multi-university trials and evaluation project. This article focuses on the co-design and qualitative user evaluation (User Experience [UEx]) of a CALM-specific careers-focused resource, which was user tested by 11 CALM students who consented to have their responses included as data. We draw on this UEx feedback to respond to our framing questions regarding students' perceptions and experiences of the *Capital Advantage* resource. Ethical approval was obtained from the human research ethics committee at the lead university (H/2024/0818).

### *User Experience (UEx)*

The development of the *Capital Advantage* resource was informed by principles of Human-Centred Design (HCD; Tosi, 2020), which actively engage end users throughout the design process, recognising that they are "holders of experience" rather than "simply sources of information" (Tosi, 2020, p. 48). As such, UEx is human-centred from the outset of the design process, encompassing the "sum of the emotions, perceptions and reactions that a person experiences when interacting with a product or service" (Tosi, 2020, p. 51). Research suggests that UEx is a key contributor to the success of online learning (Maslov et al., 2021), with co-design processes representing an innovative way to improve the UEx of learning management systems (Havinen et al., 2025).

### *Co-Design*

To ensure that the resource was responsive to the needs of CALM students, we undertook a series of co-design workshops with multiple stakeholder groups including CALM students and experts in careers, resettlement, and higher education. Insights from CALM students about their employment experiences in Australia were integral in shaping the content of the resource. As part of the iterative HCD process, CALM students also tested a pilot version of the resource, with their feedback used to refine the UEx. As a participatory research approach that actively involves people or communities in the design of a product or service that affects them, co-design recognises that lived experience, skills, and knowledge(s) are essential assets for the decision-making, designing, and delivering of tailored resources (Dollinger & Vanderlelie, 2021).

In our project, we ran two complementary co-design processes with different stakeholders. The first group included representatives from 22 organisations, encompassing higher education, careers peak bodies, careers support services, refugee/resettlement peak bodies, and two paid participants with lived experience of forced migration and careers expertise. The second group included university students with forced migration experience ($n$ = 5), who were recruited via the Multicultural Youth Advisory Network (MYAN) and were also paid for their lived expertise. Student co-designers were paid as casual employees of a partner organisation in recognition of this valuable contribution, following Kubica et al.'s (2025) guidance to avoid paying for lived experience with gift cards.

*Appreciative Inquiry*

We used Appreciative Inquiry (AppInq) to frame our co-design process. AppInq is a strengths-based approach to organisational improvement that shifts attention from problem solving to identifying and building on best practices (Cooper et al., 2023). Like co-design, AppInq seeks to engage a variety of stakeholders, with a focus on people who are a part of the social system under examination (Jones & Masika, 2021). Collaboration is an essential element of AppInq because it ensures that "all members of the system are part of the change, resulting in ownership of the outcome and enabling self-determination" (Cooper et al., 2023, p. 138). The AppInq process typically involves cycling through four phases: Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny. The Discovery phase seeks to build on successes by identifying sources of strength and hope, although challenges and problems may also be discussed (Jones & Masika, 2021). The Dream phase aims to identify participants' shared aspirations and their vision for an ideal future, and the Design phase co-constructs ideas on how participants can turn dreams into reality. Finally, the Destiny (Delivery) phase involves enacting the plans developed through the previous Ds.

We facilitated a youth-specific co-design group to ensure students' contributions were elevated, reflecting the increasing emphasis on the centrality of student voice in AppInq research within educational contexts. We started our co-design with the youth group, creating a composite 'discovery map' that outlined students' experiences, perceptions, feelings, expectations for their studies, and career advice, using text, image, voice, and video to showcase their testimonials to inform the university and peak association co-design group. We then ran the co-design workshops across the following six months, with the student meeting preceding each university meeting, with the project team communicating outcomes and feedback between the two.

The decision to keep the two groups separate was both pragmatic (logistics and timing) and trauma-informed, creating safe conditions for the students to share without feeling that they had to perform or could not be candid. While AppInq typically focuses on eliciting positive responses from participants, Jones and Masika (2021) argue that providing space to share uncensored perspectives facilitates student voice and agency, and "provides a stimulus for suggestions enabling positive change" (p. 291).

As we approached the Design phase, we undertook a storyboarding activity to make sense of the information and ideas gathered through the Discovery and Dream phases.

## *Data Collection: User Experience Evaluation*

Once the co-design of the *Capital Advantage* resource was complete, we undertook a qualitative evaluation of the UEx with CALM students ($N$ = 11) who were enrolled in a program of study at one of the participating universities from the broader trial and evaluation project. These student-participants were all paid for their contribution to the evaluation as casual employees of their respective universities. An overview of the demographic profile of these 11 student-participants is included in Table 1 in Appendix A.

To gather this qualitative UEx data, we created a set of reflective prompts that were embedded in a bespoke version of the resource to elicit targeted feedback. The reflective prompts were embedded directly into the resource so that student-participants could provide feedback as they engaged with the modules. These prompts asked the participants to reflect on their experience with the resource, including the skills and knowledge developed, and their observations of the strengths and weaknesses, and areas for improvement. These reflective prompts were designed by an experienced careers practitioner who had a substantial role in the co-design of the online resource, and these prompts were then reviewed by another researcher for clarity and alignment with the research questions before they were finalised. In line with the purpose of our research that seeks to explore the cultural responsiveness of a tailored employability resource and aligned to our second research question, we were particularly interested in this reflective prompt: *Cultural responsiveness can be defined as an approach that acknowledges and values cultural diversity, integrating this understanding into policies, practices, and interactions to ensure respect and inclusivity.* This definition was intentionally broad to prompt the student-participants, who had CALM backgrounds and were enrolled in university, to discuss a range of ideas that may have shaped how they perceived the resource to be culturally responsive.

*Reflexive Thematic Analysis*

We took an exploratory and inductive approach to the UEx evaluation data gathered through the reflective prompt activity, using Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive thematic analytic method to examine how our biographies, experiences, and values

guided our interpretations of the data. To undertake this process, we familiarised ourselves with the data before coding, generating initial themes, reviewing the themes, naming and defining the themes, and then writing up our findings (Braun & Clarke, 2021). As a research team, we familiarised ourselves with the data by jointly reviewing and coding a subset of the data gathered from the 11 student-participants who consented for their insights to be included in the research component of the project. From this collective coding activity, we co-designed a coding framework which was used to code the entire dataset via a collective process, whereupon the research team negotiated on the major themes and subthemes in the data to deepen our interpretations.

Working with data from a relatively small sample of participants means that it is important to avoid 'cherry picking' data or presenting quotes in a way that may lead to a misrepresentation of the themes. At the same time, it is important that the findings are presented in a way that gives voice to CALM students, drawing on their own language, descriptions, and experiences. As such, we follow Yeo and Han's (2025) approach in relation to the use of quotes in this paper. The quotes presented in the following sections have been selected because they meet one or more of the following criteria: functional (explain or elucidate some aspect), practical (related to the journal aims), ethical (illustrate a point or nuance as part of a broader pattern in the data), aesthetic (stylistic element), or inclusive (drawing on all respondents).

As a research team, we comprise a group of colleagues who work in or adjacent to higher education and hold a variety of roles as knowledge holders and experts. Sally is a migrant by choice and an academic with expertise in higher education equity and forced migration. Stefan is a migrant by choice and career practitioner with extensive experience supporting students' employability development by creating and delivering employability frameworks and programs as well as working with groups and individual students from a variety of backgrounds across multiple university campuses in Australia. Tim is a migrant by choice and a former teaching-focused academic in Aotearoa New Zealand. Josh is also a migrant by choice from Aotearoa New Zealand with a background in sociology. Melissa is a researcher whose family moved to Australia through forced migration and whose research explores CALM students' and families' experiences of schooling and career supports.

## *Utilising Tomlinson's GCM in the Design of the Online Employability Resource*

The *Capital Advantage* resource is an online, self-paced set of six modules based on Tomlinson's (2017) GCM. The online resource was designed to include content relevant to each of the five graduate capitals; however, no module focuses on a specific graduate capital. The first content module (Self-Awareness) encourages CALM students to identify and reflect on their strengths, skills, values, and attributes, including those developed through their migration experience(s). The second module (Exploring Careers) supports students in navigating the Australian labour market, including sourcing, interpreting, and using key labour market information relating to their field of interest. The third module (Making Career Decisions) provides students with practical tools to guide career decision-making. The fourth module (Get that Job or Work Experience) introduces key requirements for jobs in Australia and provides tips for finding advertised and 'hidden' jobs, and guidance for CALM students on how to showcase themselves effectively in cover letters, CVs, and interviews. The fifth module (Building Connections) helps students to identify and leverage their current networks and new opportunities to expand their professional connections. The sixth content module (Building Cultural Awareness and Resilience) includes activities to enhance students' understanding of Australian workplace culture and different communication styles, and advice for responding to career challenges and building wellbeing.

### *Limitations*

This study has several 'limitations'.[2] Firstly, we have relied on qualitative UEx data from a small sample of participants, with an over-representation of participants who identified as women. We recognise that the small sample size means the themes presented here illuminate potential areas for future development rather than providing definitive evidence regarding the effectiveness of the resource. Secondly, we were fortunate to access resourcing for the co-design that created the tailored and culturally responsive employability resources for CALM students. However, we acknowledge that such work takes investment (of personnel, time for coordination, collaboration, and creative energy) and the maintenance of an ecosystem of stakeholders, placing this approach outside of business-as-usual operations. Consequently, this study is neither replicable nor generalisable.

[2] Our methodological orientation does not view these as limitations per se, but we acknowledge there are limits to what we offer the audience.

## How Did Students Experience the Resource?

Participants generally described the *Capital Advantage* resource as clear, accessible, and easy to follow. Several participants noted that the resource felt culturally responsive, particularly its emphasis on respecting cultural diversity, encouraging self-awareness of one's own assumptions, and presenting diversity as a strength within the workplace. These elements helped participants feel that the resource recognised the complexity of their experiences and offered guidance that was not exclusively centred on a presumed Australian-born norm. However, despite these strengths, participants expressed a desire for greater specificity and practice-based examples. Many pointed to the need for additional illustrations of how cultural norms, expectations, and behaviours play out in real Australian workplaces. This included requests for case studies—either real or hypothetical—showing individuals navigating cultural and linguistic differences, as well as interactive simulations such as practice handshakes, networking dialogues, or scenarios depicting culturally complex interactions. Some participants described wanting explicit demonstrations of how to naturally transition and end professional conversations, indicating that the micro-level mechanics of professional communication were central to their confidence.

This desire for specificity extended to the structure and pacing of the modules. While most participants found the content appropriate, Hazel noted that "some modules are designed and structured in a way that are culturally responsive and easy to understand for everyone, but some are like a lot of information that a person might lose focus". These structural observations underscore how cultural responsiveness is not only a matter of content but also of how information is scaffolded, paced, and delivered. The feedback also pointed to gendered considerations in professional relationships, with some participants wanting clearer distinctions between "genuine friendship in the workplace" and "gender-based harassment". This signals the need for employability supports that recognise how gender, culture, and power intersect in ways that can shape CALM students' experiences differently from those of their peers.

Overall, the resource was seen as culturally considerate at a values level, but participants wanted that consideration to extend into more situated, practice-oriented ways of preparing for real-world interactions. In this section, we discuss participants' reflections on how the resource enabled them to navigate Australian work culture while retaining their cultural identity, and their understandings of workplace racism and expectations that it be explicitly covered in employability materials. We conclude the section by considering the perceived value of synchronous resources alongside full wraparound support.

### *Navigating Australian Work Culture While Retaining Cultural Identity*

A dominant theme in the data was the perception that 'Australian work culture' operates as a coherent, knowable system that CALM students are expected to decode. Participants requested more explicit and practical insights into this system—its unwritten rules, communication patterns, and workplace expectations. For many, learning to navigate Australian professional norms felt like an additional layer of skill development not automatically covered in generalist employability training.

At the same time, participants were clear that adapting to Australian workplace norms did not imply the relinquishment of their own cultural identities. Many described a desire to balance these two processes: learning to operate confidently in a new cultural context while holding onto the practices, values, and modes of communication that shape who they are. As Zara explained, "Balancing culture and fitting in: It can be hard to keep their own culture while adapting to Australian work culture. More help with this would be good". This succinctly captures the inherent negotiation CALM students undertake, often without guidance: maintaining cultural authenticity while managing expectations for professional integration.

Likewise, Anay emphasised the importance of the resource's balanced tone: "I appreciated how the content didn't overemphasise one area while neglecting another, which is especially important for CALM students navigating both career uncertainty and cultural transition". Here, the participant recognises that employability learning is not simply about skills acquisition; it is intertwined with the emotional and identity-based labour of cultural adjustment.

These reflections reveal a broader insight: CALM students do not conceptualise employability purely through human capital or skills development. Instead, they experience employability as deeply entangled with identity capital and cultural capital—domains that generalist employability resources often ignore. Their desire for more detailed examples, scripts, and scenarios suggests that cultural navigation is a practical skill that requires structured teaching, not something to be inferred or learned ad hoc through exposure. Taken together, these findings indicate that culturally responsive employability materials must explicitly address this dual movement between adaptation and cultural preservation. Doing so acknowledges the lived reality of CALM students and supports them in developing strategies that affirm both professional identity and cultural integrity.

### *Strengths-Based Views of Participants' Own Culture Versus Racism and Discrimination in the Workplace*

While participants generally articulated strong, strengths-based understandings of their cultural identities, racism and discrimination in the workplace were recurring and salient concerns. Many felt that although the resource affirmed the value of diversity, it could have addressed the structural and interpersonal realities of racism in Australian workplaces more strongly. As Zephyr wrote:

> I think discrimination is a major problem that is inadequately explored in the module. Despite how empowering this module may be, racism will continue to exist in the workplace, and I think it's important to talk about how CALM students can help address and fight it.

This comment highlights a gap between recognition and preparedness: students felt validated culturally but not equipped to respond to discrimination, as indicated by Gabo's response:

> Dealing with racial discrimination is something that I felt could have been explored in this course. I have not experienced it first-hand, but I have seen others and heard from others that this still unfortunately occurs within the workplace. Specifically, individuals openly mock other ethnic groups because of their accents or their beliefs. An additional module could be included perhaps noting the Racial Discrimination Act and mentioning different ways to deal with this in the workforce.

This statement points to a desire for rights-based, legally grounded content, not only general messaging about inclusion. Participants wanted practical strategies, escalation pathways, and clarity about organisational responsibilities—elements typically absent from generalist employability resources. Importantly, this theme exposes a broader structural tension: culturally responsive employability cannot solely celebrate cultural diversity; it must also engage with the conditions that make that diversity precarious in professional settings. Without explicit discussion of racism, employability content risks inadvertently placing responsibility for managing discrimination onto CALM students, rather than recognising it as a shared institutional and societal issue. Across the dataset, participants wanted to understand both how to showcase their strengths and how to navigate environments where those strengths might be questioned, undervalued, or mocked. Their call for more explicit treatment of racism suggests that employability resources must integrate anti-racist, rights-informed approaches if they are to be truly responsive to CALM students' experiences and needs.

### *The Value of Synchronous Interactions, Especially for CALM Migrants and Refugees*

Although participants appreciated the flexibility and accessibility of the online modules, they repeatedly emphasised the importance of synchronous or face-to-face support. Many described the limits of self-paced learning when navigating nuanced, culturally situated challenges related to job applications, networking, and workplace expectations. Hazel highlighted the practical and affective reassurance provided by human interaction:

> getting assistance with applying for jobs, having someone who looks at your resumes and gives proper human feedback and assists in checking your application before you apply (...) I think it would be a good way for students to feel supported and land a job.

The UEx evaluation participants consistently described the value of facilitated discussions, small peer groups, webinars, and drop-in mentoring sessions—spaces where questions could be asked in real time and where shared experiences could be validated. The desire for synchronous contact was particularly strong among students navigating cultural transition; as Anay described, "While the resource was informative, additional support through live peer discussions or facilitator-led webinars would have deepened engagement, especially for students from CALM backgrounds who may benefit from real-time clarification and cultural validation".

Participants also noted that confidence in career decision-making often came from personalised feedback and opportunities to talk through concerns or uncertainties. As Zephyr wrote, "talking to real people would be the only way I would feel fully equipped to make a fully informed career decision". Others proposed hybrid delivery models—short modules complemented by introductory or concluding in-person meetings—to help anchor the content within a relational context. Finally, several participants expressed interest in ongoing networking spaces, such as dedicated chat groups or peer communities, which they believed would foster belonging, provide a safe environment for practising networking skills, and build confidence before entering broader professional settings.

Throughout their feedback, participants consistently identified synchronous interaction as an essential means through which CALM students develop confidence, rehearse skills, and receive the kind of situated feedback that online modules alone cannot provide. This is an important finding as it provides impetus for future development in this space to consider how any rollout of an online resource is grounded with in-person feedback and support.

## Discussion

Returning to the questions that guided this study, the findings suggest that co-design offers a valuable mechanism for translating the GCM into a culturally responsive employability resource that is meaningful and relevant for CALM students. At the same time, the UEx data reveal both the strengths and limitations of this approach.

We started our project with the supposition that being anchored to a generalist employability paradigm is problematic for cohorts who have experienced migration and who speak other languages, have non-Anglo names, and who come from different cultural backgrounds (Baker et al., 2023; Dunwoodie et al., 2022). The prevailing model assumes that generic/broadly applicable skills workshops, online modules, and careers fairs will most effectively serve a heterogeneous student body, given the limitations on investment in tailored careers services. Our findings expose the limits of such an approach for CALM students. Three key implications emerge from these findings: the limitations of generic employability provision, the need to translate cultural responsiveness into situated forms of practice, and the importance of relational and ecosystem-based approaches to employability development.

The UEx data provide a useful lens through which to understand these limitations and what culturally responsive employability support might require in practice. For the CALM students who tested the resource, the *Capital Advantage* intervention was the first time they had encountered an employability resource that explicitly attended to the impacts of migration on career preparation and graduate capitals acquisition. Their feedback highlighted a desire for situated practice (localised cases, scripts, simulations) and relational support (mentoring, real-time feedback). In other words, generic advice travelled poorly; contextualised, dialogic learning travelled well.

These findings also need to be understood within the institutional realities of contemporary higher education, where careers services are often expected to support increasingly diverse student populations with finite resources. However, the extant literature tells us that resource sharing has long been a challenge, particularly for equity cohorts (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2017; Dunwoodie et al., 2022), with the scaling logic of one-to-many delivery becoming the default solution to resourcing constraints. Our resource answered that logic by embedding cultural responsiveness in a mass-reachable module, and students valued it—but only up to a point. Participants asked for exactly what one-to-many programs cannot supply: timely, human feedback and spaces to rehearse. Rather than reading this as a failure of online delivery, we see a design signal: culturally responsive employability for CALM cohorts works best as hybrid infrastructure—credible, well-built digital content plus scheduled, relational touchpoints (peer groups, mentors, and drop-ins). Such developments would give space for institution-specific evolutions, as well as providing a resource that can ‘speak to’ CALM cohorts in ways that universities typically find challenging.

Further, investing in staff capability to run those touchpoints is not peripheral; it is the mechanism by which confidence, belonging, and application take hold (Bates, 2022). For employability to be genuinely responsive for so-called diverse students, co-design needs to extend beyond the university as we did—to industry partners, community and settlement organisations, legal/advocacy bodies, and alumni with lived experience. This is where guidance on microaggressions, recruitment bias, and redress can become concrete, lawful, and teachable.

While these implications are important at the level of program design, they also raise broader questions about how employability and student success are conceptualised across the sector. This is particularly important at a time when universities face increasing pressure to demonstrate the outcomes of investments in student access, participation, and success. Our contribution advocates for a shift in the unit of analysis: from the student as a recipient of generic employability training to the system that surrounds them. While the co-design process and the GCM helped assemble a resource that recognises CALM students’ strengths and migration biographies, the user evaluation data unequivocally communicate that employability becomes meaningful when principles are translated into situated practice, and when learning is anchored in relationships and rights. In this light, a sector-level response to recalibrating employability for equity cohorts must be contextualised, relational, and rights-informed, with guidance grounded in Australian workplace realities. This requires structured opportunities to

practise, rehearse, and receive feedback, with the inclusion of embedded anti-racism information and 'what to do when' pathways. Delivering this will require enhanced staff capability to uplift hybrid provision that balances scale with person-to-person support, and co-design that crosses institutional boundaries, so content remains authentic, lawful, and current.

Such changes require more than adjustments to careers programming; they necessitate a broader reconsideration of what successful employability development looks like for CALM students, and how to engage this hard-to-reach cohort. This reframing matters because student success cannot be confined to academic attainment or extra-curricular enrichment. For CALM cohorts, employability development must also support acquisition of taken-for-granted components of graduate capitals: confidence, belonging, and practical know-how on navigating recruitment/workplace cultures, where discrimination and microaggressions are likely to occur. Our participants did not ask for more messaging about inclusion; they asked for tools, scripts, and routes to redress, paired with clarity about responsibilities and supports. Universities that make this pivot move employability beyond *tone* to *toolkit* and, in doing so, address a persistent equity gap in graduate outcomes.

In sum, this paper offers more than an appraisal of a resource. It demonstrates how the GCM can be operationalised through co-design to create a culturally responsive employability resource for CALM students, while also providing insight into how students experienced and evaluated that resource. The findings identify a design gap in generalist, one-to-many employability provision and suggest that culturally responsive employability becomes most effective when digital resources are complemented by opportunities for rehearsal, feedback, and human connection. For universities, the implication is operational rather than rhetorical: build capability, build partnerships, and build the hybrid infrastructures through which CALM students can translate their stories into careers. However, universities cannot 'solve this problem' solo, so to really shift the dial for CALM cohorts, responsibility needs to be shared across the myriad stakeholders: employers, industry associations, accreditation bodies, unions, civil society, and—perhaps most importantly—governments.

## References


Andrewartha, L., & Harvey, A. (2017). Employability and student equity in higher education: The role of university careers services. *Australian Journal of Career Development*, *26*(2), 71–80. https://doi.org/10.1177/1038416217718365

Arthur, N., McMahon, M., Abkhezr, P., & Woodend, J. (2025). Beyond job placement: Careers for refugees. *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance*, *25*(1), 251–269. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10775-023-09579-x

Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2022). *Cultural diversity summary* [Data set]. https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/cultural-diversity-census/latest-release#data-downloads

Australian Government Department of Education. (2025a). *Equity performance data* [Data set]. https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/resources/2024-section-16-equity-performance-data

Australian Government Department of Education. (2025b). *Student data* [Data set]. https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/student-data

Baker, S., Field, R., Burke, R., Hartley, L., & Fleay, C. (2021). Discursive constructions of equity in Australian higher education: Imagined worlds and the case of people seeking asylum. *British Educational Research Journal*, *47*(4), 836–854. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3691

Baker, S., Ramsay, G., Irwin, E., & Miles, L. (2018). 'Hot', 'cold' and 'warm' supports: Towards theorising where refugee students go for assistance at university. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *23*(1), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2017.1332028

Baker, S., Xavier, A., Due, C., Dunwoodie, K., & Newman, A. (2023). Disrupting assumptions about graduate employability: Exploring culturally and linguistically diverse university students' graduate capitals in Australia. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, *45*(2), 174–191. https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2023.2180165

Bates, T. (2022). Defining equity and inclusion in the future of career education. In M. V. Buford, M. J. Sharp, & M. J. Stebleton (Eds.), *Mapping the future of undergraduate career education: Equitable career learning, development, and preparation in the new world of work* (pp. 54–70). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003213000-7

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *18*(3), 328–352. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238

Carroll, D. R., & Li, I. W. (2022). Work and further study after university degree completion for equity groups. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, *44*(1), 21–38. https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2021.1988841

Cooper, B., Border, N., & Couperthwaite, F. (2023). Co-creating a health and wellbeing strategy for students and staff. *Student Success*, *14*(3), 136–144. https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.2781

Dakka, F. (2020). Competition, innovation and diversity in higher education: Dominant discourses, paradoxes and resistance. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *41*(1), 80–94. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2019.1668747

Dawkins, J. (1988). *Higher education: A policy statement*. Australian Government Publishing Service.

Dobinson, T., & Mercieca, P. (2020). Seeing things as they are, not just as we are: Investigating linguistic racism on an Australian university campus. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, *23*(7), 789–803. https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2020.1724074

Dollinger, M., & Vanderlelie, J. (2021). Closing the loop: Co-designing with students for greater market orientation. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, *31*(1), 41–57. https://doi.org/10.1080/08841241.2020.1757557

Dryden, S., & Dovchin, S. (2024). Accentism: English LX users of migrant background in Australia. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, *45*(5), 1466–1478. https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2021.1980573

Dunwoodie, K., Due, C., Baker, S., Newman, A., & Tran, C. (2022). Supporting (or not) the career development of culturally and linguistically diverse migrants and refugees in universities: Insights from Australia. *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance*, *22*(2), 467–490. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10775-021-09506-y

Guo, L., & Tani, M. (2026). Migrants, refugees and employer discrimination. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, *64*(1), 101–113. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjir.70016

Havinen, L., Mäkipää, J.-P., & Rousi, R. (2025). Co-designing user experience of Moodle workspaces in higher education—process and principles. In B. K. Smith & M. Borge (Eds.), *Learning and collaboration technologies* (Vol. 15806, pp. 37–56). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-93564-0_3

Jackson, D., & Dean, B. A. (2023). Employability-related activities beyond the curriculum: How participation and impact vary across diverse student cohorts. *Higher Education*, *86*, 1151–1172. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00966-x

Jones, J., & Masika, R. (2021). Appreciative inquiry as a developmental research approach for higher education pedagogy: Space for the shadow. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *40*(2), 279–292. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1750571

Kindon, S., Willette, S., Blaker, A., Brookie, H., Creese, C., Douglas, M., Farrelly, E., Greenbank, E., Joe, A., Kanthiya, S., Kearney, C., McCallum, J., Marlowe, J., Phonevilay, S., & Sharma, K. (2024). *Enhancing refugee-background learner journeys in tertiary education in Aotearoa New Zealand*. Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington. https://www.wgtn.ac.nz/__data/assets/pdf_file/0020/2250344/Refugee-background-learners-in-tertiary-education-Sara-Kindon-et-al.pdf

Kubica, A., Evans-Durán, B., Buchman, D. Z., & Orkin, A. M. (2025). Advocating for cash incentives instead of gift cards in public health research: Dollars over donuts. *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, 117, 40–43. https://doi.org/10.17269/s41997-025-01039-z

Lee, E. S., Szkudlarek, B., Nguyen, D. C., & Nardon, L. (2020). Unveiling the canvas ceiling: A multidisciplinary literature review of refugee employment and workforce integration. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, *22*(2), 193–216. https://doi.org/10.1111/ijmr.12222

Maslov, I., Nikou, S., & Hansen, P. (2021). Exploring user experience of learning management system. *International Journal of Information and Learning Technology*, *38*(4), 344–363. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJILT-03-2021-0046

Molla, T. (2022). African refugee youth in Australia: Higher education participation. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *41*(2), 481–495. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1849035

Naylor, R., Terry, L., Rizzo, A., Nguyen, N., & Mifsud, N. (2021). Structural inequality in refugee participation in higher education. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, *34*(2), 2142–2158. https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fez077

O'Kane, M., Behrendt, L., Glover, B., Macklin, J., Nash, F., Rimmer, B., & Wikramanayake, S. (2024). *Australian Universities Accord final report*. Australian Government. https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/final-report

Pham, T., Saito, E., Bao, D., & Chowdhury, R. (2018). Employability of international students: Strategies to enhance their experience on work integrated learning (WIL) programs. *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability*, *9*(1), 62–83. https://doi.org/10.21153/jtlge2018vol9no1art693

Pitman, T., Roberts, L., Bennett, D., & Richardson, S. (2019). An Australian study of graduate outcomes for disadvantaged students. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, *43*(1), 45–57. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2017.1349895

Stevenson, J., & Baker, S. (2024). *Refugees in higher education: Debate, discourse and practice* (2nd ed.). Emerald Publishing.

Tomaszewski, W., Perales, F., Xiang, N., & Kubler, M. (2019). *Beyond graduation: Long-term socioeconomic outcomes amongst equity students*. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Curtin University. https://www.acses.edu.au/research-policies/beyond-graduation-long-term-socioeconomic-outcomes-amongst-equity-students-2/

Tomlinson, M. (2017). Forms of graduate capital and their relationship to graduate employability. *Education + Training, 59*(4), 338–352. https://doi.org/10.1108/ET-05-2016-0090

Tosi, F. (2020). From user-centred design to human-centred design and the user experience. In F. Tosi (Ed.), *Design for ergonomics* (pp. 47–59). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-33562-5_3

van Kooy, J., Ahmed, S., Rioseco, P., & Marshall, D. (2025). *Economic participation of humanitarian migrants in Australia: Research report*. Australian Institute of Family Studies. https://aifs.gov.au/building-new-life-australia/all-research/research-reports/economic-participation-humanitarian

Yeo, S., & Han, S. (2025). Which quotations to use? Guidance on selecting and reporting quotations in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *24*. https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069251353449

***Please cite this article as:***
Baker, S., McLennan, T., Alexander, S., James, J., & Tham, M. (2026). Co-designing for equity and cultural responsiveness: Creating a graduate capitals employability resource for Culturally and Linguistically Marginalised (CALM) students. *Student Success.* Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.63608/ssj.4191

This article has been accepted for publication in *Student Success.* Please see the Editorial Policies under the 'About' section of the Journal website for further information.

**Student Success:** ***A journal exploring the experiences of students in tertiary education.***

Except where otherwise noted, content in this journal is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence. As an open access journal, articles are free to use with proper attribution. ISSN: 2205-0795

## Appendix A: Demographics for CALM Students Who Participated in the Research

Table 1

*Demographic profile of CALM student participants*

| | Background | | | | Course Information | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Pseudonym** | **Age** | **Gender** | **Ethnicity** | **Language Spoken at Home** | **Year of Study at Current University** | **Field or Discipline of Study** | **International or Domestic Student** | **Length of Time Living in Australia** |
| Sarah | 21 | Female | Persian/Iranian | Farsi | Undergraduate Year 4 | Laws | Domestic | Over 10 years but not born in Australia |
| Zara | 22 | Female | Sri Lankan | Tamil and English | Undergraduate Year 3 | Nursing | International | Over 10 years but not born in Australia |
| Grace | 24 | Female | Chinese | English, Malay, Mandarin, Hakka, Cantonese | Postgraduate Year 1 | Business | International | 1 to 5 years |
| Zephyr | 20 | Female | Bengali | Bengali | Undergraduate Year 2 | Economics | Domestic | Over 10 years but not born in Australia |
| Gabo | 22 | Male | Filipino | Bisaya | Undergraduate Year 4 | Medical Science | Domestic | Over 10 years but not born in Australia |
| Anastasia | 23 | Female | Vietnamese | Vietnamese, English | Undergraduate Year 5 | Data Science Engineering | Domestic | Over 10 years but not born in Australia |
| Anay | 28 | Non-Binary | Bangladeshi | Bengali | Postgraduate Year 2 | Predictive Analytics | International | 1 to 5 years |
| Jin | 21 | Male | Chinese | Cantonese | Undergraduate Year 3 | International Relations | Domestic | 1 to 5 years |
| Mina | 22 | Female | Brazilian | Portuguese | Postgraduate Year 1 | International Relations | Domestic | Over 10 years but not born in Australia |
| Hazel | 20 | Female | Pakistani | Urdu | Undergraduate Year 4 | Psychology | Domestic | 5 to 10 years |
| Steve | 27 | Male | Indian | Marathi | Postgraduate Year 2 | Business Analytics | International | 1 to 5 years |