

HASS Development Funding Pilot Project
Language, agency, and displacement: Ukrainian war refugees in Australia¹
Report

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¹ This project focused on the displacement caused by the war in Ukraine in 2022.

1. Background

Over 6,000 Ukrainians displaced by the war found shelter in Australia in 2022 (<https://ukrainians.org.au/visa-faq/>). This pilot project conducted in the first few months upon the arrival of these refugees, officially recognised in Australia as displaced persons (DPs), was crucial to document their initial settlement experiences to help inform Australia's humanitarian response in a timely manner. This pilot study was funded by the Curtin University Humanities and Social Sciences Grant Success Panel Development Funding and was carried out by a multidisciplinary team from Curtin University, UTS, and University of Sydney. The team combined expertise in Applied Linguistics, Migration Studies, and Policy Development to design the study and to collect and analyse the data.

The humanitarian response to sudden crises is often developed ad hoc, while the voices and experiences of the DPs themselves remain anecdotal. A lack of systematic understanding of the way these DPs act and speak to impact their present and future undermines the effectiveness of Australia's policies and services for them. Such services remain fragmented, guided by what the society believes these refugees are capable of, rather than an accurate empirical evidence base of their actual abilities (Enns & Combe, 2022). At the same time, from previous research we know that socio-linguistic skills are essential to negotiate agency and navigate settings of displacement (Dovchin, 2022; Gurney & Demuro, 2019). In particular, we wanted to understand how displaced persons (DPs) exercise 'agency' – a sense of control over one's own life (Duranti, 2004; Ishii, 2017) – through the languages they use and activities they participate in. Through the first-hand insights from focus groups and interviews with DPs and service providers, this report highlights practical implications and offers suggestions for Australia's humanitarian response and to support resources development for all humanitarian entrants. This is in line with Australia's increased efforts to improve socio-economic participation of humanitarian entrants for their personal, community, and national benefit (Shergold et al., 2019) and the commitment of the Australian government to provide permanent protection to people on temporary visas (Giannini & Osborne, 2022). The findings of this pilot project will also inform a larger project that seeks to create new knowledge in applied linguistics and migration studies by exploring how DPs develop sociolinguistic skills to negotiate their agency and navigate uncertainty in the settings of displacement.

2. Methodology

2.1. Context and participants

The project focused on the displaced persons from Ukraine who had entered Australia since 24th February 2022. While a vast majority of these DPs have settled in the Eastern States of Australia, Western Australia also welcomed over 500 Ukrainian DPs in 2022. Given support is provided at the Federal as well as state levels, the project adopted an interstate perspective for a more comprehensive overview. Eleven DPs from Ukraine participated in the focus groups (five in NSW and six in WA). There were four males (two in each NSW and WA focus groups) and seven females (three in NSW and four in WA), which reflects a general gender distribution among the Ukrainian DPs given most men are not allowed to leave Ukraine from the early days of the war and therefore mostly women, children, and older people (e.g., parents of expats) cross the border in search of safety (Cindogiu, 2022). Six of the participating DPs were in their early to late thirties, one in the forties, four in their sixties, from at least seven different cities in various parts

of Ukraine. There were single and married participants (including two couples), participants with and without children. All have post-secondary/higher education, and a few even hold a Doctoral degree. Most participants came to join their family members (children, siblings, in-laws), some by friends' invitation, and two participants did not know anyone in Australia when they arrived. At the time of the study, the participants had spent between 5 and 8 months in Australia. They all came to Australia on temporary visas (visitor/humanitarian), but some have since moved to other visas (e.g., bridging and parent visa types).

The service provider participants were representatives from the key settlement services in NSW and WA providing major assistance to the Ukrainian DPs, two from each organisation. These were staff members who worked with the Ukrainian DPs directly or supervised such work. Quotes and examples were included to provide a vignette into the participants' lived experiences. Quotes by the service providers are marked as (SP), and by the displaced persons as (DP, age group), unless the source is indicated in the sentence.

2.2. Data collection and analysis

This pilot study included two focus groups with the displaced persons (DPs) who arrived from Ukraine since 24th February 2022 – one in NSW and one in WA – about their settlement experiences, and interviews with representatives of the key settlement services providers in these two states about their experiences of providing such support. The focus groups and one service provider interview were conducted in Ukrainian, and were consequently analysed by the Ukrainian speaking members of the team who identified the main issues/themes mentioned and translated the key quotes to illustrate those; the other three interviews that were conducted in English were transcribed and then coded for themes (i.e., key issues discussed by the participants). Then the themes were compared across participant groups to identify common issues as well as individual issues (given the qualitative approach adopted in this study and demographic variability in the sample, every issue raised was deemed equally important to represent in this report).

3. Findings

The findings are presented according to the three broad categories of the participants' experiences: the use and provision of settlement and related services, general challenges of settlement in Australia, and key suggestions for moving forward. Each section is then divided into smaller parts focusing on particular issues and themes.

3.1. The use and provision of settlement and related services

The DP participants reported using the following services: accommodation support and paperwork assistance (by the SSI and Red Cross); Centrelink; Medicare; Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP); Concession travel (such as Opal in NSW); not-for-profits (such as Kaleidoscope in WA); and various charities (for food and clothing, such as Salvation Army).

- Centrelink was referred to as a temporary “safety pillow” while DPs are learning English and looking for jobs.

- AMEP was appreciated for being available for free, integrating language and knowledge about “how things work in Australia”, such as public transport, education and professions, and preparing for the next steps – e.g., how to get employed (what jobs are out there, how to compile a CV, do job interviews, etc.).
- The Australian schools were seen as “very multicultural” and providing positive experiences for children. While for one of the participants’ children, the Intensive English Centre was full and could not admit them, going to mainstream school seemed to assist faster learning of the language for the younger child (5 y.o.), but was harder for the 8-year-old as peer communication at that age is more complex. The school provided a lot of support, including advice to speak Ukrainian at home (not to lose their cultural heritage), which this DP (30s) appreciated.
- Those who did not use or were not fully satisfied with the mentioned services, for various reasons, reported relying on family and friends. Some indicated that in some instances, volunteers helped more than specialised services, without having to deal with the bureaucracy and without being paid. Family and friends provided a warm welcome with flags and posters. Local people of Ukrainian descent and others are doing “an amazing work” on top of their own working hours. Wider society showed support by welcoming smiles. One participant shared how they were impressed when a Transperth worker showed them all the way to the stop they needed. On another occasion, they were allowed to get on a bus when they lost a SmartRider and were going to work.

Insights from the **service providers** included the ways Ukrainian DPs differ from the other settlement services’ clients:

- ✓ Being the only groups who are on temporary visas and not recognised officially as refugees. Hence, the services they are entitled to differ to what other groups can utilise (as explained in detail in Section 3.2. below).
- ✓ Higher digital literacy, well-travelled, and used to living in an independent democratic state.
- ✓ Active life position (agency) with a strong desire to regain control of their lives in the fastest way possible.

For instance, their desire for employment is higher compared to other refugee groups, accompanied with actual physical attempts to find a job. Used to handling their financial situation and had financial freedom back in Ukraine, they want to find sources of income in Australia as fast as possible. They are committed to learning English, have good work ethics, do not want to miss their classes. They are “very good advocates for themselves” (SP) as they go online and look for other organisations and extra support. They would do it independently and then inform their case manager:

“I would have a client say: ‘By the way, I went to this organization and they told me this, you can tell your other clients’, and I think a lot of that information was being shared within the community as well via social media and ... word of mouth. So, they were really good at doing that” (SP)

“[Ukrainian DPs] like to come in and ... talk face-to-face, because it's easier than over the phone, but they are really trying to use their English to communicate with me... They like to try and practice to speak English, because they know that's how they have to learn.” (SP)

In line with this, some DP participants mentioned that when coming to Australia, they had an understanding that it will be difficult and a disposition to cope with it no matter what. “Rescue of the drowning people is in their own hands [a Ukrainian saying] – we need to find things out for ourselves” – as articulated by a DP. One DP, 60s, explained her can-do attitude: “you can, you are a mum” – which helped her find a job within a few weeks of arrival. Another DP, 60s, mentioned singing in the Ukrainian choir that makes him feel comfortable and relax, which is “very good after such a tense working day”, getting enough rest to plan the next steps. A young mum mentioned she got used to rely on herself and not ask for help as there are people in greater need of the resources – despite coming to Australia with two young children and only three backpacks. Those with low language proficiency reported trying to catch up: they emphasised how it is important to ask questions, to overcome fears, to be bold to ask for clarification/repetition if something wasn't clear, to practice the language.

- ✓ Higher expectations from settlement services (e.g., housing closer to the city centre rather than outer suburbs, which is where majority of the refugees are settling in first).
- ✓ High distrust in services: Ukrainian clients tend to use other sources to validate the information provided to them and express distrust to organisations. They take time to familiarise themselves with the information where their consent is needed as they want to be informed: initially, they were reluctant to do the full health examination available, but once a long letter with explanations in Ukrainian was provided, the uptake of that possibility increased. On the other hand, double checking information obtained from different sources, especially social media, was seen as a useful trait and another example of agency:

“But the fact that they're saying ‘we're not sure it's correct’ is awesome... that's a really good strength Social media has fantastic potential to help people, but also, if there's nobody mediating the truth... It's not even necessarily malevolent, there's no malevolent intent. It's just people think they're right. But then when the situation is evolving, and evolving, and evolving, and every day, we're getting new instruction from the government as to what's in and what's out and what to do, you have to be really careful with social media”. (SP)

- To manage the expectations, and given government-driven service management processes were different from other clients, service providers have been identifying information gaps on the go and prepared information sheets, including in Ukrainian.

- Due to the strong support from the Ukrainian and wider Australian community, in particular through Facebook groups, which mobilised to meet the needs (finding low-cost dental surgeries, GPs, etc.), settlement services referred their clients to these groups as well.
- Those who entered Australia after the humanitarian visa program cut off in July 2022 are not eligible for the SSI or Red Cross services. The resources and support they can use elsewhere depend on the type of visa they have.

3.2. Key challenges of settlement

The main challenges that **DP participants** mentioned in relation to their settlement in Australia as humanitarian migrants related to the socio-economic and linguo-cultural aspects of settlement. Among key considerations were employment, accommodation, and family life, which appeared to be complicated by the changes in the visa program and overall bureaucracy in the arrangement of various services in both states. Language was seen as a key tool to either resolve or exacerbate the issue – depending on proficiency.

- Most participants reported the feelings of fragility, vulnerability, and uncertainty. As one younger participant put it: “I don’t know if I had ever felt as vulnerable in my life before”. Some explained there were so many issues that they had to learn to “solve problems as they come” as a coping strategy.
- Lack of opportunities for professional participation at the level they used to led to a crisis of self-identification. As one young professional said, he started asking questions he used to ask as a teenager: who am I, what should I do, do I have to start “fully from scratch”?
- For women with children, it is hard to be too far from the family and support networks. In these circumstances, working schedule for women with children (without having the usual family assistance with childcare) starting in the early morning can be challenging. Working part time (school hours) is also challenging as does not provide enough income to cater for the family.

“men cannot leave [Ukraine] at the moment, and [our] visa conditions are rather peculiar – we cannot leave Australia for 3 years, so it wasn’t an easy decision [to come here].” (DP, 30s)

- In the first few months, some Intensive English Centres (IECs) were full and not accepting students (explained to the participants to be a result of staff reduction during Covid), so families had to find an alternative and change schools later. There is also no meal provision in schools, which differs from Ukraine when children are provided with lunches by the government in some cases.
- Lack of stable support: While settlement services were found very useful in the first two weeks upon arrival – meeting at the airport, providing accommodation for the first 28 days, food, shop

vouchers, sim card – after 2 weeks, the interaction and support from the SPs subsidies and there is uncertainty as to the services available.

- Access to free driving courses only through TAFE for 786 visa holders means other humanitarian entrants (e.g., who have moved to parent or bridging visas) cannot use this resource.
- Uncertainty about the future: It was not clear what settlement support will be available after the first few months: “We do not know how long the Red Cross will be supporting us, and what are the future options” (DP, 30s). There was also uncertainty about the pension. People on parent visas in their 60s need to think 10-15 years ahead regarding their work before they get pension and whether they will have enough provision for their retirement. Our participants mentioned the need to gain a clear understanding of what support will be available post-retirement, where to look for such information, and how they can increase their assets for when they cannot work anymore. One DP in her 60s said: “‘Where will I live [post-retirement]?’ is the most important question”, fearing being ‘dumped’ to the aged care facility. Despite children providing comforting responses that they will care for their aged parents, parents need to gain this information to rely on themselves, to buy their own apartment.

At the same time, DPs reported actively trying to regain control over their life, such as by planning to gain a university degree in Australia, preparing for language tests for the purposes of longer term and better employment or education, paying private tuition to learn the language faster, trying to spend more time around local Australians to understand the local people better, learning to drive. One participant was offered on the job training (in the area of childcare). Participants also reported plans to live in more urban areas and move from regional/distanced suburbs closer to CBD.

- Language impacted all areas of life:
 - ✓ Language to negotiate settlement: low levels of English made it hard to communicate with service providers, find a job, address children’s school needs (e.g., the school chat is in English). Participants emphasised that they needed assistance with paperwork for various services. Family members or friends often communicate with service providers on their behalf, due to higher proficiency. Where no personal contact with the DPs was established, calls from the service providers could be seen as having ‘formal reporting’ purposes only.
 - ✓ Language to negotiate social participation: DPs reported that lack of English prevents them from feeling a part of Australian society (harder to have conversations with the locals or watch/read locally produced media).
 - ✓ Language to avoid discrimination: instances of linguistic discrimination were evident in the hiring process privileging English-background candidates. Negative attitudes to accents and non-standard use of English made it hard to talk on the phone with service providers. Once a Centrelink officer just hung up on one of the DPs after finding it hard to understand him (the officer also failed to offer interpreting service). This created an ongoing psychological barrier for that DP who started feeling highly stressed every time he needed to call the services.

- ✓ Language as a means of independence: Participants reported dependence on their local family members and identity crisis. They explained that “it is hard for an educated person who had higher education and a good job at home, and when you come [here] you are offered low paying and physically hard jobs.” For instance, not being able to go to the doctor themselves. They said it felt like starting your life “from zero”, from the “blank page”.

“I greatly lack good language proficiency, it is a great lack and an issue number one because wherever you go, whatever you touch upon, you need to have an understanding.... I am dependent on [my adult child] in all aspects: accommodation, food, everything.... I really want to work, but at this point I do not have enough language proficiency to understand what others are saying I need to do, I will not be able to orientate. That is why I am studying at TAFE and have hope to acquire the knowledge I need to have a full life and get rid of this discomfort.” (DP, 60s)

On the other hand, those with high English proficiency (e.g., Upper Intermediate) reported feeling much more in control over their life. For some of them, language was in fact a determinant of the country of settlement. One participant explained how she did not choose, for instance, Germany, as she doesn't know German, nor Holland, as she doesn't speak Dutch, and hence would have fewer future perspectives in those countries. English may be easier for those who learned it at school and/or worked in the international companies (e.g., in tourism or IT as some of our participants). Overall, they could socialise more and reported admiration of the Australian people and the general country setup.

The settlement services outlined the following challenges:

- Financial struggle during transition time: while on visa 600 and then on visa 449 waiting for 786, DPs could not work and did not have access to Medicare. After visa 786 was granted, it then took some time for Centrelink payments to be processed. That was particularly difficult for elderly clients with significant healthcare needs who had to rely on family support to meet their needs. DPs struggled to even meet their basic needs such as food, and they were referred to the Food Bank, given food vouchers, and assisted by various NGOs.
- While other groups were straight away linked to HSP and had to participate, for Ukrainian DPs it was an “opt in” mode and they had to express willingness to receive certain support, which then had to be confirmed by the Department – and that created delays in providing support.
- In addition, the supports were not the same for everyone, but depended on the need, and it took time to realise that that was causing problems, and understand how to explain this – that if a service was available, it doesn't mean everyone will be able to use it, such as providing 28 days free accommodation. It also meant that information sheets on what services can be provided were not readily available (they were not needed before as everyone else got a standard package).

- Health challenges: some elderly clients were not able to get around and attend English classes because of their health issues, which made them feel isolated.
- Differences in the healthcare system: e.g., Ukrainians were used to seeing paediatrician with their child for common colds, while in Australia such specialists only attend to very complex issues and waiting times are very long.
- The service provider had to balance the housing expectations with the costs and availability given housing crisis:

“So when you are on a Centrelink benefit, or special benefits, or you're using your pension from Ukraine, we can't get you an apartment in an inner city suburb. You could interpret that as being, oh, they want too much. But actually, it's not that. It's that we believe that they're coming from densely packed small cities with really, really fast underground transport systems. So for them the idea of going even to [a suburb a bit further from the city]... it's just way way too far. Whereas, unfortunately, in Western Australia, the more challenged you are financially, the more likely it is that you are going to live far away from the city center.” (SP)

- Language barrier: interpreters are not always available, and not provided for the GP initial form filling as a new patient, and some DPs found it hard to understand and fill in the Centrelink application or even do their day-to-day things such as shopping.
- Lack of interpreters, including telephone interpreters of Ukrainian: It is preferable to work with an interpreter for serious in-depth discussions where understanding of the services and their limits is crucial, even with clients who have higher levels of English and who may be feeling rather confident in communication (sometimes, overconfident), and more preferable to work with an interpreter face to face.

3.1. Recommendations for improvement of settlement services to DPs

Both participant groups, DPs and service providers, mentioned various ways provision of settlement services can be facilitated in the future. These incorporated suggestions for streamlining services, timely and comprehensive information support; enhanced communication experiences, accessibility, and language support; and the need for additional services.

Streamlining services

- Informing about available services can be improved/streamlined to allow for timely and effective support. For instance, a centralised and clear list with explanations of services can be provided in the DPs' language from the start or as soon as possible; faster approval chain can be established for ongoing decisions; internal reporting can be cut off so it does not take more time than actual service assistance. Information sessions can be arranged for newly arrived prioritising the latest entrants, as those in the queue who have been in the

country for longer periods would often have already located the information by the time they are invited to the sessions.

- A stakeholder engagement officer is needed (the role must be funded) to ensure a “sort of more streamlined engagement between the services that are providing the humanitarian response and the community groups on the ground: The [settlement service provider], different community groups, the Department of Home Affairs, the Office of Multicultural Interests, potentially, around the table” (SP).
- More assistance with AMEP access and registration is needed: 3 participants out of 5 in NSW did not receive access to TAFE language courses, though they applied and actively sought access to English language classes at TAFE. As a result, 2 are paying for their own private English classes; the 3rd participant was not attending any language courses at all.
- Having a dedicated team for a group of DPs at service provider locations such as at Centrelink would help, so they are not waiting in the mainstream queues.

Timely and comprehensive information support

- There is a need for information sessions about what service providers are available for different visas, what resources are available, about school access and enrolment in Intensive English Centres (IECs) and in schools. DPs are happy to access or make use of some resources themselves, but often just need guidance as to where these can be found.
- As everyone has a different background (language level, family, profession, etc.), personalisation is needed with such services, which DPs felt wasn't provided to them.

Enhanced communication experiences

- More digitalised communication processes can improve user experience: phone communication is a default option for services in Australia, you cannot activate profiles without the phone conversation, which complicates the process of registering with different services. The officer on the phone makes mistakes (e.g. in name spelling), so DPs had to call back to rectify the mistake.
- More flexible assistance hours will mean that the DPs who are already working do not need to take a day off if they need to seek guidance.
- Calls from the Private Number were problematic as that made it impossible to call back – if possible, a call-back number or email should be provided.
- Instead of providing DPs with the resources that were deemed suitable, the DPs would prefer to have information about what resources are available in order to decide what to make use of.

Enhanced accessibility

- Some services are interconnected: those who do not have access to AMEP on their visa, also miss out on TAFE driving training. Alternative options for such visa holders should be considered.
- In addition, TAFE offers support with getting a driving license only to full time students – those who start working lose this access, although they are the ones who need the license the most. Again, alternative arrangements must be considered.
- Considering availability of services such as the NDIS and aged care for these DPs.

Enhanced language support

- Ensure IECs and AMEP classes have capacity to provide services.
- Hire more client managers who speak Ukrainian/ Russian or increase availability of Ukraine/Russian translators.
- Add the Ukrainian language to the West Australian Language Services Policy and consent forms, including those for health services, need to be translated into the DPs' language(s).

Additional services

- Social meetings for DPs should be included in the government support programs from the first weeks of arrival. Those were organised by volunteers for Ukrainian DPs were very useful, even therapeutic for peer support and processing war trauma.
- Counselling services are essential but not always available – very often the calls from clients include requests for counselling support.

4. Conclusions

This report provides an insight into the settlement experiences of the Ukrainian DPs who came to Australia escaping the war in 2022, and those of settlement service providers in NSW and WA. Our participants indicated the need for better information support and user experiences of the humanitarian migrants, while service providers reported challenges working with the cohort that differed from their usual clients in many ways, which in some instances led to misunderstandings and hence wrong expectations of services. Some of this confusion was also caused by the differences in the lifestyle (e.g., city living) and the way various services operate in Ukraine and Australia (healthcare professionals, etc.). Overall, there is a need for more streamlined and less fragmented settlement services.

The participants were satisfied with their choice of Australia. However, they were mostly unsure about their future. They reported high levels of uncertainty in regard to both short-term and long-term planning. For the long-term perspective, there was an apparent lack of information re visa options for further stay. Some felt unrealised in a work sense as they had no clear plan how to make a living in Australia. Some were not working as they felt they needed to invest in learning English first. Others felt they lacked stability while husbands were still in Ukraine. There is also a lack of clarity about the future for family reunion: how husbands can join their families when they are allowed to leave Ukraine. It was emphasised that information support should come from experts to avoid “Chinese whispers”.

The findings highlight the need for a better understanding of how agency and language interplay in the experiences of displacement and the significance of such knowledge for the service providers and policy makers who work with humanitarian entrants. In particular, the feeling of control over one's life and satisfaction with their progress in Australia were directly linked to the level of English proficiency. Our participants also reported experiencing linguistic discrimination, and as a result of it, foreign language anxiety (Tankosić & Dovchin, 2021). At the same time, DPs actively searched for ways to improve their situation, either by study, work, or other means, irrespective of their level of proficiency – either building on high language skills or trying to develop those. Although it has long been recognised that competency in the language of the host country is one of the key determinants of social and economic integration, a lack of understanding about how language works to assist integration and is approached as a human capital, unnecessarily increases the costs of the settlement services (Hou & Beiser, 2006). Hence, understanding how DPs use language(s) to exercise agency will help all stakeholders collaborate

more efficiently in the integration of new refugees not only from Ukraine but also, potentially, elsewhere.

As the current study only involved a limited number of participants and services, and only in two states, further research is needed to probe deeper into the issues uncovered. It is also important to provide space for collaborative development of the resources indicated as missing or in need of adjustment, and collecting user feedback to ensure they are user friendly and effective in the long term. The reason we have not received extended comments about Medicare may be because our participants were aged between 30s to 60s and did not have outstanding medical needs, as well as the group interview setting being less conducive to sharing more sensitive information. Hence, planning future studies with a larger demographic coverage and involving one on one interviews can provide further insights. At the same time, research with several community groups would allow for a cross-cultural perspective and greater sustainability of the resources and policy recommendations.

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