

The invisible barrier: Reaching the learners we never meet

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Many providers within the adult education sector have invested significantly in supporting learners to develop the foundation skills necessary for learning. In recent years, digital skills have been added to the list of notable barriers to education participation. As a result, many training providers and organisations across Australia now offer digital orientation workshops, pre-course upskilling programs and other dedicated resources for newly enrolled students. For example: learning management systems include help functions and automated tutorial modules; providers are rolling out digital literacy testing; and in some cases, significant resources are devoted to bridging the digital divide for learners once they're in the system.

Yet, despite these comprehensive efforts, recent research reveals a sobering reality: we may be missing the learners who need the support most. A staggering 67 per cent of adults motivated to work in aged care lacked the basic digital skills needed to identify the training they need or find a suitable provider. These are learners we never get the chance to support because they remain stuck on the outside looking in—unable to access the very programs designed to help them.

This research exposes a fundamental gap in our support strategies. While testing protocols and upskilling resources exist for enrolled learners, many in the sector have overlooked learners who are unable to navigate the initial steps of finding and accessing education. Our digital orientation workshops are invisible to those who cannot receive email invitations. Our sophisticated pre-course programs are out of reach for those unable to complete enrolment processes. Our support systems are irrelevant to those who never make it through our doors.

The scale of the hidden problem

Building on earlier research that resulted in the must-read *Good Practice Guide* (Cox, 2023) for supporting learners with digital skills barriers, this more recent study took a different approach. That earlier work identified three categories of digital skills necessary for education participation: access (finding and enrolling), engage (connecting with materials and trainers), and advance (progressing through programs using everyday digital tools).

Rather than focusing on improving existing support for enrolled learners—an area where the sector has made considerable progress—this study focused specifically on the access category; that is, the digital skills needed for learners to even reach our doors. Through a unique opportunity to work with 100 aspiring aged care workers aged 25-45, we uncovered the extent of the pre-enrolment digital barriers that render our current support systems ineffective.

These 100 aspiring learners were recruited through a partnership with a training provider that advertised information and enrolment support days across two metropolitan locations for individuals interested in aged care careers. Participants provided informed consent and were aware their experiences would be monitored and documented throughout the research process. Foundation skill experts, who received specialised training in digital skills assistance, helped facilitate the single-day events. Participants were subsequently tracked throughout their learning journeys to observe ongoing digital barriers, support needs and learning outcomes.

These participants knew they wanted to work in aged care and felt motivated and suited to the sector. They simply didn't know what specific certificate they needed or how to find a training course. What we discovered challenges common assumptions about digital capability in our community.

Notably, 67 per cent of these aspiring learners were unable to search the internet to identify the training requirements for working in aged care, nor could

they locate where to access that training. In short, two-thirds of these learners were experiencing digital skill barriers that kept them on the outside looking in. This does not include enrolment difficulties; we're talking about the most fundamental step of understanding "what course do I need, and where can I get it?"

Interestingly, no correlation was found between written or spoken language literacy and digital skills. Nor was a

Key Finding: Two-thirds of these aspiring aged care workers couldn't complete basic internet searches to identify training requirements or locate providers.

correlation found with learner access to digital devices. Indeed, one 19-year-old participant stood out for their extensive collection of digital devices and impressive social media following, yet they were unable to find a course or navigate the online enrolment process without significant hands-on support. These observations reinforce that digital skills for accessing education represent a distinct set of capabilities.

The enrolment obstacle course

When we assisted participants in understanding that they needed a Certificate III in Individual Support and connected them with various training provider websites, the digital hurdles continued because, regardless of course delivery mode, enrolments are still self-service online processes. We found:

- **28%** could not complete enrolment without significant support,
- **53%** needed moderate support and
- only **19%** could successfully enrol independently.

The enrolment process proved particularly challenging around several key areas. Finding the actual course on provider websites was the first hurdle. Then, once on the correct page with the appropriate course listed, many participants struggled to locate enrolment buttons or links, and the enrolment forms themselves proved extremely challenging. The Unique Student Identifier (USI) requirement created a particularly complex barrier—very few learners could follow links to externally obtain a USI and then return to complete their enrolment.

Key Finding: Only 19% of aspiring learners successfully navigated the enrolment process without hands-on support

Beyond enrolment: the communication gap

Even after we provided enrolment support, which included organic upskilling provision, digital barriers persisted. Many participants lacked the skills to then monitor their emails for enrolment confirmations or welcome messages. Those who did receive welcome emails couldn't understand instructions for setting up student email accounts, logging into learning systems, creating passwords or finding timetables.

This helps explain why many trainers observe that learners "don't bother logging in" or "don't show up" in week one. For many learners, it's not about motivation—they simply don't know how to navigate the digital requirements to access training and then engage with their program.

Most participants were also unaware of follow-up learner support opportunities, particularly digital upskilling classes or orientation sessions. Receiving an email asking if you need digital skills support is of little value if you lack the skills to receive or interpret that email.

The impact of digital orientation

To test whether existing support works when accessed, we subsequently tracked groups of new learners. This comparative follow-up study involved two separate groups of 100 learners, each drawn from entirely different cohorts and not involved in our earlier observations of enrolment experiences and challenges.

The first group followed standard onboarding processes, learning about digital orientation workshops through email notices and learning management system alerts. Predictably, they didn't receive or understand these messages and therefore didn't attend orientations.

For this group, trainers went on to spend more than one-third of their time in weeks 1-3 providing digital skills support rather than teaching assigned content. Only 53 per cent of this group successfully completed their first unit.

In contrast, the second group of 100 learners received interventions to ensure they attended digital orientations before starting their courses. The results were dramatic:

- Teaching time spent on digital support dropped to almost nothing
- Completion rates soared to **84%**.

The only difference was attending pre-course digital skills orientation. This demonstrates that support initiatives work when learners can access them, but the current communication methods fail to reach those who need help most.

Practical solutions that work

Our research identified several effective strategies for reaching and supporting learners with digital barriers:

Course matching and enrolment support

Campus open days with local advertising proved highly effective, particularly when promoting 'course matching' and 'enrolment support.' These terms resonated strongly with prospective adult learners because they address two very real access barriers.

Multi-modal communication

Text messaging proved crucial for backing up email communication. Many learners with significant digital barriers are more familiar with text messaging than email. However, simply texting 'check your email' doesn't help. Plain-language messages that clearly explained next steps proved far more effective.

Language matters

The term ‘digital orientation workshop’ meant nothing to participants. The word ‘orientation’ was perceived as vague and seen to be ‘insider language’. Changing this to ‘pre-course training’ with the tagline, ‘all the must-have skills and tips before you start your course’ dramatically improved attendance. When we use clear, descriptive language, it removes the guesswork about a program’s purpose and relevance.

Key Finding: ‘Orientation’ was a confusing term for all learners, not just those with digital skill barriers.

‘Pre-course training’ was more readily understood and significantly more highly attended.

Effective screening questions

Simple screening at orientation events proved highly effective. These three verbal questions worked best:

1. "How often do you look things up on the internet?"
2. "How often do you send email?"
3. "What sort of device do you have or mostly use?"

These experience-based questions (rather than ability-based ‘can you?’ questions) naturally revealed capability levels and enabled provider team members to efficiently and accurately direct learners to the appropriate support area. These questions were effective during telephone-based enrolments too.

A word on digital skills testing

While many providers have implemented digital skills testing as part of their support strategies, our research reveals concerning patterns in how these assessments are experienced by learners. Too often, digital skills tests are perceived as hurdles designed to exclude rather than as tools to identify support needs. Without proper framing or explanation of their purpose, learners frequently interpret these tests as gatekeeping mechanisms that may deny them access to education. This perception undermines the very support these tests are meant to facilitate. Rather than simply purchasing testing solutions to meet compliance requirements, providers need to carefully evaluate whether their chosen tools serve learners effectively. The *Good Practice Guide* provides detailed guidance on selecting digital skills solutions that genuinely support learners rather than create additional barriers to education access.

Implications for the sector

The findings reveal a significant equity issue in adult education access. While we focus considerable effort on supporting enrolled learners, a substantial population of motivated, suitable candidates never reaches our services because of digital skill barriers, particularly those related to accessing education.

For foundation skill practitioners, this research highlights that digital capability represents a specific form of barrier that requires specialist support. Research has found that it’s critical to deliver this support before mainstream program commencement rather than alongside it.

The research also demonstrates clear benefits for both learners and educators when digital skills support is properly implemented ahead of a course or program. Mainstream trainers can then focus on their assigned content and established learning plans across their whole learner cohort rather than providing remedial digital support that is often outside their expertise, remit and already often-compressed delivery timeframes.

A call to action

The 67 per cent of potential learners who were observed as unable to navigate basic internet searches to identify training represent not just individual missed opportunities, but also a significant loss of human capital for industries like aged care that desperately need workers. These are not people lacking motivation or suitability—they’re blocked by digital skill barriers that can be addressed.

As a sector, we need to reconsider how we communicate with and support prospective learners. This includes candid assessments of communication methods, pre-course preparation, and enrolment processes (205 of 231 surveyed trainers stated that their enrolment processes were “known to be significantly flawed”). The research demonstrates that relatively simple interventions can dramatically improve learner access and success rates.

Encouragingly, the solutions don’t require massive resource investment. They require thoughtful implementation of screening processes, accessible communication methods, and targeted pre-course support. Most importantly, they require recognition that digital skills barriers begin well before enrolment and extend far beyond learning management system tutorials or even ‘orientations’—sessions that many learners, regardless of digital skill level, do not understand the purpose or necessity of.

For the adult education sector, this research presents both a challenge and an opportunity. We can continue losing potential learners to removable digital barriers, or

we can adapt our approaches to create genuinely inclusive pathways to education and employment.

Practical implementation checklist

Communication and outreach:

- Actively offer 'course matching' and 'enrolment support' in advertising.
- Implement multi-modal communication (beyond just email and LMS notifications).
- Replace jargon like 'digital orientation' with clear descriptors.

Screening and assessment:

- Embed simple experience-based questions.
- Screen all enrolling students using non-technical language.
- Direct learners to appropriate support levels based on screening.

Pre-course support:

- Deliver digital skills support *before* course commencement.
- Frame support as preparation for success, not remediation.

System design:

- Review enrolment processes for unnecessary complexity.
- Offer alternatives to complex online forms—personal support is well regarded *and* enables

digital skill support to be immediately flagged as essential for individual learners.

- Ensure website navigation aligns with actual user capabilities.
- Test all processes with foundation skill specialists.

The research demonstrates that when we remove invisible barriers, both learner success and educator effectiveness improve dramatically. The question is whether we're ready to acknowledge and address the learners we've never had the chance to meet.

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