

Understanding cohort and demographic selection in program design

What are cohorts and demographics?

In program design, cohorts are specific groups that your program aims to support, while demographics describe the characteristics within these groups, such as age, cultural background, gender, or identity. For example:

- Cohort – young people disengaged from school.
- Demographics – this could include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, young people with disabilities, or culturally and/or linguistically diverse young people.

When applying for grants, it is essential to clearly identify who your program is intentionally targeting – **not just who may participate**. Review panels assess applications looking for well-considered, evidence-based choices that address specific needs within these groups. This is about making informed decisions that shape your program design rather than simply ticking boxes.

Why is this important?

Panels seek a clear understanding of who your program is for and how your activities meet their needs. Applications demonstrating intentionality and a thorough understanding of the chosen cohorts and demographics are more competitive.

To stand out, focus on two main areas:

Who your program is intentionally for

How you clearly explain this in your grant application

Intentional cohort and demographic selection

Choosing your program's cohorts and demographics involves making deliberate, informed choices that will shape the entire program. Each selection should reflect an understanding of the group's specific needs, ensuring effective activities, risk management, cultural safety practices, partnerships with young people and families and meaningful service pathways.

Cohort and demographic selection should be intentional and informed. This critical step in program design sets the foundation for addressing the unique needs of your chosen groups.

Key considerations for cohort selection

- **Intentionality:** Be specific about your target groups. For example, if your program supports young people at risk of justice involvement, detail how it will meet their specific needs with trauma-informed practices and safety protocols.
- **Alignment with program activities:** Ensure cohorts align with program activities, making them purposeful, culturally appropriate, and accessible. Be mindful of the individual needs of young people, not a homogenous group.
- **Evidence-based:** Use data or research to substantiate your choices. Include this evidence in your application instead of just referencing it without context to the grant proposal.

Demographics in program design

Demographics are about the specific characteristics within your chosen cohort, like gender, ethnicity, ability, or identity. For example, when asked, “Who is your proposal explicitly aiming to work with?” you might choose:

- Young people who identify as female.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.
- Young people with disabilities.
- LGBTQIA+ young people.

If you select a specific demographic, demonstrate a clear understanding of their unique needs, and explain how your program addresses them. This includes detailing how your activities, staff training, and environment ensure safety, inclusion, and effectiveness.

Examples of key considerations for demographic selection:

Cultural appropriateness

- Programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people must ensure cultural safety by collaborating with community leaders, respecting cultural practices, using the knowledge of First Nations peoples and providing staff with cultural competency training.

Sensitivity and inclusion

- Programs for LGBTQIA+ young people should create a welcoming, supportive environment. This could involve training staff on gender diversity, using inclusive language, and making sure program activities are safe and affirming.

Accessibility and adaptability

- Programs for young people with disabilities must be accessible and adaptable. Consider physical access, communication needs, and other supports to ensure participation. Staff should be trained in disability awareness and inclusive practices.

Gender-specific needs

- Programs aimed at young people of specific genders should focus on understanding their unique needs and lived experiences, avoiding reinforcement of stereotypes. Ensure staff involvement aligns with cultural protocols or religious requirements.

Age appropriateness

- Consider the age range of your participants. Make sure your activities, language, and content are suitable for their age, engaging, and relevant to their needs. Be mindful that older young people and younger aged people may not be appropriate in group settings.

**Staff training
and
preparedness**

- Training is essential for all demographic considerations. Staff should be prepared to engage and support participants respectfully and safely, with ongoing professional development in cultural competency, trauma-informed care, disability awareness, and gender sensitivity.

**Service
pathways and
support access**

- Establish connections with relevant support services and community organisations. Service pathways help participants access additional resources, such as mental health support, victim support or educational assistance, ensuring holistic support beyond the program itself.

Intersectionality: combining cohort and demographic considerations

Intersectionality considers how multiple identity factors (such as culture, age, and gender) interact within a cohort, creating unique needs. Programs should thoughtfully address these overlapping identities.

Example of intersectionality: If your program targets culturally and/or linguistically diverse young people disengaged from school, consider:

- **Language support and cultural integration:** Bilingual staff or materials and activities that celebrate cultural diversity.
- **Educational engagement:** Partner with schools and other services to help young people find their way back into education. Make sure you get the permission of the education facility you are partnering with.
- **Holistic support:** Provide services that address not just education but also mental health, social integration, cultural and community connections.
- **Reflection on delivery:** Consider whether staff should share backgrounds with participants to align with cultural practices. If representation is lacking, seek ways to include cultural expertise or collaborate with the community.

Cohort and demographic influence on program design

The groups you select will impact every aspect of your program, including:

Program activities

- Tailor activities to meet the needs of specific groups, ensuring they are age-appropriate, engaging, and culturally relevant.

Risk management

- Outline safety protocols, training, and service pathways.

Staff training

- Train staff and volunteers to effectively support the demographic, including cultural competency training as needed.

Referral pathways

- Show how your program connects to other services, like education or mental health support.

Outcome measurement

- Tailor your evaluation methods to track the changes your program aims to achieve. Is it having an impact?

Communicating your choices in grant applications

Explaining who your program is for is just as important as how the program is designed. Panels prefer applications that demonstrate a thoughtful, intentional approach and a deep understanding of the target group's needs.

Key communication points:

- **Be specific and direct:** Clearly say which groups your program is targeting. Avoid using vague or unclear or non-contemporary language.
- **Show how it all connects:** Explain how your choices about the target groups connect with your program activities, staff training, risk management, and evaluation..
- **Support with evidence:** Include data, research, or past experiences that back up your design choices.

Key takeaways:

- **Be intentional:** Identify your target groups and design your program to meet their specific needs.
- **Communicate clearly:** Make sure the panel understands who you're working with and how your program addresses their needs and the anticipated and measurable outcomes.
- **Ensure cohesion:** Make sure your choices about target groups are linked to all parts of your program design.