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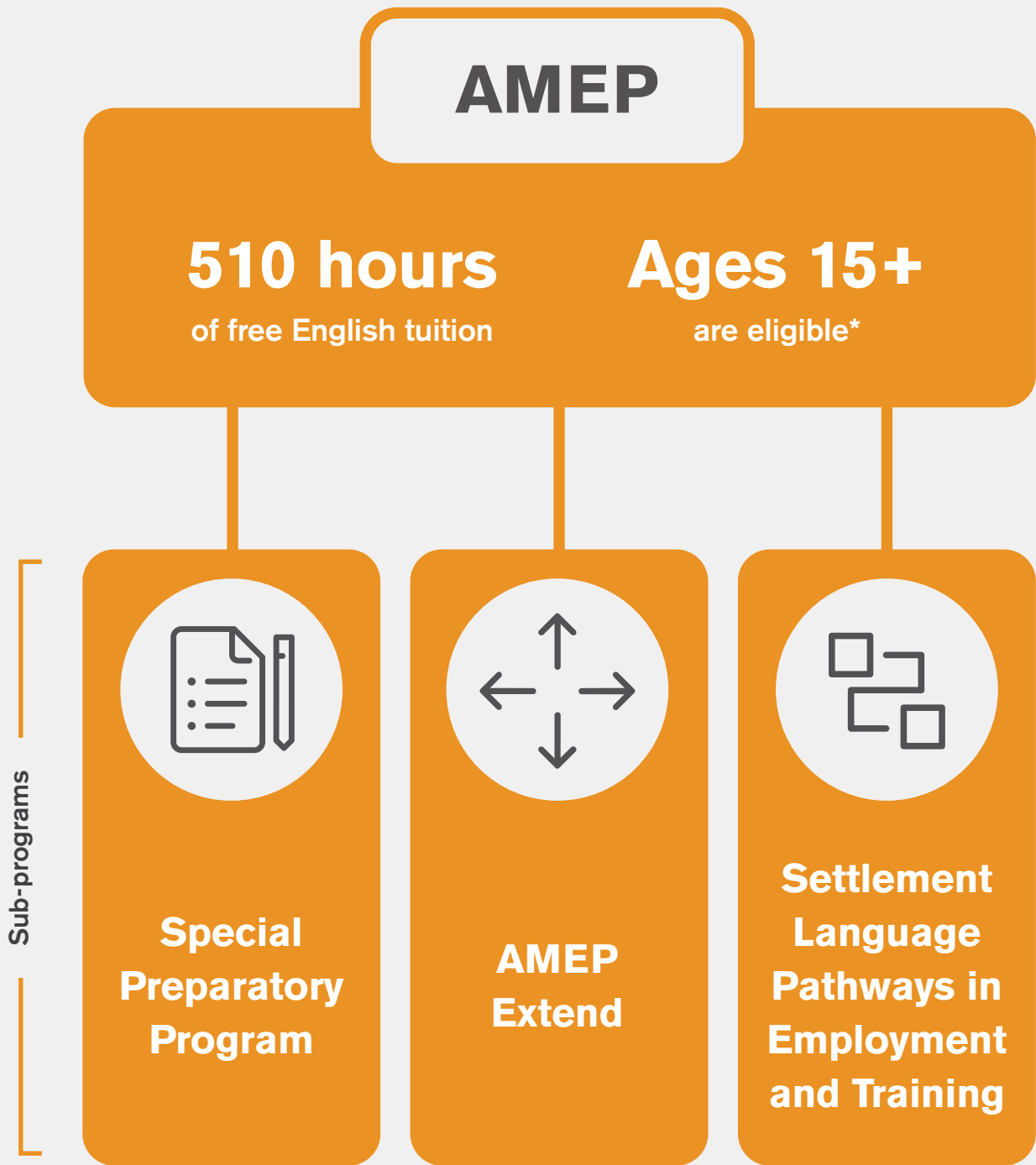
Australia's English Problem:

**How to renew our once celebrated
Adult Migrant English Program**

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The AMEP at a glance



The Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) offers 510 hours of free English tuition to refugees entering Australia under the Refugee and Humanitarian Program, to migrants in the family stream, and some migrants in the skilled stream. While the program is for adults, refugees aged 15 to 17 who have disengaged from school are also eligible.

To qualify, students must have English language proficiency that is assessed as below Functional English (see box on page 10). They can study for a maximum of 20 hours a week in AMEP courses offered by not-for-profit and private providers or a statutory authority such as AMES Australia. These providers also offer distance learning and the Volunteer Tutor Scheme.

In addition to the 510 hours available to all eligible migrants, there are three sub-programs:

- **Special Preparatory Program** offers all eligible refugee and humanitarian entrants extra hours in the AMEP. People aged between 16 and 24 years old whose education has been disrupted can access up to 400 extra hours of tuition. People aged over 24 years can access up to 100 extra hours.
- **AMEP Extend** offers up to 490 hours of further tuition to eligible students who complete the 510 hours without achieving English language proficiency.
- **Settlement Language Pathways in Employment and Training** offers up to 200 extra hours of vocation-specific English language tuition, including up to 80 hours of work experience, in order to help students become familiar with Australian workplaces.

A “fair proportion” of AMEP students go on to study in the Skills for Education and Employment (SEE) program, according to the Department of Education. However, an evaluation of the SEE program in 2015 found that a “proficiency gap” between the two programs needed to be addressed to ensure a clear pathway from the AMEP to vocational education and training.



Narrative Overview: Australia's English problem

Australia has a long and proud record of teaching English to migrants and refugees. It was the first – and, for many years, only – country to provide newcomers with fully funded English-language teaching. The Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP), established soon after World War II and after the first post-war migrants learnt English on the first boats to Australia, has been the flagship amongst a range of government services that try to ensure that migrants and refugees quickly find their feet, and their voice, in their new land.

Delivery of these services in employment, health, housing, education, psychological support, and English language learning has been so effective overall, that it prompted former Immigration Department Secretary John Menadue to say in 2016 that “no country has integrated newcomers as well as we have.” In 2009, the then United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Antonio Guterres, said that Australia had “one of the best refugee resettlement programs in the world.”

Language learning has been at the heart of these services because the government, Australians, and new migrants themselves all believe that proficiency in English provides the road to making Australia home. In an Australian National University poll in 2015, 92 per cent of Australians considered that the ability to speak English was important or very important to ‘being truly Australian’. Having been born in Australia was seen as much less important.

It's a vital issue, because as migrant numbers have increased in the twenty-first century, so has the share of the population that does not speak English as its first language. Today, 28 per cent of the population was born overseas, the highest proportion in a hundred years. Nearly a quarter of Australians speak a language other than English at home. Moreover, many refugees who have migrated this century under the Refugee and Humanitarian Program come from societies that provide little access to schooling, or their schooling has been severely disrupted by war, trauma, or long waits in refugee camps. Teaching English to these newcomers can be a formidable task.

Over 71 years, Australia's main answer to these challenges has been the AMEP. About two million migrants have studied in it. The program is legislated and demand-driven, meaning that funding rises or falls with the number of students, not the whims of politics – a rare beast in cost-conscious Canberra. In 2019-20, the government expects to spend \$259 million on the program, more than half of all the money it will spend this year on targeted services for refugees and migrants. Over the years, the AMEP has produced materials, teaching methods and research that have led the world. Students have been able to access a personal counsellor to help them with educational and vocational pathways while getting free childcare as they study. No wonder that in May 2017, eight MPs, divided equally between both main parties and including a former AMEP teacher, Dr Anne Aly, lined up in the House of Representatives to praise the program's part in the success of Australian multiculturalism. Yet even as they did, the AMEP was about to experience perhaps its greatest period of difficulty since its founding.

Two years since substantial changes were introduced to the program in July 2017, a chorus of teachers, providers and informed observers now says it suffers from a lack of identity, focus, and morale. An older cohort of teachers is leaving and not being replaced. Alarming, government figures suggest that numbers in 2018-19 have dropped to about 53,000 students, from a usual enrolment of about 60,000. Numbers in the distance learning stream of the AMEP – so important for students in regional and remote areas – are understood to have collapsed. Perhaps acknowledging the problems, after the May election the government moved the AMEP out of the Department of Education and Training and back into Home Affairs, the successor to the Immigration Department, in which the program had been housed between 1948 and 2013.

An independent evaluation of the AMEP, due to report to government at the end of June 2019, is likely to shed light on what has gone wrong. A review for the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, entitled **Integration, employment and settlement outcomes for refugees and humanitarian entrants** and awaiting public release, is also believed to discuss the current problems of the AMEP. Yet the program's identity crisis has been 30 years in the making. Should it prepare migrants for settlement in Australia or, more narrowly, for work? Ideally, it should do both, depending on individual capacity and need, yet it may be doing neither well.

Recent changes, which focus more on employment outcomes, seem to have aggravated the problems, yet even before these changes were introduced, a mere seven per cent of migrants and refugees who studied in the AMEP each year achieved functional English as a result, according to the latest available figures, from 2015. Another difficulty is that many students do not complete the 510 free hours they are entitled to under the program; instead, students spend an average of just 330 hours in classes, often because they leave to take or seek jobs, or to care for family. Few publicly-funded programs are so under-utilised.

For many migrants, the 510 free hours provided by the program have never been enough to attain functional English. Yet the failure to attain it might have more damaging consequences than in the past. The time when migrants could walk straight into factory jobs, whatever their English level, has long gone. Today even a cleaner might require a vocational education Certificate II in cleaning, with an English component, in order to be able to read labels on hazardous materials. At the same time, language proficiency matters for much more than work. It enables newcomers to fill in forms, greet strangers, question doctors, take the bus. It enables migrant parents to talk to their children's teachers, and to their children.

This narrative paper examines the state of the AMEP in order to explore the landscape of English language learning among migrants and refugees in Australia. It focuses on three broad groups that face particular struggles to acquire English: parts of the Chinese-born population, groups who arrived under the humanitarian (refugee) program, and women at risk of isolation. It explores the difficulties that have beset the AMEP, and proposes some possible reforms to restore the strength of the program. It argues that any move to improve the state of English language learning must involve a collaborative response from government, business and civil society to the settlement and employment challenges of new migrants.

Australia runs one of the world's largest and most successful migration programs. Brutal in its stance toward asylum seekers who try to arrive by boat, it nevertheless runs a formal and well-funded offshore refugee program — first, because it feels it has obligations to help displaced and desperate people, and, second, because since World War II refugees have contributed enormously to Australian society. If the integration of migrants and refugees fails, they risk leading isolated, thwarted lives, while social cohesion and public support for migration risks being undermined.

The AMEP provides a vivid case study in the achievements, failures and dilemmas of immigration policy in Australia. It's not just a classroom but a construction site — Australia being built. As this paper seeks to show, that classroom concerns us all.

What is functional English?

How is functional English defined? It's an important question, because only migrants and refugees assessed as not having functional English can study in the AMEP. Yet even some AMEP providers are not entirely sure.

The Australian Government defines functional English as “having achieved Level 3 proficiency or above under the Australian Core Skills Framework (as in force or existing from time to time) across each of the core skills of learning, reading, writing and oral communication.” Clear?

The website of ILPR Language Services, a private company that provides English language proficiency tests, offers a fuller definition. Speakers of functional English can usually take part in informal conversations on everyday topics in person or on the phone. They can communicate their own needs and wishes at work, and handle routine but linguistically undemanding situations in commerce and recreation.

What is most important to know is that functional English is generally regarded as well below the level required in most workplaces and TAFE courses. Yet a student who acquires functional English must leave the AMEP.

Key messages

1. English language learning is central to Australian nation building, and should be central to immigration and settlement policy.
2. The Australian Government has a long and proud record of helping migrants to learn English. That record is threatened today.
3. The groups most at risk of not speaking English well are sections of the Chinese community, refugees, and some women.
4. Five large-scale shifts in the economy, the source countries of Australia's migrants, diaspora communities, and the practice and philosophy of government have created significant difficulties for the 71-year old AMEP program.
5. The program, which has been a world leader in language learning, suffers from a lack of clarity in balancing its settlement and employment objectives.

Considerations for how to improve the AMEP

1. Extend the time in which migrants can enrol in and complete the AMEP, while continuing to encourage migrants to start the program as soon as possible after arrival.
2. Uncap the AMEP Extend sub-program, so that all students can study at least 1000 hours.
3. Maintain and extend the AMEP sub-program, the Settlement Language Pathways into Education and Training (SLPET).
4. Restore government funding for independent research on the AMEP.
5. Promote a diversity of ways to deliver the AMEP, notably in online and distance learning.
6. Restate the settlement focus of the AMEP as part of developing more sophisticated and realistic outcome measures for the program.
7. Incorporate English language learning into more personalised approaches to settlement services.

Greater detail on these proposals can be found from pages 43-47.



Australia's landscape of English language learning

In nearly every city, suburb or town where migrants have settled in significant numbers, there are both government-funded literacy programs and ad hoc community efforts to help newcomers communicate.

While the Commonwealth funds the AMEP, State and Territory governments also fund English language programs for migrants – sometimes to try to bridge the gap between the level of English many migrants have attained through the AMEP and the level needed for vocational education and training and for employment. Both the AMEP and state government programs are delivered by a range of providers in the not-for-profit, community and private sectors, along with statutory authorities such as AMES Australia, which operates mainly in Victoria and is directly accountable to the State government.

Since 2017, institutes of Technical and Further Education (TAFE) have provided most AMEP courses across Australia. Yet migrant, refugee or asylum seeker students might also learn English at a Community and Education Centre, with a non-government organisation such as the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, in a Neighbourhood House, a public housing estate, a primary school, a library or even a crèche. Some churches offer English classes to members of their congregations and outsiders. A current research project, funded by the Commonwealth and undertaken by the Federation of Ethnic Communities Council and the Settlement Council of Australia, is seeking to map the scope of English language learning provided by the community sector.

While most teachers of accredited programs have postgraduate qualifications in Teaching English as a Second Language, many providers also have well-subscribed volunteer programs. The AMEP's Volunteer Tutor Scheme trains volunteers to conduct conversations with migrants and refugees, usually in their homes. The impulse behind this popular scheme, in which many thousands of Australians have participated, stretches back to the 1950s and the government-sponsored Good Neighbour movement, which encouraged locals to knock on the doors of new migrants or invite them in for a cup of tea.

Three more fields of English language learning are significant, but are not discussed in this paper.

Many fee-paying overseas students who want to undertake higher or secondary education in Australia but lack the level of English required to do so are enrolled in English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS).

Business has long been concerned about low levels of literacy and numeracy among both native-born and migrant employees, leading some employers to run workplace programs to lift these levels. The 2018 Australian Industry Group (AIG) survey report, **Skilling: A National Imperative**, found that all but three of the 300 businesses that answered the survey believed their business was affected by low levels of literacy among their employees; 39 per cent of businesses were highly affected. However, in the 2014 Budget, the Coalition Government abolished the longstanding Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) program, which helped businesses to train employees needing language and literacy support.

Finally, large numbers of migrant and refugee children learn English as an additional language at school. In New South Wales about 145,000 students – or about one in five – learn English as an additional language. In Victoria, the figure is about one in eight students. In both states one in three students has a language background other than English. As the following section shows, the challenges for all providers of language learning are growing.

Lost in translation: Three groups at risk of not learning English

As late as the 2006 Census, about 85 per cent of Australians reported speaking English as their first language at home. The number who reported not speaking English well or at all was about 500,000, a figure that had not increased much in 15 years. Yet with the surge in migration from 2006 onwards, the number not speaking English well or at all rose to 655,000 in 2011 and to 820,000 in 2016. By then, one in eight overseas-born Australians reported poor English proficiency, the highest level since 1996.

At first glance, the loss of English proficiency among migrants is confusing. Two-thirds of Australia's annual migrant intake is made up of skilled migrants, most of whom need to pass a language test in order to obtain a visa. And overall English levels among migrants are high. A 2017 OECD report, [*Building Skills for All in Australia*](#), finds that "in contrast to many other countries, migrants in Australia have literacy and numeracy skills comparable to those of natives." A report published in 2018, [*English Proficiency in Australia, 1981 to 2016*](#), by demographers Peter McDonald, Helen Moyle and Jeromey Temple, sheds light on which groups of migrants have the greatest struggle to learn English. The following section draws substantially on their report.

Refugees

Refugees who migrate through the Refugee and Humanitarian Program make up less than 10 per cent of Australia's annual intake of migrants and refugees, but more than a third of students in AMEP classes. While they comprise a diverse group, and include large numbers of relatively well-educated Syrian and Iraqi refugees in recent years, many come from Afghanistan, Nepal, Horn of Africa countries and Myanmar. War, ethnic unrest and other trauma, along with long stays in refugee camps, have often deprived these groups of schooling. A 2014 survey of refugees who arrived in late 2013 found that 78.2 per cent did not speak English well or did not speak it at all before they came to Australia. Commonwealth Education Department data shows that 71 percent of humanitarian entrants to Australia who started the AMEP in 2017-18 were assessed at the lowest levels of the eight indicators of the Australian Core Skills Framework.

Chinese language speakers

Refugees are not the biggest story among Australian residents struggling to learn English. [*The English Proficiency in Australia report*](#) finds that in the 2016 Census, the population not speaking English well "is dominated by those speaking Chinese languages at home." Almost a quarter of a million Chinese speakers in Australia did not speak English well in 2016. The next largest groups were those speaking Vietnamese and Arabic. But whereas Arabic speakers showed considerable improvement in their English language levels between 2011 and 2016, the same could not be said for the Chinese.

The Census form asks respondents to report their own language proficiency. Chinese speakers may under-report their proficiency through modesty or having studied in Chinese education systems that put a premium on high achievement, says Lynda Yates, an honorary professor in linguistics at Macquarie University. Nevertheless, it appears that there are several main groups of Chinese in Australia who do not speak English well.



In 2016, more than 1 in 10 of all Australian residents not speaking English well – as many as 85,000 people – were 45 to 64-year olds who spoke a Chinese language. A significant number arrived from China as students in the late 1980s and early 1990s, then applied for refugee status after the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre and the declaration of the then Prime Minister, Bob Hawke, that all 20,000 Chinese students in Australia at that time could stay. That number eventually rose to 42,000 after others, mainly students, also applied successfully for visas. In order to enable them to stay, these applicants were given an English test that was much less demanding than the test for key migrant groups that was introduced in 1992, as Professor Lesleyanne Hawthorne shows in her 1997 paper, [*The political dimension of English language testing in Australia.*](#)

A second group of Chinese migrants with poor English arrived in Australia as recently as between 2011 and 2016. This group of about 20,000 people makes up just under a third of Chinese migrants not able to speak English well over this period. It includes parents and partners arriving under the Family Stream, partners (usually wives) of permanent skilled migrants, and participants in English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students who need to improve their English before enrolling in higher and vocational education.

Finally, it may also include a number of Chinese citizens now coming into Australia on tourist visas, then claiming asylum. The intention of some of these asylum claimants appears to be to work while their claim is processed. Backlogs on applications are now so great that these applicants can work for two or more years before that occurs. They work typically for below-award wages on farms and in restaurants, and often appear to be controlled by human trafficking syndicates that are exploiting a clogged system of asylum seeker processing. This is a new and difficult challenge for Australia.

Women

The third group of migrants most at risk of not learning English are women, especially married and single mothers. Among those speaking a language other than English at home in 2016, 18 per cent of women were likely to not speak English well, compared to 15 per cent of men. More than half of students in the AMEP came to Australia under the family stream of the migration program, and many of these are wives and mothers of male migrants. Others have been in Australia too long to be eligible for

the AMEP. All these groups risk being isolated at home, often while raising children, and new approaches are needed to help them learn English and stay in touch with the larger community. One of these is the Commonwealth-funded Community Hubs Australia program. A 2017 parliamentary report on migrant settlement outcomes described the program as “a proven effective way to bring together newly arrived migrants and their families in their settlement journey.”

About 10 years old and now rapidly expanding in four states, 74 Community Hubs provide a place where women can be connected to government services, start their children in early childhood education, sign up for programs, learn about training and jobs, make friends, and get their first foothold in Australian life. They are usually attached to primary schools, often ones with preschool centres, because on any morning that is where mothers are most likely to be. Although the AMEP offers childcare, it is often not located at the same place as the classroom. The Community Hubs provide a much more attractive option.

In 2018, the government provided Community Hubs Australia with \$1.4 million pilot funding to expand and streamline their English language classes, after it found that the Hubs might be an effective way to attract and retain certain groups of women in English language learning. One language class, at St Dominic’s Primary School Community Hub in the northern Melbourne suburb of Broadmeadows, contains 10 women, eight of them refugees from Syria and Iraq. Some of these refugees fled virtually overnight before the arrival of ISIS militants in their city. All have seen their old lives uprooted, and now they sit in a small room, their children playing nearby, while teacher Dinusha Perera explains the difference in English between ‘how much’ and ‘how many.’

“I want to be able to understand everything,” says one student, Maysoon. “I want to be able to ask the teacher, ‘How is my child going?’” Mirna, who studied maths at university in the Iraqi city of Mosul, nods: “It is hard at the moment. But I love this class, the teacher is very good and we are all like friends. I have to learn. The key to Australia is language.”

A portrait of the AMEP and its students

Twenty kilometres from the St Dominic’s Community Hub, in a Neighbourhood House in the shadow of the high-rise public housing towers of Richmond, Liz Keenan is showing her AMEP class of 11 women and two men how to pronounce English. Using a pedagogical approach she describes as “very slow, very patient, and a little bit theatrical,” she asks each student to say their name and where they come from.

With large hand gestures that denote sounds and common words such as ‘what’ or ‘why’, and with lots of nervous laughter, each student has a go at talking like an Australian. Then, all write the sounds on a magnetic board using the symbols of the International Phonetic Alphabet. They are learning an alphabet that dictionaries use but that very few native English speakers know. One older Somali woman, wrapped and swathed in the bright red cloth of the Oromo people, says slowly and tentatively, with lots of hand movements and a wicked grin: “My name is Sumaya... and I am from... South Yarra!”

Carringbush Adult Education, which runs the AMEP class, devised this phonetic, physical way to teach English in response both to research on language learning and to repeated feedback from students that no matter how hard they tried to speak with locals, they struggled to understand and be understood. For students with low levels of English, it can be very effective.

This class of 11 women and two men from seven countries is almost a microcosm of the AMEP. The greatest number of class members comes from China (as it does across Australia, followed by people from Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and Vietnam). Migrants in the family stream and refugees, especially from Horn of Africa countries, are strongly represented. Nationally, about two-thirds of AMEP students are women, and about two-thirds live in Sydney and Melbourne.

Before the class begins, Liz Keenan describes to the author of this narrative the educational and emotional state of each of her students. One couple is learning English quickly; one woman speaks just one word of English and had to be taught how to hold a pencil. One woman has waited five years for her husband to get out of a refugee camp; another has spent seven years sleeping with her children on the floor of a friend's flat while they wait for public housing. "She's troubled today," says Ms Keenan. "I'm not sure how much she'll learn." Yet when the class begins, humming with humour and goodwill, the woman joins in with everyone else.

This is a beginners-level AMEP class, which means that it focuses on giving students the language skills to enable them to make a start in Australia. Ms Keenan says that many of her students would like to work. "They hope for retail jobs or jobs in aged care or in cleaning." One man recently got a job as a crossing supervisor, "He's thrilled and proudly showed us his uniform."

For most, employment is still far away. But the AMEP is a diverse program, containing everyone from a Karen farmer who has been in a Thai refugee camp for 10 years and has never read a book, to a neuro-scientist from Syria who is frustrated that Australia does not quickly recognise his professional qualifications. You'll find a 15-year old refugee from South Sudan and a Russian couple in their early 90s (one such couple studied in Sydney recently). AMEP classrooms hold people from 150 countries and territories. Many come to class with two questions: how does this country work, and how can I find work?

Those questions have framed the program from its earliest days, when the first post-war migrants began arriving at the Bonegilla reception centre in northern Victoria in 1948. English classes were mandatory and were designed to encourage migrants to assimilate into Australian society. Students were grouped in classes of about 25, and every day for a month were given four hours instruction: one of learning the language, one applying it through word games, reading and discussion, one of documentary films and one on the Australian way of life. Dr Ralph Crossley, a professor of German from the University of Sydney and the first Principal Instructor at Bonegilla, explained the method this way:

"Here was no academic project involving, as language study so often does, dilettantish juggling with words from one language to another, but an urgent problem directly associated with life. These students are learning a language to use it – immediately... The methods used would have to be direct, natural and oral in order to meet a

situation which is vastly different from that of the ordinary run of language classes.” Other countries later adopted a textbook setting out this approach, Situational English.

Australia has moved a long way from the assimilationist ethos of the post-war years, yet the goals of the AMEP have not greatly changed. In 1992, the AMEP adopted a national curriculum – the Certificates in Spoken and Written English – that included topics on transport, shopping, health, housing, socialising and employment.

These topics were designed to be enriched by real experiences of Australian life. AMEP providers such as Adult Migration Education Services (AMES) in Victoria and New South Wales would combine study of The Language of Childbirth, a course based on procedures at a Sydney hospital, with visits to hospitals, to prepare mothers and mothers-to-be for childbirth in Australia. Or they would invite police officers to speak to students, many of whom came from countries where police were brutal and corrupt, to explain the local operations of the law. Providers have offered excursions to museums, visits to AFL clubs to learn the rules of football, and women-only swimming classes.

“The AMEP is proud to be more than just a language program,” wrote the then Immigration Minister, Philip Ruddock, in 1998, in a foreword to a history of the AMEP written by one of its former teachers and administrators, Shirley Martin. “It is a major settlement tool, enabling students to avoid the isolation which comes from being unable to communicate.” Mr Ruddock praised “the practical advice and information provided by teachers, the lively multicultural atmosphere (of classrooms) where tolerance is both necessary and appreciated, the opportunities for friendship during what can be a very lonely and bewildering period in a person’s life, and of course the chance to learn and practise new linguistic and cultural skills in an encouraging and non-threatening environment.”

Yet even as Mr Ruddock made this eloquent statement, the government was imposing a dilemma on the AMEP, one that it faces even more starkly today. Is it a program for welcoming new arrivals, teaching them English by showing them how to go to the bank, ask a teacher about their daughter’s electives in Year 10, and look for a job? Or should it focus more tightly on vocational and workplace English, because finding work is one of the best ways to enter Australian society?

Frequent reforms have sought to answer these questions. For example, in 2011, the government introduced Settlement Language Pathways into Education and Training (SLPET), a work experience program that provided higher level language speakers with 200 hours of vocation-specific language tuition, including up to 80 hours in a workplace. This proved to be a significant and popular reform. One provider, Navitas, created a data base of 1500 employers who were prepared to accept AMEP students. They ranged from the big supermarkets to small businesses to Bunnings, which was reportedly glad to have speakers of different languages to assist its migrant clientele.

The difficulty is that the AMEP only offers to provide students with functional English (for a definition see box on page 10). Once they have achieved it they must leave the program. Yet functional English is well below the level required for most jobs and vocational education. For other students, 510 hours are nowhere near enough for acquiring even this level of English, according to language learning specialists. As a result, in recent decades the program has never found a set of measurements that government, providers and teachers can agree on to define the differing skill levels, objectives and outcomes of a cohort of students that is literally as wide as the world.

These tensions did not exist in the first three to four decades after World War II, when Australia was awash with low-skilled jobs, and migrants were here to help fill them. The AMEP's big problem was attracting and retaining students, most of whom were bent on finding jobs. But in the past 30 years, tidal changes to the economy, to immigration, and to the philosophy and practice of government have transformed the program, and left it in its current vulnerable state. Five trends, all at least partly global in origin, stand out.



Five big shifts that have shaken the AMEP

Economic upheaval

The first change is the most significant, because it has not only transformed the landscape for migrants, it has driven all subsequent government policy on language learning.

As the economy opened to global competition in the 1980s, the low-skilled manufacturing jobs that had been the ticket for many migrants into Australian life began to disappear. Skills-first was the new mantra; employment, not settlement, the new migration policy priority. “A more sophisticated economy demands a labour force with greater fluency in English and higher levels of literacy,” argued a 1992 joint statement by Immigration Minister Gerry Hand and the Minister for Employment, Education and Training, Kim Beazley.

In response to business complaints that workers lacked the skills to succeed in this new world, governments embarked on a revolution to identify, measure and increase the education and vocational skills of the workforce. A new National Training System and an Australian Quality Framework that captured all qualifications, from Certificate I to Doctorates of Philosophy, sought to measure what capabilities a worker had, and what training pathways he or she had to undertake to build them. Over time, English language learning was integrated into these new arrangements. But whether the nature of language knowledge and skills can be divided into a set of discrete and identifiable parts, the way hairdressing, motor mechanics or paramedicine can be, remains a hot debate.

New migrants and refugees

As the economy changed, so did the nature and origins of people coming to Australia under its migration and refugee programs. A majority of migrants now come from Asian countries, especially China and India. Australia has also increasingly taken many refugees from cultures that have oral rather than written traditions, who have had little or no literacy education, or whose years in refugee camps deprived them of schooling. These groups include people from South Sudan, Somalia, Myanmar and Nepal. Both migrants from Asia and refugees usually have to learn a new alphabet and script, unlike the migrants and refugees who came mostly from Europe in the first three decades after World War II.

Over time, the increase in required workplace skill levels has placed particular pressure on refugees. On the best available evidence, fewer than one in five of humanitarian migrants are in paid work after being in Australia for 18 months, according to the 2017 Centre for Policy Development report, [*Settling Better*](#). Two out of five recently arrived humanitarian migrants work as labourers, but over the long term the need for labourers in the economy is falling.

Changes to diaspora communities in an age of global travel and media

Once, migrants made long journeys to Australia on ships, expected to come for the rest of their lives, and often never returned to their birthplaces. Today, migrants no longer have to cut their old ties; they can return to their homelands on an overnight flight. The advent of the internet and satellite TV makes it possible to live anywhere and get all news and information in a foreign language. That creates a powerful risk of closed digital enclaves that delay and even prevent English language learning, and integration into Australia.

Contracting out of government services: value for money or driving down price?

Accelerating reforms that had begun under the previous Labor Government, from 1996, the Howard Government contracted out a range of government services to private and not-for-profit providers. Provision of AMEP programs was offered for tender from 1997. Competition policy, said its promoters, would abolish feather-bedded public and private sector monopolies and open the door to new approaches that provided both quality and value for money. To its critics, this philosophical rationale provided a skimpy fig leaf for cost-cutting.

One senior bureaucrat involved in the changes in the early 1990s described them to academic researcher Helen Moore for her paper, ***Although it wasn't broken, it certainly was fixed: Interventions in the Australian Adult Migrant English Program, 1991 – 1996***: “What we were trying to do was to get out of continually reporting simply on inputs into this program...six million hours delivered at an average cost of x dollars. Because that's the cheats' and easy way out in education. You've got to get to a point where you say 'Well look, what on earth did you get for that seventy-five million dollars?’”

All government programs must show they are delivering good outcomes for taxpayer money. And being tight on spending is not bad in itself: governments must economise if they are to fulfil even part of the unlimited demands they face. Finally, it is true that outsourcing prompted some talented AMEP managers and teachers to leave organisations that they believed had become complacent, to form or join ventures that pioneered creative approaches to teaching language.

Nevertheless, it is worth hearing from one of these former AMEP teachers, Linda Wyse, who in the 1990s set up Lynda Wyse and Associates with another former AMEP teacher, Kath Brewer, to deliver literacy programs and, in time, quality assurance of other providers.

Ms Wyse, now retired, participated successfully in many tenders to win government business. Yet she has come to believe that “tendering has been damaging” to the AMEP. She says that over the past two decades, fulfilling the government’s contract demands has gotten “tougher and tougher” – to the point where providers cannot succeed in the contract “if they are tendering what it genuinely costs to provide best practice.” She cites one university, audited by her firm, that ditched its high-quality English language program because it could not meet the contract price, to be replaced by private providers that she believes were cut-price. With such changes, “of course your quality is going to be diminished.”

Another problem is that outsourcing has turned the AMEP from a “high trust, low regulation” program to one that is “low trust and high audit,” argues Chris Corbel, a researcher at the University of Melbourne Graduate School of Education and a former AMEP teacher. Dr Corbel says that because the government is now distanced from providers, it has felt a need to set up an overly complex and burdensome regulatory framework to ensure they are doing what they promised.

New government attitudes to immigration

In the past two decades, governments have sought to slow the take-up of permanent residence by trying to introduce provisional visas and restricting other pathways. Reversing half a century of bipartisan policy, they have tried to make it tougher to become a citizen through proposals (now dropped) to introduce a more demanding English language test, and a test to measure knowledge of Australian life. The paradox is that as the country has become ever more reliant on the economic benefits of migration, government has become ever more wary of some of its perceived cultural impacts.

The change applies especially to Coalition governments, but Labor politicians have also grown reluctant to say too much about migration. As a result, its role in the national story has shrivelled to a mostly material concern. While migration was always about economics, it was once also celebrated as the building of a nation and its people. In 2017, the then Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, defined immigration as “recruiting” and said that Australia should use it “as a company uses its HR department.”

The five big shifts described above culminated in the decision of the Abbott Government, in 2013, to quietly fillet the department that had managed Australia's migration program since 1947. Multicultural policy and settlement services were transferred out of the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (which was renamed the Department of Immigration and Border Protection, then Home Affairs) and into the Department of Social Services. The AMEP was also moved out of Immigration, dwelling for a while in the Department of Industry before finally finding a home in the Department of Education and Training.

The change had a profound impact on the AMEP, mainstreaming it in the vocational education and training sector, and weakening its identity as a cornerstone of migrant settlement. More than ever before, government put pressure on the program to show it was providing clear pathways for students into jobs or training, and delivering perceived value for money. At a meeting held while the program was housed in the Industry portfolio, a senior manager for an AMEP provider heard a federal minister express frustration at 60-year old grandmothers being taught in the program, given the near impossibility of their ever finding a job.

Teachers and providers, on the other hand, tend to stress the program's settlement objectives, which they say includes employment. But what do students say? Two reports shed light on the objectives and outcomes of the AMEP by providing vivid, first-hand testimony of the experiences, fears and hopes of migrants as they study English and try to find their place in Australia.

What are settlement services?

Settlement services are what the Australian Government offers to refugees on their arrival in Australia and for a period afterwards. The government funds non-government providers to help newcomers get access to housing and employment services, general health services and more tailored ones such as torture and trauma counselling. English language learning through the AMEP is also defined as a settlement service.



NSW Education & Communities
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OUR TIME

WORLD MADE BY US

WESTMEAD PUBLIC SCHOOL

City of Sydney
experience of Sydney city.

A poster for Westmead Public School's 'OUR TIME' program. It features a child's drawing of a city skyline with a yellow sun and blue sky. The text includes 'NSW Education & Communities Public Schools YC&U', 'OUR TIME', 'WORLD MADE BY US', 'WESTMEAD PUBLIC SCHOOL', and 'City of Sydney experience of Sydney city.'

Students speak: What the AMEP means to me

The reports, [*Language training and settlement success: Are they related?*](#) (2010) and [*Adult Migrant English Program Longitudinal Study*](#) (2015), emerge from a five-year, longitudinal study of migrants as they learned English in the AMEP and then continued their lives in the community. Led by linguistics professors Lynda Yates and Ingrid Piller and published by the AMEP Research Centre at Macquarie University, the study was conducted in two phases – 2008-2009 and 2011-2014 – and followed one cohort of students from their time in the AMEP for up to five years, and another for a period of up to 18 months.

Most participants were “very positive” about the program, the study found. Most felt that it had not only improved their English but their confidence to live in Australia. Many felt particular bonds with their teachers, and with friends they had made in class. Many saw the AMEP classroom as their primary or only source of information about Australian culture, government and society, and the only place where they spoke English with native speakers (their teachers and counsellors), or at all. Jane from Poland (the study uses pseudonyms) said of her years in the AMEP: “It was a hard time but we all had a hard time. I have my good friends here now; four years together and we will be to the end of our life together.”

Alex from Saudi Arabia became emotional when telling an interviewer how the AMEP had helped him not just to learn English but to settle in Australia. In the classroom, “I found people from Japan, Italy, France, Israel, anywhere in the world. It is a precious feeling when you get all these cultures around you.” The advice he received from his AMEP counsellor was invaluable when he applied to join the armed forces. While he waited on his application, he drove a bus for an aged care facility, working every day to practise his English with the residents, paying particular attention to slang.

Not all students were happy with the approach taken by the program. Some, particularly students from China, had studied a formal, writing-based curriculum at home and wanted to do so here. Some well educated people found classes too easy and boring: Rita from Mexico suggested that the AMEP should be for refugees while professional people took a different class. Jeannie from China worried she would be influenced by the poor vocabulary and accents of fellow learners.

Conversely, some people with little prior experience of schooling struggled to advance in the program. Kiran and Gayatri, both Nepali Bhutanese, said: “We are learning and also at home sometime we are opening books and trying to do something but we don’t know anything and try to learn a word, but again it will not stay in mind.” Nevertheless, Kiran persisted, learning basic phrases such as “Where do you come from?” or “What is your name?”. Ultimately, he said he was able to understand more when people talked to him at the supermarket.

Mandarin, Cantonese, and Arabic speakers in Sydney and Melbourne faced a particular challenge: the opportunities to shop, go to the doctor, hairdresser, church or mosque in their first language reduced their need to practise English. By contrast, migrants in regional centres and smaller towns faced both more pressure and more opportunity to learn their new language.

Students cited the following classroom topics as being of particular value: Australian slang, pronunciation, history and culture, and how to talk with Australians, including appropriate levels of formality. Australian humour was a recurring issue. Ryoko from Japan lamented: “I cannot understand Australian humour.” Cherry, a music teacher from China who now worked in a childcare centre, had to ask her co-workers, “What is a dummy spit?”

Students also wanted to understand how government functioned in Australia, and how to use computers. Above all, many wanted to work. Researchers found “considerable interest in childcare, aged care and beauty therapy among women, and in interpreting and setting up a small business among both genders.”

The study made important findings. First, higher English language skills undoubtedly helped students to find work. A student with a Certificate III in Spoken and Written English was three times more likely to find a job than one with a Certificate II. Second, many migrants and refugees were eventually able to find jobs, but these jobs were often short-term and did not match the qualifications they had brought to Australia. Nevertheless, of the two groups in the study, the one that was followed for up to five years showed better employment outcomes than the one followed for 18 months, suggesting that for many migrants the road to full participation in Australian society was long but that it did have a destination.

A clear view emerges from the study that students saw no contradiction between the settlement and employment goals of the AMEP. For Lily, a 24-year old from China, learning English and working were both vital to a sense of belonging. At first she felt frustrated and lonely in Australia, as if she did not fit. But she finally landed a full-time job as a cashier in a supermarket. In her last interview with the researchers, she spoke with passion about what the job meant to her:

“That store is a small one and I know everyone, everyone knows me as well and the people there are so nice. It is my second home, yeah, I feel so warm in that store. We’re a great team and we’re talking a lot every day and about everything, every part of your life.”



Sea change: Morale and purpose adrift in the AMEP?

On July 1, 2017, the Department of Education and Training introduced a new business model for the AMEP. This section, based on interviews with providers, former providers and teachers in both the public and private sectors, explores the difficulties faced by the AMEP in the past two years. The following section considers how the government and providers might respond.

The first point about the new business model is that some of its provisions have been widely welcomed. A new AMEP Extend sub-program offers 490 extra class hours for students who have not reached functional English after completing their entitlement of 510 hours. The cap on funding for the Special Preparatory Program, which offers young refugees an extra 400 hours tuition in the program, has been removed. These changes tackle some of the AMEP's biggest problems: how to achieve functional English in 510 hours, and the particular obstacles faced by refugees.

Nevertheless, two years since the introduction of the new business model, discontent among both providers and teachers is intense. Choosing her words carefully at an AMEP and SEE provider forum in late 2017, Karen Andrews, Assistant Minister for Vocational Education and Skills, acknowledged "some challenges" and that the Department had "heard your concerns and is here to support you." Yet a year later, when 435 AMEP teachers and managers answered a survey conducted by the Australian Council of TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) Associations, or ACTA, 44 out of 75 managers who responded described the model's new audit requirements as "extremely stressful." Another 22 saw them as "moderately stressful."

In the same survey, 42 per cent of 288 teachers in the AMEP and SEE programs said their morale had “significantly declined,” and another 29 per cent said it had “slightly declined,” since the model was introduced. Of these teachers, 14 had left the programs, 30 said they were actively looking for another job and 65 were “seriously considering” doing so.

These surveys involve respondents who self-select and do not necessarily represent the views of all managers and teachers. Nevertheless, the current review of the AMEP, undertaken by evaluators Social Compass, is understood to have also heard widespread criticism of the new model. The ACTA submission to that evaluation may not exaggerate when it says that the AMEP “is in crisis.”

Lost focus on settlement, little gain for employment

A 2015 evaluation of the AMEP by consultants ACIL Allen reaffirmed the program's longstanding objective as the “settlement of migrants into Australia” through development of English language proficiency. Yet while the Department said that it based its design of the new business model on this evaluation, changes to the AMEP's assessment framework made it much harder to fit in talks and topics on settlement. A specific class on settlement was no longer provided, and citizenship classes no longer took place. More than half of teachers surveyed by ACTA identified sharp cuts both in the number of topics related to Australian life and of excursions to important sites in the community. There was simply no longer time or funds for them, teachers said.

Instead, students are divided into two streams: Pre-Employment English and Social English. The goal of this reform seemed to be to provide a more employment-focussed curriculum for those planning to work, and one more focussed on settlement for those who are not. Yet it appears to have had a perverse outcome. Fewer than one in eight students have enrolled in Social English, when the proportion of all AMEP students whose English is not close to being at employment level is probably five times that figure. The reason for the low take-up of Social English is easy to find, according to one TAFE provider. “Students think, ‘Why would I study a curriculum that is clearly seen as offering less?’”

The teacher representative body, ACTA, has also objected to the lowering of qualification requirements for teaching Social English, arguing that it requires high skills to teach students at the lowest levels of English attainment.

Finally, providers say that because the range of employment fields students want to enter is so wide, they cannot tailor the curriculum to students' precise aspirations, or offer much more than generic instruction in the language of work: how to write a resume, be aware of broad (but not industry-specific) occupational health and safety issues, make conversation in the cafeteria, and so on.

The pros and cons of provider disruption, and of delivering the AMEP through TAFE

When the government introduced the new business model in 2017, big changes in the selection of AMEP providers also took effect. The greatest upheavals occurred in Victoria and New South Wales, where major providers AMES Australia and Navitas lost major contracts to TAFE institutions. Having long delivered most AMEP programs in other states, TAFE now became the nation's dominant provider in the two big states. The journey of the AMEP into the nation's vocational education system was largely complete.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to evaluate or compare the quality of provision by AMES Australia, Navitas, TAFE, and other providers. Nevertheless, it is clear that amidst the disruption that occurred with the huge turnover of AMEP contracts, innovative approaches and corporate memory about how to provide settlement programs were lost. Some good teachers went to other providers, some left the system altogether. Some students also left the system, which may help to explain the big shortfall in current numbers.

TAFE providers vary widely in approach, and generalisations are risky. North Metropolitan TAFE in Perth, for example, has a strong commitment to the settlement side of the AMEP, funding counsellors for all students and supporting the work experience sub-program, SLPET, even for students at lower English levels. TAFE also sub-contracts AMEP classes in a range of settings, including the Neighbourhood House in Richmond discussed earlier in this report.

Nevertheless, while TAFE is a natural home for students who are ready for higher levels of vocational education, it is not clear whether the more conventional classroom settings of many of its providers offer the best environment for students at low levels of English attainment. In a large TAFE institution dominated by local students, is there a risk of the AMEP and its somewhat marginalised or vulnerable cohort getting lost? The closure of some TAFEs between December and February can also deter students keen to get on with their English.

Compliance demands in the classroom

Providers say that rising government demands on the AMEP to show it is achieving outcomes and value for money have placed a massive burden on teachers, generating unpaid extra work and sapping morale without producing clear gain.

These demands take two main forms. Before the introduction of the 2017 contract, AMEP teachers were required to evaluate students in their attainment of the curriculum. Now teachers must assess students not only against the curriculum but against the Australian Core Skills Framework, a second assessment designed to measure students' readiness to enter vocational education and training. Moreover, teachers must apply both assessments when students enter the program and at the 200-hour point. It is unclear why the Department demands so many assessments or what value they provide.

Teachers are now also required to call the roll 15 minutes after the start of class and 15 minutes before the end. When students come late, leave early, or do not attend, providers are not paid for those hours. The increased financial pressure on providers has led some to put too many people in classes, to cut classes or collapse them together, according to ACTA's submission to the current AMEP evaluation. Moreover, the move to pay providers by the hour of program delivery leads many to reduce teacher preparation time and, when they can, teacher qualifications.

In another perverse outcome, because students who do not attend classes that they have signed up for no longer lose those hours, they are more likely to come and go as they please. All these changes prevent teachers and students from developing routines and rapport in class. They may also be contributing to the lack of young teachers coming into the AMEP to replace the large older cohort now on the brink of retirement.



AMEP counsellors

One feature of the old AMEP was the counsellor assigned to each student. Hired to advise students on educational and vocational pathways after they left the AMEP, counsellors often also advised them on a range of life problems, from how to obtain support for trauma to how to find a house. “It was one of the things that made the AMEP unique,” says Richard Flack, AMEP manager of North Metropolitan TAFE in Perth. His program still employs counsellors because it sees them as vital. But when the 2017 contract no longer funded counsellors as a separate line item but as part of the overall budget, it is likely that some providers have taken the opportunity to remove them in order to cut costs.

The long and difficult road out of the AMEP

Because most AMEP students do not attain functional English through the program, the issue of pathways to work and further education has always been vexed. Changes introduced in the new business model, notably assessment of students through the Australian Core Skills Framework, were designed to address this problem. There is no evidence they have done so.

Surprisingly, the Department keeps no data on what happens to students after they leave the AMEP. In a written response to questions, a spokesperson said that “a fair proportion” of AMEP students went on to study in the Skills for Education and Employment (SEE) program.

SEE is not specifically a program for migrants and refugees, though they comprise about two-thirds of its students. It is also open to native-born English speakers with low literacy levels, and a relatively small number of Indigenous Australian speakers of English and/or Aboriginal languages. SEE students study the same curriculum as those in the AMEP, yet \$37 million of funding cuts to the SEE program in the three years to 2019-20 are making it harder for AMEP students to transition into the program, writes Michael Cox of private provider Navitas in a background paper. He points out that just as the large recent cohort of Syrian and Iraqi refugees was leaving the AMEP and being referred to the SEE program, the funding cuts excluded many of these refugees from the program. Also, it is harder for women to attend SEE because it does not provide childcare.

Some AMEP and all SEE students are defined as “job seekers,” and therefore subject to the mutual obligation requirements of the jobactive system. In other words, to receive welfare payments they must show that they are either in education and training or actively looking for work.

Yet a 2019 Senate committee inquiry into jobactive noted that given the importance of English skills in gaining fulfilling employment, there were too many instances of refugees and other migrants “missing English language classes so that they can attend appointments with their employment services provider.” Michael Cox cites an AMEP student who was forced to abandon his English language studies because a job had been found for him as a chicken catcher on a poultry farm, a job that offered no long-term career path. Students who undertake short-term jobs often fail to return to their English classes.

As is often the case, problems are aggravated by a lack of flexibility in the system. In a submission to the AMEP evaluation, the Centre for Policy Development said that AMEP providers express frustration that they cannot get some migrants to attend classes because they are too focused on finding a job. Yet these migrants “may end up finding work in low-skilled jobs, with little opportunity to improve their English through or outside work.” On the other hand, some jobactive providers say that some humanitarian migrants – especially ambitious young people without family responsibilities – are reluctant to take low-skilled work that does not require English proficiency, because they see English as critical to their future prospects and want to keep studying it rather than being locked into what they see as a dead-end job. One solution may be to allow English language learners to identify and control what support they need to receive.

The following section, based on discussions with people who have worked in the AMEP, proposes seven reforms to strengthen English language learning. These will be particularly relevant to the Department of Home Affairs, which has just assumed responsibility for the AMEP following the machinery of government changes announced by the Commonwealth Government in May 2019.



Seven considerations for how to improve the AMEP

- 1 Remove time limits so that all migrants with low English language proficiency can enrol in and complete the AMEP, while continuing to encourage migrants to start the program as soon as possible after arrival.**

Migrants and refugees must enrol in the AMEP before they have spent six months in the country. They must begin study before a year in the country, and finish their allocated hours within five years. At the same time, they may need to find a house, a job, a school, a hospital. They may be dealing with memories of war or other trauma. The time of arrival is not always an easy time in which to study. The Federal Parliament's Joint Standing Committee on Migration's 2017 report into settlement outcomes recommended extending AMEP access periods to give students two years to register for and begin the program, and 10 years to complete it. While the Department of Education and Training granted about 8700 annual exemptions to enable students to enrol in, begin or continue study in the program, students had to know about the potential exemption and apply for it. A better approach would be to remove these time limits, while nevertheless encouraging students to enrol as soon as possible and take advantage of the road to successful settlement provided by the AMEP.

2**Uncap the AMEP Extend sub-program, so that all students can study at least 1000 hours.**

Some students might achieve English proficiency in 300 hours; many will need 3000, or more. Uncapping the AMEP Extend program would provide more students with the opportunity to develop functional English. If the funds required make a full needs-based system unrealistic at present, that should nevertheless be the government's ultimate goal, as over time the benefits are likely to outweigh the costs.

3**Maintain and extend the Settlement Language Pathways into Education and Training (SLPET).**

Under this sub-program (see page 7), students with higher levels of English attainment who undertake SLPET as part of the AMEP get experience in a workplace of their choice, then the chance to come back to class to learn language specific to that industry. It's an expensive initiative, but it is widely seen as an effective way to teach students about both settlement and work. Students like it. The government should explore ways to expand the sub-program, including enabling students with lower levels of English attainment to participate.

4**Restore government funding for independent research on the AMEP.**

The AMEP Research Centre, housed at Sydney's Macquarie University, produced original and effective research on the structure and outcomes of the AMEP for 26 years, until it was defunded in the 2009 Commonwealth Budget. Apart from the longitudinal study cited above, it produced assessments and materials for students and teachers. For example, one fact sheet drew on research on a large group of migrants, the Dinka of South Sudan, whose direct speaking style can sometimes sound too blunt when translated into English. The fact sheet offered role-play scenarios for the classroom in making requests such as how to ask Centrelink for an appointment, or the boss for leave from work. An independent AMEP research capability should be funded to provide such materials, and to analyse successes, failures and innovation within the program. The issue of teacher quality and the need to prepare a new workforce must also be carefully studied. Whether or not a centre on the Macquarie model should be restored, the government needs to invest in independent research for the AMEP. Such research could also help achieve the following recommendation.

5

Promote a diversity of ways to deliver the AMEP.

The AMEP should be delivered in a variety of settings by a range of providers, and best practice understood and widely disseminated. All AMEP students must be supported to develop digital literacy, including being comfortable with myGov and the online world. AMEP courses must creatively reflect that priority without in any way reducing the face-to-face aspect of classes that is vital to the program's success. So that students in regional and remote areas are not disadvantaged, the collapse of distance learning provision needs to be understood, and reversed. Online and distance learning may also increase engagement among students who lack access to efficient transport or who are time poor, perhaps struggling to balance English language acquisition with work and/or family responsibilities.

Beyond these necessities, other experiments should be considered to increase the effectiveness and appeal of the program. For example, should Chinese students have the option of more academic classes in line with Chinese pedagogical traditions? What would be the trade-offs with such an approach, recognising that culturally diverse classrooms are a strength of the program? Another potentially beneficial reform is to build on the Volunteer Tutor Scheme by increasing opportunities for AMEP students to converse in a natural, organic way with native speakers. Government can encourage these opportunities by providing support for mentoring or volunteer programs within communities and by promoting positive messages about migrants and their contribution to Australian life.

6

Restate the settlement focus of the AMEP as part of developing more sophisticated and realistic outcome measures for the program.

The AMEP should be viewed as a core part of an integrated settlement program that, where appropriate, also prepares students for work. It is entirely reasonable for the government to want taxpayers' money to be spent effectively on students improving their language skills and transitioning to training and work, yet it is not realistic to expect many of its students to achieve English proficiency in the time provided. The AMEP needs a set of outcome measures that define success for the government, for providers and for students. These measures should focus on English language acquisition, but also include the program's reach and retention rates, flexible and relevant delivery, client surveys of attainment and well-being as they seek to settle in Australia, and the program's capacity to build social cohesion.

7**Incorporate English language learning into more locally tailored and personalised approaches to settlement services.**

For years providers have argued that the form of delivery of settlement services for migrants and refugees, involving many government departments with many agendas, often confuses and impedes the progress of the people it is meant to serve. At any one time, a newly arrived refugee might have a case manager through the Humanitarian Services Program, another through jobactive, and guidance on pathways through the AMEP. The result is “increased complexity, confusion and competing outcomes,” including migrants being compelled to give up English language learning in order to take up marginal jobs that offer no prospect of a career path, according to a 2017 paper by settlement services and AMEP provider, Navitas.

However, promising experiments in approaches tailored to individual needs are underway. In the local government area of Wyndham, on the western edge of Melbourne, the city council is leading a consortium of service providers who are developing a more place-based approach to refugee settlement. The goal is to ensure that refugees living in Wyndham can talk to a central case manager (ideally a skilled bi-lingual worker) who can provide holistic advice and referrals, taking into account their needs and that of their family. The case manager might advise on how to access settlement services, meet jobactive requirements to enrol in training or look for a job, and find time and opportunities to study English.

This initiative, supported by the Centre for Policy Development, includes the Wyndham Community Education Centre, which provides settlement and employment services and is sub-contracted to provide AMEP classes; jobactive providers Job Prospects and AMES; and local employers and education providers. With the co-operation of employers on small farms south of Werribee, refugees from several Burmese communities have found sustainable employment while studying English onsite at the end of the working day.

The model seeks to end the tension between studying English and finding work, and to replace fragmented service delivery with ongoing one-on-one support. It also provides a vehicle through which local stakeholders are harnessing available funding from federal and state government in a more joined-up and effective manner.

Government has long been aware of the problem and has experimented with ways to align settlement services, policies and contracts, so far without great success. As of May 2019, settlement services and the AMEP have been reunited inside the Department of Home Affairs. While over the past six years the department's emphasis on the integration of migrants has been replaced by a focus on security and border control, the change nevertheless presents an opportunity to create a unified approach to these services.



Conclusion

When Australia's first Immigration Minister, Arthur Calwell, stood in Parliament in August 1945 to announce the start of the post-war immigration program, he laid down a set of principles, in effect a grand bargain for the nation. To ensure public confidence, the government would keep rigid control of the program. There would be no haphazard migration, as would happen in Britain, France or Germany, no underclass of undocumented aliens, as would develop in the United States.

Calwell urged Australians to shed old prejudices and to welcome the newcomers. He urged migrants to find jobs and become Australian as quickly as possible. English language learning soon became a big part of the plan.

For all its flaws, and for all the changes that have happened since then, including a move away from assimilation to a multiculturalism that would have shocked Calwell, his model has largely worked. Today it is no longer clear that governments subscribe to it. Yet, as Calwell understood, it is impossible to extract the economic benefits of migration without creating the conditions that will ensure migrants' economic success.

Above all, the cohesion of Australian society is highly vulnerable to a failure to invest fully in migrant settlement. The risks of insufficient or ineffective support are growing. For example, the government wants to encourage new migrants to go to regional areas, and it is true that some towns have provided welcoming homes for groups of refugees in recent years. Yet in many regions provision of English language learning is increasingly threatened or non-existent.

The arguments for generous funding and support of English language learning are both pragmatic and principled. While young Australians must get every chance to be properly educated and trained, it seems clear that in coming years many large and growing industries – including aged and disability care, agriculture, hospitality and information technology – will need migrant workers, with good English language skills to fill their demand for labour.

Australian governments remain committed to the refugee program. In 2018-19, Australia is expected to slightly increase its refugee intake, to 18,750. Educating and settling people who have fled war, trauma and lack of schooling is expensive

and difficult. Governments might well balk at the initial cost. Yet over the long term, refugees have contributed greatly to Australia's economy and society, and their children and grandchildren are likely to contribute even more. If we wish to be a nation that proudly accepts responsibility for assisting a small number of the world's persecuted people, we have to do it well. This means helping newcomers to find jobs. It also means ensuring that a mother or grandfather who has little prospect of paid employment can say to a child: "How was school today? What's going on? Can we talk about it? Can I talk to your teacher about it?"

"Language most shows a man. Speak, that I may see thee." The Elizabethan playwright Ben Johnson's famous line might apply not only to people but to nations as well. Language is their tool for living together. One early act of the re-elected Morrison Government should be to restore the effectiveness of its once lauded English language program. This is one class that no migrant, and no Australian, can afford to fail.



Institute discussion of the narrative

In June 2019, members of the Scanlon Institute for Applied Social Cohesion Research, representing non-government and government organisations across Australia, met to discuss a draft of the narrative on English language learning set out above. A number of themes emerged from the meeting.

Participants broadly agreed both that learning English was a vital part of the settlement of migrants and refugees, and that Australia did not perform as well as it once did in this area.

A number of participants were keen to stress that the problem of migrants not getting access to English language learning was not confined to the big cities. Migrants in regional and remote areas faced particular challenges that needed to be better understood. How do you deliver the AMEP in a town with only two or three eligible students? Yet both the Commonwealth and state governments are keen to develop and populate the regions, including with new migrants, so the problem should not be ignored.

Another participant identified young refugees as another group at risk of missing out on English language learning. While 15 to 17 year old refugees who have disengaged from school have been eligible for the AMEP since 2011, the participant pointed to the importance of youth-specific AMEP classes. They do not exist in all areas of the country, yet without them, it is hard to keep young people engaged in the program.

Participants acknowledged that the barriers to successful English language learning were greater than they used to be. As one said, the 21st century online and media environment made it increasingly possible to live in Australia without being able to speak English. “For \$56 a month you can sit at home and get all the news and information you like in whatever language you like on your television.”

The economic and social changes of our time required new, flexible approaches to English language learning, yet according to one participant, such flexibility seemed to be reducing, both in the AMEP and across language programs more broadly.

She believed that delivery of AMEP classes in a diversity of settings, such as workplaces, libraries and Neighbourhood Houses, was being replaced by a more uniform model dominated by formal classroom settings containing larger numbers of students. Such an approach was not appropriate for the needs of many AMEP students, she argued. The loss of AMEP counsellors also reduced diversity in the program.

Participants believed it was important that government restated the settlement focus of the AMEP program – including a focus on employment. The two goals did not need to collide. Both were part of what had made the AMEP such a successful program over a long period of time.



Considerations for Practical Implementation

1

Encouragement and support for everyone who is eligible to use their full 510 hour allocation.

We know that there are often significant reasons why individuals are unable to complete their full allocation. This may be due to childcare not being available, the need to take up an offer of employment or other responsibilities that need to be accommodated. In addition, others may feel that the environment of the classes is not conducive to their learning style or they may find it too difficult. Building bridges between services and individuals continues to be essential.

2

Introduce social English wherever possible

In areas of high migrant populations, local business, schools, libraries, recreation facilities, universities and transport bodies should all play a part in encouraging the acquisition of English. Whether it is bi-lingual or multi-lingual signage or the increased use of pictures and graphics, this needs a whole of community response.

3

Engage with the AMEP Volunteer Tutor Scheme

For those who are struggling with learning English, it is very important that they are able to engage in conversations with native English speakers. The Volunteer Tutor Scheme is a perfect opportunity for community members to make a significant difference.

4

Emphasise welcoming in the community to reduce isolation.

Isolation detracts from a sense of belonging and the ability to learn English. Engagement of the local community through local government, faith or civic organisations is important. Whether it is the introduction of a calling tree for older community members or new arrivals, localised community dinners or neighbourhood meetings on local developments, all provide gentle and non-confronting ways to reduce isolation.

Reports, articles and submissions consulted for this narrative

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About the Narrator



James Button, a former Walkley Award winning journalist and speechwriter, is Narrator of the Scanlon Institute for Applied Social Cohesion Research. The role of the Narrator is to curate academic reports, commentary and publications that relate to social cohesion, and synthesise the thinking into a narrative that brings their rationale and findings to the fore and encourages consideration.

About the Scanlon Foundation

The Scanlon Foundation was established in 2001 with the endeavour to enhance and foster social cohesion within Australia.

It was formed on a view that Australia, with the exception of Australia's First Peoples, is and always will be a migrant nation.

The Scanlon Foundation aspires to see Australia advance as a welcoming, prosperous and cohesive nation, particularly in relation to the transition of migrants into Australian Society. The Foundation supports ongoing research into the indicators of social cohesion and the results of this research inform the Foundation's activities.

The Foundation makes grants to improve social cohesion in areas of greatest need within Australia.

List of Institute members

Chancellor Professor Peter Shergold AC, Chair

Victoria

1. **Abdiaziz Farah** | Somali Community Champion
2. **Ali Ahmed** | CEO, Youth Activating Youth
3. **Andrea Pearman** | General Manager, Community and Philatelic, Australia Post and Inclusive Australia
4. **Anna Parle** | Chief Resilience Officer and Director, Countering Violent Extremism Unit, Department of Justice and Community Safety, State of Victoria
5. **Carmel Guerra** | CEO, Centre for Multicultural Youth
6. **Cath Scarth** | CEO, AMES
7. **Celian Kidega** | Magwi Development Agency Australia
8. **Gavin Ackerly** | CEO, Community Four
9. **Janine Lawrie** | CEO, Space2b
10. **Kim Sykes** | CEO, Bendigo Community Health Service
11. **Kiros Hiruy** | Senior Research Fellow, Centre for Social Impact, Swinburne University
12. **Megan Johnson** | General Manager, TRY Australia
13. **Robert Gruhn** | Senior Policy Officer, Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria
14. **Sonja Hood** | CEO, Community Hubs Australia
15. **Soo-Lin Quek** | Executive Manager, Centre for Multicultural Youth
16. **Viv Nguyen** | President, Vietnamese Community in Australia/Vic Chapter Inc

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17. **Dylan Smith** | Executive Officer, Fremantle Foundation
18. **Hannah Fitch-Rabbitt** | CEO, Fremantle Multicultural Centre, Inc.
19. **Rachael Chenhall** | Book keeper, Zonta House Refugee Association
20. **Stuart Tomlinson** | CEO, Fremantle Multicultural Centre, Inc.

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21. **Aleem Ali** | CEO, Welcoming Australia
22. **Bilge Ozgun** | Diversity and Inclusion Lead, Wesley Mission Queensland
23. **Julie McDougall** | Director, Multicultural Affairs Queensland
24. **Mackayla Jeffries** | Director, Community Engagement, Anti-Discrimination Commission, Queensland
25. **Rohan Cassell** | Community and Social Football Manager, Football Queensland
26. **Sharyn Casey** | President, Islamic Women's Association of Australia

South Australia

27. **Jodie Van Deventer** | CEO, Committee for Adelaide

New South Wales

28. **Jackie Ruddock** | The Social Outfit
29. **Jill Gillespie** | Multicultural NSW
30. **Lesley Unsworth** | Founder, Taste Tours
31. **Lisa Waldron** | Executive Officer, Westpac Foundation
32. **Malcolm Haddon** | Senior Community Relations Adviser, Multicultural NSW
33. **Margaret Teed** | Mentor Coordinator, City East Community College
34. **Martin Stewart-Weeks** | Principal, Public Purpose and part of The Impact Assembly at PwC
35. **Megan Lancaster** | Director, Community Engagement at Multicultural NSW
36. **Reyna Flynn** | Client Support Manager, The Bread and Butter Project

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37. **Ana Jansa Kralj** | Policy Officer, Settlement Council of Australia
38. **Jack Archer** | CEO, Regional Australia Institute
39. **Dr Janecke Wille** | Policy and Project Officer, FECCA
40. **Mohammad Al-Khafaji** | CEO, FECCA

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