

Maximising AMEP and English Language Learning

Consultation Report

Introduction

In January 2020, the Settlement Council of Australia (SCoA) consulted with its members regarding the Australian Migrant English Program (AMEP) and English language learning for newly arrived refugees and migrants. The consultations consisted of four face to face roundtable discussions and a national teleconference. In addition to these events, approximately 11 people who were unable to attend in person provided short written feedback. A total of 105 people from 55 organisations took part in the consultations. See Appendix 1 for a list of attendees and the organisations they represented.

The purpose of the consultations was to provide further insight into the current arrangements for English language learning provided to new arrivals, including the strengths of the current program and aspects which could be strengthened and improved. This follows recent investigations on behalf of the Commonwealth Government during 2019, including the *Evaluation of the Adult Migrant English Program New Business Model* conducted by Social Compass for the Department of Home Affairs, and the *Independent Review into Integration, Employment and Settlement Outcomes for Refugees and Humanitarian Migrants to Australia*, chaired by Professor Peter Shergold AC.

This report provides a summary of the feedback received through SCoA's consultations with its members.

Key Findings

Following are the key findings to arise from the consultations:

1. Having a program like AMEP that offers free English language tuition to a broad range of newly arrived migrants and refugees is a great asset to Australia. It should be celebrated, protected and enhanced.
2. AMEP is a flexible program that can serve the diverse needs of learners, but it is limited by the current funding and reporting requirements. This needs to be addressed in order to achieve the maximum benefit from AMEP.
3. AMEP should be reoriented as a program focused primarily on the effective settlement of newly arrived refugees and migrants. The recent appointment of the Commonwealth Coordinator-General for Migrant Services, and moving AMEP and settlement services into the one department are positive steps towards achieving this.
4. There are many examples of effective collaboration between AMEP and other settlement services. However, there is significant scope to improve both integration with other settlement services and collaboration between providers. This should be encouraged and incentivised.

Feedback

1. Strengths of the current arrangements

Participants in the consultation identified numerous strengths with AMEP. These include:

- The **existence of AMEP** - the fact that Australia has a federally funded program that provides 510 hours of free tuition to a broad range of newly arrived refugees and migrants - as well as a number of other supplementary programs such as SLPET / SPP / extended learning in AMEP - is a major strength, which needs to be recognised, celebrated and protected
- **Childcare** - the availability of free childcare is hugely positive, and enables many more people to attend, in particular mothers and grandparents
- **Flexible delivery** - having classes available in the evenings, at weekends etc (at least in larger metropolitan areas). Possibility to study full time, part time or through home tutoring
- The ability to **contextualise learning** - classes provide an immersive learning experience which can be tailored to the needs of the particular class / group. This also encourages peer-to-peer learning
- Ability to include a **wide range of services** to complement classroom learning - settlement services, Police, Surf Lifesaving etc
- **Experienced and qualified teachers** - who are able to tailor the learning experience to the particular group they are working with. The regularity of classes also means that teachers become trusted support people to students, who are then able to refer students to other appropriate supports and services. This is particularly useful for students who are not eligible for HSP or SETS
- The **Volunteer Tutor Scheme** which complements classroom teaching for those unable to attend classrooms, such as frail older people, people with disabilities etc. The volunteer program also provides a pathway to employment for many former students. Participants speculated as to how volunteers could be utilised even more, though this was tempered by concerns around the risk of exposing learners to lower quality tuition
- **Career Pathway Guidance** has been successful in engaging, retaining and delivering employment outcomes for learners (a testimonial was offered by a provider in the Ballarat region). However, participants stressed the need to restore funding for careers guidance within the AMEP contract
- **Social interaction** - AMEP helps people to build networks and social connections, feel a sense of belonging and reduces social isolation - all of which contributes to peoples' positive settlement
- **Strong partnerships** between AMEP and settlement service providers - there are many examples of collaboration and partnership cross the country. For example, many settlement services have case workers regularly located at AMEP venues
- The ability to **stream classes** and to provide classes for particular groups - such as youth-specific classes, classes for mothers with young children - works well when it's possible to do so.

Refugee and migrant community leaders and community members highlighted the following aspects of AMEP as valuable:

- *"It's free and it includes childcare"*
- "Social engagement is encouraged and we get to meet people from other cultures"
- "Tutor are available for disabled people and those who need more time to feel confident to attend formal classes"
- "It's a fun and social learning environment"
- "It has simple enrolment procedures"
- "It provides exemption from jobactive"

2. Areas that are not working or need improvement

A number of issues were raised regarding the current funding / contracting model, and the impact this has on AMEP delivery. These issues include:

- An **over-emphasis on assessment** under the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF) model - many participants stated that this is not a suitable approach to gauge language learning. The overemphasis on assessment has inhibited learning, making it more academic, and less focused on effective settlement. Much of the class time is spent preparing for and conducting assessments, at the expense of actually teaching English. AMEP outcomes could be better measured using a broader set of social and economic participation indicators, including the social benefits of belonging to a language learning community - such as building networks and social capital
- Furthermore, **ACSF reporting** is restricting the ability of teachers, administrative staff and management to offer a flexible AMEP program which is responsive to clients' settlement needs. ACSF reporting is a significant burden for teachers, and results in:
 - too much focus on assessment;
 - client outcomes implicitly defined by an academic understanding of English, not one contextualised by individual learner goals, and;
 - not enough time leftover for teachers to focus on their core role of teaching English to help learners achieve settlement success
- The **income streams** under the 'actual hours' funding model are unpredictable and inconsistent. Classes become unviable when student numbers drop below a certain level. This forces AMEP providers to merge classes, and to put learners with different levels of English, different learning needs etc into the same class. The funding model does not give providers the confidence to invest in a diverse course offering, or for teachers to plan a tailored and flexible course. In addition, teachers are spending too much time monitoring attendance. Because of this situation:
 - classes are often too large;
 - the range of English competency in each class is often too great for learners to progress;
 - the learning environment of a large class is not welcoming for some learners.

This is particularly an issue in regional areas, where overall student numbers are lower and there is less opportunity for providers to be flexible in their AMEP offerings. In some places, such as Tasmania, AMEP students are placed in classes with fee-paying international students, despite very different learning needs. Given issues of scale, some providers can't offer the range of class options that students require (e.g. evening classes, classes for youth, classes tailored for certain occupations or desired outcomes etc.). Therefore, the ability to cross-refer between providers would be useful. Though this is currently possible, the current funding model doesn't incentivise this practice

- Participants suggested that, due to the funding environment, some **providers are protective** of their expertise and access to clients, volunteers etc. The Department should put less emphasis on competition within AMEP, adopting the recommendation from the *Social Compass* evaluation to encourage consortia of diverse providers, and co-develop a funding model that incentivises finding the right providers for learners
- Some AMEP providers are **not aware of the various aspects** of AMEP that can be offered to settlement clients (e.g. VTS, AMEP Extend etc) – while some AMEP providers (particularly those in regional areas) were not aware of how AMEP could be delivered, or is being delivered by providers elsewhere. There is a need for more opportunities for providers to share information and experiences widely, and to better understand the settlement sector. There was mention of considerable material that has been developed over the years on topics such as "the language of childbirth", "how to budget" etc. An AMEP Research Centre with a mass of resources has now been made redundant by the current assessment system. Professional Development is needed for teachers, as are teaching resources.

Other issues raised in the consultations included:

- The **allocation of 510 hours** per learner is arbitrary and not evidence-based. Some learners achieve functional English in this time, but many do not. Some are still unable to write their own name after this time. Many consultation participants favoured shifting to a needs-based allocation of AMEP hours. Whilst there are opportunities for learners to have more than 510 hours of tuition, access to additional hours doesn't always work in the way was intended
- The **five year eligibility period** for AMEP is unhelpful. The time limit fails to recognise the competing priorities that new arrivals face. Many groups, such as women with caring responsibilities, do not access AMEP for several years after initial arrival. Participants suggested that the five year limit be removed from the contract, or at least extended
- The **two streams** of AMEP are not working well. There is misunderstanding amongst learners about this, and many of the funding constraints mentioned elsewhere mean that providers are unable to offer both streams because numbers in the "social" stream are too low.
- Some participants felt there is **not enough diversity** in AMEP classrooms. Under previous contracts, specialised AMEP providers ensured a range of backgrounds were present in classrooms, to encourage interactions in English and increase opportunities for building social capital.

3. Barriers to accessing and completing AMEP

A number of barriers can inhibit newly arrived refugees and migrants from accessing and/or completing AMEP. These include:

- **Competing settlement priorities** can get in the way of students gaining optimal outcomes from AMEP. This can include pressure to find work in order to support themselves and/or their family; not being in the right "head space" to learn effectively because of the range of issues they are dealing with; processing experiences of torture and trauma etc
- Despite recent improvements, **mutual obligation requirements** and an over-emphasis on finding employment are hindering the benefits of learning English. Settlement activities, including attending AMEP, should be recognised as part of a jobseekers requirements by Centrelink and jobactive. Putting too strong an emphasis on job-seeking too early in a person's settlement journey often limits their progress in learning to speak English, as well as limiting their potential to acquire a job to match their skills and aspirations. The four year waiting period for Centrelink payments is also driving people to work before they have a sufficient level of English
- **Transport issues** – including the cost of catching public transport; availability of transport; feeling safe and comfortable using public transport (particularly for women and older people); access to concession cards varies from state to state – for example in NSW you can't a concession card unless you are doing a certain number of hours of study, but in some areas there are not enough classes and/or there is not enough childcare available for students to meet the minimum hours
- **Lack of flexibility** in the AMEP offering – if people are working or studying or have caring responsibility, the availability of classes in rural or regional areas, in particular, often isn't flexible enough
- **Students with a disability** or medical conditions sometimes cannot attend classes. The waiting list for home tutoring is often very long. If a person is hospitalised and absent from classes their payments are often stopped
- **Knowledge of AMEP** is varied amongst newly arrived refugees and migrants. Many people - especially those who are not eligible for settlement support services - are not aware that they are eligible for AMEP, or misunderstand what is on offer

- The huge **variation in students** can be a barrier for some - for example young people being placed in classes with their parents
- The **traditional classroom setting** can be foreign, intimidating or confronting especially for people who have little or no previous formal education.

4. Issues for specific groups

Consultation participants identified a number of issues faced by particular groups in accessing and completing AMEP. These are outlined below.

Women

- Many women have family responsibilities so there needs to be flexible and supportive delivery
- Stronger focus on a wider range of employment pathways such as volunteering, work experience
- Focus on developing their existing skills and up-skilling women
- Provide transport to women with children
- Friendly informal community settings help to engage women
- Women - particularly mothers with caring and family responsibilities - are often unable to begin AMEP or utilise all of their hours within their first 5 years of settlement
- Cultural barriers can prevent women from participating more widely in community life.

Young People

- Young people often get caught between school and AMEP. Older young people may not realise that AMEP is an option - as well as or instead of school
- More hands on, practical classes work well for young people
- More support is needed to help young people find appropriate pathways after AMEP, such as TAFE courses
- Young people need mentors
- More digitalised learning, as young people often enjoy using technology more than older adults
- More cultural training is needed for teachers to help them understand differences between refugee and migrant young people and Australian-born young people - such as having more family responsibilities.

Older People

- More activities are needed to tackle social isolation
- Classes should be combined with practical activities that older people enjoy, e.g gardening
- Provide transport to older people
- Elderly learners really benefit from having bi-lingual classes.

People with Disability

- More classes to cater for the needs of people with a disability
- Address transport barriers to accessing English language classes
- Meet individual support needs – for example accommodating carers in the classroom
- AMEP doesn't provide any additional funding to support those who may need visual, hearing, sign language support. This makes it difficult for AMEP providers to meet their needs
- There are specific issues in teaching people with an intellectual disability.

People Living in Regional Areas

- For some people living in regional Australia, the Distance Learning AMEP is not a viable option or has been difficult to access. Others just prefer face-to-face learning
- Some of the positive aspects of the AMEP are unavailable to those in particular regions (as outlined elsewhere in this report). This can be exacerbated by a shortage of qualified teachers, lack of classroom space etc.

5. Other outcomes of AMEP

As well as supporting newly arrived refugees and migrants to develop a functional level of English, the AMEP program helps to achieve a number of other outcomes. These include:

- **Links to services and supports** - Many AMEP providers invite a broad range of services to present during classes. Others achieve this by organising local Expos covering issues such as the law, health, employment and education
- Teachers become trusted sources of **support and referral**, especially for those who are not eligible for HSP or SETS. Teachers also often act as accidental counsellors
- **Building social networks** - AMEP strongly supports the social needs of recent arrivals. Class groups provide important opportunities for new arrivals to socialise, share experiences, refer each other to job opportunities and so on. This greatly contributes to successful settlement and a sense of community and belonging
- Similarly, AMEP **drives integration and social cohesion**, helping newly arrived refugees and migrants to learn more about Australia and Australian culture. This in turn helps them navigate their daily activities, services etc
- AMEP **supports and facilitates other learning** - including literacy, numeracy and digital skills
- AMEP improves the **self esteem and confidence** of learners
- For some, AMEP provides a **pathway to volunteering**, which may also lead to paid employment.

6. Cooperation between settlement services and AMEP

Many participants spoke of strong relationships and regular collaboration between AMEP and settlement service providers. This could be further enhanced by:

- Increasing opportunities to capture, share and showcase **examples of good practice** in collaboration settlement services and AMEP providers
- Better **linking and engagement** between service providers, AMEP classes and the community
- Developing **communication strategies** and facilitating effective communication between all stakeholders, including regular meetings, ongoing engagement and feedback exchange
- Regular **consultation** to identify challenges and achievements
- Program **co-design** with community leaders
- **Tours** of AMEP and service providers for new arrivals.

Students can be confused about the role of various service providers, and often come to AMEP teachers with concerns about their settlement in Australia. An emphasis on co-located settlement service provision would result in better coordination of services, effective referrals and a more personalised understanding of client needs, and as a result AMEP teachers would be able to focus on their key roles. This has worked well in Ballarat and Mildura, for example.

Settlement Council of Australia
February 2020

Appendix 1. List of Attendees - SCOA AMEP Consultations

National Teleconference - Friday 31st January 2020

Name	Organisation
Conor Butler	AMES
Vivienne Haines	Department of Home Affairs (DHA)
Silvia Perez	unknown
Tim Gray	SSI
Jess Del Rio	DHA
Shannon White	MYAN Australia
Sue Valdeck	Navitas
Janna Sharples	SSI
Gini Ennals	TAS TAFE
Georgia Briggs	Max solutions
Karen Sole	unknown
Karen Barber	Tafe WA
Mersaline Monteiro	Tafe NSW
John van Kooy	AMES
Helen Moore	Australian Council of TESOL Associations (ACTA)
Jetinder Macfarlane	Navitas
Andrew Kugelman	Tafe QLD
Lisa Tudehope	DHA
Mandy Nour	Tafe NSW
Debbie Carstens	Northern Settlement Services
Sara Barron	Wimmera Development Association
Dr Maree-Rose Jones	ACTA TAS Councillor
Emily LaBrooy	Red Cross - WA
Katherine Seal	Tafe WA
Linda McLeod	TAFE WA - North Metropolitan team
Darren Curl	Tafe NSW
Sharon	Northern Settlement Services
Helen Larkin	Settlement Services International - Hunter Region

ACT Roundtable - Wednesday 22nd January 2020 at MARSS Australia

Name	Organisation
Suzanna Burrows	MAX Solutions
Helen Moore	ACTA
Lesley Cioccarelli	Canberra Institute of TAFE (CIT)
Alice Hope	MARSS
Emma Edwards	Red Cross
Joanna Bragg	Libraries ACT – Multicultural Learning Coordinator
Olivia Afiabo	ACT Office for Multicultural Affairs
Lauren Stark	FECCA
Janecke Wille	FECCA
Jodie Campbell	Legal Aid
Mandy Scott	Canberra Region Languages forum and ANU
Zouheir Dalati	ACT Human Rights Commission
Dewani Bakkum	MARSS Australia
Hussan Hashim	Legal Aid
Melissa Gomez	Salvador Community Leader
Aristides Gonzalez	Salvador Community Leader
Sharon Gilbert	NAVITAS
Dewani Bakkum	MARSS
Rayla Barcelona	Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office
Marial Kol	South Sudanese Community
Naresh Gunasekere	MARSS
Richard Bakkum	MARSS
Madi Cooper	SCoA

SA Roundtable - Friday 17th January 2020 at the Australian Migrant Resource Centre

Name	Organisation
Alexandra Segura	Lutheran Community Care
Bao Lou	Murraylands/Bordertown MRC Chinese Community
Cynthia Caird	AMRC Filipino Community
Eugenia Tsoulis	AMRC - Facilitator
Heather Muirhead	Murraylands MRC
Hiba Al Alwani	Syrian Community of SA
Hussain Razaiat	Middle Eastern Communities Council of SA (MECCSA)
Jamila Ahmadi	AMRC
John Khateeb	Anglicare SA
Mirsia Bunjaku	Albanian Community of SA
Patience Odia Diessa	African Communities Council of SA (ACCSA) - Congolese community
Prue Hemming	AMRC Works
Quyen Hoang	Vietnamese Community of SA
Reyhana Akhy	Afghan Community CMRW Board
Rodney Welch	City of Port Adelaide Enfield
Zeleka Habtegiorgis	Ethiopian Community
Karen Kretschmer	Australian Refugee Association
Michael Schultz	AMES
Dimi Rumpe	MYSA
Aubree Banggud	MYSA

NSW Roundtable - Wednesday 29th January 2020 at Settlement Services International

Name	Organisation
Steven Endres	Navitas English
Mandy Nour	TAFE NSW
Mersaline Monterio	TAFE NSW
Darren Curl	TAFE NSW
Jane Lu	Chinese Australian Services Society (CASS)
Conscila Emilianus	Community MRC
Morgar Steinmet	Red Cross - HSP Wollongong
Mom Bishwakarma	SSI
Sky de Jersey	SSI
Andrew Cummings	SCoA
Begita	SSI – Coffs Harbour
Hussain Rajwani	SSI

Victorian Roundtable - Thursday 30th January 2020 at AMES Australia

Name	Organisation
Valerie Lester	Ex Swinburne teacher
Barbara Reekman	Melbourne Polytechnic
Carole Pondeviet	Not stated
Justine Negus	Melbourne Polytechnic
Margaret Corrigan	Carringbush & ACTA
Hiranthi Perea	Community Hubs Aysralia
Despina Haralambopoulos	MiCare
Lidia Pivato	Williamstown Community and Education Centre Inc (WCEC)
Valeska Zuniga-Chodo	WCEC
Annie Dunn	Ballarat Regional Multicultural Council (BRMC)
Mini Abdd	BRMC
Ramesh Kumar	Southern MRC
Joseph Youhana	Brotherhood of St Laurence
Sarabjit Kaur	BRMC