



Settlement
Council
of Australia

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Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training
PO Box 6021
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Settlement Council of Australia submission: Inquiry into adult literacy and its importance

The Settlement Council of Australia (SCoA) welcomes the opportunity to provide input into this inquiry. SCoA is the peak body representing the vast majority of settlement agencies across Australia providing direct services and support to people from migrant and refugee backgrounds. Our members include organisations large and small, who are committed to the successful settlement of migrants and refugees across the country. Their services range from greeting new arrivals at the airport, through to assisting them to secure housing, learn English, make social connections, access services and find their first job.

This submission will focus on issues relating to migrants and refugees. However, it is pertinent to acknowledge at the outset that low literacy is an issue affecting a diverse range of Australians. In this regard, we note evidence provided to this inquiry that approximately 80 per cent of those lacking essential literacy come from households where mainly English is spoken.¹

The most recent OECD survey of adult skills shows that migrants in Australia are more likely to have higher literacy skills than migrants in most other OECD countries. The literacy gap between migrants and non-migrants is smaller in Australia than other countries.² Education and occupation remain more significant factors than immigrant status as an indicator of literacy skills.

It is also important to acknowledge the distinction between literacy and English language proficiency. Literacy skills include a range of competencies, such as listening, reading, viewing, speaking, writing and creating oral, print, visual and digital texts, and using and modifying language for different purposes in a range of contexts.³ While a person may not be proficient in English, they may be highly literate in their mother-tongue. The distinction

¹ Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training (2021), Adult literacy and its importance, Wednesday 17 February 2021, Proof Committee Hansard, p. 1., available online at: https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/commrep/7430be9b-5257-44f7-95d3-59b4916e5e71/toc_pdf/Standing%20Committee%20on%20Employment,%20Education%20and%20Training_2021_02_17_8495.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%22employment,%20education%20and%20training%20

² OECD (2012), Survey of Adult Skills, Australia, available online at: https://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/Country%20note%20-%20Australia_final.pdf

³ Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (2020), *Literacy*, available online at: <https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/general-capabilities/literacy/>.

between English language proficiency and literacy is well-made in the submission by our colleagues at the Australian Council of TESOL Associations.

This submission will focus on English language proficiency for adult migrants and refugees, digital access and literacy, and support for the children of parents with low English proficiency.

1. English language proficiency for adult migrants and refugees

The overwhelming majority of migrants and refugees want to, and do, learn English. Ensuring they have the right tools available to them to improve their English language proficiency is a key area of focus for SCoA.

English language proficiency is a key component of effective settlement and is an important part of the *National Settlement Outcomes Standards*.⁴ Achieving even greater English language proficiency among migrants and refugees will result in better settlement outcomes, greater social and economic participation, and benefits for Australia as a whole.

There are two primary ways adult migrants seeking to learn English can be supported to improve their English language proficiency. These are through: the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP), and various community based English language programs. Both are worthy of celebration – they are a great asset to Australia and a key part of building a successful and socially cohesive multicultural nation.

In recent years, SCoA has conducted extensive work on identifying how existing programs for English language learning for migrants and refugees can be enhanced. SCoA refers the committee to the following publications in which relevant issues and solutions are comprehensively canvassed:

- Maximising AMEP and English Language Learning: Consultation Report (2020).⁵
- Community Driven English Language Programs (2019), published jointly with the Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils of Australia.⁶

SCoA warmly welcomed the federal government announcement of changes to the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) in 2020. We particularly welcomed the removal of the cap of 510 hours, and removing the time limits for enrolment and completion.

These changes will mean more migrants and refugees who want to learn English will have the opportunity to do so, and this will have flow on effects into employment, income levels, social participation, and outcomes for the children of migrants and refugees over their life-course. The changes will be of particular benefit to women, as the five-year limitation has meant that many women who assumed caring responsibilities for young children missed the opportunity to make full use of language learning opportunities.

Notwithstanding these positive changes, there remain further areas for improvement in the program. In particular, there is a need to reduce the emphasis on assessment. Several AMEP providers have put to SCoA that an over-emphasis on assessment under the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF) model has been detrimental to the program. The

⁴ Settlement Council of Australia (2020), *National Settlement Outcomes Standards*, available online at: <http://scoa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/NSOS-2020.pdf>.

⁵ Settlement Council of Australia (2020), *Maximising AMEP and English Language Learning: Consultation Report*, available online at: <http://scoa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/SCOA-AMEP-Consultations-Report-2020-PDF.pdf>.

⁶ Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils of Australia and Settlement Council of Australia (2019), *Community Driven English Language Programs*, available online at: http://scoa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/FECCA-Community-Driven-English_WEB.pdf.

ACSF is not designed for English language learners. It assumes the person has oral English, and is therefore overly focused on literacy skills without acknowledging learners do not have oral English as a basis for building literacy. Much of the class time is spent preparing for and conducting assessments, at the expense of actually teaching English, and in particular, the form of English conducive to good settlement outcomes. This has reduced the programs flexibility and ability to be responsive to clients' settlement and English language learning needs. Further, the over-emphasis on assessment is overly time consuming, and teachers have insufficient time leftover to focus on their core role of teaching English.

Recommendation 1: Review the assessment framework used in the AMEP with a view to reducing the proportion of time devoted to assessment to meet accountability requirements, allowing a greater focus on teaching, and more appropriate attention to the English language learning needs of AMEP students.

SCoA notes the emphasis on improving employment outcomes through all settlement programs, including the AMEP. This focus is welcome, as many graduates of the AMEP with prior industry experience prefer a model that is flexible and can be tailored to some industries. For example, a migrant who is a mechanic would benefit from a class that supports them to familiarise themselves with terminology used in Australia in their industry. The availability of opportunities to learn English relevant to the occupations individuals wish to be employed in is crucial to facilitating good employment outcomes.

There are a number of promising approaches to delivering English language programs in ways that support learners toward obtaining employment. For example, SCoA has profiled case studies of settlement services that have worked with AMEP providers to deliver English language teaching tailored to particular workplace contexts, or alongside particular VET courses.⁷ Activities such as these should be further supported and expanded.

Recommendation 2: Expand models that combine English language learning with vocational training.

However, SCoA cautions against an over-emphasis on finding employment in the AMEP. For many participants, employment will be their primary personal goal, and their settlement goal. However, there will also be participants who are not of working age, or who have health, social or other settlement goals as their more immediate focus. An over-emphasis on employment can undermine other legitimate goals.

Further, putting too strong an emphasis on job-seeking too early in a person's settlement journey can be counter-productive to their employment outcomes. This approach 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. They may instead become stuck in low-skilled and low-income jobs, and consequently experience poorer social outcomes. The goals of the program should remain firmly in the achievement of English language proficiency, literacy skills, and good settlement outcomes.

Recommendation 3: Avoid an over-emphasis on employment outcomes within the AMEP, ensuring the primary focus remains on the achievement of English language proficiency, literacy skills, and good settlement outcomes.

⁷ Settlement Council of Australia (2020), *Case Study: AMRC Women's Employment Into Action Program*, available online at: http://scoa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/AMRC_template_final.pdf; Settlement Council of Australia (2021), *Case Study: LCMS Certificate II in Engineering Studies Pilot Program*, available online at: <http://scoa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/LCMS-FINAL.pdf>.

2. Digital access and literacy

As Australia becomes increasingly reliant on digital technologies across all spheres of life, equity between newly arrived migrants and refugees and the rest of the population will be dependent on the ability to ensure they are digitally included. The experiences of settlement services, particularly during COVID-19, has been that there is a digital divide between many in migrant and refugee populations, and the rest of Australia. This is supported by evidence showing that certain groups—namely humanitarian entrants and those who are newly arrived, often experience digital exclusion.⁸

Participation in the AMEP is one way to improve digital access and digital literacy, as many providers have incorporated digital learning into their teaching. However, there must be opportunities for digital learning outside the AMEP, as many who require this assistance may not require broader English tuition, or the program may otherwise be inappropriate for their needs. It is therefore critical that there are a range of ways to learn digital skills, including embedding digital learning in other settlement programs, providing in-language and peer support, and other opportunities for digital learning.

In addition to this, issues of access to technology must also be addressed. A lack of access to digital technology both inhibits digital learning, as well as preventing the benefits of digital literacy – such as improved education and employment outcomes – to accrue.

Many in our network have reported issues of families that do not have access to a device to meet their education and work needs, as well as many instances where a family unit is sharing a device, making it difficult for individuals within the family to devote themselves to their work and study commitments. During the COVID-19 lockdowns, this resulted in disruption to many students learning.

These issues have been explored in further detail in our recent report: *Supporting the digital inclusion of new migrants and refugees*.⁹ The report makes a range of recommendations to improve digital literacy and digital access, which we encourage the Committee to consider.

Recommendation 4: Address digital literacy and digital access issues in line with the recommendations made in SCoA's recent report: Supporting the digital inclusion of new migrants and refugees.

3. Support for children of parents with low English language proficiency

Research with parents with low English language proficiency has found that they are very committed to their children's education and want to support their children to do well.¹⁰ However, parents who have low English language proficiency can find it difficult to know how to support their children in their schooling. In addition to language barriers, they can be inhibited by differences in the Australian school system, curriculum, and approaches to teaching compared to their countries of origin. These differences can mean children receive conflicting information or guidance when they do seek support from their parents with their homework, even on subjects such as science and maths which do not require such a high level of English language proficiency.

⁸ Australian Digital Inclusion Index (2020), 'Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: Australian Digital Inclusion Index Report', p. 20.

⁹ Settlement Council of Australia (2020), *Supporting the digital inclusion of new migrants and refugees*, available online at: <http://scoa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Supporting-the-digital-inclusion-of-new-migrants-and-refugees.pdf>.

¹⁰ ACT Government (2014), *Progressing Parental Engagement* available online at: <https://www.education.act.gov.au/?a=807433>.

Many organisations throughout our network are addressing this gap through various programs designed to provide extra support to school students.¹¹ This includes homework clubs, and after school tutoring programs. These programs perform an essential role in supporting disadvantaged children in their schooling. However, many of these programs are unfunded or inadequately funded, and even when they are funded – the funding is often short-term and inconsistent. This means children of migrant and refugee background do not always have access to additional support with their schooling. This support must be more widely and consistently funded to ensure universal access to such support.

Recommendation 5: Ensure consistent funding for homework clubs and after school tutoring programs for children of migrant and refugee background.

While recognising the need for additional programs to support children of parents with low English language proficiency, it is also important to encourage parents to play an active role in their children’s learning. SCoA is concerned that so many parents with low English language proficiency feel discouraged from actively engaging in their children’s learning. We are particularly concerned that misplaced advice to parents of migrant background to use English in the home continues to be perpetuated.

Noting the distinction between English language proficiency and literacy outlined above, parents with low English language proficiency can still make a valuable contribution to improving their children’s literacy skills. Evidence shows that a strong foundation in a child’s home language, including literacy in that language, is the best way to support a child’s learning.¹²

Conversely, the use of English in a home where speakers are not fluent can be harmful as it inhibits interactions between children and carers and therefore limits opportunities for cognitive, psychological, emotional, and linguistic development. Further, avoiding the home language sends negative messages to the child about their home language and culture, undermining their confidence in their identity and increasing the potential for intergenerational conflict.¹³

There is therefore a need to encourage parents with low English language proficiency to actively use the home language with their children, including reading to children in the home language, and conversing and engaging in the home language. Doing so will build important overall literacy skills, encourage healthy development, and allow children to reap the demonstrated benefits of bilingualism.

Recommendation 6: Ensure parents with low English language proficiency are encouraged to take an active role in their children’s learning by reading to, conversing with, and engaging children in the home language.

¹¹ See for example, Settlement Council of Australia (2020), *Case Study: Light the Way Study Club*, available online at: http://scoa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/CatholicCare_template.pdf.

¹² Susana Eisenclas, Andrea Schalley, and Diana Guillemin (2013), ‘The importance of literacy in the home language: the view from Australia,’ available online at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2158244013507270>.

¹³ See for example: Dana Bitetti and Carol Scheffner (2016), ‘The home literacy environment and the English narrative development of Spanish-English bilingual children,’ *Journal of Speech, Language and Hearing Research*, vol. 59, no. 5; and Betina Hsieh, Jung Kim and Nate Protzel, ‘Feeling not Asian enough: Issues of heritage-language loss, development and identity,’ *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, vol. 63, no. 5.

Conclusion

Literacy and English language proficiency are key requirements for the effective settlement of migrants and refugees, which in turn, leads to full social and economic participation. Australia has a strong history of providing English language learning opportunities for migrants and refugees, and SCoA welcomes this long commitment as well as recent reforms to enhance English language learning for migrants and refugees. To drive even better literacy and English language outcomes, SCoA recommends the following:

1. Review the assessment framework used in the AMEP with a view to reducing the proportion of time devoted to assessment to meet accountability requirements, allowing a greater focus on teaching, and more appropriate attention to the English language learning needs of AMEP students.
2. Expand models that combine English language learning with vocational training.
3. Avoid an over-emphasis on employment outcomes within the AMEP, ensuring the primary focus remains on the achievement of English language proficiency, literacy skills, and good settlement outcomes.
4. Address digital literacy and digital access issues in line with the recommendations made in SCoA's recent report: Supporting the digital inclusion of new migrants and refugees.
5. Ensure consistent funding for homework clubs and after school tutoring programs for children of migrant and refugee background.
6. Ensure parents with low English language proficiency are encouraged to take an active role in their children's learning by reading to, conversing with, and engaging children in the home language.

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