



13th February 2008

This paper is a response to the request for views on the current employment services model from the Minister for Employment Participation, the Hon Brendan O'Connor.

ACL, in consortium, is the provider of the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) in the West and South West regions of Sydney. Every year approximately 8,000 – 10,000 newly arrived migrants and refugees participate in the AMEP in ACL colleges. Due to a range of reasons related to the program and client language and literacy profile a significant number of clients tend to leave the AMEP with low levels of English and their full employment potential is unable to be realised by Job Network services.

This paper would like to propose that greater flexibility and access to English language provision is an early intervention strategy, which would minimise the number of long-term welfare dependant Australians of working age and increase the skills base of the Australian workforce.

Every year Australia welcomes over 150,000 migrants and refugees and they generally move into the workforce fairly readily. However, arrivals in Australia from the humanitarian and the family stream visa categories, who on the whole have lower levels of English than those from other visa categories, have limited participation in the workforce.

DIAC data published in 2007 indicates that, of those refugee and humanitarian entrants who arrived in Australia in 2004, 71% were unemployed 6 months after arrival and 43% remained unemployed 18 months after arrival. Results for the family stream arrivals are more positive (22% unemployed 6 months after arrival and 13% 18 months after arrival) but unemployment rates are still significantly higher than for any other migrant visa category.¹ Refugee and Humanitarian arrivals are able to access Social Security benefits and Job Network Services. The Family and Skilled client group are unable to access Social Security benefits and Job Network services for two years.

In their fact sheet - *Migrant Labour Market Outcomes*, DIAC indicated that the ability of migrants to find work quickly hinges on four main factors - their level of skill, English language proficiency, age and period of residence in Australia.²

In this paper we wish to submit that one way of addressing the first two of these factors – skill level and English proficiency – would be through some modifications to the AMEP and integration with other government employment services and programs. This intervention would reduce the number of refugee and migrant settlers moving through the AMEP and remaining unemployed or underemployed for extended periods.

¹ *Fact Sheet 14, Migrant Labour Market Outcomes*, produced by the National Communications Branch, Department of Immigration and Citizenship. Revised 30 January 2007.

² *Ibid*

1. English language proficiency

The Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) is a DIAC funded program available to migrants and refugees who have less than functional English proficiency (rated as Level 2 on the International Second Language Proficiency Scale or ISLPR). The program provides students with up to 510 hours of English language tuition.

The main groups eligible for the AMEP are those in the humanitarian and the family visa categories. In the west and south western regions of Sydney, for example, 45% of AMEP clients in 2006-07 were humanitarian entrants.

The DEWR (now DEEWR) paper, *Migrants in the NSW Labour Market*, indicated that persons born in North Africa and the Middle East have the highest unemployment rate in NSW (9.9%) of any group that were born in non-English speaking countries.³ Clients coming from the combination of these two regions constituted 46.8% of the total number of clients in the AMEP in the west and south western regions of Sydney for the year ending December 2007.⁴ It should be noted however that approximately 30% of those people participating in the AMEP are working.

Migrants and refugees are eligible for the AMEP up until they reach ISLPR 2 proficiency. This is referred to as Functional English and rated as Level 2 on the International Second Language Proficiency Scale, i.e. “Able to satisfy basic social needs, and routine needs pertinent to everyday commerce and to linguistically un-demanding ‘vocational’ fields.” Presently slightly over 10% of AMEP clients exiting nationally achieve Functional English, and over 40% exit the program having used all their hours.

The majority of migrants and humanitarian entrants enter the AMEP with zero or minimal English (68%). Significant numbers are illiterate or with minimal literacy and schooling. Consequently they require additional support in acquiring basic learning skills.

The issue of the 510 hours entitlement needs to be clarified. Most clients in the program are entitled to 510 hours but refugees are provided with an extra 100 hours under the Special Preparation Program (SPP) and young refugees who are between the ages of 16 and 24 and who have had less than 7 years schooling are provided with an extra 400 SPP hours. They receive up to 910 hours in total. The purpose of the SPP is to provide humanitarian clients with additional settlement support and English language learning before entering the AMEP.

A study by the Department of Immigration in 1989/90, based on the migrant cohort at that time, showed that the **average** time to achieve functional English (ISLPR2) was 510 hours. However, the Immigration (Education) Act 1971, as amended, specifies an AMEP entitlement of **up to** 510 hours. As a result the actual average time that people spend in the AMEP program is around 370 hours as some clients do achieve Functional English in less than 510 hours. An unfortunate consequence of the 510 hours limit is that those with the greatest need – low language and literacy skills – are most disadvantaged.

³ *Migrants in the NSW Labour Market* Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, September 2005.

⁴ ARMS – AMEP data base.

There has been little research on the time refugees and migrants take to learn English. Some sense of the time that it takes to learn a language can be gained by looking at the recommended timescales for learning foreign languages that are followed by the Australian Defence Force School of Languages. Some examples include 1800 hours over 45 weeks for highly motivated, professionally educated learners to attain minimum professional proficiency in Greek, Thai or Vietnamese. This timescale increases to 2000 hours over 50 weeks for learners to achieve similar proficiency in Japanese, Mandarin and Korean.

Unfortunately for AMEP clients, provision of relevant post AMEP English tuition is patchy. Childcare is not funded under the LLNP and JET and childcare subsidies only last for 12 months. This is a significant barrier to participation. Another barrier is brought about by the fact that AMEP colleges cannot directly refer exiting clients to LLNP providers. Referral is undertaken either by Centrelink or by Job Network providers. Due to this lack of streamlining and the inevitable delays in achieving a referral, many eligible exiting AMEP clients fall between the “systemic” cracks. This is exacerbated by differing levels of awareness of eligibility requirements by local Centrelink and Job Network staff. In addition, discussion about accessibility of the LLNP is still irrelevant to approximately two thirds of AMEP students across Australia who are not entitled to this program until two years after arrival. For them, there are very few publicly funded English programs post AMEP and, without formal opportunities to learn, their language skills may stagnate or decline.

2. Skill level

Approximately one third of the students entering the AMEP are from skilled or professional occupational backgrounds in their country of origin. However it is difficult for Australia to engage these skills as the vast majority of people exiting the AMEP do not have Functional English. The AMEP standard of Functional English is historical and does not meet the needs of clients and employers in terms of educational and employment pathways. *At least* Functional English is required to work in most unskilled or semi-skilled jobs, which involve tasks such as reading OH&S signs, completing forms and operating computer based equipment. There is some workforce participation by those with lower levels of English, but on the whole employers are reluctant to employ people with poor communication skills as it impacts on the safety and the day to day operation of their business. Generally though, Australia’s labour shortages are not in unskilled or semi-skilled jobs and there are limited opportunities for those who have very low levels of English.

Most importantly for Australia’s skill base is the need to capitalise on the potential of migrants to undertake further training. However, *at least* Basic Vocational English (ISLPR 3) is required to access vocational training or participate effectively in a skilled workforce. 510 hours tuition is insufficient for skilled migrants entering with low levels of English to work in their profession or undertake the further vocational or professional training required to meet Australian standards.

If students were enabled to remain in the AMEP until they reached ISLPR 3 – basic vocational proficiency – they would be ready to undertake Certificate III vocational training when they exited the AMEP.

The current employment situation

There are clear benefits to Government and the economy, in the form of reduced welfare payments and high taxation receipts, in investing in English language education, and vocational skills training. Intensive provision of English language and vocational skills enables their acquisition and assists people to move from welfare to work and assists those with low skills in the initial stages to gain basic and higher skills. The AMEP is a key factor in moving migrants and refugees from government support to economic and social inclusion.

At the moment though, there are competing and conflicting Government agendas. There is pressure from Centrelink and Job Network agencies for AMEP clients to take jobs in the workforce before they have accessed their full English tuition entitlements and are 'job ready'. As a result under-employment is an unfortunate outcome for many skilled migrants and refugees.

These pressures, and because of low English skills, many migrants and refugees take jobs well below their capability and skills. The evidence shows that productivity improves with skill levels and people without qualifications are less likely to be employed, and are at risk of being marginally attached to the labour force⁵. Low English language, literacy and numeracy levels are major barriers to full and effective participation in the workforce⁶.

At present the AMEP does not allow for work placement and therefore AMEP clients lack work experience in Australia. This is a major barrier to any person seeking employment. Work placement has major benefits to AMEP clients and employers and has been shown to achieve high employment outcomes for AMEP clients. Examples in other countries, such as Canada, have shown the value to supported entry into the work force has benefited employers and new arrivals.

Pre-mature workforce participation in unskilled and semi-skilled jobs by migrants and refugees with inadequate English levels and OH&S knowledge will not reduce our skills shortages. If clients enter the workforce prematurely they are often unable to maintain ongoing employment which can affect self esteem, family stability and future employment.

⁵ The probability of a person with a VTE Certificate III or IV qualifications being employed is almost as high as the probability of a person with a university Bachelor degree being employed. In addition adults aged between 25 and 64 without a qualification at the Year 12 level are significantly more likely to be unemployed.

⁶ The Australian Bureau of Statistics found that 36% of employed Australians have low literacy levels which affect their capacity to function effectively in the workforce.

Recommendations

That in order to best prepare AMEP clients to participate fully in the workforce ACL recommends that:

1. The entitlement for to English language provision be changed from a **maximum** of 510 hours to an **average** of 510 hours.
2. The exit level for the AMEP should be raised to ISLPR 3 – Basic vocational proficiency to allow streamlined entry into vocational training and advanced jobseeker programs and employment.
3. That the AMEP include provision for Work Experience and Work Placement for AMEP clients with an emphasis on development of generic employability skills.
4. The Language component of the LLNP be incorporated into the AMEP for refugees and migrants currently accessing the LLNP program. This will reduce the complexity of the current arrangements and more effectively meet the needs of the clients.
5. The Job Network Members should give greater consideration to AMEP clients and enable them to complete their English entitlement at least to ISLPR 2 (or ISLPR 3 should the exit level of the AMEP be raised) rather than pressing them into employment before they are ready.