

MEDIA RELEASE

DOWNGRADING MIGRANT ENGLISH TEACHING HITS THE MOST VULNERABLE

President of the Australian Council of TESOL Associations (ACTA), Dr Michael Michell, said today that the Government is making **“a mean, backdoor attempt to undermine vulnerable refugees and new migrants’ legal entitlements to English classes.**

“Although what is happening in Nauru and Manus is making headlines, **people who advocate for a refugee and migrant intake should also pay attention to what happens to those who actually get here.**

“If refugees and migrants are to contribute fully to Australian society, they need English. This recognition underpins successful bipartisan policies since 1948 that have made Australia a world leader as an immigrant society. It’s why new arrivals with minimal/no English **are legally entitled to 510 hours English tuition** in the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) under the *Immigration (Education) Act 1971*.

“The latest publicly available figures show that approximately **30,000 people enrolled in the AMEP in 2013-14. About 10,000 were refugees.** The latest Government-funded Review of the AMEP found that *‘the AMEP plays an important role in assisting clients achieve settlement outcomes. Participation in the programme helps clients access services in the general community, develop networks in their community, understand their rights and obligations and can provide a pathway to employment and/or further study or training’* (ACIL Allen Evaluation AMEP Review, Key Finding 19, p. 68).

Dr Michell continued: “It’s now proposed to **split up the AMEP to allow unqualified teachers to run impossibly large ‘conversation’ classes.** These classes are clearly for **the most vulnerable, including women with childcare responsibilities, refugees with limited or no previous formal education, and older immigrants.** The classes will be cheaper to run and therefore attractive to those competing for AMEP contracts and looking for every possible means of keeping their bids low. Although we’re told that newcomers will have a choice when they enrol, will anyone tell them they are choosing larger classes taken by unqualified teachers? As one of our teachers said, *‘I fear that students may be coerced into accepting a position in these classes because they will be so much cheaper to run. Students are vulnerable at the enrolment stage and being anxious to please, will agree to whatever is offered.’*

“**Without expert teaching, refugees’ and migrants’ once-in-a-lifetime English entitlement will be wasted.** The best these classes can produce will be **stigmatised speakers of ‘broken’ English on a road to discrimination, unemployment and social isolation.**

“This downgrading **directly contradicts the findings of the Government’s most recent review of the AMEP.** It violates their stated commitment to ‘quality provision’. They claim it will increase flexibility but the requirement to offer ‘conversation’ classes will only make the AMEP more rigid. It ignores the current curriculum’s world-wide acclaim for catering to diverse needs.

“The only flexibility that follows from creating these sub-standard, lower-cost English classes is that they help achieve the Government’s ‘efficiency dividends’. **This downgrading relies on no one noticing** because the issues are too technical, the media are pre-occupied with events on Manus and Nauru, and the vulnerable people most affected have no way of knowing what’s planned for them. At the same time as it increases the refugee and migrant intake, the Government – through its covert cost-cutting – is undermining a key strategy in Australia’s successful resettlement and integration of newcomers.

“On behalf of ACTA, I wrote to Education Minister Birmingham on 30th August requesting revisions to the document that calls for bids for AMEP contracts. We sincerely hope he will consider our detailed submission and think better of this short-sighted, discriminatory, cost saving measure.”

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