



**Adult Migrant English Service Teachers Association  
NSW Teachers Federation**

## **Submission**

**to**

# **Parliamentary Inquiry into the Australian Citizenship Amendment (Citizenship Testing) Bill 2007**

## **Consideration of the proposals for a formal citizenship test**

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## Introduction

Teachers and other educational staff who work in the NSW Adult Migrant English Service (AMES) and are members of AMES Teachers Association, comprise part of the membership of NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF), a registered industrial organisation of public education teachers in NSW.

The NSW AMES has been providing English language education and on arrival orientation to migrants and refugees for more than 50 years.

NSW AMES teachers devised in collaboration with Macquarie University National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research (NCELTR), the *Certificates in Spoken and Written English (CSWE) 1, 2 and 3* curricula which are used throughout the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP).

NSW AMES teachers also wrote, in collaboration with the AMEP Research Centre at Macquarie University, *Let's Participate: A Course in Australian Citizenship*, comprising book, audio/ video materials and a professional development website for teachers. This programme, commissioned by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA), was launched by the former Minister Ruddock in June 2001.

NSW AMES provides this citizenship course which has been evaluated by both students and teachers as valuable for both its content and its language instruction.

## The Current System

AMESTA / NSWTF submit that the current assessment system for citizenship is adequate and presents very few barriers for individuals seeking to access Australian citizenship.

There is no evidence in the government's discussion paper or subsequent material that shows that the current system is inadequate, nor that systems in other countries provide enhanced citizenship uptake or quality of participation.

## The Proposals for Citizenship Testing

The increased complexity of the assessment process will install barriers to accessing citizenship especially for migrants and refugees whose first language is not English.

The cost of an assessment test, or tests, alone will constitute a significant barrier.

The discussion paper at paragraph 26, and more recently Minister Andrew's speech 30.5.2007, suggests that a formal test, in English, will provide assurances to the community that intending citizens understand;

- our respect for the freedom and dignity of the individual
- our support for democracy
- our commitment to the rule of law
- the equality of men and women
- the spirit of a 'fair go'
- mutual respect and compassion for those in need and
- Australian history, culture and values as learned in primary and secondary school.

The complexity of these ideas could neither be fully understood nor responded to by assessment, oral or written, at the basic levels of English that are achieved through the current 510 or 610 hours of AMEP courses.

**Results under the current AMEP provision**, according to the *DIMA 2005-2006 Annual Report*, show that only 19.3% of students are able to achieve a Certificate 3 (intermediate level) outcome; 80% achieve beginner or post-beginner levels of spoken and written English which would be

insufficient for the kinds of assessment proposals outlined so far to be undertaken in English by migrants and refugees. Also, only 87% of refugees and around 65% of eligible migrants are able to access the AMEP.

**The legislation** requires of an intending citizen that, 'the person possesses a basic knowledge of the English language'. (Australian Citizenship Act 2007 Section 21, 2 (e))

The proposed test, with 'questions encompassing a range of topics relating to both historical and contemporary issues', (Minister Andrews, Second Reading Speech 30.5.'07) could not be responded to with a 'basic level' of English as understood by professional practitioners in language testing or language teaching.

The proposed provision of a 'test resource book' would need to be supplemented by access to appropriate courses delivered by qualified teachers. 'Research shows that test strategy preparation takes priority over more serious learning goals'. (MacNamara 2006) Some teachers and students have commented that the test, as proposed, could favour those with rote learning skills and/or encourage the emergence of private coaching to train intending citizens in appropriate box-ticking with no assurance of understanding of the underlying principles.

Also, the extension of the period before access to citizenship, by 2 years to 4 years, with the presumed increase in English proficiency, cannot ensure acquisition of the complex language and concepts adequate for passing a formal citizenship test as proposed.

**What it takes to learn a language:** 1990's data (none more recent) indicates that it takes between 600 and 2500 hours of formal training to learn a language, dependant on educational and language background and the purpose for the language learning.

**Evaluation of the citizenship course, *Let's Participate***, commissioned by DIMA in **2003**, included many student respondents (about 20%) resident more than 4 years and up to 8 years, some longer. *Teachers and students particularly noted the difficulty of the vocabulary and concepts of government and law.....*

- *even in the learner's first language (L1), the language is formal and difficult, especially for learners with minimal formal language education;*
- *in some L1s there were not equivalent translations for some terms/concepts that did not exist in their language/culture and that these had to be paraphrased;*
- *the concepts are quite new to some learners; for example, 'trial by jury', 'anti-discrimination laws'.*

*When asked to comment on learning materials, students perceived teachers to be the most helpful resource in their learning. (Murray pp.126,127)*

**The proposed assistance for those with literacy difficulties**, involving a test administrator who would read out the test questions and then the multiple choice options, would need to be evaluated against government standards for assessment including 'validity' and 'reliability'. One possible barrier is that many learners, including intermediate and advanced learners, report difficulties with understanding 'Aussie' English. Comprehension and memorisation of a multiple choice question with difficult vocabulary and concepts, delivered by an 'Aussie' English-speaking administrator could be quite difficult especially for someone who may not have had formal educational opportunities.

**Any formal test would need to be able to demonstrate consistency with accepted government standards for assessment systems.** These standards include:

- 4 technical principles of assessment: validity, reliability, flexibility and fairness
- working in partnership with technical experts
- a code of practice for assessors (MacNamara, 2001, 2006)

**To achieve full participation in Australian life**, including satisfactory vocational and citizenship outcomes, **access to sufficient English language courses** needs to be provided.

**Further, the 2 year waiting period for benefits** is a barrier to satisfactory settlement including early and effective achievement of functional English for access to training, access to work appropriate to skill level, as well as becoming community members who are less reliant on government services.

Many migrants (35%), including those who have paid prior to arrival, cannot attend AMEP classes, or only for a short time because of the need to support themselves as there is no access to social security benefits for 2 years.

## **Suggestions for enhanced participation by migrants and refugees whose first language is not English**

### **1 English Language Skills Increase**

- Define 'functional' English levels for a variety of settings, for example;
  - community including citizenship privileges and obligations,
  - further study and training,
  - work; skilled and professional including Occupational Health and Safety (OHS)
- Collect recent data on what it takes to learn a language. 1990's data indicates a range of 600 to 2500 hours, dependant on educational and language background and the purpose of the language learning;
- Lift the 2 year waiting period for benefits for those who attend AMEP classes
- Provide access to AMEP for skilled migrants with 'good' English skills who require an Australian English context 'top up', for example, in pronunciation, understanding Australian native-speaker English

Full participation in our society requires near native-speaker competence in English. Citizens should have sufficient English to obtain employment at their skill level and to exercise their privileges and responsibilities as citizens. Many Australian born native speakers are neither fully knowledgeable about citizenship nor fully participate in society.

Language levels and language genres for functioning in workplaces and for getting jobs are more complex than ten years ago.

The *DIMA Annual Report* shows that skilled migration has increased greatly, particularly to regional areas. In 2005, 14% of skilled migrants to regional areas were still unemployed after 6 months and 23% of those employed were not employed in their skill area. These migrants can rapidly deskill.

Eligibility for free English classes must be expanded to all long term temporary and permanent residents. Migrants and refugees who arrived prior to January 1998 are not eligible, as well as 8900 Temporary Protection Visa (TPV) holders.

### **2 Citizenship Uptake and Participation**

Migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds have historically taken up the opportunity of citizenship in much greater proportions than those of English speaking backgrounds. To enhance participation, and learning about Australia and citizenship, access to courses delivered by qualified teachers needs to be expanded.

*Let's Participate: A Course in Australian Citizenship* could be further developed.

An expanded curriculum could include:

- visits to Parliament and law courts / role plays
- election workshops and role plays
- greater understanding of Australia's indigenous heritage and reconciliation
- global human rights which are endorsed by Australians

Such a curriculum would assist with social cohesion as it encourages communication and participation

A formal test would only provide a barrier to citizenship for many and be of no additional benefit to the learning process and exercise of the privileges and responsibilities of citizenship.

### **References**

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- 2 Murray, Denise E, *Integrating citizenship content in teaching adult immigrants English: An evaluation of Let's Participate* NCELTR Macquarie University 2003
- 3 McNamara, Tim *Language Testing*, Oxford University Press 2000  
*Why raise the bar?* Lingua Franca ABC Radio National 9.12.2007
- 4 *DIMA Annual Report 2005-06*, Commonwealth of Australia
- 5 OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers 49, Thomas Liebig , *The Labour Market Integration of Immigrants in Australia*, 2007.