“How Long” studies and EAL/D learner progress in mainstream and intensive English settings: What counts for equity?

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Context

- Productivity Commission review of the National School Reform Agreement, 2022. Report made specific mention in Finding 4.4 and Recommendation 4.2 of the need to recognise students for whom English is an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) as a (new) priority equity cohort.
- Review to inform a Better and Fairer Education System, 2023. An expert panel led the review, and in the call for submissions, asked whether EAL/D should be added as an additional priority equity cohort.
- (Forthcoming) review of the Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia (MFSA): nationally agreed KPMs for schooling, annual assessment and reporting, underpins data collection for National Report on Schooling in Australia. **This is where EAL/D would be counted as a priority equity cohort**.(ACARA, 2022) (https://acara.edu.au/reporting/measurement-framework-for-schooling-in-Australia)

What is equity?

Definitions reflect that school systems should strive to eliminate discrimination of all kinds and to ensure differences in education outcomes associated with students' culture, disability, remoteness, or socioeconomic status are reduced or eliminated...

…being in a priority equity cohort denotes that , at the population level, students from these groups have historically experienced ***lower outcomes*** *than the general population (at all levels of achievement) and the reasons for this stem from systemic barriers embedded in education systems (and society generally)…*

(Productivity Commission final report, 2023, p.100)

How to identify EAL/D for counting as an equity group?

Australian quantitative evidence to date:

- NAPLAN and LBOTE (ACARA, Ongoing)
- Cross-sectional analysis of NAPLAN, LBOTE and EAL/D (Creagh 2013)
- Queensland Longitudinal ‘How Long’ study
- A school-based longitudinal study (Creagh 2023)
- The AERO study (Lu et al. 2025)

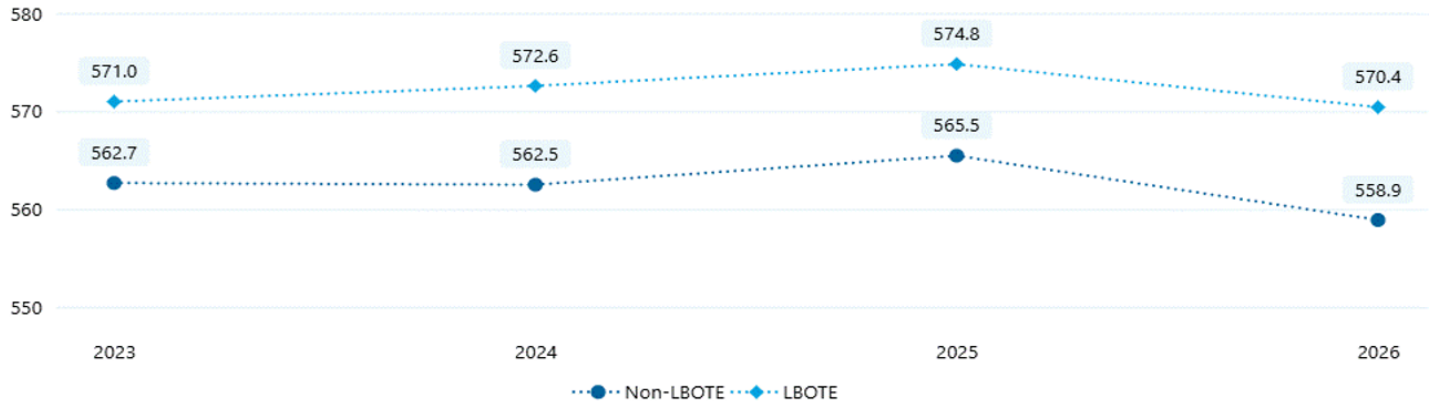
None of this research has been inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander EAL/D students. All studies have focused on migrant and refugee-background students.

1. NAPLAN and LBOTE

Comparison of average NAPLAN score for Year 9 students in reading by language background, Australia 2026

Subgroup	Non-LBOTE	LBOTE
Non-LBOTE	558.9 (±1.7)	■
LBOTE	11.5 (±3.7)	570.4 (±3.3)

Average NAPLAN score over time for Year 9 students by language background in reading, Australia 2023-2026



https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/naplan-national-results

The problems with LBOTE and NAPLAN

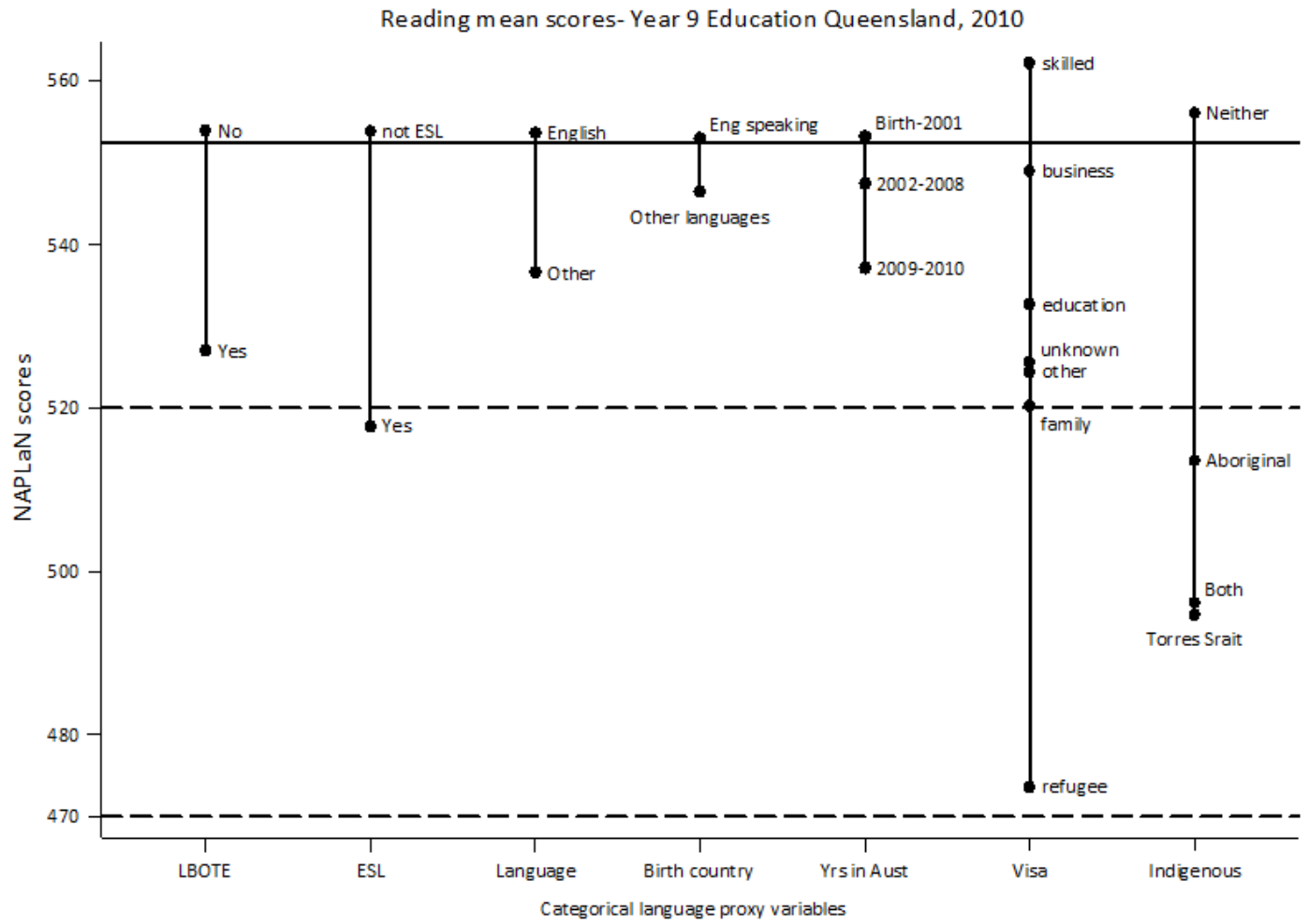
Determination of equity groups is **entangled** with measurement according to NAPLAN. For example…

*In 2021, between 5 and 9% of students fell short of meeting **national minimum standards in reading and numeracy**. A significant minority of these students do not 'catch up' in later years.*

Lifting outcomes for students who are not meeting basic levels of literacy and numeracy and for students from priority equity cohorts should be a focus for the next intergovernmental school reform agreement…

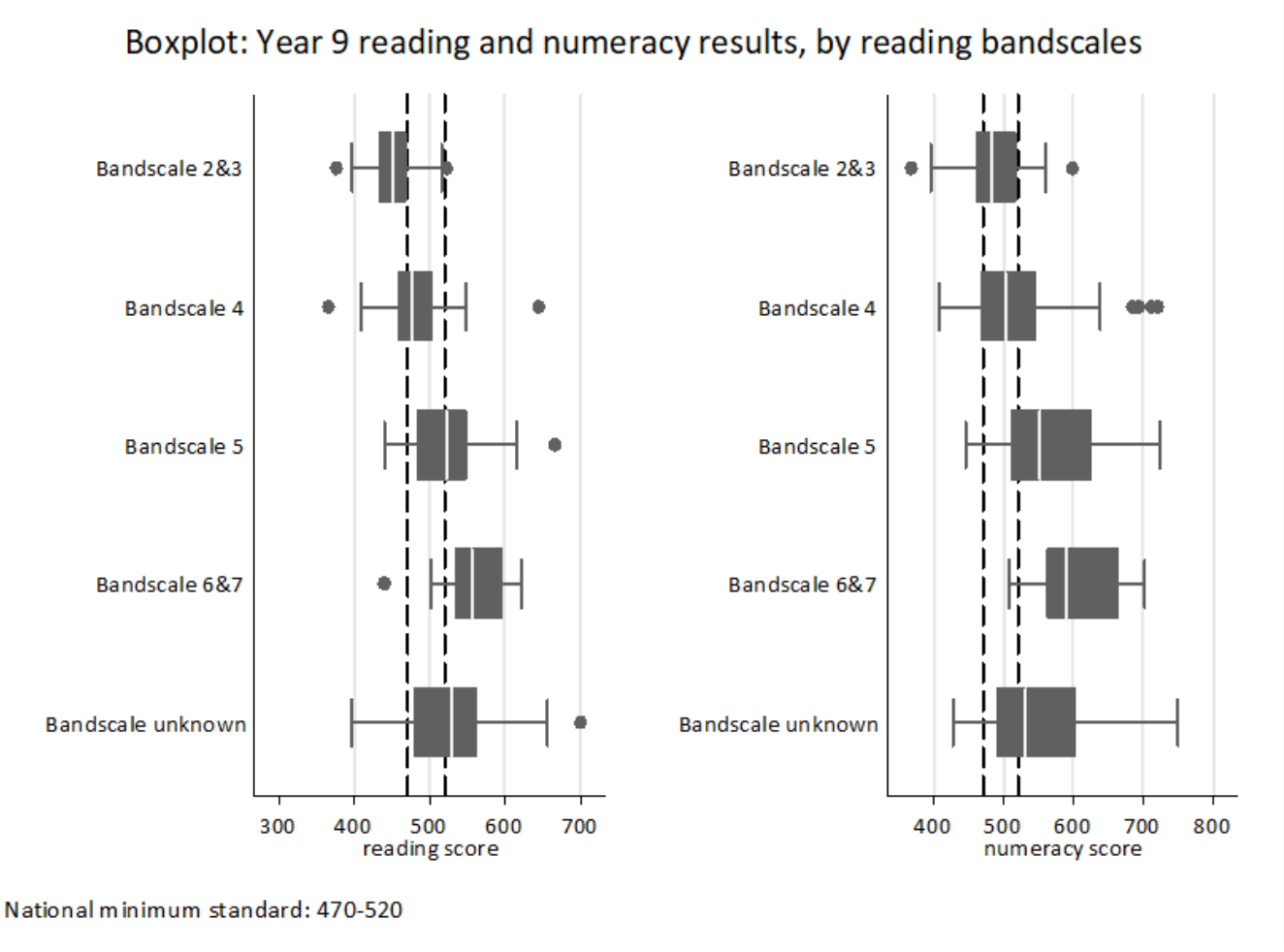
(Productivity Commission, Final report, 2023, p.99)

2. Cross-sectional analysis of NAPLAN, LBOTE and EAL/D (Creagh 2013)



Creagh, 2013, p.128

Language level and NAPLAN performance



Creagh 2013, p. 193

3. Longitudinal “How Long?” study.

QUT team led by Margaret Kettle, with Jennifer Alford, Barbara Comber, Paul Shield and Sue Creagh, supported by the Qld Department of Education, who provided a very large longitudinal dataset of Qld students 2009-2015 from the S.E corner of Qld.

Our aim was to track the progress of migrant EAL/D students over time, using NAPLAN results to show how long until parity with English speaking peers.

First longitudinal study in Australia of this kind. Similar studies had been undertaken in the US, Canada and UK.

This methodology was replicated as part of a study undertaken by AERO using Department of NSW education data (Lu et al. 2026).

How did we identify the EAL/D group for this study?

We had the following information from enrolment or school data

- Language background other than English (n=4,244)
- Main language other than English (n=3,186)
- ESL Flag (n= 2,258)
- ESL Bandscale (n=890)
- Visa subclass (n=1,246)

In the end, we identified EAL/D students on the basis that they had either an ESL Flag and/or an ESL Bandscale level (n=2,414) further reduced to 1,872 because of missing NAPLAN data.

It was not possible to track students longitudinally with Bandscales nor disaggregate visa subclasses because of missing data, or groups being too small. Thus, not possible to breakdown the 'how long' question on the basis of language acquisition, nor according to background educational experiences (i.e. refugee vs migrant backgrounds).

Creagh et al., 2019

Findings: ‘lower outcomes and EAL/D status’

For young EAL/D learners commencing school aged 5-8, parity reached by yr 7.	Implication: EAL/D support needed throughout all of primary school
For EAL/D learners starting Aust school aged 7-10, (school yrs 3-5) parity reached within 2-4 years of arrival.	The right age for learning language? Sufficient schooling experience to map language of this stage of schooling? Does engagement with an EAL/D program help?
For older EAL/D students aged between 9 – 12 years on arrival,(School yrs 5-7) parity not reached by Year 9 NAPLAN	Given the changes in the demands of the curriculum from upper primary to secondary and then senior secondary, ongoing EAL/D support needed.

Creagh et al., 2019

4. School-based study of newly arrived EAL/D students in an intensive setting

This study was based in an intensive secondary school for EAL/D newly arrived migrant and refugee background students (so 'controlled' for language program – all students were accessing the same intensive program).

Given the circumstances of an intensive English language program, what is the progress of newly arrived migrant and refugee-background students?

Progress was measured in relation to time in the program, and language development, measured using the Qld Bandscales.

Useful and site-specific data collection practices enabled finer-grained analysis. In addition to enrolment information:

- Bandscale levels on arrival and exit
- Time spent in each stage of the program
- Prior years of schooling recorded

Details of the student group and program

- Student group (n=232) represented all enrolments in the school in 2018.
- 48% female, with 39 countries represented.
- 48% on migrant visas, 52% with refugee or refugee-like visas
- Stages of the program: Beginners (10 weeks), Post Beginners (10 weeks), and 2 x year level (20 weeks), with Foundation offered as an additional program for students with no prior schooling.
- English language curriculum adapted from and guided by the Australian Curriculum.

Creagh 2023

Findings

1. Average time spent in the program was 34 weeks for migrants compared to 44 weeks for refugee-background.

2. The extra time spent in the program occurred in the early phases (Foundation, Beginner, Post-beginner) rather than in the year level phases closer to exit. Students were given time to consolidate beginning English language knowledge.

3. For students who achieved an exit Bandscale of 4, there was little relationship to visa group or years of prior schooling. This suggests other factors, not measured in this study are associated with this finding.

4. However, students who progressed from Bandscale 1 to 2 on exit took considerably longer in the program (up to 65 weeks). The majority of these students were of refugee background and did not have age-appropriate education prior to arrival.

5. Intensive English programs provide necessary but insufficient support for the long-term learning pathways of EAL/D students of refugee background with limited prior schooling, and programs of high support must continue beyond intensive.

Creagh 2023

What have the studies shown?

There are existing indicators that can be used to identify EAL/D subgroup and disaggregate levels of need:

- EAL/D or ESL indicator (insufficient on its own)
- English language level (different measures used across states/territories)
- Refugee-background, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander EAL/D status

What else would be helpful?

- Indicator of intervention (e.g. intensive, mix of intensive & mainstream, differentiated teaching practice, access to EAL/D specialist…)
- Length of time in a program or receiving support
- Years of schooling prior to arrival (for migrant/refugee cohort)

Submissions to Review to inform a Better and Fairer Schools System, 2023 : Diversity within the group

Students who speak English as an additional language or dialect should not be identified as an additional priority equity cohort because of the diversity within this group (see Creagh, 2016)… Establishment of a more sophisticated index of disadvantage, one that does not assume that low income, Indigeneity, or multilingualism is synonymous with deprivation, is possible in Australia.

(Centre for Inclusive Education, QUT)

…If we gather data on the number of students from EAL background, this ought to be done in a way that ensures this data is disaggregated by ethnicity, length of time in Australia, language background and other indicators linked to disadvantage, such as refugee status. It is pointless to assume that EAL/D students form a single cohort.

(Centre for Research and Educational Impact, Deakin University)

Moving Forward from here…

Improving Outcomes for All Expert Panel final report argues for better recognition of EAL/D as an equity group for data collection.

Recommendation 5C

The Panel recommends governments commit to revising the Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia to ensure it collects essential data, including:…

d. Identifying and defining priority equity cohorts clearly, by replacing 'language background other than English' (LBOTE) with 'English as an additional language or dialect' (EAL/D) …by 2027.

Methodological and resource challenges

…there is general acknowledgement that LBOTE status does not necessarily correlate with a student's English language proficiency. ..English language proficiency (ELP) is a potential alternative to LBOTE for national reporting purposes. …nearly all public systems use ELP to measure and allocate resources for EAL/D students and there (is) close alignment of practices and definitions. However, differences in methodology means that a nationally consistent approach is currently not feasible without prioritization and resources for further work…

ACARA, Submission to Productivity Commission review, 2022

In what ways can ‘EAL/Dness’ be rendered numerically and calculably?

Clear support for the recognition of EAL/D as a priority equity cohort, BUT methodological challenges in ensuring data collection is sufficiently granular.

EAL/D identifier on its own is insufficient, probably no better than LBOTE if you interrogate our studies, which demonstrate enormous range of NAPLAN performance and varying time lengths for parity for EAL/D group.

Language proficiency would provide clear direction for resourcing based on language learning need, but measure/tool must be inclusive of all cohorts and learning contexts (Indigenous, migrant, refugee).

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