



AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF TESOL ASSOCIATIONS

MEDIA RELEASE

Government plans drastic cuts to English for migrants while refusing to consult

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Australian Council of TESOL Associations (ACTA) – the peak body of English language educators – says the Government is rushing through extensive and ill-considered cuts to the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP). Consultation and a Parliamentary Inquiry are needed to ensure that these changes will not impact those who most need expert English tuition.

The AMEP is governed by *Immigration (Education) Act 1971* and provides free English tuition to approximately 53,000 eligible migrants and refugees each year. Major reform to the AMEP was announced in the 2026 May Budget. Cost cutting includes restricting eligibility and removing the childcare which is currently embedded in AMEP provision. It is anticipated that the Act will be amended to restrict eligibility in the October Parliamentary October sitting with the full suite of changes implemented on 1 January 2029.

"We are mystified as to why this Government would seek to undermine access to a Program that targets social cohesion in Australia more directly and effectively than any other," said ACTA President, Professor Chris Davison. "Cuts to English tuition play straight into the hands of those who attack migrants for not speaking English."

Eligibility changes: who will lose out?

Information on the Home Affairs website is that the AMEP will focus on English language learners who will "benefit from structured English tuition".¹

"But no one will explain what is meant by 'structured tuition' and who these learners are", said Dr Helen Moore AM, co-convenor of ACTA's Adult English Consultancy Group.

Gillian Edmiston, fellow co-convenor and teacher, explained: "Those details matter enormously. Clearly, the changes are intended to improve Home Affairs' bottom line. But who will be excluded: humanitarian entrants with little or no prior education, women with young children, people with caring responsibilities, and survivors of trauma and torture? These are the people who most benefit from high quality, needs-oriented teaching taught by expert teachers in flexibly managed programs held to high standards. These learners should not be pushed off into informal community classes taught by unqualified teachers. Reducing access to AMEP will isolate people in precisely the communities where alternative support is least available. It not only undermines opportunities for English learning, but the local connections that help new arrivals participate safely, confidently and independently in Australian life."

Childcare: cost shifting, not cost saving

The reforms include removing childcare provision from within AMEP budgets. Providers will now be tasked with assisting prospective students to access mainstream early childhood services and subsidies.

"Embedded childcare is a key driver of women's participation in the Program," said Professor Davison. "Making English-language providers responsible for navigating families through the complex childcare and subsidy system raises serious questions about access, including to safe, culturally responsive provision, not to mention AMEP providers' liability if things go wrong." She continued: "There are not

¹ <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/reports-and-publications/submissions-and-discussion-papers/reform-of-the-adult-migrant-english-program>

enough existing private or community based childcare places to meet existing demand in inner city, rural and regional areas. How will increasing demand for those places by adding AMEP clients' children serve anyone's interests? What is the evidence that this change will really save money and not simply shift costs elsewhere? The only way to make savings in this space is to make it more difficult for migrant families, and mainly women, to access childcare."

"No capacity for consultation," says the Department of Home Affairs

ACTA's concerns are heightened by the Department's advice at a stakeholder briefing on 25 May 2026, that there was "no capacity for further sector consultation," citing "probity" and "the need to progress cost reductions urgently within the Budget and legislative timeframes."

"This refusal is extraordinary," said recently retired, former AMEP manager, Darren Curl. "Major changes are being proposed to a key national program, yet the Government will not hear from the professional organisation and teachers who know how this Program works on the ground. Consultation could identify unintended consequences before legislation is passed and could help develop reforms that both improve the Program and reduce costs."

"The irony is" said Dr Moore, "that ACTA has been advocating for reform of the AMEP for decades but these changes will not address the key issues." AMEP teachers have repeatedly described to ACTA and others a curriculum that forces "teaching to the test," right/wrong assessments that cause students to fail for omitting a single required grammatical element or supplying a correct but unanticipated idiom, excessive and time-wasting reporting, rigid attendance rules that take no account of the settling-in demands on newly arrived migrants and refugees, and compliance requirements that have "sucked the soul" out of the Program. Long waitlists and a five-year eligibility cap disproportionately disadvantage women in regional areas and those who take time out to have children.

"Instead of addressing what needs to change," Professor Davison said, "the Government is undermining the Program. ACTA has constructive ideas to offer about how eligibility and childcare could be better managed but discussion has been closed down."

A national program at risk

The AMEP has been a keystone in Australia's settlement infrastructure since 1948. It transforms the lives of migrants and refugees by providing English language tuition and the skills and knowledge to find their place and contribute socially, culturally and economically to their new country.

"The AMEP needs reform, but it needs **better reform**, not simply cuts," Dr Moore said. "A Program that has served Australia for decades should not be redesigned – yet again – behind closed doors by those far from the coalface. The Government should pause, publish the evidence underpinning the proposed changes, and engage in a genuine consultation process with educators, providers, and migrant and refugee communities."

ACTA is calling for:

- full and transparent information about the proposed changes to AMEP eligibility
- assessment of the impact of the proposed changes on migrants and refugees with the greatest English-learning needs
- proper consideration of the impact on migrant and refugee women
- genuine consultation with stakeholders (existing AMEP students, ethnic organisations, AMEP educators, provider managers and ACTA)
- genuine reform of the AMEP.

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