

24 November 2020

Committee Secretary
Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Via email: legcon.sen@aph.gov.au

Inquiry into the Immigration (Education) Amendment (Expanding Access to English Tuition) Bill

The Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA) is the national peak body representing Australia's culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) people, communities and their organisations. FECCA conducts advocacy, develops policy, and promotes issues on behalf of its constituency to government and the broader community. FECCA strives to ensure that the needs and aspirations of Australians from cultural and linguistically diverse backgrounds are given proper recognition in public policy.

FECCA's role is to make sure Australia's multicultural policies strive towards inclusion of all, ensure access and equity to all Government services, provide opportunities independent of ethnic, cultural or linguistic background, recognise people's diverse backgrounds as a value of Australia and reject all forms of discrimination and racism to build a productive and culturally rich Australian society. FECCA's policies are developed around the concepts of empowerment and inclusion and are formulated with the common good of all Australians in mind.

FECCA appreciates the invitation from the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee to make a submission to the Inquiry into the Immigration (Education) Amendment (Expanding Access to English Tuition) Bill. We would welcome the opportunity to provide further comment and encourage you to contact the FECCA CEO, Mohammad Al-Khafaji at ceo@fecca.org.au.

Summary

FECCA believes we should be working towards the creation of a fair, sustainable and inclusive society for all new migrants. A cohesive society encourages belonging and

participation and provides opportunities for all its people to contribute, regardless of their background. FECCA recognises the important role of the English language in helping people to navigate Australian life, including transport, housing, employment and education, and the health and justice system. People also see the importance of the English language for themselves, for their children and for their greater wellbeing in Australia.

A lack of English language skills is often reported to be a barrier to successful settlement, particularly in accessing the labour market and accessing government services. It is, however, essential to recognise that knowledge of the English language does not determine someone's ability to be a good citizen or actively participate in Australian life. FECCA emphasises the importance of recognising people's ability to actively participate through volunteer work, through employment, and through engaging with Australian society without 'vocational' English.

Even without English skills, many people help their families by looking after children, volunteer in their community, and find work without the requirement for higher levels of English. While FECCA understands and acknowledges the importance of English for successful settlement and integration, FECCA urges the committee to consider the fact that there are people who will struggle with learning functional English and these people must still be supported with appropriate multicultural services, translated information and interpreters when required.

FECCA wishes to emphasise the following:

1. New arrivals to Australia are generally eager to learn English
2. New arrivals as well as migrants and refugees already in the country generally want to participate and contribute to Australian society.
3. While people from migrant and refugee backgrounds in Australia feel positive towards learning English as part of their settlement and integration into the Australian society, many face barriers accessing appropriate English learning.

Recommendations

1. Ensure timely, flexible and culturally appropriate English classes that cater for the diversity of arrivals to Australia.
2. Acknowledge that migrants and refugees in Australia learn in diverse ways.
3. Recognise the diversity in people's reasons for learning English - in particular recognise that not all will enter the work force.
4. Recognise that people can participate and contribute to the Australian society without 'vocational' English.
5. Maintain the integrity and quality of the AMEP and ensure the program continues to benefit those needing it the most.
6. Be transparent and provide details of future development of the AMEP program and requirements for new and established migrants to FECCA and other stakeholders supporting migrants and refugees.

Discussion

FECCA congratulates the Government on listening to recommendations from the community sector and understanding the need to provide greater access to free English language tuition for migrants and refugees to Australia. FECCA supports the major changes of removing the 510 hours cap and the time limit for commencing and completing the AMEP course. FECCA has been a long-time advocate for making English classes more accessible to ensure those eager to learn the English language have many opportunities to do so without unnecessary limitations and requirements. FECCA emphasises the need to consider flexibility in English tuition provision together with ensuring access for all new arrivals in Australia, independent of visa category. For more details on FECCA's recommendations in relation to English learning see our report on [Community Driven English Language Programs](#).

Removing the 510 hour limit

Removing the 510 hour limit for people wanting to learn English is an important step in ensuring equal opportunity to learn independent of people's educational, linguistic and cultural background. FECCA, together with other organisations in the sector such as the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) (<https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/submission-into-evaluation-of-the-adult-migrant-english-program-amep-new-business-model-nbm>), the Settlement Council of Australia (SCoA) (<http://scoa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/SCOA-AMEP-Consultations-Report-2020-PDF.pdf>), the Multicultural Youth Advocacy network (MYAN) (http://scoa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/amep_discussion_paper_10.pdf) and the Scanlon Foundation (https://scanloninstitute.org.au/sites/default/files/2020-01/June2019_Scanlon-Institute_Narrative-3.pdf), have asked for this over a number of years based on consultations with migrants and refugees across the country. While generally people are eager to learn English to participate in Australia society and to contribute to their new country, it is essential that barriers to learn are removed.

In addition to removing the 510 hour cap, FECCA emphasises the need to acknowledge the importance of flexible English learning focusing on clients' needs, abilities, plans and backgrounds. While the aim for most arrivals in Australia is to learn English to fully participate in Australian society it is important to recognise that people have different abilities to learn a new language and not all will enter the workplace.

Time limits

Removing the time limit on registration, commencement, and completion of English tuition for certain visa holders is a highly positive step in ensuring more arrivals can learn English within a time frame suitable with their lives in Australia. Newly arrived people to Australia often find themselves struggling with the everyday tasks of starting their lives such as finding employment, housing, and getting children started at school. Competing challenges such as having to learn English at the same time as starting their lives is often a struggle for many and some miss out. For women in particular, the limited timeframe to start and complete the AMEP poses a problem as they often have caring responsibilities and no immediate need to find employment in the early settlement period.

From functional English to vocational English

FECCA welcomes to suggestion to amend the upper limit from functional to vocational English. While this is a positive step towards allowing people to learn English to equip them for the workforce, vocational English must not be the end goal for all people attending the AMEP classes. High levels of English such as vocational is not a requirement to live in and contribute towards Australian society. FECCA would welcome greater transparency and more detail when it comes to evaluation and testing of people's English levels, especially related to partner visa.

FECCA consultations with people across Australia on their experiences with AMEP noted the need among many to continue their English learning after the completion of AMEP as the English learning at AMEP was not enough. Allowing students to strive for vocational English will address this shortcoming with the existing program.

FECCA consultations across the country also highlighted the benefits of attending English classes to people's mental health and wellbeing, and the flow on effect that this has on creating a socially cohesive society where people can participate and contribute to their best ability. English classes should ensure there is a social component for people who do not necessarily plan on entering the workforce but want to learn English for their daily life and needs. FECCA highlights the positive impact from conversation classes—either through the AMEP program or through added funding for community organisations providing such classes. Again, people's diverse skills and needs must be taken into consideration at all levels of the AMEP program.