

English teaching at risk

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The Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) is currently open to tender for its next round, commencing on July 1, 2017 for up to five years. The AMEP is a federal government settlement program which offers eligible new arrival migrants and humanitarian entrants 510 hours of free English language learning.

The Adult Migrant English Service (AMES), established in 1951, was the largest public provider of the AMEP and has taught more than 1.5 million people through this program. The privatisation of this educational provision in the mid-nineties saw private for-profit corporation Navitas take hold, winning the tenders for the most profitable regions in high-settlement areas, crippling AMESNSW.

Currently, the AMES NSW/TAFE Consortia have just three regions: the Illawarra, Hunter and Northern Sydney. While 72 TAFE campuses are offered as providers, these are predominantly located in rural and regional areas. Locations such as Blacktown, Auburn, Bankstown, Cabramatta, Liverpool, Fairfield, Campsie, Hurstville, Sydney CBD are held by Navitas.

A review of the AMEP was conducted in 2015 following a

new business model introduced in 2011, and significant structural changes are now being proposed, with the new model outlined in the "Service Provider Instructions (2017 – 2010)" in the draft Request For Tender.

Federation holds grave concerns for this model's introduction as it sees the division of the program into two streams: the Pre-Employment Stream and a Social English Stream.

AMEP must remain settlement-focused

Further, the model states that teacher qualifications will no longer be required to teach students in the Social English Stream; graduates from any discipline will now be acceptable as teachers.

The AMEP has always been a settlement-focused program and must remain so. The shift in focus to an employment program will threaten resources for programs without labour market outcomes. The streaming of students also risks trapping students in a particular stream.

It is essential that both these pathways be integrated for the AMEP's stated outcomes to be fulfilled: "The AMEP aims to

promote and support the acquisition of English language skills by all eligible adult migrants and humanitarian entrants ... to produce outcomes in relation to social participation, economic wellbeing, independence, personal wellbeing, all contributing to settlement within, and integration into, the broader Australian community" (AMEP Evaluation, ACIL Allen Consulting).

The focus in the social pathway is primarily on spoken and aural English. This is not only pedagogically unsound for TESOL methodology but could also lock students out of employment and further education. Conversely, the focus in the employment stream on labour outcomes could ignore the needs of students with "functional" English.

Employers now commonly require "excellent communication skills in English" for a range of positions, including lower skilled jobs.

The lack of requirement for teachers recruited for the proposed Social stream to have teaching qualifications will create difficulties. They will be administering a federal government immigration and education program with rigorous accountability requirements. The students will be assessed by people with no skills or

knowledge in describing the progress of English language learning.

It is vital at this point to acknowledge the value of the highly-qualified public education teachers from AMES NSW who had to possess postgraduate qualifications in TESOL. The loss of their expertise and specialisation was bad enough but to now watch the AMEP race to the bottom in the name of competition is devastating.

Other sections of the tender highlight further attacks on the AMEP. These include a loss of access to counselling services for students, a doubling of class sizes and changes to the way childcare is costed.

All of these measures do nothing for the outcomes of AMEP students and are driven by the economic rationalist model to education provision.

Federation has worked with the AEU nationally to write to federal Education Minister Simon Birmingham on the issue, and is continuing to work with community organisations.

Members are urged to seek a meeting with their local federal MP on the AMEP tender. For information and materials, please email Amber Flohm or Terry Moriarty at multicultural@nswtf.org.au.