



Submission

to

the Department of Immigration and Citizenship

on the

Australian Citizenship Test Review

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Introduction

The NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF) is a registered industrial organisation of public education teachers in New South Wales. Teachers and other educational staff who work in the NSW Adult Migrant English Service (AMESTA) comprise part of our membership.

The NSWTF wants to ensure that the citizenship test does not pose barriers for individuals seeking to access Australian citizenship. This test now represents a substantial change to the way in which we have assessed English language proficiency of potential citizens since the 1950's, where the test of 'basic' spoken English has been most successful. The new test assesses the way in which migrants and refugees have the ability to read, write and respond in English and is particularly disadvantaging certain migrant and refugee groups and lowering their uptake of citizenship. The computer based test and associated costs also present further barriers to many, and are far from fundamental to the understanding of the responsibilities, privileges and values of Australia as promoted by the test.

English Language Proficiency

The increased complexity of the assessment process is undoubtedly installing barriers to accessing citizenship, especially for migrants and refugees whose first language is not English. While it is clear that skilled migrants, who have already demonstrated English proficiency prior to arrival into Australia, appear not to be struggling with the test, having a pass rate of 99%, the figures for Humanitarian Entrants are quite stark in contrast. Figures available to 31 March 2008 shown in *Australian Citizenship Test, Snapshot Report, April 2008* highlight this. 16% of Iraqis, 17.5% of Afghans and nearly 23% of Sudanese were not successful in passing the test on their first or subsequent tests. 18.3% of all humanitarian migrants who sat the test from October to December were unsuccessful.

Many humanitarian migrants face low level literacy in their first language and have substantial gaps in their own educational backgrounds. It is commonsense that those who have lived in a refugee camp, have had little to no schooling, experienced war and trauma and who have never had English language education or exposure to English would be highly unlikely to be successful in such a test.

The formal citizenship test, in English, is supposed to provide assurances to the community that intending citizens understand 1) our respect for the freedom and dignity of the individual, 2) our support for democracy, 3) our commitment to the rule of law, 4) the equality of men and women, 5) the spirit of a 'fair go', 6) mutual respect and compassion for those in need and 7) Australian history, culture and values as learned in primary and secondary school. The complexity of some of the ideas presented in the booklet 'Becoming an Australian Citizen' could neither be fully understood nor responded to by an assessment, oral or written, at the basic levels of English that are achieved through the current 510 or 610 hours allocated through the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP). According to government figures, in 2005 89% of those completing the AMEP did so without achieving 'functional' English.

The most recent available data from the 1990's 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. The citizenship test 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. Language levels and language genres for functioning in workplaces and for getting jobs are far more complex than ten years ago and many Australian born native speakers are not knowledgeable about citizenship.

Citizenship Uptake and Participation

Migrants and refugees from non-English speaking backgrounds have historically taken up the opportunity of citizenship in much greater proportions than those of English speaking backgrounds. It now appears that as a result of the Citizenship test, this is no longer the case. Many refugee groups have reported that due to 'a fear of failure' and a perception of being deported if unsuccessful in the test, they are far less likely to sit the test at all. This is further evidenced by the low numbers of Afghanis and Sudanese, for example, who are only willing to sit the test at 2.5% and 2.0% of total migrants respectively. (*Australian Citizenship Test, Snapshot Report, April 2008*). Only 9043 migrants applied to sit the test after its introduction in October through to December last year. Refugee advocate groups state that many who have initially failed their test will be unlikely to take it again and thus never become Australian citizens as they and we so desire.

The 13,000 refugees and other displaced people who enter Australia through our humanitarian migration programs are generally to whom citizenship is vitally important. It is precisely these migrants, who as a necessary part of their psychological and physical settlement processes, want and need to commit to their new country, many of whom have been stateless in the past. Citizenship for this group aids them to belong and feel safe, an experience for many which is alien.

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 another 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.

The Current Test

A complex layer of cultural bias surrounding many of the questions in the test provides another unnecessary barrier for potential citizens. For example, one of the questions that appears in both the Tutorial and Practice Questions at www.citizenship.gov.au asks, *Which one of these is a responsibility for every Australian citizen?* The correct answer is the final one which is to *Join with Australians to defend Australia and its way of life, should the need arise*. The word 'defend' creates different cultural understandings dependent upon those sitting the test. Many refugees who have escaped conflict may well interpret 'defend' to mean to take up arms and fight, possibly misleading them due to their understanding that it is not obligatory to take up arms in Australia. Experts in this field must be engaged to rewrite some of the questions in plain English so that we can be satisfied that the questions asked are not being answered incorrectly due to the nature in which the question has been phrased.

An emphasis on dates of sporting events and other Australian achievements also adds unnecessary obstacles to the citizenship test. While some Australians would accept these are an important part of our

culture, testing of historical sporting icons does nothing to enforce a potential citizens understanding of Australian rights, responsibilities, privileges and government. These trivial sections of the book and therefore the test may well encourage substantial rote learning of facts, doing nothing for a deep understanding or education in these areas and may even encourage the rise of unscrupulous private coaching colleges claiming to be able to assist people to pass the test, as is the case with the current selective high school test.

Education – The Way Forward

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 program, commissioned by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA), was launched by the former Minister Ruddock in June 2001, a copy of which has been sent with this submission.

Let's Participate: A Course in Australian Citizenship covers a range of topics consistent with those in the 'Becoming an Australian Citizen' booklet. The syllabus includes topics such as ; what being an Australian citizen means, who is eligible for Australian citizenship, Australia's multicultural society, reconciliation, some Australian national symbols, landmarks and features, foundations of Australia's Federal Parliament, representative democracy, the three levels of government, the rights of all Australians, the responsibilities and privileges of Australian citizens, how laws are made and administered in Australia, applying for citizenship and attending an Australian citizenship ceremony. The workbooks cover a range of levels and are

consistent with CSWE language levels I, II and III. Texts and facts sheets are also aligned with language competencies of the CSWE.

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. This course contains an assessment framework which is outcomes based and can be used by teachers throughout the course and at varying levels of achievement. It could be expanded further.

Recommendations

- **The 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 currently eligible**
- **Lift the 2 year waiting period for benefits for those who attend AMEP classes**
- **Courses delivered by qualified teachers needs to be expanded to enhance participation and learning about Australia and citizenship**
- **Successful completion and assessment through citizenship courses at the NSW AMES should be recognised as being of equivalent value to the current citizenship test**
- **Provide access to AMEP for all migrants and refugees**
- **Provide funds from the recently announced \$49.2 million to expand the allocation of hours to 910 to all AMEP students in public education institutions.**

Conclusion

The formal English citizenship test is placing significant barriers for many and is of no additional benefit to the learning process or the exercising of the privileges and responsibilities of citizenship. English language skills, understanding the fundamentals of the legal system and familiarity with Australian history may indeed aid people in the process of settlement and belonging, but a test of such knowledge is now showing up as

being more divisive than uniting. Public education courses in Australian citizenship will enable all migrants and refugees to gain the necessary knowledge and skills to be able to engage in all aspects of Australian society.



Students from AMES Burwood debate “Access to English” in NSW Parliament, November 2007