

**NSW Service for the Treatment and
Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma
Survivors (STARTTS)**

**Submission to DIAC on Review of Adult
Migrant English Program (AMEP)
Discussion Paper**



STARTTS

August 2008

Background to the NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture & Trauma Survivors (STARTTS)

The NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture & Trauma Survivors (STARTTS) is a state-wide NSW Health service, established in 1988, that responds to the needs of torture and trauma survivors who have migrated to Australia, most under the Australian Government's Refugee & Humanitarian Program. We also assist on-shore refugees who have arrived in Australia as asylum seekers. STARTTS seeks to address the impact of torture and trauma on the individual, family and community through health assessment and referral, information provision, counselling, psychotherapy and other clinical interventions, community development, advocacy and training of other service providers. Funding is provided primarily by the NSW Department of Health, the Federal Department of Health & Ageing and the Department of Immigration & Citizenship, the latter for assessment and short to medium term counselling intervention under the Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy (IHSS). More information on STARTTS' services and programs can be found at <http://www.startts.org.au/>.

Rationale for our Submission

Our comments on this Discussion Paper are motivated by our awareness of the crucial importance of English language acquisition for successful settlement and full participation and engagement in the Australian community by refugee and humanitarian entrants. We are particularly concerned about the barriers to English language acquisition faced by more recent humanitarian arrivals who may be illiterate in their own language and have had very limited education, if any, before arriving in Australia. We would like to see the AMEP better able to target and assist this group, and believe that one strategy for enabling this to occur is to significantly expand the number of hours that clients have access to under this Program.

In responding to this Discussion Paper we are also motivated by our awareness of the barriers to learning that refugees who are torture and trauma survivors may face arising from the mental and physical health impacts of their experiences. STARTTS has found at the stage of initial health needs identification, 29% of those assessed suffered from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as a consequence of their torture and trauma experiences. As a result of these experiences, refugees who are torture and trauma survivors typically suffer from a range of health problems. Physical health difficulties occur due to factors such as physical torture, malnutrition, lack of capacity to maintain oral health, while mental health symptoms associated with torture and the refugee experience are also common. These include depression, anxiety, sleep disorders (particularly nightmares), intrusive thoughts and flashbacks, memory and concentration problems, feelings of guilt (survivor's guilt), loss of self esteem, social isolation, suicidal attempts, difficulties in social functioning and marital and family disruption (Allodi, et al., 1985; RCT, 1985; Bendfeldt & Zachrison, 1985; Goldfeld, et al., 1988; Codepu, 1989; Lira, & Weinstein 1984; Gonsalves, 1990; Fischman, 1990; Barudy, 1989, cited in Jorge A & Coello M: 1994).

While all of these mental health symptoms can have a negative impact on learning, especially language acquisition, sleep disorders, intrusive thoughts and memory and concentration difficulties are particularly detrimental (Freire: 1990; Stone: 1995; Golier et al: 2002; Behrendt & Moritz: 05). The consequences are that torture and trauma survivors may face significant health related difficulties which function as barriers to learning English when they first arrive in Australia, prior to beginning to recover from their torture and trauma experiences. We are concerned that the AMEP program should adequately cater to the needs of torture and trauma survivors, by enabling them to enrol in courses later than would normally be expected if torture and trauma represent a barrier to learning. We also believe that a range of learning options and strategies should be available to cater to their needs rather than a 'one size fits all' approach and that English language teachers and aides should have an understanding of the refugee experience, including the impacts of torture and trauma so that they are able to provide a more appropriate and effective learning experience. We take these issues up in the body of our Submission.

Eligibility for Program

- Information about the AMEP available on DIAC's website indicates that migrants are required to register with the AMEP within 3 months of arrival or of gaining permanent residency and start within 1 year (DIAC: 2008a & b). However we understand that this requirement can be deferred if there are legitimate reasons why a person is unable to commence a course in this time, such as torture and trauma.
- We believe that it is very important that this practice of deferring the AMEP start date for refugees with torture and trauma and other health barriers to leaning continue. As discussed above, torture and trauma can seriously impact on memory and concentration and therefore capacity to learn. We have had a number of clients who have attempted to learn English on arrival, but have found that they were not able to and withdrew from classes. We believe there should be considerable flexibility in the way that settlement programs including AMEP meet the needs of refugees who are torture and trauma survivors, focused on responding to the needs of the individual. In addition we are aware of cases of clients who have been unable to access AMEP within their first five years for mental health reasons, and then have reported that they were ineligible for the Program. We understand that for persons arriving before 1998, there is a 5 year cut off for access to the Program.
- It is our view that Temporary Protection Visa (TPVs) and Temporary Humanitarian Visa holders should have full access to settlement services including AMEP. We understand that the amendments to the Migration Regulations that give these groups access to permanent protection are effective from the 9 August, and assume that from this date TPV & THV holders will have access to the AMEP. There has been an urgent need for these groups to access this Program for sometime. However we are aware that there are a group of refugees on Temporary Humanitarian Concern Visa (Sub-class 786), around 110, whom the government is having difficulty moving over to permanent visas. We are of the view that this group should also have immediate access to AMEP.

- We would also like to see improved eligibility to AMEP or suitable alternatives for recently arrived 16-18 year olds unable to participate in the school system.

Proposed future directions for AMEP

General Comment

Learning English is a crucial aspect of successful settlement for refugee and humanitarian entrants as it enables people to participate more fully in society. One important aspect of this participation for working age people is workforce participation. However rather than placing an overemphasis on employment as the primary reason for English language acquisition, we believe that it should be viewed primarily in the broader context of social participation and social inclusion.

Two pathways proposal

We have some concerns about the proposal to split AMEP clients into two groups depending on whether they intend or are able to participate in the workforce soon after arrival. While we agree that it is the case that not all new arrivals, including some refugees who are torture and trauma survivors, will be ready to move quickly into the workforce upon arrival, we are concerned that social participation pathway as described may represent a poorer educational option. We consider it important that the social stream should have attainment goals for spoken/ oral English and for English literacy and numeracy, and that these result in people being equipped with adequate language skills to function well in the community. We would be concerned if social stream participation did not lead to a Certificate in Spoken and Written English (CSWE) level qualification, as suggested, although altering the curriculum to suit the needs of this group would probably be advisable. The social stream should not represent a poorer quality educational option or resource investment. If this was the case the social stream could risk creating a social underclass, comprised primarily of women, thereby reinforcing gender inequality. In addition, people in this stream could use up valuable AMEP hours without obtaining the English skills they will need.

We are concerned that the social stream concept, as articulated, may reinforce gender based inequality. It may be that women from some communities may choose this option because it is more culturally acceptable, and may be unaware that other options are available to them in Australia. For example in some recently arrived communities like the Hazara community from Afghanistan, participation in the workforce may not be perceived as an option for women, based on beliefs about gender roles. In order to ensure that women from this community and potentially other communities are aware of the options open to them in Australia, vocational counselling needs to occur prior to the client making a decision about what stream to enter. Such counselling needs to be performed by counsellors who understand culture and gender issues for newly arrived communities. We agree that if this two pathway approach is introduced, clients should be able to transfer into either program if they determine, in consultation with their vocational counsellor that one or the other is not suitable to them.

In regard to the employment pathway, we are concerned that this pathway may not have an adequate focus on settlement. The employment pathway should also include mention of employment options that are culturally appropriate to some communities,

such as starting a business using existing skills, for example textile and craft skills. We are also of the view that both pathways should cover issues related to citizenship as a basis for political participation, such as had previously been offered through the AMEP's 'Let's Participate' course. In addition, the employment pathway should cater to people with existing professional qualifications, who may need to learn English relevant to particular professional groups, so that people can be channelled into work that suits their background. We also have questions about how the teaching to the mixed target group of the employment pathway would function in practice, and assume that professionals and pre-literate clients would be split into different classes.

Related Issues

Broadening access to STARTTS' Families in Cultural Transition Program to AMEP clients

In order to ensure that adequate settlement related information reaches new arrivals, we believe that DIAC should enable broadening of the availability of STARTTS' Families in Cultural Transition (FICT) Program to all AMEP clients. DIAC recently showcased FICT in its 2008 publication, *Empowering Refugees- A Good Practice Guide to Humanitarian Settlement*, and given that it is considered such a successful program, STARTTS would like to see it reaching more newly arrived refugees. We suggest that bi-lingual teacher's aides be trained to offer this program: STARTTS would be able to offer training and ongoing supervision to this group, should adequate funding be available. Furthermore, FICT is currently delivered in a number of other States and Territories (WA, ACT, NT, Q, TAS) by our FASSTT¹ counterparts thus offering a national roll-out option. FICT, which is delivered for a total of 30 hours, 3 hours per week, over a 10 week period, could be delivered concurrently with the AMEP at the same site. However, as FICT was not designed as an English learning tool (albeit, it may provide some language gains), but as a settlement tool, the 30 hours of FICT should not be counted towards the overall number of hours dedicated to learning English. The 30 hours of FICT should occur on top of the English language allocation. AMEP Providers should be funded to deliver FICT and relevant torture and trauma services should be funded to train and support AMEP staff. Being trained as FICT facilitators will also enhance AMPS staff's skills in adult education.

Problems associated with interaction between AMEP & employment system and need for cultural competence in employment service providers

Some of STARTTS' Early Intervention Program (EIP) Counsellors have indicated that clients are being referred to Job Network providers and expected to obtain employment too soon after arriving in Australia, sometimes as early as 3 months, before they have had the opportunity to learn English. We also understand that there is sometimes pressure placed on clients to move into employment before they have utilised their 510 AMEP hours and any supplementary hours that may be available. We do not believe that this is appropriate and are of the view that new arrivals without adequate English should be encouraged to enrol in AMEP and that AMEP clients should be encouraged to remain in the program until they obtain a proficiency in English adequate to participate fully in the community, including the workforce. In addition, we understand that not all people who wish to access the 20 hours full-time

¹ Forum of Australian Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma (FASSTT)

AMEP are able to do so due to high demand, and that this means that people are required to fulfil Centrelink activity requirements. This added requirement can represent a barrier to English language acquisition. We also understand that people are not always able to take up their full AMEP entitlement because of under-availability of child-care.

While we agree that it is important that AMEP clients who are ready to move into employment be connected with Employment Service Providers, that latter need to be culturally competent, have an understanding of the cultures of newly arrived refugee communities and of the issues impacting on refugees, including torture and trauma. We are concerned that there will be less room for specialist Personal Support Program Providers such as the one that STARTTS is funded to operate for refugees with non-vocational barriers to employment, under the government's proposed new employment service provider framework. In a submission on the discussion paper released on this new framework, STARTTS' emphasised that tender documents and contracts should specify that employment service providers operating in areas with high CALD and refugee populations, be required to demonstrate the cultural competence and awareness discussed above.

AMEP Individual Learner's Passport (ILP)

It may be that the ILP will result in better understanding of goals and achievements on the part of the client and the Employment Service Provider, as anticipated. However we suggest that the ILP should not function like a school 'report card', which is not an appropriate concept for an adult learner. We are also concerned that documentation of poor performance could undermine the self-esteem of the student and be a source of embarrassment, particularly where the document is intended to be used by a third party like an Employment Service Provider. There is also a risk that documented poor performance could lead to reluctance on the part of an Employment Service Provider to work with a client, who may be perceived as difficult to place. We suggest that the Department consult with educational experts on the merit of this approach.

AMEP Counsellors

Under the new proposed model, it appears there would be an augmented role for AMEP vocational counsellors. There would need to be an element of case management, plus assistance with gaining qualifications recognition or relevant registration with professional or industry bodies. In order to perform these tasks effectively, counsellors would require adequate training in both areas, and as the counselling session would be likely to take longer, AMEP would require additional funding to cover this. A number of people from refugee-like situations join family members in Australia under the family reunion program, rather than the humanitarian program, as they believe the waiting time may be shorter. We would like to see people who arrive under the general family reunion program gain access to Australian Government Employment Services however if this is not possible, vocational/employment guidance under the AMEP.

Connections between AMEP & Australian Government Employment Services

We have made comments above under Proposed Future Directions for AMEP, about the need to maintain specialist PSP services and for Employment Service Providers (ESP's) to be culturally competent and understand refugee issues. Practical strategies to assist AMEP and the ESP's to work together could include co-location and strategies to ensure ongoing, regular communication, such as regular meetings or joint participation in networks.

We are also aware of the need for improved post AMEP pathways, both for those wanting immediate employment and people who are not ready for it, through better coordination and referral on the part of AMEP, education and training providers such as TAFE and Employment Service Providers.

Strategies to make mixed level classes effective and deal with continuous enrolment

We are unsure of the desirability of establishing interim classes to allow new students to attend classes after classes have already started. The potential difficulty may be that clients may have to repeat ground they have already covered when they enter a more intensive class, or the low intensity class may not be at the right level for them. Any decision about where to place a client should be based on an individual assessment of their English language capacity, their familiarity with an educational setting (level of education upon arrival), and the client's goals. These factors, together with how much of the term has passed, and the general standard of the class should be considered in deciding whether to place someone in an interim class or in the class that is already running.

We also believe that other strategies could be introduced to create a more effective learning environment. Some of our clients have complained that AMEP class sizes are too big and the pace is too fast, and that they get left behind. These factors, and the fact that their torture and trauma experiences can make it difficult to learn, can result in our clients dropping out of AMEP. The fact that many more recently arrived humanitarian entrants have little or no education compounds the difficulties they face. To address this STARTTS has recruited voluntary English teachers to assist clients who may have dropped out of AMEP or completed it without gaining a basic grasp of English, as the program hours were simply inadequate. STARTTS has found that pairing teachers, or having two teachers teaching one group of students can be an effective strategy.

Teaching in pairs supports the teacher and can lead to more effective and faster learning. It also allows students to receive more individual attention and for those on a different level to have their needs met. Ideally, teachers should be bi-lingual and bi-cultural, and we believe that the AMEP should be actively recruiting bi-lingual teachers. Our volunteer English teachers have had success by using flexible teaching strategies, for example, adapting the curriculum to the student. While we feel that pairing teachers is probably the more effective option, particularly if teachers are bi-lingual, we also support the proposal that bi-lingual aides be used in mixed level classes. To improve the quality of the education received by students we think that bi-lingual aides be encouraged to qualify as teachers' aides and teachers. The type of bi-

lingual support provided should depend on the composition of the class. As a quality control measure we think that unqualified bi-lingual aides should work alongside teachers rather than independently.

We also think that students should have access to a range of other assistance and resources to support their learning, for example additional access to home tutors, audio resources, web based resources and after hours computer and internet access. Some of these strategies are suggested later in the discussion paper.

Increased options for youth

We are very supportive of the decision to increase humanitarian students access to English language tuition (ELT) to 12 months in intensive English centres. However we think that there should be some flexibility applied to this cap, with teachers able to recommend that students receive more than 12 months assistance if this is required in special cases.

At the same time, STARTTS recognizes that there are potential problems associated with too long a stay in IEC's. In order to cater for the additional needs of students from refugee backgrounds, often affected by the impact of trauma and by lack of access to formal education prior to their arrival in Australia, additional resources to support and facilitate their transition into the mainstream education system may be required. This need has been identified by parents, children, counsellors and teachers. Ideally, the readiness of children and young people from refugee backgrounds should be assessed before they start school, so that the amount of support needed to effect a successful transition may be identified and provided for, and retention in the IEC considered as an option in special cases.

We agree that there is a need for after school language and literacy support to 15-18 year olds from refugee backgrounds in the school system to assist them to cope with school work and make greater language gains. Homework and English language support by tutors based at community agencies is one strategy that may be effective. It is important that members of this age group who have dropped out of school be reconnected with education and training providers, particularly AMEP if they have not attained adequate English language skills. Once they have acquired adequate English language skills, gaining compulsory and post compulsory school qualifications through TAFE could be an option. While we believe that vocational education and training is an option for this group, and indeed other AMEP graduates, we would not like to see people channelled into this option when they might have other educational/ career preferences.

Increased allocation of hours

The lack of sufficient AMEP hours to enable students to acquire adequate English language skills to participate fully in Australian society, including the workplace, is of great concern to us. Adequate provision of hours and an appropriate learning environment is particularly needful for refugee and humanitarian entrants who may have little or no previous education, and torture and trauma related barriers to learning. A number of our clients, including those who have completed AMEP

without acquiring functional English, have reiterated that the 510 hours is not enough for them. We note that DIAC's own data cited in the Discussion Paper indicates that only 20% of AMEP clients reported on in the 06/07 Annual Report, exited the program at Certificate 111 in Spoken and Written English, which equates to basic English. The Paper notes that "those lacking literacy in their own language do not achieve the required English language proficiency within the available hours" (DIAC: 2008: 22).

It is clear that the number of hours available under AMEP, particularly for those who lack literacy in their own language, needs to be significantly increased. As we are not educationalists, we are not in a position to advise the number of hours that may be required, but believe that DIAC should take the advice of experts in the field on this matter, including AMEP providers. We think there is considerable merit in the approach the Discussion Paper indicates has been adopted by Canada and England, of not capping English language hours. Along these lines, we believe that AMEP should have sufficient flexibility to respond to the needs of the individual, which will vary depending on their circumstances, providing more or less hours as required. The proposal of re-crediting unused hours to those most in need within the system is a good one, but it is unlikely that this will be adequate to addressing student need.

We are very concerned about the issue that many of the recent graduates of the AMEP program entering under the humanitarian program with very low rates on literacy in their own language, have completed the program without attaining basic literacy. This is not a criticism of AMEP providers, but a recognition that there appears to have been inadequate planning on the part of DIAC to meet the needs of this group, as no additional resources were made available to AMEP or other changes made to the Program to address the needs of this group. We would suggest that these individuals be identified and offered additional AMEP hours until they reach a functional English level, as they are at great risk of social exclusion and a high level of social disadvantage due to ongoing illiteracy.

Increased delivery settings

It is our experience that availability of a choice of delivery settings, particularly local community based settings, is important to facilitate access to programs for newly arrived refugees. We understand that access to AMEP remains a problem for women with young children, and people who are unfamiliar with using public transport. We agree that delivery in the workplace would facilitate access, as would access to on-site childcare. The type of delivery setting, including an effort to create a friendly and non-intimidating environment, is also important for setting accessibility, as are the teaching strategies and pace of the class.

Childcare arrangements

We agree that use of on-site childcare for classes held in community settings is a good option to improve access to childcare. It also makes the process of attending class easier for parents, including those without access to private vehicles or a driving licence, as children do not have to be dropped off and picked up. While it does not have the advantages of on-site childcare, we would also suggest that there is potential

for AMEP to liaise with the local government authority to place children in family day care places. We also agree that more use could be made of the Home Tutor Scheme for clients for whom caring responsibilities are a barrier.

More effective learning

We agree that provision of a variety of learning options and strategies as suggested on page 24 is important to enable students to continue learning outside of class hours. Access to computers for self-learning including through after hours access to AMEP premises, developing strategies to assist students to purchase computers and DVD's, and access to audio and DVD resources are all important. Provision of on-line learning resources is an excellent idea, on the proviso that students be provided with computer and on-line access, (for example, through libraries, community organisations, after-hours AMEP access). If this does not already occur, we think that all students would benefit from being provided with an overview of the program, the teaching method and assessment tasks at class commencement.

In addition to the range of learning strategies outlined we believe that consideration could be given to utilising excursions/ site visits as a teaching strategy where this relates to the curriculum. We think this would be useful to familiarise the social stream with community services and would also be useful for members of the employment stream with professional backgrounds wanting to enter particular fields. In addition, if possible the AMEP vocational counsellor could assist clients whose English was sufficiently advanced to obtain volunteer work, as a way to improve English language skills and become acquainted with the work environment.

In addition we believe that specific teaching strategies are needed to address the needs of newly arrived humanitarian program entrants who are illiterate in their own language. We understand that the higher the level of education in the first language, the easier it is to learn another. On this basis ACL successfully submitted to DEEWR under the LLNP Innovation Projects for funding for a one-off pilot with the Dinka Literacy Association. Under the pilot, women who have done 510/ 610 hours under AMEP and did not make much progress with learning English will do 8 weeks Dinka (reading and writing), followed by 8 weeks AMEP. We believe that the success of this pilot should be followed, and be extended as a program and applied to other recent arrivals in a similar situation if it proves effective.

Better promotion of AMEP

As far as we are aware IHSS service providers in the Sydney area are quite effective in promoting AMEP to refugee and humanitarian entrants. However we are unsure if people from refugee like backgrounds who arrive under the family reunion program receive information about the AMEP through formal channels, as they are less likely to have contact with settlement service providers. We believe it is important that new arrivals are made aware of the full range of AMEP options available, including those available outside area of residence and colleges that may offer specific courses, including English for people with existing professional qualifications. For example some providers like the Institute of Languages, UNSW, offer Special Focus Courses at Level 3, such as English for Health Professionals and English for Business. Promotion of AMEP and the learning options available (distance learning, Home

Tutor Scheme), using the range of strategies suggested on page 25 would appear worthwhile. We would also suggest that consideration be given to promoting the AMEP through the Australian Cultural Orientation Program before people migrate to Australia.

Improved reporting arrangements

We think it is important that adequate reporting occur within AMEP that indicates client achievements, drop out rates and reason for drop out, and the option the client moves into following AMEP, be it employment, further study or some other option. We are aware that some clients of our service who are torture and trauma survivors drop out of the AMEP due to their torture and trauma symptoms, and lack of literacy in own language making it difficult to keep up in class. We think it is important that this issue be monitored and alternative options put in place for this group through the AMEP, as required. These options could include some form of intensive support, specially designed classes, home tutoring and/ or distance learning. We also think that effective processes for measuring client satisfaction are important, in addition to regular independent program evaluation.

Better targeted professional development of teachers

We agree with the suggestions of the Discussion Paper that teachers would benefit from support and training in the areas outlined on pg 26, including more information on clients' cultural backgrounds and experiences and cross cultural training. We believe that other staff involved in teaching such as teacher's aides and bi-lingual aides should also have access to this type of training. It is important that information that is provided include up to date details of the cultural background of newer groups of humanitarian arrivals. It should also include a familiarisation with the impacts of refugee torture and trauma, including its impact on learning. It is important that the syllabuses are suited to the client group, including newer arrivals who may have lower levels of literacy, and cater to their interests. We agree that it is also important that teachers have some understanding of how AMEP fits in the vocational and training system and how to prepare clients for movement into other education and training programs as well as employment and employment services. However this is more the responsibility of the AMEP vocational counsellor, while the primary responsibility of the teacher is to teach English, and we believe that additional roles should not detract from this.

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