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ESOL FOR SKILLS

A Report by the Lifelong Education Commission



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ABOUT THE LIFELONG EDUCATION COMMISSION

The Rt Hon Chris Skidmore MP launched the Lifelong Education Commission under his Chairmanship at ResPublica in February 2021. The Commission will seek to recommend how the multiple and varied barriers to lifelong learning can be removed, what future investment is needed to support this, and what regulatory change is needed to ensure the maximum possible flexibility that will benefit learners and deliver on the promise of a whole system change for education post-18.

The commission will focus on how post-18 education and skills ought to be designed, so that both Higher and Further Education institutions are valued, but also how the individual learner can be better empowered to make decisions and undertake their learning. Lessons can be learnt from abroad, as well as from mistakes made in the past, but post-Covid, the need to act differently for different outcomes will be essential.

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FOREWORD

With skills shortages in the UK now acknowledged as a major constraint to economic growth and productivity, the debate about the balance between filling the gaps with migrant workers and improving the skills of the existing workforce is once again in the headlines.

The numbers of working age people who have dropped out of the labour market following the pandemic continues to increase, leaving employers struggling to recruit staff with appropriate experience and skills. Although a wide range of reforms to post-16 education and training are under way, designed to greatly improve the supply of highly qualified professionals, most will not have an impact for some years. In the meantime, there is a ready source of skilled workers potentially available to us: the migrant population already in the UK.

As a country with a long history of global trade and influence, Britain has always attracted immigrants from all over the world. Recent estimates indicate that in 2021 nearly 10 million people – representing 16% of the UK population - were born overseas. While many have been here for decades, there is a constant flow of new migrants, including refugees and asylum seekers, with the recent conflicts in Afghanistan, Syria, Hong Kong and most recently Ukraine, accelerating this trend.

Many bring with them considerable prior experience and qualifications. They are willing and able to join the UK workforce, and where they are intending to become settled immigrants are desperate to use the skills they have to help them live independently and provide for their families as soon as possible. The main thing holding them back is a lack of English Language proficiency.

Refugees and asylum seekers join a growing pool of UK citizens and aspiring citizens who weren't born in this country. Settled immigrant communities also have untapped skills which, with the right training support can be unlocked. Key to this is better provision of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) at all levels and for all types of learner.

This report makes a number of recommendations for changes to strategy, policy and funding to support a much more positive approach to integrating migrants into the labour market, through ESOL for skills. There will always be a need to have firm and fair controls to prevent unauthorised immigration,

but the negative narrative around the minority of migrants who arrive illegally needs to be replaced with a positive narrative about the ways in which temporary migrants and longer term immigrants can contribute to the UK's prosperity by stimulating growth and productivity.

The English language, which has become the international language of business, is one of this country's greatest assets. We now need to make sure we use this asset actively within our own borders, by ensuring that lack of proficiency in English is no longer a barrier to economic progress.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report argues that, in the face of an acute skills crisis in Britain, better provision of English for Speakers of Other Languages – ESOL – should now be a key strategy for tackling skills gaps and skills shortages. While in the past the delivery of ESOL has been framed as an important way of ensuring community cohesion and social integration, it now needs to be seen as a vital component of a strategy for economic growth. ESOL for Skills should now be the priority, and policy and funding should be reformed to support this focus.

There is a growing pool of migrants, many of them skilled and experienced professionals, who are UK residents. The biggest barrier they face to filling jobs in shortage areas is their ability to communicate in English, not just basic everyday English, but at a level of competence in speaking and writing that enables them to work effectively in highly skilled occupations. Greatly improving the delivery of ESOL is the best way of mobilising the skills that exist amongst the migrant population.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The DfE should develop an ESOL Strategy for England, laying out plans for teaching, learning and student support, and covering not just issues of social cohesion and integration, but ESOL for skills.
2. The ESOL Strategy for England should be “settlement-positive”, enabling the provision of free English language teaching to all those seeking UK citizenship after six months in the UK.
3. ESOL provision up to Level 2 should be fully funded across England for all refugees and asylum seekers, by making courses eligible for full fee remission.
4. Funding for ESOL courses up to and including Level 2 should be raised to enable at least 360 hours of tuition per year to be delivered.

5. Specific support funding for ESOL students, including Refugees and Asylum seekers, should be allocated to all providers, based on the numbers of ESOL students enrolled. The amount of funding should be set at a level to enable providers to offer services to meet welfare and mental health needs.
6. Access to HE courses specifically tailored to the needs of ESOL students should be introduced, with loans for these courses written off if students progress to higher education, as is already the case with other similar courses.
7. It should be a requirement that ESOL for skills is considered as a specific strand in all Local Skills Improvement Plans.
8. ESOL tuition should be offered in addition to vocational training in selected growth industries and industries with severe skills shortages. These sectors could be identified nationally, but devolved authorities should have the power to include additional sectors based on local needs analysis.



1. INTRODUCTION

ESOL – English for Speakers of Other Languages – forms a sizeable part of England’s adult education provision. In urban areas, ESOL courses account for between a quarter and half of all adult enrolments, more in some parts of London. In funding terms, ESOL accounts for approximately 5% of England’s total annual Adult Education budget.¹

Estimates of the number of adults who need ESOL courses vary, but results from the 2021 census indicate that the number of England and Wales residents born outside the UK has doubled over the last 20 years and now stands at over 10 million, which is one in six of the total population.² The great majority of these will have significant deficits in their ability to use spoken or written English. Analysis of 2011 census data indicated that around 770,000 adults in the UK did not speak English well - or at all³ - which suggested a far greater number likely to have limited skills in written English. Given the overall growth of over 30% in the immigrant population since then, it is reasonable to assume that today’s figure for the number of adults needing to improve their spoken English is over 1 million. According to the 2021 schools census there are 1.6 million pupils (19%) who are provided with ‘English as an Additional Language’ support, indicating that a growing proportion of the younger population have significant ESOL needs. Taking into account the census data over the past three decades, it is almost certain that the growth in the need for ESOL provision is going to continue strongly for the foreseeable future.

With up to 16% of our fellow citizens potentially needing ESOL provision, it might be expected that ESOL policy, strategy, and funding would have a high profile in any discussions about adult education and lifelong learning. The 2022 Skills Act has placed adult skills at the heart of Government’s post-18 education policy,

and the Levelling Up White Paper has emphasised the vital link between skills and economic success in all of England's regions. But little attention has been given to ESOL in recent Government statements on policy or strategy. Where ESOL is mentioned, it is usually in the context of the need to encourage social cohesion through better integration of immigrant communities into civil society.

This report focuses squarely on the issue of ESOL and economic success, rather than ESOL and social cohesion. While community integration is undoubtedly an important topic, the issue of English language as a key barrier to re-skilling and up-skilling England's workforce is just as vital. With serious skills shortages and skills gaps opening up at regional and national level, much more needs to be done to improve the supply of skilled workers to the economy. ESOL must be part of the solution to this challenge.

All the evidence shows that within the immigrant population there is a huge untapped resource of talented and motivated individuals, as many came to this country with significant work experience and prior qualifications. The biggest single factor holding most of them back from making progress is the language barrier: their insufficient level of English. This is not just the basic English needed for everyday life, for daily conversation, and for communicating with colleagues at work. To access higher skills courses and gain higher level qualifications, a sound grasp of formal - academic - English is essential. This is the much more structured English required to write assignments, sit exams, and tackle the end-point assessments that are now an integral part of apprenticeship standards.

A Note on Terminology

Throughout this report we have adopted the current definitions used by the United Nations for various categories of migrant.

Migrant – a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently.

Immigrant – a person who moves into a country other than that of his or her nationality or usual residence so that the country of destination effectively becomes his or her new country of residence.

Refugee – persons who are outside their country of origin for reasons of feared persecution, conflict, generalised violence and other circumstances that have seriously disturbed public order.

Asylum Seeker – an individual seeking international protection. Not every asylum seeker will ultimately be recognised as a refugee, but every recognised refugee is initially an asylum seeker.

From: [www.refugees.migrants.un.org/Compact for Migration/Resources/Definitions](http://www.refugees.migrants.un.org/Compact%20for%20Migration/Resources/Definitions) (United Nations, 2022)

The current policy and funding system is, as many commentators have observed, fragmented and far too complex. There are different rules for different categories of ESOL student, with asylum seekers and refugees having to navigate specific funding rules which in practice prevent many from accessing courses. As devolution has been rolled out in more and more areas of the country, the Adult Education Budget (AEB) which funds most ESOL provision, has developed another dimension of fragmentation, with distinctive funding policies and rules now being applied in different regions.

The starting point for this report is a brief history of ESOL in the UK and a review of the current ESOL policy and funding environment. Following on from that, the report focuses on the many barriers that stand in the way of making ESOL part of the Government's lifelong education revolution. Finally, it provides recommendations designed to dismantle these barriers, and make ESOL education a much more prominent part of the new era for adult skills that the Lifelong Education Loan Entitlement is designed to usher in.

Its overall approach is to explore ESOL through the lens of the skills agenda. With ESOL for skills as the theme throughout, it takes a close look not only at the issues facing settled immigrants, but also at the additional barriers facing refugees and asylum seekers, who make up a sizeable proportion of the overall migrant population. While their needs are in many ways similar to the settled immigrant community, their additional support needs, added to the extra hurdles they face in gaining access to ESOL because of current policy, makes them a test case for the effectiveness of a coherent and integrated strategy for ESOL.

In a recent speech about the Lifelong Education Loan Entitlement that is the flagship new policy in the Skills Act, Michelle Donelan, former Minister for Higher and Further Education, illustrated how the new system will work with the imaginary example of a vehicle technician in 2025 or beyond, realising they need to up-skill to avoid redundancy, and logging on to their online LLE account which provides them with information, advice, and guidance about courses, as well as funding to pay for whatever is the best option.⁴

This report asks the question: what if that Vehicle Technician was from Africa or Ukraine, a refugee or asylum seeker only recently arrived in the UK, with only basic English skills: will the Lifelong Education Loan system work just as well for them? Will it enable them to be part of the solution to the UK's critical skills shortages?



2. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

2.1 THE HISTORY OF ESOL IN THE UK

ESOL provision can be traced back to the 1870s, when Jewish immigrants began to settle in East London and other parts of the country.⁵ It was largely delivered by volunteers in the community, rather than being funded, and this pattern continued through successive waves of refugees from the Spanish Civil War, and Nazi Germany up to the Second World War. It wasn't until the onset of a very different pattern of migration in the post-war years as Britain withdrew from its Empire, when large numbers of immigrants from the Caribbean, Africa, and the Indian sub-continent started to arrive in British cities, that things began to change. Local Authorities and central Government began to respond in a more structured way. Funding became available for courses, and the 1960s and 70s saw the beginning of formal curriculum development and the production of tailored learning materials. From the 1980s onwards, ESOL tended to be subsumed by Government into a wider focus on adult literacy and numeracy, although NATECLA, the National Association for Teaching English and Community Languages to Adults, has since its formation in 1977 provided a distinct forum for ESOL professionals and a special focus on ESOL policy issues.

From a policy perspective, the history reflects the weak and intermittent focus that ESOL has received. It has often been local, rather than national Government that has taken the initiative, and national reports have been few and far between. The Russell Report of 1973⁶ viewed ESOL as part of a response to the needs of socially and culturally underprivileged groups and recommended a continuation of delivery through voluntary partnerships between charitable groups, local authorities and central Government. The Moser Report of 1999⁷ focused entirely on the urgent need to improve adult literacy and numeracy, of which ESOL

was one component, as part of a drive to improve adult skills and raise productivity. This report prompted the launch of a new national strategy and a new national curriculum for adult basic skills, spearheaded by a new Strategy Unit within the DfE.

Moser's report was followed in 2000 by the much smaller and less well-publicised report of a working group on ESOL set up by the DfE. Their report, "Breaking the Language Barriers"⁸ argued strongly for the specific needs of ESOL learners to be addressed and made ten wide-ranging recommendations. It received only a single-sentence mention in the subsequent statement from the Government announcing the establishment of the new basic skills strategy.⁹

Since Moser, the only other Government reports with a significant focus on ESOL have come from outside, not from within the DfE. The first was Sir Anthony Goldsmith's 2008 review, "Citizenship: Our Common Bond",¹⁰ which emphasised the importance of ESOL not only for learners themselves, but as part of a strategy of providing tangible reassurance to the general population of Government's commitment to the social integration of migrants. Eight years later, Dame Louise Casey was asked to undertake a review into integration and opportunity in isolated and deprived communities. The Casey Review of 2016¹¹ identified English language skills as "fundamental" to community integration and recommended a significant increase in funding for ESOL.

Three themes emerge from the history of ESOL policy in England over the past 50 years, all of which are still influencing Government thinking today. One is the continuing struggle for ESOL to be seen as a distinct issue in its own right, and not to be subsumed into wider adult basic skills strategies. The second is the chronic indecision over whether ESOL is best seen as an issue of community integration in deprived parts of the country or as a part of a national skills and productivity challenge.

This is despite the consensus that has emerged amongst educationalists over the past twenty years over the importance of ESOL for addressing both issues. One example is the report "More Than A Language..." published in 2006 by the NIACE (National Institute of Adult Continuing Education) Committee of Inquiry on English for Speakers of Other Languages.¹² This argues in no uncertain terms that ESOL is equally vital for skills as it is for social inclusion, not to mention many other important national agendas, including child poverty, health, and regeneration.

The third theme is the extent to which debates about ESOL have been overshadowed by the social and political controversy surrounding UK immigration policy. Writing in 2008, Hamilton and Hillier argued that "the big drivers of ESOL policy are still public attitudes towards immigration, and Government expediency in managing these."¹³ This has manifested itself in the way in which ESOL budgets have been so frequently reduced and eligibility rules for ESOL students so often changed. Governments have been aware that anything that might be seen as offering too much taxpayer support to migrants, especially illegal or

unauthorised immigrants, is likely to attract public criticism from some quarters, and have been reluctant to take bold decisions. This perception needs to be challenged. It is important that politicians start seeing ESOL as part of the solution to the country's skills shortages, rather than part of the problem, before progress can be made in developing ESOL policy for the 21st century.

The Impact of Immigration on Public Finances

The financial impact of immigration is a complex subject, since there are significant gaps in the available evidence, and all calculations depend on making many assumptions. Figures are based on calculating the contributions migrants make to the public purse through, for example, paying tax, minus their cost to the taxpayer through, for example, receiving benefits, healthcare, and education.

Expert estimates have therefore varied considerably. The key point to emerge from recent studies is that the greater the proportion of migrants who are of working age and employed in high-skill jobs, the more positive is their impact on public finances. For example, a 2018 study found that migrants from the European Economic Area (EEA) made a net fiscal contribution of £4.7bn in the 2016/17 financial year, while non-EEA migrants incurred a net cost of £9bn. The Office for Budget Responsibility forecasted in 2018 that higher net immigration would help to reduce the level of Government debt over the long term.

The introduction in January 2021 of the new post-Brexit points-based immigration system created a different context. The Government's impact assessment of the new system estimated that it would carry a fiscal cost of £2.4bn over the first ten years of implementation, based on assumptions about the numbers of immigrants likely to be allowed into the UK under the new regime and their skill levels.

However, assumptions about immigration trends have proved highly unreliable since the pandemic. One thing is clear: the quicker immigrants are able to join the UK workforce and pay taxes, and the higher the value of the jobs they are able to fill, the more likely it is that they will be a net contributor to our public finances, rather than a drain on them.

Based on a March 2022 briefing paper from Oxford University's Migration Observatory.

Vargas-Silva, C, Sumption, M & Walsh, P.W, "The Fiscal Impact of Immigration in the UK", Migration Observatory, 30th March 2022.

The authors of a very comprehensive 2014 report summarised the arguments in a way that has particular resonance today, given the productivity and skills crisis the UK is grappling with: “Over and above the savings to the public purse in welfare and health that will result from enabling migrants to navigate life in the UK better, and the desirability of a better integrated, more socially cohesive society, an English speaking migrant workforce can bring a significant skills boost to the economy”.¹⁴

2.2 FUNDING FOR ESOL IN ENGLAND

Funding for ESOL has become increasingly complicated. Based on a survey conducted in 2018/19, the vast majority is delivered through the annual Adult Education Budget (AEB), but this is supplemented by the majority of providers from a variety of other sources: the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme, local authority grants, the European Social Fund, the Local Authority Controlling Migration Fund, and charitable donations from charities, the general public and private company donations.¹⁵

Since 2019, this tangled spaghetti of funding has been further complicated by the devolution of AEB to the growing number of Mayoral Combined Authorities, who between them now control well over half the AEB national budget. In 2021/22, out of a total AEB budget of just under £1.4b, £773m, or 58.4%, was allocated to the ten Combined Authorities. In funding terms, the role of the MCAs is even more prominent. In 2020/21 the MCAs controlled 68% of the total AEB national spend on ESOL, delivering £36.2m of the £53.2m total. With several more devolution deals in the pipeline, this figure is set to increase significantly over the next few years.

TABLE 1 – AEB AND ESOL SPENDING 2020-2021

	TOTAL AEB FUNDING	ESOL FUNDING	ESOL SHARE OF AEB
Cambridgeshire and Peterborough	£12,084,061	£479,300	3.97%
Greater Manchester	£98,725,779	£4,233,600	4.29%
Greater London	£316,112,791	£19,985,100	6.32%
Liverpool City Region	£50,398,292	£1,469,300	2.92%
Tees Valley	£31,394,542	£584,200	1.86%
West of England	£15,714,477	£51,100	0.33%
West Midlands	£133,950,859	£5,392,100	3.96%
North of Tyne	£23,747,909	£1,551,700	6.53%
Sheffield City Region*		£1,000,100	N/A
West Yorkshire*		£1,556,000	N/A
National*	£657,871,289	£16,970,000	2.58%
Total	£1,339,999,999	£53,182,500	3.97%

Source: Analysis of ESFA funding data provided by Ascentis Awarding Body

*Sheffield 21/22 AEB allocation = £39,300,000, *West Yorkshire 21/22 AEB allocation = £63,905,233, *National 21/22 AEB allocation = £557,099,760

In the past decade, the ESOL policy and funding environment has been devastated by funding cuts and frequent policy changes. The number of students starting funded ESOL courses fell by 36% - from 179,000 to 114,000 - between 2009/10 and 2016/17, while funding from the Adult Education Budget (AEB) declined by 56% in real terms during the same period.¹⁶

Automatic fee remission was withdrawn in 2007/8, and in 2011/12 full funding was restricted to only those in receipt of unemployment benefits. Funding for ESOL in the workplace was axed. In 2013/14 ESOL courses moved to being funded at a flat rate per qualification, rather than according to their length. In 2014/15, a substantial extra pot of money, the ESOL Plus Mandation Fund, was introduced for those on Jobseeker's Allowance, but abruptly withdrawn a year later.

The impact of the many funding restrictions has been predictable. Based on the latest data covering 2019/20, the total number of AEB funded ESOL learners in England was 116,000, only slightly up from the low point of 2015/16. Impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, it fell to 97,300 in 2020/21, and although early data from the DfE indicates enrolments in 2021/22 have increased to over 90% of pre-pandemic levels, we have yet to see how far the numbers recover during this current year. Funding has followed a similar path, falling from £67.3m in 2019/20 to £53.2m in 2020/21, and looking likely to recover to around £61m this year, still below pre-pandemic levels.

TABLE 2 ANNUAL ENROLMENTS OF ADULT ESOL LEARNERS 2017-2021

ACADEMIC YEAR	ADULT LEARNERS
2017-18	114,300
2018-19	120,500
2019-20	116,100
2020-21	97,300
Over the Period	17,000 decrease

Source: Dept for Education/ESFA, Full Year's Final Data on adult (19+) Further Education ESOL Qualifications

Over the years, surveys of providers and learners have consistently found that the demand for ESOL exceeds the supply by quite some way. In 2014, 80% of providers reported long waiting lists, sometimes numbering thousands of applicants, and although the situation has improved in some parts of the country as a result of regional funding decisions, there is still insufficient provision to meet the need in many areas. Lack of any nationally aggregated data makes it hard to quantify the scale of the problem, but the available evidence indicates that learners are still having to wait a long time to join a course, and in many cases are forced to join any available classes, even if they are not well suited to their needs.¹⁷

There are many ESOL students who don't fit the eligibility requirements for free courses. This includes those who can't claim Jobseekers' benefits; for example, asylum seekers, most of whom don't have the right to work in the UK while their status is being decided, and those with caring responsibilities, who are predominantly women. It also affects those in work but on low pay, which covers a high proportion of refugees, as well as many settled individuals. For these groups, the expectation is that they should meet 50% of the cost through fees, which currently range from £15 to £30 a week depending on the type of course. Given that asylum seekers receive £39.63 per week to cover all their basic needs, this is clearly unaffordable for the great majority, and is a huge challenge for those in part-time, insecure, low-paid jobs. Many colleges have therefore opted not to charge fees, but given the financial pressures on providers, this has been increasingly unaffordable.

As a result, many providers - 75% according to recent estimates¹⁸ – have instead enrolled students on English Functional Skills courses, which are fully funded and therefore require no fee payment. The problem here is that most experts agree that Functional Skills is not suitable for ESOL learners, especially when they are not being taught by an ESOL specialist and when ESOL learners are mixed together in the same class with basic skills students for whom English is the first language. Moreover, Functional Skills courses are taught in far fewer hours than ESOL, don't support the kind of structured teaching of grammar needed for ESOL students, and are not comparable in content or level, making moving from one to the other a significant hurdle.¹⁹ The overarching issue is that the choice of course for too many ESOL learners is being primarily driven by funding considerations, not by learners' educational needs.

One straightforward way of addressing this issue would be to change the funding rules to put ESOL courses on the same footing as Functional Skills and GCSE English courses, by making them eligible for full fee remission.

From 2019 the devolution of AEB to mayoral authorities has introduced significant variations to the rules relating to ESOL in more and more parts of England. The Greater London mayoral authority have increased the funding by 10% and are now fully funding asylum seekers for ESOL courses up to Level 2. The Greater Manchester and Cambridgeshire and Peterborough MCAs are fully funding asylum seekers for all adult courses. The West of England Combined Authority have introduced additional funding for community outreach and support activities to facilitate better access to adult ESOL provision. While these developments are very welcome, they add to the complexity of ESOL funding, making it harder than ever to collate any national data on ESOL enrolment or achievement, and more importantly making access to adult ESOL uneven and inconsistent across England.

Most importantly, in focusing on ESOL as part of the UK's workplace skills challenge, current funding policy doesn't properly support the progression of students from beginner level through to the higher levels of spoken and written English needed to gain technical and vocational qualifications. Different kinds of funding have to be used to support learners with different immigration status, at different levels and different ages.

English native speakers born in this country are supported at school and post-16 by formula funding, then by either the university loan system or apprenticeship funding depending on which route they take. For an ESOL student the journey is typically much more convoluted and for refugees and asylum seekers, much more uncertain.

2.3 CURRENT ESOL POLICY FOR ENGLAND.

The policy environment around ESOL reflects the complexity and fragmentation surrounding the funding environment. There is no single policy, and recent major policy developments have side-stepped ESOL. Instead of long-term commitments, short-term initiatives reign. While Scotland and Wales have had strategies for many years, there is still no coherent strategy for England in place, with no sign of one in the near future.

The Conservative Party did make a specific commitment in its 2019 General Election manifesto: “We will boost English language teaching to empower existing migrants and help promote integration into society”. But there has been no progress from Government towards delivering this, and moreover, while previous manifestos had promised “a National English Language Strategy”, there was no reference to this in 2019.

Since the Casey Review in 2016, NATECLA have led a campaign calling for a national strategy for ESOL for England. Drawing on a whole series of reports from a whole range of education and social welfare organisations, they have argued the economic and social case for a strategy, observing that “despite politicians’ apparent recognition of the importance of learning English, there has been a lack of political will to create a strategic framework for ESOL”.²⁰ In the face of concerted pressure, the Government promised to publish a strategy in 2019, but to this date we are still waiting.

One reason advanced by some observers is that a national strategy would be inappropriate when so much of the responsibility and funding for ESOL is being devolved to Combined Authorities. From this perspective there is a risk that a strategy would be too centralised in its approach and might therefore restrict innovative and flexible local approaches. But in other policy areas, effective ways have been found to balance localism and centralism. One recent example is the strategy of giving local areas responsibility for developing Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs), whilst ensuring that this is implemented within a controlled national framework. There is no reason why a similar balance can’t be struck in relation to ESOL provision.

The benefits of a national strategy have been reiterated time and time again over the past twenty years. Introducing a more consistent and coordinated approach would enable funding to be better matched to identified needs, and as a result, resources would be deployed more cost-effectively. At present, three separate Government departments have overlapping responsibilities; although the DfE takes the lead, the DHCLG and the Home Office are also involved in shaping policy and provision. A single strategy would enable far better clarification of roles and a better balance to be achieved between the two overriding policy goals of improving community integration and investing in a more highly skilled workforce.

A national strategy would also provide a framework for a more systematic and sustained collection and analysis of evidence about the needs of ESOL learners and the most effective ways of meeting them. Currently there are big gaps in the available data to assess the scale of demand for ESOL at different levels, the relative success of different teaching approaches or the value of ESOL provision. This is the case both in relation to the earnings premium students gain from having better English and in the savings to the public purse of moving individuals away from benefit-dependency towards being productive contributors to the economy. There is no coherent mechanism for evaluating the impact of ESOL courses or disseminating best practice.

A national strategy would need to be accompanied by a national funding strategy. There needs to be an up-front commitment to 1) funding ESOL provision in line with the priorities identified by an evidence-based strategy and 2) to ring-fencing sufficient funding to meet agreed needs. This does not necessarily imply an overall rise in public spending on migrant welfare. As many expert commentators have argued, ambitious targets for moving greater numbers of ESOL learners out of unemployment and low paid work into stable, higher paid employment will reduce expenditure on benefits and increase tax revenues overall.

Meanwhile, in lieu of a coherent strategy, two new funding initiatives have been announced, both of which in different ways illustrate the policy vacuum around ESOL. The first is the ESOL for Integration Fund, which returns to the policy theme of social integration. In March 2020 the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government issued a call for bids designed to help local authorities meet the needs of specific local areas.²¹ The aims of the fund are highly targeted and limited in scope, focusing on ESOL beginners who are isolated and workless within their own communities. From a priority list of 65 localities, 30 were selected to run classes and activities during 2020/21. To date it is unclear how much of an impact this additional funding has had, but to put the £6.5m fund in perspective, it is worth recalling that the total annual AEB budget for ESOL delivery prior to the pandemic was £67m.

More recently, the EU structural funding that many providers used to supplement their ESOL funding has been replaced post-Brexit by the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. The prospectus, which came out in April 2022, explicitly links this fund to the Levelling Up White Paper, and restates its policy objectives, with a strong emphasis on place-based solutions to social and economic disparities across England. The overall budget is the same as the previous EU funding – a very significant £2.6 billion over three years - and up to 30% of the fund can be allocated for a “people and skills” priority designed to address the whole range of UK skills issues. But as the fund only starts next academic year (2022/23) the amount that will end up being spent on ESOL, which is not specifically mentioned in the prospectus, is a complete unknown.²² Apart from the question of funding, neither the Shared Prosperity Fund nor the Levelling Up White Paper take us any nearer to a national ESOL strategy or policy.

In January 2021 the Skills for Jobs White Paper heralded a major shift in post-18 policy, towards a much more flexible, responsive system. Its central vision is for adults wishing to study at higher levels – in particular level

4 and 5 higher technical qualifications – to be able to have much better access through the introduction of a Lifelong Learning Loan Entitlement. The proposals have been subject to consultation, and it will be a few months before the details are confirmed, but it seems likely that ESOL will be excluded from the new regime, since most ESOL learning takes place at level 3 and below.

The White Paper devotes only one paragraph to ESOL: “We believe that everyone who lives in England should have the opportunity to learn to speak English so that they can participate in our labour market and civil society. Our commitment to boost English language provision for existing migrants will be a key part of the future adult skills system to help people to achieve and progress through employer-recognised, high-quality qualifications.”²³ There has been no further information since it was published on how exactly this aspiration is going to be delivered. The Skills Bill could potentially be very significant in helping drive through a much more coherent policy around ESOL and adult skills, but so far there is no sign of this.

The ESOL policy and strategy vacuum in England makes responding to change an uphill battle, and there have been three major changes recently that will have a big impact on the ESOL landscape.

First is Brexit, and the new points-based immigration system that has now being introduced, with the clear political aim of “taking control of our borders”. From 1st January 2021, all arriving in the UK are subject to the new policy. The end of free movement within the European Union has already meant that the number of ESOL enrolments from European migrants is reported by providers to have fallen sharply. The extent of the decline is impossible to accurately quantify, partly because of the lack of any central data on the country of origin of ESOL students, and partly because of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have caused some workers from the EU to depart from UK temporarily rather than permanently. It is simply too early to make an evidence-based assessment.

What’s clear is that the new immigration system will have a predictable impact on the numbers of economic immigrants with limited English, simply because there is now a requirement that those applying for work visas are able to speak English at intermediate level at least. The intention of the policy was to restrict immigration to higher skills areas of the labour market where there is an identified shortage, though this approach is coming under pressure as serious skills shortages open up in lower skill areas of the economy, such as Hospitality, Care, and Food production. However, despite the current uncertainty over the exact impact of the new system, it appears very likely that it will mean that we can expect there to be fewer economic immigrants with poor English skills, which in turn means that ESOL enrolments from this section of the population will be lower in the future.²⁴

While this may be the case, the skilled migrant route is not the only way in which immigrants will arrive in the UK. Spouses and family members of skilled workers will continue to arrive, as will asylum seekers. There will still be a demand from some industry sectors for temporary migrant labour to work in seasonal occupations.

Meanwhile, the backlog of settled immigrants in the UK, many of whom have made little or no progress in learning English, remains in place, with continuing evidence from providers that demand for ESOL classes remains high and there is plenty of evidence of unmet demand.

The second major change has been the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite most providers rapidly switching to online delivery during the period of successive lockdowns, it soon became clear that this was not a format that suited adult ESOL learners. Many had limited or no access to good quality IT equipment and broadband services, so were effectively locked out of participation. Anecdotal evidence indicates that even when they were able to access it, ESOL students, particularly at beginner level, did not find online delivery effective, perhaps because of a lack of digital skills, perhaps because the social element of attending classes is a powerful motivator or perhaps because the quality of delivery was not good enough, due to tutors who may have had limited experience of - or training in - e-learning, and little time to prepare good online material.

As we emerge from the pandemic, AEB funded ESOL enrolments have recovered almost to pre-pandemic levels, with the data for 2021/22 showing the number of learners at 93% of the 2019/20 total.²⁵ It could well be that the main legacy of the pandemic in relation to ESOL students will be to prompt clearer thinking about the extent to which digital learning is suitable for different types of learners at different levels. Much more research will be needed to establish this.

The third major change, post-Brexit and post-pandemic, is the dramatic combined impact of both events on the UK labour market. Information is still emerging, but it is already clear that there is a severe shortage of recruits not only in high-skill sectors, but an equally serious shortage in low-skill areas. While the former issue has been a long-term concern, pre-dating Brexit and the pandemic, the latter is an unpleasant new feature of the economy. Although there seem to be several factors at play, common sense suggests that one cause of the problem is that a big portion of workers from Europe, prepared to do unglamorous jobs at relatively low pay levels, often working anti-social shift patterns with little job security, has disappeared from the country and shows little sign of returning.

We simply don't know how many of these workers – some of whom were temporary migrants - participated in ESOL, and with no availability of funding for workplace-learning, all the indications are that they have previously formed a relatively small part of the ESOL student body. However, their absence is likely to have a sizeable impact in specific industrial sectors for the foreseeable future. It is becoming very apparent that English workers, even those who are unemployed or in part-time jobs, are not prepared to take arduous, low-skilled jobs without significant improvements to pay and conditions. The only alternative is to find non-European sources of migrant labour, which is already beginning to happen in sectors such as Healthcare, and to relax the language requirements for work visas in specific shortage occupations. This would lead to an increase in the demand for ESOL.



3. REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

3.1 NUMBERS AND NEEDS

On top of the major changes brought about by Brexit and COVID-19, recent events have provided a stark reminder of the likelihood of sudden influxes of asylum seekers and refugees in a world still riven by conflicts. Some are relatively easy to predict in advance; many are not. The war in Ukraine has already led to a surge in demand for ESOL, and even at the lower end of estimates of the likely numbers of Ukrainian refugees arriving in the UK, they will have a considerable impact. Just over 115,000 had arrived by August 2022, and the number who have applied for visas was 206,000, with 177,000 visas issued.²⁶

The UK's scheme for Ukrainians follows a long history of specific Resettlement Schemes in response to previous refugee crises. Special provisions have recently been made for refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, and Hong Kong, and on top of these specific initiatives, the Government, for historical reasons, now operates four different resettlement schemes for refugees in general²⁷

Alongside the depressingly frequent occurrence of major refugee crises, there is also a constant inflow of asylum seekers, arriving in the UK through authorised and unauthorised routes. The annual volume of asylum applications has been on an upward trend since 2010, reaching over 55,000 in 2021, and this showing no sign of letting up. In 2021, the nationalities with the largest number of asylum applications were Iranian (9,800), Iraqi (6,141), Eritrean (4,648), Albanian (4,522), and Syrian (3,353). There is also an upward trend in the number of unaccompanied children who arrive in the UK, which is currently over 3,000 a year.²⁸

It is hard to put a precise figure on the numbers of refugees and asylum seekers as the figures are constantly changing, but a recent estimate is that in mid-2021, there were 136,000 refugees, 83,000 asylum seekers, and 4,000 stateless people in the UK, making a total of 223,000²⁹. This would suggest that refugees and asylum seekers make up over a quarter of the total number of individuals needing ESOL.

The vast majority of refugees and asylum seekers require extensive English language teaching, creating a continuing demand for ESOL, with sudden unexpected surges for the foreseeable future. Even if the Government's controversial scheme to transport unauthorised asylum seekers to Rwanda to be processed is successful, there will still be a continued demand, given that over half of asylum applications are eventually successful³⁰

However, most asylum seekers are not eligible for any funded education programmes. This is for the simple reason that they are not allowed to work while their claim for asylum is being considered. After 12 months in the UK, they can apply for special permission to work, but are only able to apply for jobs from the Home Office shortage occupations list. Given the unprecedentedly high numbers of applications for asylum, and the fact that many unsuccessful applicants have the right to appeal against the initial decision, 70% of asylum seekers are waiting over a year for a decision, with 5% waiting more than five years³¹. This lengthy period of uncertainty makes it difficult for asylum seekers to settle into a new life or plan for their future. It often exacerbates the welfare and mental health problems they face and erodes their confidence. In the early stages of the application process, the vast majority are unable to access ESOL courses in most areas of the country unless they are lucky enough to find providers prepared to waive the normal fees. Even if they have some knowledge of English, they are excluded from most education and training opportunities.

Refugees and Asylum Seekers' ESOL needs are met primarily by FE Colleges, alongside local authority Adult Education services, and other adult education providers such as the Workers Education Association and the network of Adult Education Institutes across England. Many Colleges, particularly in urban areas, enrol hundreds of ESOL adults each year, often representing a high proportion of their overall adult education delivery. Colleges are also able to offer full time ESOL courses to 16–18-year-olds, and many enrol large numbers of young people annually, including a significant number of unaccompanied refugees and asylum seekers.

Despite the half-hearted approach taken by national Government, Local Authorities and FE Colleges have generally adopted a positive and welcoming stance to this highly vulnerable group of learners. A growing number of British cities have become Cities of Sanctuary, an initiative started in Sheffield in 2005 that now involves over a hundred localities, while many education establishments have also joined this movement, including seven FE Colleges and over twenty Universities.³² Coordinated by a national charitable network, this involves an institution-wide commitment to developing enhanced support services to migrant students.

It is hardly surprising that Colleges feel obliged to provide a lot more for asylum seekers and refugees than simply classroom teaching. Many of them are desperately short of money, in insecure and sometimes low-quality accommodation, and have suffered serious trauma as a result of discrimination, persecution, and warfare in their home countries. Most have lost all their possessions and have used all their money to pay for each leg of their long journey to the UK. Since most asylum seekers are not eligible for any of the financial support offered to other disadvantaged students, Colleges have to find ways of providing support to many of their ESOL learners to enable them to attend regularly and be able to focus on their learning. For many years, Colleges have made extraordinary efforts to meet students' practical and psychological needs, but resources are stretched. In many cases college staff go far beyond what is required in offering support, in the face of a system which has become increasingly complex and bureaucratic. In practice, colleges which are themselves facing financial challenges and can often do little more than signpost individuals to local charities and support networks.

Refugees and Asylum Seekers are caught in a Catch-22 situation. Learning English quickly and to as high a standard as possible is vital to their chances of establishing themselves in the UK and getting a job which moves them away from benefit-dependency and towards a productive career. But having to face so many practical hurdles, as well as coping with the legacy of psychological damage suffered in their home country and on the journey to safety, makes it a considerable challenge for many of them to focus on their learning, to attend classes regularly and to achieve their ESOL qualifications.

3.2 PRIOR QUALIFICATIONS AND SKILLS

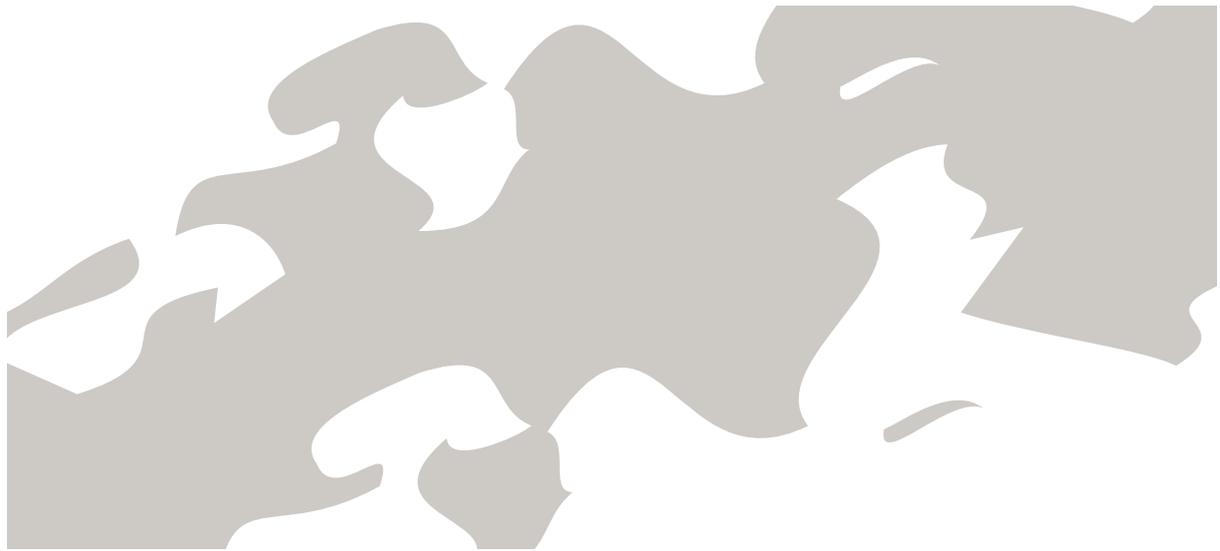
Successive surveys have found that a high proportion of refugees have significant prior educational attainment, with a 2004 large-scale survey finding that 46% had ten years or more of education, 16% having post-16 qualifications, and 8% having university level qualifications.³³ These findings have been broadly replicated in studies over the past twenty years, with a trend towards a higher percentage of refugees and asylum seekers having significant post-school qualifications. A Home Office Research Report in 2010, for example, found that 45% of refugees had a qualification and 49% were previously employed or self-employed.³⁴ A survey of the West Midlands published in 2018 found that half of respondents had received seven to twelve years education, with 23% previously working in professional or skilled occupations, and 8% holding degrees or technical qualifications.³⁵ A more recent report for the Welsh Government found that 27% of refugees and asylum seekers had higher education, and 14% had further education qualifications on arrival in the UK.³⁶

While it is clear that a significant proportion of refugees and asylum seekers have good skills and qualifications, it is equally clear that those who are legally able to work in the UK struggle to secure jobs which reflect their experience. Most end up working in low-skill, low-paid, insecure employment, often unrelated to their previous occupational sector or level. A 2019 study by Carlos Vargas-Silva and colleagues

concluded that asylum migrants – defined as those asylum seekers who have been granted citizenship in the UK – had an employment rate of 51% compared to 73% for the UK-born and earned on average 55% less per week and 37% less per hour.³⁷ These findings replicate those of all other studies that have investigated the labour market position of refugees and asylum seekers.

Refugees and asylum migrants face several major barriers when they try to find jobs commensurate with their skill levels. Many arrive with serious health problems, both mental and physical, following their difficult and often dangerous journey to the UK, and often having left many of their friends and family members behind. In most cases, they have no network of social support to help them deal with any trauma, nor any professional contacts to help them navigate the labour market in an unfamiliar country. Frequently they face difficulties in having their qualifications accepted, either because they don't have access to documentary proof of their prior attainment or because the qualifications they hold are not recognised by professional bodies in the UK.

But of course, the most significant barrier is their lack of proficiency in English, so ESOL provision is universally accepted as key to participation in the labour market. Alice Bloch's study puts this succinctly: "proficiency in the language of the country of asylum is fundamental for the social and economic integration of refugees", and summarises the factors that enable refugees to gain jobs: "refugees in employment are likely to speak English fluently or fairly well, have arrived in the UK with a qualification, have obtained qualifications in the UK...have been resident in the UK for three years or more...be under 35 years old and be male"³⁸ All this points to a need for a package of support to be offered if skilled refugees and asylum seekers are to get work. Sustained ESOL training needs to be supplemented by various forms of pastoral care and welfare assistance, which need to be offered in a coordinated and integrated way.³⁹



4. LEARNER NEEDS

4.1 LANGUAGE LEARNING NEEDS

Even if social cohesion is the overriding aim of policy towards migrants, it is clear that having a job is vital, and that having a job at the right level of skill and with good pay and conditions is a big factor in the ability of individuals to integrate successfully into UK society. Post-war immigration to the UK was characterised at first by a demand for labour in specific industry sectors – manufacturing, transport, health – where there were shortages. Immigrants took up mainly unskilled or semi-skilled jobs, and it was typically men, not women, who had employment. This has left a legacy of men who have only colloquial English and women who have hardly any English at all, despite being in the UK for years.

But while recent Government policy – such as the ESOL for Integration Fund – has rightly identified English language learning as the key to social and economic participation for these settled communities, there has been little focus on what exactly is needed to make ESOL provision effective for those who arrive in the UK without going through a planned immigration route under the new points-based system. One key advantage of the new system is that the language ability of migrants is now an integral part of the application process, as is the requirement to demonstrate a level of skill and qualification appropriate to the needs of the UK labour market. In the words of former Home Secretary Priti Patel, the new system will “prioritise skill and talent over where someone comes from”.⁴⁰

For this to work, ESOL provision is necessary, but not sufficient. ESOL provision itself needs to be significantly enhanced, and English language learning needs to be better tailored to the requirements of the skilled labour market. In addition, given the requirement under the new immigration system for work visa applicants to speak English at intermediate (GCSE) level, there is very likely to be a rising demand for higher level ESOL in future.

One major problem is that current ESOL delivery is focused almost exclusively on the most basic levels of learning. Overall, 95% of ESOL enrolments, according to DfE data, are for courses below GCSE level, and this figure has remained constant, with only minor fluctuations, since the current suite of qualifications was introduced in 2014/15⁴¹. This reflects the assumption that it is the older immigrant communities who most need ESOL to improve their level of social integration. Yet this basic level doesn't allow learners to gain sufficient proficiency to progress beyond unskilled work. Experts in language learning argue that a much higher level of learning is needed to enable access to skilled jobs, with research from Australia suggesting that 1,765 hours of specialist ESOL teaching is needed to reach an adequate level of English for most jobs, which equates to 350 hours for each level from beginners to GCSE-equivalent.

In practice, almost all ESOL students get far less direct teaching contact time than this, with most studying between 4-6 hours per week, which is around 150 to 230 hours per year.⁴² As a result, many move on to vocational courses without an adequate grasp of English and "have to cope with learning new complex, technical subject content in a language they are still learning."⁴³ While the quality of ESOL teaching – as reflected in achievement rates and Ofsted reports – is generally high, even the most skilled and experienced specialist teachers face an impossible challenge in trying to meet the needs of their students within such a constrained curriculum and resource framework.

A second major problem is that the current funding arrangements incentivise students and providers to place ESOL students on non-specialist courses once they have achieved the basic level 1 qualification. While ESOL for most adults is only partly funded and requires learners to pay fees – outside the three devolved authorities where the rules have changed – Functional Skills and GCSE English is fully funded and therefore free of charge. But Functional Skills and GCSE courses are designed for native English speakers, and don't focus on aspects of English vital for ESOL learners – grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and the difference between formal and colloquial English.⁴⁴ They also are typically delivered through fewer teaching hours than ESOL and are usually taught by staff who are not specialists in ESOL. To achieve the level of proficiency required for skilled occupations, far more ESOL needs to be delivered at higher levels and more intensively, and there, therefore, needs to be a much stronger focus on Level 2 (GCSE equivalent) and above, both in terms of policy and funding.

Recognising the limitations of the current curriculum offer, many providers have attempted to deliver ESOL training as an integral part of higher-level vocational training courses, so, for example, students have the opportunity to learn English while they are studying Health and Care or Catering or Engineering at Level 3. The advantages of this approach are that it allows ESOL learners to continue to develop their English proficiency, and that it enables teachers to focus on elements of vocabulary that are specific to specialist occupations, and on specific language requirements for particular jobs, such as the skills needed by nurses and care professionals to present accurate and succinct written reports on patient progress. However, it is not easy to find ways of making courses that combine ESOL and vocational training cost-effective, given the current funding rules and resource constraints. For this reason, many ESOL students on vocational pathways are only offered Functional Skills or GCSE courses.

The third major problem is the absence of any AEB funding for workplace ESOL since it was withdrawn in 2011. While some providers have managed to sustain some provision through the use of other funding streams, particularly the European Social Fund, many have found it too difficult to deliver. There are a number of barriers; irregular working hours and shift patterns leading to fluctuating attendance, uneconomic small class sizes, and the difficulty of trying to meet widely varying levels and needs.⁴⁵ With access to courses so restricted, it appears that many workers go no further than basic ESOL and rely on informal learning to progress any further. The failure to fund any workplace ESOL makes it even more difficult for immigrants to develop the level of English they would need to access higher skilled and better paid jobs, either through promotion or career development.

Finally, there should be a much greater focus on how ESOL students are supported to progress on to the higher levels of learning necessary to access higher technical skills training, and higher education generally. While most universities offer high level English classes to second language students – migrant and international – this is typically only available to those already enrolled; Foundation Year courses for ESOL students are usually restricted to international students on a full cost basis, making them unaffordable for UK citizens.

Currently, supported by the RefugEAP network of academics working within and across institutions, many students are offered bespoke English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) courses as a supplement to their main programmes. While this is very welcome, consideration needs to be given to introducing Access to HE courses specifically tailored to the needs of home based ESOL students, and subject to the same loan funding rules, meaning that those who progress successfully on to bachelors' degrees or other higher education courses have their Access to HE loans written off. This would need to be developed in close collaboration between FE and HE providers, to ensure that transition to HE for these students is as seamless as possible.

4.2 STUDENT SUPPORT NEEDS

Over and above the barriers created by inflexible and under-funded ESOL delivery, students have additional hurdles to overcome. Those from settled communities often face cultural and religious barriers to participation in learning. As already noted, individual refugees and asylum seekers often have mental and physical health issues directly related to the traumatic experience of fleeing from their country of birth. In addition to these needs, they also require active support in orientating to a new life in a new country. Successive surveys have revealed that most have very positive attitudes to Britain and are thankful for the kindness they receive from many people in the host community. However, they still face the many daunting challenges involved in securing a stable home and a reasonable standard of living for their families.

In addition, they have to understand the education and employment opportunities available in the UK and map out a pathway to improving their position. In this context, the weakness of information, advice, and guidance (IAG) tailored to the needs of ESOL students creates another barrier. While young learners may benefit from Careers Education at school, the IAG support they receive when they transition to post-compulsory education is patchy and of variable quality. This is compounded by the lack of any tracking system to ensure that school pupils' English needs are identified and picked up by post-16 institutions. Many providers have incorporated IAG into their courses and enrolment procedures, but there is a lack of provision focused on progression pathways and employment opportunities.⁴⁶ Immigrants need specific help in understanding the UK's complex post-16 education system, with its wide range of qualifications, types of learning and funding regimes, and this is currently only available on an informal basis, dependent on the goodwill of individual members of staff in colleges and other settings.

There are signs that the Government is beginning to acknowledge the range of factors preventing immigrants from filling vacancies, particularly in the current labour market, where skills gaps and skills shortages are becoming acute in many industrial sectors. Various Government departments have recently begun experimenting with a much more proactive approach to recruiting skilled refugees and asylum migrants into areas where there are pressing needs. In July 2021, the Home Secretary announced a new initiative, the Displaced Talent Mobility Pilot, "designed to facilitate UK work permit applications by skilled refugees and displaced people from Jordan and Lebanon."⁴⁷ This is a pilot scheme, run in partnership with the charity Talent Beyond Boundaries, which describes it as seeking "to establish a 'proof of concept' and test whether a more permanent solution...is viable and/or necessary". In effect, it is a variation of the Skilled Worker Route already available under the new immigration legislation, adding an extra layer of support to employers who are prepared to sponsor individual applicants, and aiming to attract 50-100 highly qualified migrants to jobs in IT, Engineering, and Construction over a two-year period.

In May 2022 NHS Employers announced a scheme in partnership with the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and non-Governmental organisations (NGOs) "to help place skilled refugee nurses from both outside of the UK and within, back into employment" The NHS initiative builds on previous schemes

– including the Displaced Talent Mobility Pilot – and refers extensively to the special provisions made to support Ukrainian refugees, as well as the previous Afghan Citizens resettlement scheme. It also highlights specific regional projects, such as RefuAid in Merseyside, Reache Northwest, the Healthcare Overseas Professionals scheme in the West Midlands and the Building Bridges programme in London.⁴⁸

No new resources are available under the various schemes, but they provide structured advice and guidance to employers on meeting not only the language needs, but also the wider support needs of participants, through, for example, providing training for recruiters and supervisors, offering mentorship or buddy schemes, providing short-term internships, and improving IAG for newly recruited workers. A growing number of charitable organisations are now offering to support refugee employment, either through place-based projects or through working with employers in specific sectors.

However, welcome though all these activities are, they are no substitute for a nationally coordinated strategy to meet the needs of refugees and asylum seekers. At best, charitable organisations only have the resources to work with relatively small cohorts of clients, and are reliant on short-term, temporary funding. With the numbers of emergency migrants growing to unprecedented levels, and the new immigration system struggling to cope with a swelling backlog of unresolved asylum cases, existing projects can only scratch the surface of the problem.

Small numbers of highly skilled applicants for UK work visas are beginning to be successfully processed, but the number is nowhere near large enough to meet the UK's skills needs. As skill shortages open up in new occupational sectors following the pandemic, the highly targeted system operated by the Government is coming under strain and is unable to respond quickly enough to employers' urgent needs. Already 9% of the labour market is covered by the Government's Shortage Occupation List (SOL), rather than the 1% envisaged when it was first brought in.⁴⁹

In essence, the whole system is reactive, rather than responding in a timely manner to anticipated future skill shortages, and there is an inevitable lag between recommendations being made to widen the ESOL and decisions being made. For anyone planning ESOL provision to meet the needs of incoming workers, the system is practically unworkable.

The opportunity now exists to move towards a proactive system, linked to the new Local Skills Improvement Plans, which are now being piloted across England following the passage of the Skills Act. LSIPs will be based on a detailed picture of the skills needs and priorities in each area, and this will enable ESOL needs to be considered, not just generally, but linked directly to specific sectors and occupations where there are skills gaps and shortages. This, in turn, would provide the basis for a system through which ESOL is offered as an additional component of vocational training where there is an identified need for it.



5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Proficiency in English is by far the single most important factor in enabling the social and economic integration of immigrants. The great majority, especially the ones who do not come to the UK through the new points-based system, have limited English on arrival, and so for them, ESOL is vital. In an unstable world, the growing numbers of refugees and asylum seekers, in combination with the rapid expansion of the Shortage Occupation List as the UK struggles with skills shortages, indicates that demand for ESOL is likely to increase for the foreseeable future. Ignoring the problem will only store up greater problems for the future; not only problems of social integration and community conflict, but also economic problems of growing skills gaps and stagnating productivity across the UK.

Most economists agree that immigration is a positive force in driving innovation, entrepreneurship, and growth. Certainly, that has been the case in the UK for the past century at least, with successive waves of immigrants making a vital contribution to the vigour and competitiveness of the British economy. In the words of former Home Secretary Priti Patel, “it is an undeniable fact that immigration has and continues to enrich - in every sense of the word - our nation immeasurably”.⁵⁰ But in the wake of Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic, it has become only too clear that UK productivity and growth is in danger of stalling because the supply of skilled migrant labour is not keeping up with demand. The policy levers designed to take firmer control of unauthorised immigration are threatening to create even greater barriers to the economic integration of immigrants.

What is needed is a decisive move towards a much more pro-active and positive attitude towards migrant talent. A new policy framework is needed that recognises and encourages the need to identify, develop, and maximise the skills and positive motivation of immigrants – those migrants who are intending to settle in the UK, including those who arrive as refugees and asylum seekers. Providing training and support for immigrants of all kinds, rather than spending money on keeping them in enforced inactivity while the state pays for their accommodation and living costs, is surely a more effective use of public funds. Having a “settlement-positive” strategy would make it far more likely that those who are granted citizenship could become economically self-sufficient much earlier and could contribute much more quickly to filling the skills shortages currently holding the UK economy back. There is no intrinsic tension between having a firm and fair immigration system which ensures that only those who are entitled to citizenship are allowed to stay in the UK and having a positive and supportive system for ensuring the successful economic integration of those entitled to stay.

The most important first step would be for the Government to create and implement an ESOL strategy for England. The absence of a national strategy has allowed ESOL provision to become increasingly fragmented, over-complicated, uneven, inequitable, and inefficient. Without a strategy we have no mechanisms through which to forecast, plan and coordinate the national supply of ESOL training against current and future demand. Although there is an effective mechanism for identifying young people with English as an Additional Language needs in the school system, there is no standard system for tracking their evolving English needs as they move from school to college, to university and into work. There is no mechanism for identifying good practice and learning from what works, either with regards to best practice in the teaching of ESOL or in relation to appropriate curriculum and qualification pathways.

With considerable differences now emerging in the rules around who is eligible for free ESOL provision, the funding regime around ESOL risks becoming arbitrary and unfair, far too dependent on where students happen to live. In general, funding is poorly related to need, with far too many students being offered courses as a result of funding considerations, rather than an assessment of their learning needs. A well-designed national strategy would aim to allow for local flexibility and innovation within a coherent national framework.

As we have seen, it isn't enough for an ESOL strategy to just be based on the funding of teaching and the delivery of learning. ESOL students have a wide range of additional support needs, and in the case of asylum seekers and refugees, some very distinctive individual needs. An ESOL strategy would also be an opportunity to address these needs more efficiently and effectively. Welfare needs, health needs, psychological needs, religious and cultural needs are all important factors in learners' progress, and if not properly addressed, make it hard for many students to attend regularly, feel comfortable and settled in their classes, and focus on their learning.

An ESOL strategy for England would also be an opportunity to emphasise the importance of English language skills in enabling students to progress from basic to higher skill jobs. In an era of lifelong learning, and with the radical new Lifelong Loan Entitlement due to begin in 2024, the time is right to bring ESOL into the skills discussion. Viewing ESOL as a vital component of a strategy for raising economic performance through upskilling and reskilling the UK's workforce would ensure that English language learning was seen not only as a social skill, but as a vocational skill. ESOL for social cohesion is of course vitally important for the health of the UK as a society; but so is ESOL for skills for the health of the UK economy.

So, the vision for an ESOL strategy for England should be underpinned by a philosophy of enlightened self-interest. Providing ESOL for those sections of the settled immigrant community who have been left isolated over the years is a laudable aim, as is providing ESOL for asylum seekers and refugees fleeing humanitarian crises and global conflicts. The public response to wave after wave of refugees - from Vietnam, Somalia, Syria, Afghanistan, Hong Kong and, most recently, Ukraine - has demonstrated the humane instinct and compassion that is part of the UK's culture.

But alongside this charitable response, there must also be an element of self-interest. If immigrants are perceived as "taking our jobs" or as undercutting UK workers' pay and conditions by being a source of cheap labour, then public opinion will tend to gravitate towards a negative attitude to migrants and a reluctance to offer them support. If, on the other hand, immigrants are acknowledged as net contributors to national prosperity and a vital part of the solution to the UK's productivity challenge, then it is in everyone's interest to focus on investing in their skills development, in ESOL and beyond.

The development of Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) for every area of England is one of the key ideas of the new Skills Act of 2022. All those involved in drawing these plans up should be asked to consider, as an integral part of their work, the supply and demand for ESOL to support vocational skills improvement and ensure the availability of sufficient high quality ESOL provision, from basic to advanced levels. This should be in parallel with the existing focus on general adult literacy and numeracy, but recognise that ESOL is a distinct discipline, requiring distinct course design and teaching.

The English language occupies a unique position as the global language for international business and trade. The idea of "Global Britain" rests, to a large extent, on the way in which English language and culture was disseminated historically around the world in the era of colonialism and Empire. It is now time to fully embrace the concept of global Britain within our own borders, by ensuring that the English language is spoken, understood, written, and read to a high standard by all those who live in the UK, and all those active in the UK's labour market. We need better English language teaching for adults of all backgrounds, and at the same time, better ESOL for skills.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The DfE should develop an ESOL Strategy for England, laying out plans for teaching, learning and student support, and covering not just issues of social cohesion and integration, but ESOL for skills.
2. The ESOL Strategy for England should be “settlement-positive”, enabling the provision of free English language teaching to all those seeking UK citizenship after six months in the UK.
3. ESOL provision up to Level 2 should be fully funded across England for all refugees and asylum seekers, by making courses eligible for full fee remission.
4. Funding for ESOL courses up to and including Level 2 should be raised to enable at least 360 hours of tuition per year to be delivered.
5. Specific support funding for ESOL students, including Refugees and Asylum seekers, should be allocated to all providers, based on the numbers of ESOL students enrolled. The amount of funding should be set at a level to enable providers to offer services to meet welfare and mental health needs.
6. Access to HE courses specifically tailored to the needs of ESOL students should be introduced, with loans for these courses written off if students progress to higher education, as is already the case with other similar courses.
7. It should be a requirement that ESOL for skills is considered as a specific strand in all Local Skills Improvement Plans.
8. ESOL tuition should be offered in addition to vocational training in selected growth industries and industries with severe skills shortages. These sectors could be identified nationally, but devolved authorities should have the power to include additional sectors based on local needs analysis.

ENDNOTES

- 1 From Ascentis Exam Board internal data, see Table 1 on chapter 2.2
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This report argues that, in the face of an acute skills crisis in Britain, better provision of English for Speakers of Other Languages – ESOL – should now be a key strategy for tackling skills gaps and skills shortages. While in the past the delivery of ESOL has been framed as an important way of ensuring community cohesion and social integration, it now needs to be seen as a vital component of a strategy for economic growth. ESOL for Skills should now be the priority, and policy and funding should be reformed to support this focus.

There is a growing pool of migrants, many of them skilled and experienced professionals, who are UK residents. The biggest barrier they face to filling jobs in shortage areas is their ability to communicate in English, not just basic everyday English, but at a level of competence in speaking and writing that enables them to work effectively in highly skilled occupations. Greatly improving the delivery of ESOL is the best way of mobilising the skills that exist amongst the migrant population.



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