

ESOL provision for those in low-paid work

Findings from key stakeholder consultation

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About Learning and Work Institute

Learning and Work Institute is an independent policy, research and development organisation dedicated to lifelong learning, full employment and inclusion.

We research what works, develop new ways of thinking and implement new approaches. Working with partners, we transform people's experiences of learning and employment. What we do benefits individuals, families, communities and the wider economy.

This work was undertaken as part of our role as UK National Coordinator for the European Agenda for Adult Learning (EAAL).

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Introduction

This report sets out findings of data gathered from consultation activity with key stakeholders in the sector. This included an expert panel. Stakeholder voices included providers and practitioners, Mayoral Combined Authority representatives, local authorities, employers and refugee and asylum seeker organisations. The expert panel included representatives from Association of Colleges, Local Education Authorities' Forum for the Education of Adults , National Association for Teaching English and other Community Languages to Adults, Ofsted, The Bell Foundation, University College London Institute of Education and University of Cardiff.

While this consultation activity covered issues pertaining to all individuals with an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) need, this short report presents findings relating to individuals with an ESOL need who are in work.

Eligibility and exclusion

Access for adults to English language learning, whether delivered through 'mainstream' Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) funding or via other routes, is governed by a range of eligibility criteria. These criteria present barriers to participation for some adults, either because they are not eligible to enrol or to access funding, or because they are unable to fulfil some aspect of the course requirements once they are on programme. Further, while some adults are technically eligible, they are excluded by other factors linked to current funding policy.

Adults in low-paid work were one of the groups that emerged as priorities for action as they face financial barriers in the current system. The following priority groups were identified within the cohort:

- Individuals whose earnings are just above the threshold for accessing Adult Education Budget (AEB) funding through the low pay pilot. Many learners in low-paid work are in fact earning only around the national minimum wage, but have several jobs and work a large number of hours which pushes them above the funding threshold.
- Adults on low pay and without dependent children who are not in receipt of any benefits.
- Workers with irregular terms of employment, such as rolling shift patterns and zero-hours contracts, struggle to meet attendance and punctuality requirements for mainstream courses. Providers may therefore be unwilling to enrol them in anticipation that they will withdraw or otherwise fail to achieve, with financial penalties for the institution. Moreover, individuals cycling between low-paid work and benefits face constantly changing eligibility, which can act as a disincentive to continue with a course.
- Older adults on low incomes, as pension credits do not confer eligibility for fee remission.

Given the complexity of the eligibility criteria, potential learners need access to good quality information, advice and guidance (IAG) to help them to understand what is available, but insufficient funding is available to provide this.

Types of provision

There are a range of types of provision which it is currently challenging to deliver and would be of benefit to the in-work cohort.

ESOL for employment

A major gap exists in relation to provision that more explicitly links ESOL with employment, to support progression both into and within work. For example:

- Employment-focused support that ‘wraps around’ ESOL provision, such as mentoring. This need is particularly evident among adults aged 25+ and is critical for the wider ambitions of integration policy around supporting people into work.
- Support for delivery in the workplace is a key priority for action. It would make English language learning accessible to adults in low paid work who are currently excluded. As low levels of English language are a major inhibitor of progression at work, the current situation effectively leaves individuals trapped in jobs with poor pay and few prospects.
- Funding should support the delivery of ESOL on employers’ premises, as is the case for Maths and English. Opening up this delivery route would help to reach adults in low-paid work, including those whose employment patterns impede participation in college and community-based provision, and others for whom work and other commitments make it a challenge to find time for study. A number of programmes delivering ESOL in the workplace have been effective in reaching and motivating staff with language needs. However, there are mixed views on the extent to which employers should be expected, or would be willing, to fund provision of this kind.
- Greater involvement of local employers in developing the ESOL curriculum and offering work placements and work experience would strengthen learners’ opportunities and preparedness for work-related progression.

Higher-level ESOL provision

There is a lack of higher-level ESOL provision to meet the needs of migrants, including refugees, who have tertiary qualifications and professional experience from their home country but are held back in the UK employment market by their low level of English. These groups would benefit from more intensive provision, clearly contextualized and orientated towards preparing learners towards opportunities in relevant sectors and occupations and with support to access International English Language Testing System (IELTS) where appropriate. There is limited provision to support adults to progress to Higher Education.

Functional Skills English Programmes

Many providers do not offer ESOL at Level 1 and Level 2, but instead move learners onto Functional Skills English programmes where they can access fee remission through the statutory entitlement. This approach does not necessarily meet the needs of ESOL learners, as Functional Skills English is designed for native speakers. However, within the current system there are benefits to learners of taking Functional Skills. In particular:

- the greater volume of Functional Skills provision means that learners have more choice about the timing and location of courses, which may improve accessibility of provision for those in work.

- Functional Skills qualifications are more effective in supporting progression both to vocational training such as apprenticeships, and in work as they are recognised by employers.

Flexibility of provision

Digital technology and blended learning

Digital technology has a role to play in supporting participation of adults who face barriers to regular attendance at classroom-based learning. There is considerable scope to make greater use of blended learning approaches into the ESOL classroom, and these have the potential to increase accessibility for some key groups such as shift workers.

The following issues would need to be taken into consideration in developing blended learning ESOL:

- It would be helpful if blended learning models could be developed nationally to ensure consistency.
- It cannot be assumed that all learners have the digital skills to engage with digital learning. Support for the development of learners' digital skills may need to be embedded into language learning.
- Some learners do not have access to the relevant technology (computers, smartphones), so this aspect of access would need to be supported by providers.
- The level at which blended learning becomes an option for language learners is an important consideration. The [English My Way](#) programme is an example of how pre-Entry provision can be successfully delivered in this way, however it may not always be suitable for low level learners.
- The ESOL workforce would require some development support to become confident and competent to deliver through blended learning.

Short-term and evening provision

In addition, it would be helpful to be able to offer roll-on, roll-off provision and to run more courses in the evenings, particularly with a view to improving access for adults with irregular work patterns.

Availability

Workplace-based delivery

Workplace-based delivery is necessary to overcome the challenge of reaching adults in work, particularly those in low paid and irregular employment. Entry into this kind of work can act as a powerful brake on motivation, as well as presenting practical obstacles to participation.

Curriculum content

Curriculum content is a key motivator of engagement, and it is important that ESOL which is clearly linked to the needs and interests of potential learners is offered. For example:

- Courses are needed which link ESOL with skills and trades which potential learners already possess (e.g. plumbing, carpentry, tailoring), and there would be value in offering some vocational ESOL courses through a non-regulated route to support the initial stages of re-engagement. The needs of Syrian refugees have highlighted the gap in relation to this kind of provision.

Involving employers in the development of these would present an opportunity to raise the profile of ESOL.

Conclusion

For adults who have English language needs and are in work, accessing ESOL provision can support them to progress in work. However, there are a range of issues which make it challenging for adults who are in work to access ESOL provision. Current eligibility criteria mean that many low-paid workers miss out on language learning opportunities. There are also gaps in available provision that would be of particular value to adults in work, such as ESOL for employment, and higher level ESOL provision. Flexible options such as a blended learning or evening provision could be a solution to improving the accessibility of provision for some learners. However, blended learning may not meet all learners' needs – for example those who don't have digital skills to engage or access to relevant technology. Ensuring that ESOL is delivered in the workplace is crucial to overcome the challenge of reaching adults in work, especially adults in low-paid and irregular employment. Curriculum content can also play a key role in engaging learners. ESOL that is clearly linked to learners' needs, experiences and aspirations and vocational training that embeds ESOL can be effective. Securing employers' involvement in the development of these would help to raise awareness about the importance of ESOL for adults in work.