

Post-16 Level 2 and Below Study and Qualifications in England – A Government Call for Evidence

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About The Bell Foundation

The Bell Foundation is a charity which aims to overcome disadvantage through language education by working with partners on innovation, research, training and practical interventions. The Foundation works with a range of partners to produce robust, evidence-based research and has three programmes of work - English as an Additional Language in Schools, Criminal Justice and the new ESOL Programme. The Foundation is submitting evidence to highlight relevant research from across the three programmes. This submission includes evidence from a [literature review by the UCL Institute of Education](#) into young people, education, employment and ESOL, commissioned by The Bell Foundation, which will be published in 2021.

Introduction

The Bell Foundation welcomes the opportunity in this call for evidence to demonstrate the need for ESOL provision at all levels from entry level to levels 1 and 2. The Foundation will be happy to work with the Department for Education on the development of policies around ESOL following this call for evidence.

Of most importance to highlight is that there is a current lack of robust and up-to-date data on the scale of need for ESOL at level 2 and below for young people aged 16 to 25 years. This situation is no different for adults. The best estimate of need is based on data drawn from the 2011 Census and other data from further education colleges. This is not a good proxy on the need for ESOL provision as the census is based on self-perception and not an accurate measure of proficiency in English. In further education, some students who speak languages other than English will be placed in GCSE or Functional Skills English courses or on vocational training programmes; therefore, progression in English language proficiency is not recorded. UCL Institute of Education, commissioned by The Bell Foundation, is undertaking data analysis of the National Pupil Database (NPD) and Individualised Learner Records (ILR), to be published in 2021, to gain a better understanding of the post-16 destinations of pupils with English as an Additional Language (EAL). It is expected that the forthcoming report will provide useful insights into the need for ESOL qualifications below level 2 for young people moving from school to further education, but the insights will still be lacking for older age groups.

The Foundation welcomes the Department's commitment that level 2 study should be better at supporting students to access and achieve level 3 qualifications. Evidence from Ofsted shows that the learning gap has widened between pupils who use English as an Additional Language (EAL) and their peers during school closures. The period of prolonged school closures may lead to a future increase in demand for ESOL provision post-16 and level 2 transition qualifications proposed in this call for evidence, as English language proficiency may have deteriorated during the pandemic and intensive catch up will be needed.

For adults, the ESOL landscape is more complex, dependent on their eligibility for state-funded ESOL provision. Again, within non-state-funded community settings there is little robust data available on the numbers of adults who learn ESOL at level 2 and below. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that there is high demand for entry level ESOL, while

smaller numbers are enabled to progress to levels 1 and 2. This submission will demonstrate that the low uptake at levels 1 and 2 is not reflective of the actual need.

Although this call for evidence does not directly address ESOL data, the gap in knowledge of the scale of the need for ESOL below level 2 should be addressed. Accurate data collection will ensure that ESOL provision would meet the needs of the local population, enabling individuals to achieve the English proficiency they require to progress in education and employment. The forthcoming ESOL Strategy should include plans to introduce a measure for data collection and for measuring and collecting learner's proficiency in English.

Many of the barriers and recommendations in the submission below would be improved with robust data collection.

Question 26: which features of ESOL qualifications are most effective in supporting students to progress to further learning or into employment?

The available evidence suggests a lack of clear pathways for learners moving from ESOL qualifications to mainstream further and higher education and training ([Higton et al, 2019](#); [Simpson, 2019](#); [Mishan, 2019](#)), and a lack of data on the scale of need for young people aged 16-25 years ([Paget and Stevenson, 2014](#)). Overall, there is very limited literature on how young people who speak languages other than English are supported on vocational and academic courses within the further education and training sector post-16. This makes the question above difficult to answer.

There are two key features of ESOL qualifications which enable ESOL learners to progress – firstly, giving time and intensity to learn a language and, secondly, making learning relevant to the learner, depending on their ultimate purpose for learning and progression to higher level academic and/or vocational study, apprenticeships, and employment.

Language learning is a demanding process which takes a long time to master. It is important to recognise that it can take years to achieve the necessary level of proficiency to access higher education or employment, meaningful to the individual. It takes on average six years to reach proficiency. The reality is that many ESOL learners will be studying other qualifications or working at the same time. This reduces the number of hours to focus on language learning per week and slows down progress in achieving the required proficiency in the language of instruction. Many qualifications, including English and maths, in further education are currently only fully funded up to the age of 19, while ESOL is not. This creates a systemic barrier for learners from progressing to higher levels of ESOL qualifications, which they may need for higher education or employment. This contributes to broadening the gap between ESOL learners for those who cannot afford to pay for ESOL lessons, let alone pay for both ESOL and an academic or vocational subject course even though this can contextualise and accelerate learning overall and enable progression. Current funding arrangements give ESOL learners a double burden. The solution to this would be to consider funding options for ESOL learners beyond the age of 19 to allow time to learn ESOL to the required proficiency to progress to further learning or employment.

As recognised in the [Skills for Jobs White Paper](#), any migrant should have access to high quality ESOL qualifications which enable them to progress in work. As such, any individual over the age of 19 should be able to access ESOL qualifications, up to and including level 2. This could be through the Lifetime Skills Guarantee, if this will support them to progress their career or retrain, whether this is fully-funded, or whether ESOL qualifications are eligible for a Lifelong Loan Entitlement as proposed in the Skills for Jobs White Paper.

ESOL qualifications should be aligned to the purposes that ESOL learners might have for learning English. The main purposes for language learning are either personal and public (i.e. to participate fully in civic, community and social life and to get things done in everyday life), occupational (i.e. to enable young adults to perform their duties at work confidently and expertly in and through English), or educational (i.e. to enable ESOL learners to access further and higher education and demonstrate learning through the medium of English). Many migrants coming to the UK already have skills and require English language courses to unlock that expertise. Data from OECD ([2018](#)) shows that 48% of migrants were educated to tertiary level. The features of ESOL qualifications need to take account of and reflect

these different purposes in the curriculum specifications, course content and contexts for texts and tasks, including assessment tasks.

Evidence demonstrates that a lack of information, advice and guidance on education and training pathways which lead to employment is a key barrier for young people aged 16 to 25 ([Mishan, 2019](#)). For example, a young person who uses a language other than English may face barriers in understanding the nuances of where and how to apply for jobs, CV-writing, and interview skills as they have had little or no access to learning the English language specific vocabularies and registers needed, nor the cultural insights and understanding of the selection processes. Roberts describes how the formal British job interview operates as a 'test of belonging' ([2019:223](#)) for migrants undergoing a formal job selection process where they need to demonstrate cultural and linguistic understanding of 'the interview game'. These are two examples of where ESOL for a specific purpose would be an advantage. In this case, ESOL for employment.

Recommendations:

- Department for Education should establish the optimal measure for collecting data on ESOL qualification needs and proficiency in young people and adults.
- Department for Education should consider funding options for ESOL learners beyond the age of 19 to be based on sufficient time and intensity of study to learn ESOL to the required proficiency to progress to further learning or employment.
- Department for Education should consider ESOL as part of the Lifetime Skills Guarantee and ensure funding models are the same for ESOL as for other level 1 and 2 qualifications.
- Department for Education and Ofqual should review the core curriculum for ESOL to improve on the linguistic and pedagogical principles which underpin it. The forthcoming ESOL Strategy is the ideal place for this to be set out.

The transition programmes proposed in the consultation document should give a balanced and purposeful curriculum helping accelerate and increase progression from lower levels of study. ESOL transition programmes should be piloted as an integrated transition programme with work experience and preparation, introductory technical skills, pastoral support, and personal development, with a focus on, and more time allowed for, the language learning. These could be, but not limited to:

- ESOL transition programme for employability;
- ESOL for transition to academic study;
- ESOL for transition to vocational study;
- ESOL for personal development.

Funding would need to be commensurate to the level of study due to the intensity and increased volume of study needed for ESOL learners. This funding level is necessary in order for fair access and progression to be achieved for transition programmes for ESOL learners.

Recommendations:

- Department for Education to pilot ESOL transition programmes which are integrated with other transition programmes, such as employability and personal development.

- Department for Education to consider funding models for ESOL transition programmes which are commensurate to the volume of study required for ESOL learners to achieve the language proficiency needed to progress to level 3 qualifications.

Question 27: are ESOL qualifications at levels 1 and 2 necessary? If yes, what role do they play?

The Bell Foundation believes that ESOL qualifications at levels 1 and 2 are necessary. Entry level ESOL qualifications are equally important. As evidence indicates, post-16 learners represent a diverse population and current post-16 ESOL provision does not always meet learners' needs and aspirations ([Paget and Stevenson, 2014](#)). Without learners achieving higher levels of English and attaining qualifications in levels suitable for their future prospects, the UK is missing out on a pool of potential talent.

Department for Education data for 2016/17 shows that 84% of ESOL enrolments were entry levels 1 to 3; 14% were at level 1 and 5% at level 2. As Schellekens ([2019](#)) points out, while a proportion of migrant graduates have sufficient English to find employment, many are unemployed or under-employed because their English proficiency is too low. Language levels at entry levels 1 to 3 do not allow learners to reach a level of proficiency to progress beyond unskilled work.

Experts in ESOL practice say that learners will usually move to vocational training and education when they have achieved entry level 3, before they have sufficient language skills ([Schellekens, 2019](#)). As a result, ESOL learners have to cope with learning new, complex, technical subject content in a language they are still learning.

These points demonstrate that levels 1 and 2 are necessary, the role they play in enabling ESOL learners to access education and employment and achieve their aspirations, and that they are a more appropriate use of resources than putting learners on Functional Skills.

Recommendation:

- Department for Education should consider funding options which allow providers to offer free ESOL to all learners, including levels 1 and 2 with proper advice and guidance to learners on the need for and benefits of higher-level language skills.

Alternative qualifications

Evidence indicates that Functional Skills English (FSE) and GCSE English Language are not substitutes for ESOL levels 1 and 2. A recent consultation project, commissioned by the Department for Education and undertaken by the Learning and Work Institute ([2020](#)), found that adult ESOL learners generally worked towards ESOL qualifications at entry level, before progressing to FSE classes at level 1 or level 2. The lower number of guided learning hours in FSE classes makes them unsuitable. As discussed above in this submission, learning a language is demanding on time and a low number of hours of English per week will not allow a learner enough time to absorb the language and reach the required proficiency to progress to higher education or achieve employment aspirations. FSE is designed for native speakers who already are fluent, not for ESOL learners. The fact that FSE is free and ESOL is currently charged for distorts decisions made by individual ESOL learners, and providers as

it gives perverse incentives for ESOL learners to be inappropriately placed on English courses for native speakers.

As Schellekens ([2019](#)) demonstrates, FSE is not suitable for ESOL learners as the qualifications lack both the focus on speaking and listening skills, which are the baseline to develop reading and writing skills, and on the development of much-needed language development, such as word order and tenses, vocabulary and grammar. To make matters worse, FSE is often delivered by teachers who lack the skills to teach people whose first language is not English ([Schellekens, 2019](#)). Furthermore, the English taught and used in Functional Skills lessons requires levels of vocabulary and grammar that ESOL learners are unlikely to have. The Bell Foundation recommends against this practice, and instead urges ESOL funding to be available beyond entry level, to enable learners to continue to learn English in the best setting for their English development.

[Higton et al](#) (2017) question whether GCSE English Language is the most suitable examination for all 16-18 students with ESOL. They argue that the revised GCSE English Language curriculum, which includes 19th century texts, presents additional hurdles for young people who use a language other than English.

Recommendation:

- Department for Education should ensure that funding models mean colleges are not disincentivised from offering ESOL provision, over free and affordable Functional Skills English.

Systemic barriers to progressing to ESOL levels 1 and 2

There are barriers within the ESOL system which prevent people from progressing to levels 1 and 2, meaning that the number of ESOL learners at levels 1 and 2 does not truly reflect the need.

The overall education system lacks a common framework at national level to describe, map and coherently articulate progression in English language skills, and assessment of such skills, for second language speakers. This results in a lack of robust assessment data on proficiency in English as learners progress from compulsory to post-compulsory education, which could usefully inform initial assessment at the start of FE and appropriate English courses. This in turn results in students being placed in unsuitable ESOL classes. There is even anecdotal evidence of young learners placed in adult ESOL courses which do not meet their needs and progression.

As the evidence shows, proficiency in English is the major factor in determining both the degree of support an individual student will require and their attainment ([Strand, Malmberg and Hall, 2015](#)). Any assessment process must be independently moderated and consistently applied to ensure that the data is robust and students can access the most appropriate ESOL provision.

Recommendations:

- Department for Education should commission research into proficiency and the ESOL levels, linked to the length of time of progression of ESOL learners aged 16 to 19 in further education to acquire the required proficiency in English for progression in education and for meaningful employment.
- Department for Education should commission the development of an evidence-informed and robust assessment framework for proficiency in English, for use across ESOL provision nationwide. The Bell Foundation could work with an academic team to support the Department in developing this tool.

The barriers are compounded by a shortage of qualified ESOL tutors, who have the sound pedagogical knowledge. The number of centres offering ESOL teaching qualifications has reduced, which creates a barrier to anyone wishing to undertake an ESOL teaching qualification.

Recommendations:

- Department for Education to review ESOL teacher qualifications to ensure they meet the demands of teaching ESOL and they are equipped in assessing ESOL needs ensuring that ESOL learners can progress onto further relevant ESOL qualifications, higher education and employment.
- Department for Education to develop with partners the promotion of teaching of ESOL qualifications to increase the number of qualified ESOL teachers to meet needs.

Summary of recommendations:

- Department for Education should establish the optimal measure for collecting data on ESOL qualification needs and proficiency in young people and adults.
- Department for Education should consider funding options for ESOL learners beyond the age of 19 to be based on sufficient time and intensity of study to learn ESOL to the required proficiency to progress to further learning or employment.
- Department for Education should consider ESOL as part of the Lifetime Skills Guarantee and ensure funding models are the same for ESOL as for other level 1 and 2 qualifications.
- Department for Education and Ofqual should review the core curriculum for ESOL to improve on the linguistic and pedagogical principles which underpin it. The forthcoming ESOL Strategy is the ideal place for this to be set out.
- Department for Education to pilot ESOL transition programmes which are integrated with other transition programmes, such as employability and personal development.
- Department for Education to consider funding models for ESOL transition programmes which are commensurate to the volume of study required for ESOL learners to achieve the language proficiency required to progress to level 3 qualifications.
- Department for Education should consider funding options which allow providers to offer free ESOL to all learners, including levels 1 and 2 with proper advice and guidance to learners on the need for and benefits of higher-level language skills.

- Department for Education should ensure that funding models mean colleges are not disincentivised from offering ESOL provision, over free and affordable Functional Skills English.
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- Department for Education to develop with partners the promotion of teaching of ESOL qualifications to increase the number of qualified ESOL teachers to meet needs.

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- [Strand, S., Malmberg, L., Hall, J., \(2015\), *English as an Additional Language \(EAL\) and educational achievement in England: An Analysis of the National Pupil Database*](#)

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