

Review of Post-16 Qualifications at Level 2 and Below in England

26 April 2022

Question 29: do you agree that we should continue to fund ESOL at the following levels?

Level 2 - Yes

Level 1 - Yes

Entry level (including sub levels 1, 2 and 3) - Yes

Please give reasons for your answers

Different terminology is used in this submission, and it is important to understand these differences. The term 'EAL' refers to pupils in compulsory education who speak English as an additional language. English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) is used as the name of qualifications or provision for people who study English as a second or additional language beyond compulsory education. The term 'people who use ESL' refers to people who use English as a second or additional language.

ESOL at all levels should be funded for any person who experiences disadvantage as a result of language barriers. English is needed for life in the UK, in order to progress in education and employment; to access services and support; and to feel a sense of belonging in communities. The paragraphs below highlight the challenges faced by ESOL learners in achieving their aspirations.

Evidence ([Strand, S and Lindorff, A, 2020](#)) shows that 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 ([Strand, S and Lindorff, A, 2020](#)). The reality is that many ESOL learners will be studying other qualifications or working at the same time as learning English. Many qualifications in further education, including English and Maths, are currently only fully funded up to the age of 19, while ESOL is not fully funded. This creates a systemic barrier for learners from progressing to higher levels of ESOL qualifications, which they may need for higher education or highly skilled employment. This contributes to the disadvantage faced by ESOL learners who cannot afford to pay for the ESOL lessons that they need to overcome language barriers and to access other qualifications, which would lead to employment. The solution to this would be to consider funding options for ESOL learners beyond the age of 19 to allow time to learn English to the required proficiency to progress to further learning or employment. The Lifetime Skills Guarantee, as set out in the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill ([Department for Education 2021b](#)), will not support funding of qualifications below level 3, which means that ESOL qualifications are excluded from this funding. This could exclude some young people from progressing to higher level ESOL qualifications, which they require for employment, if they are self-funding. Consideration should be given to the eligibility of the Lifetime Skills Guarantee so that it would include funding ESOL levels 1 and 2. This is also in line with the recent recommendation in the House of Lords report on youth unemployment ([House of Lords, 2021](#)).

Recommendation: The Department for Education should consider extending the eligibility criteria for the Lifetime Skills Guarantee to include ESOL from entry level up to level 2, which would allow for people who use ESL to have the funds and time to progress through ESOL levels and achieve a proficiency in English for skilled employment.

Similarly, the [National Skills Fund](#) is eligible to people over the age of 19, without level 3 qualifications. From April 2022, the Fund will be available to anyone earning under the National Living Wage, who wants to study a level 3 or above qualification, regardless of the qualification level they already have. While this change could support ESOL learners to gain a level 3 qualification in another discipline, ESOL qualifications would still be ineligible as the highest level of ESOL is level 2. The National Skills Fund could also be extended to include language learning support for students studying apprenticeships or vocational qualifications. The language learning support could be sector-specific and relevant to the apprenticeship or vocational qualification.

Recommendation: The Department for Education should extend eligibility of the National Skills Fund to include ESOL qualifications below level 2 and additional sector-specific language support in combination with level 3 qualifications. The possibilities to make training under the National Skills Fund accessible to people who use ESL could be:

- a) to include ESOL at levels 1 and 2 as fully funded courses under the National Skills Fund;
- b) to extend eligibility to include English language learning support alongside level 3 qualifications such as apprenticeships or vocational qualifications.

There is some evidence that suggests that a lack of ESOL provision means that the UK economy is missing out on potentially talented employees as a result of language barriers ([Schellekens, 2019](#)). ESOL qualifications should enable people to progress through ESOL levels, which is not currently the case ([Schellekens, 2019](#)). The current system does not easily allow people to progress to higher levels of ESOL learning, which would allow them to reach a proficiency in English for the workplace. The highest level of ESOL qualification (level 2) does not equip learners to progress into highly skilled employment or higher education. 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 graduates who speak a language other than English 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.

In the current system, learners often study ESOL to entry level 3 (which is below a level 1 qualification). 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.

The Government has prioritised youth unemployment and has implemented initiatives to support young people into work – for example, the introduction of T Levels as an alternative to A Levels and changes to apprenticeships. However, no consideration has been given as to whether ESOL embedded into these youth labour market interventions would be effective. The Government could explore, as part of the qualifications review, whether ESOL embedded into apprenticeships or T Levels could improve proficiency in English and lead to meaningful employment outcomes for young people who speak ESL. This could be offered as language learning support and be sector specific, as explained further above in this response. This would be achieved through working with colleges to embed ESOL with T levels and apprenticeships and evaluate the impact of this.

Recommendation: The Department for Education should develop, trial and conduct a robust evaluation of ESOL embedded with apprenticeships or T Levels to understand

whether this improves accessibility, and education and employment outcomes for young people who speak languages other than English.

Personal, social and employability qualifications

Question 30: do you agree that we should develop national standards and set broad core content at level 1 for:

Personal and social development -

Employability skills - Yes

Independent living and life skills -

Please give reasons for your answers

Personal, social and employability qualifications should include an understanding of the labour market and how to apply for jobs in the UK. This is especially important for people who use ESL and move to the UK post-16. A person who uses ESL 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'. This is an example where ESOL for a specific purpose would be an advantage, which in this case is ESOL for employment.

In a call for evidence on level 2 and below qualifications, the Department for Education ([2020](#)) proposed transition programmes. The proposed transition programmes should give a balanced and purposeful curriculum helping accelerate and increase progression from lower levels of study and should be embedded within personal, social and employability qualifications. 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. The programmes could include:

- ESOL transition programme for employability.
- ESOL for transition to academic study.
- ESOL for transition to vocational study.
- ESOL for daily living.

This demonstrates the need for an integrated approach to ESOL provision, with funding which allows for a tailored package for young ESOL learners, enabling them to learn the language they need to go into and progress in work.

Recommendation: The Department for Education to pilot ESOL transition programmes which are integrated with other transition programmes, such as employability, vocational study and life skills.

Answers submitted via an online form.

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