

**The Future of Post-16 Qualifications
Education Select Committee Inquiry**

20 January 2022

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. This submission includes evidence from a literature review by the UCL Institute of Education into young people, education, employment and ESOL ([Hutchinson et al, 2021](#)) and quantitative analysis of Next Steps data ([Cara, 2021](#)). The evidence in this submission relates to young people aged 16 to 25 who use English as a second or additional language (ESL).

Introduction

English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision is important to ensure those young people who are not English speakers, can achieve education and employment outcomes. These young people (aged 16 to 25) could be refugees, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) or children of migrants, who may have arrived in the UK between the ages of 13 and 16 and are going through the transition from compulsory to post-compulsory education. These young people could be in schools, sixth form colleges or further education colleges.

There is currently a lack of data on the numbers of young people who use ESL in post-16 education. According to the 2021 School Census, there are 1.6 million children (19%) who use EAL ([Department for Education, 2021a](#)). Currently the best estimate of the numbers of people who use ESL is based on data drawn from the 2011 Census. According to the 2011 Census, 726,000 people (1.3%) reported that they could not speak English well and 138,000 people (0.3%) that they could not speak English at all. This data is based on self-perception, so is not an accurate or valid measure of proficiency in English. Data from the 2021 Census will give a more up to date picture for all adults who use ESL, but it will not necessarily be more accurate as the same caveat around self-perception still applies. Evidence on the issues caused by this lack of data is included in this submission.

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.

The strengths and weaknesses of the current system of post-16 qualifications

Fragmentation of ESOL provision and a lack of data

The ESOL landscape is fragmented and confusing due to multiple funding streams from various Government departments, meaning that it does not always meet the needs of young people who use ESL. This is an issue which needs addressing in post-16 education. This results in learners:

- Waiting a long time for a space in a local ESOL class;
- Going to classes which are not always suitable for their level of proficiency; and

- Attending an inappropriate class. For example, the needs of young ESOL learners are different from older learners with a few years of professional experience ([Hutchinson, 2021](#)).

A review of successful interventions and barriers for young people in London, aged 16-18, who were designated as 'vulnerable' or 'not in education, employment or training' (NEET) from the Association of Colleges and Ofsted ([Ofsted, 2014](#)) found that speaking languages other than English was one of many risk factors cited by teachers and providers affecting some young people's lack of participation in education and training post-16.

To understand this situation fully, schools should assess and record the proficiency in English of pupils with EAL. There also needs to be introduced an EAL marker on the National Pupil Database (NPD) for post-compulsory education and a marker included on Individualised Learner Records (ILR). This would mean that the outcomes of pupils marked as an EAL pupil in compulsory education would be tracked into sixth forms within schools, further education and training post-16.

Recommendation: Department for Education introduces a mechanism for ensuring that an EAL marker is collected for students on the NPD beyond compulsory education and that marker is transferred across to ILRs, where appropriate, for the purposes of recording the education and employment outcomes of young people who speak languages other than English.

Suitability of alternatives to ESOL

In further education, some students who use ESL will be placed in GCSE or Functional Skills English (FSE) courses; however, this may not be the most appropriate solution for the young person. Evidence, as set out in this paragraph and below, indicates that 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 for learners. 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 in English, not for ESOL learners. The fact that FSE is free and ESOL is currently charged for distorts decisions made by 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 taught by teachers who lack the skills to teach people who use ESL because they are not qualified ESOL teachers ([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. Given that the learning trajectory of ESOL

learners differs fundamentally from that of people whose first language is English, and that FSE largely does not meet ESOL learners' needs, The Bell Foundation recommends against this practice. The Foundation instead urges adequate funding for ESOL provision so that ESOL courses taught by qualified ESOL teachers can be offered beyond entry level. This would enable learners to develop their English language skills within a setting that best meets their needs, allowing them to develop the oracy skills, vocabulary and grammatical knowledge they need to master in relevant contexts to be able to then progress onto vocational courses.

It is a matter for concern that there are colleges where ESOL learners make up more than 60% of learners on Functional Skills courses ([NATECLA, 2021](#)). In a survey of further education providers conducted by NATECLA and the Education and Training Foundation ([2021](#)), a quarter of providers reported that ESOL learners made up more than 60% of their learners on Functional Skills courses. This applied especially to 16- to 19-year-olds on study programmes.

[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.

The impact of qualifications review on disadvantaged groups (young people who use ESL)

The qualifications review offers an opportunity to improve access to ESOL qualifications for young people who need to reach a level of proficiency in order to progress to higher education or highly skilled jobs. This section of the submission sets out recommendations for the qualifications review to ensure that ESOL provision for young people who speak ESL enables them to go into their preferred form of post-16 education.

The Skills and Post-16 Education Bill ([Department for Education, 2021b](#)) has a focus on high level qualifications which lead to highly-skilled jobs. This excludes ESOL which currently only goes up to a level 2 qualification in England¹. In the paragraphs below, The Bell Foundation explains why ESOL is important in enabling some young people who use ESL to achieve their education and employment goals.

Education and employment outcomes for young people who use ESL

A recent analysis of the Next Steps data by UCL Institute of Education ([2021](#)), commissioned by The Bell Foundation, found that young people who use ESL were more likely to stay in education and go to university post-16, but this same group were also more likely to be unemployed at the age of 25, despite going to university. The young people who

¹ For qualification levels, see: [What qualification levels mean: England, Wales and Northern Ireland - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

reported using ESL were more likely to be in education at age 19 compared to young people who only speak English, born in the UK. For young people who use ESL, 70% were in education at age 19, compared to 41% of young people who speak English only, born in the UK. However, at age 25 the picture is different. The group of young people who use ESL have the highest proportion of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) at the age of 25. For young people who use ESL born in the UK and those born outside the UK, 21% and 23% respectively reported being unemployed or economically inactive at the age of 25. This is compared to 15% of all young people in the Next Steps study not in education, employment or training aged 25.

Progression through ESOL levels which lead to employment

ESOL qualifications should enable young people to progress through ESOL levels, which is not currently the case. The current system does not easily allow young 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, young people 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 use ESL. This would be achieved through working with colleges to embed ESOL within T Levels and apprenticeships and evaluate the impact of this. Possible outcomes could be that young people gain the language skills needed to go into their chosen careers or higher education.

Recommendation: Department for Education should collaborate with colleges to develop, trial and conduct a robust evaluation of ESOL embedded within apprenticeships or T Levels to understand whether this improves accessibility, and education and employment outcomes for young people who speak languages other than English.

Case study – experiences of vocational education and training for young migrants in Germany

Some studies have explored the transitions to Vocational Education and Training (VET) for young migrants. One survey of 5000 young people (18-24 years) in Germany found that young migrants were less likely than other young people to progress to company-based training, particularly if they had not acquired a higher education entrance qualification during their schooling ([Beicht and Walden, 2017](#)). In general, young people from higher social classes were more likely to achieve the higher education entrance qualification in Germany and the authors reasoned that the effect of social class is exacerbated in the case of young people with a migrant background. They also identified discriminatory practices by companies which affected transitions for young migrants leaving school with the lower secondary school leaving qualification. Following this research, they made recommendations for company training and for mentoring support for young migrants.

Requirements for English language qualifications in post-16 education

In November 2021, the Government [announced](#) that the requirement to achieve a level 2 qualification in English alongside T Levels will be abolished ([Hansard, 2021](#)). This brings T Levels in line with A Levels and the aim is to make T Levels accessible to talented young people who would not otherwise have the opportunity to undertake the qualification. However, the English qualification requirement still exists with apprenticeships, and this may act as a potential disincentive to young people who use ESL from taking an apprenticeship. An ESOL qualification at level 1 or 2 should be considered a suitable qualification. In 2017, the policy changed so that British Sign Language (BSL) users could undertake a BSL qualification instead of Functional Skills English with their apprenticeship ([Department for Education, 2017](#)).

Recommendation: Department for Education should consider removing the English qualification requirement from apprenticeships to bring them in line with T Levels and to ensure that young people who use ESL are not disincentivised from taking an apprenticeship.

Funding of ESOL

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 in further education, including English and Maths, 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 for ESOL learners 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 it stands, plans for 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 again could exclude some young people from progressing to higher level ESOL qualifications which they require for employment. 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: Department for Education should consider extending eligibility criteria for the Lifetime Skills Guarantee to allow for young people to have the funds to progress through ESOL levels and achieve a proficiency in English for employment.

Access to information, advice and guidance

For those young people who use ESL, there is evidence of the barriers they face when transitioning from compulsory to post-compulsory education, particularly for those who want to progress to further education. Key to this is a lack of information, advice and guidance (IAG) for young people who need to identify future education and training pathways that will provide a route to employment. While some learning providers have incorporated IAG into their individual programmes and enrolment processes, there is a lack of IAG about progression pathways and opportunities for employment.

For refugees and asylum seekers, the lack of IAG is compounded by a lack of opportunities to learn about the culture of the education system in England and the possible options available. As Mishan ([2019](#)) states, young refugees and asylum seekers need information about the English education system as well as advice and clear information about available choices leading to education, training and employment.

Case study - access to information and guidance in the USA

In terms of transitions to higher education, research in the USA has found that teachers and guidance counsellors regularly steered young English language learners (ELLs) away from high track courses in the name of “protecting ELLs”, as well as citing a lack of differentiated instructions in high track courses to accommodate young ELLs ([Kanno and Kangas, 2014](#)). Finally, young ELLs and their parents acquiesced to the recommendations from teachers and guidance counsellors. ELLs either did not know that they had a say in their course selection or did not advocate for themselves to take higher courses than were assigned, due to lack of information. Their parents and guardians were unlikely to challenge the school's decisions.

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 independent advice and guidance to learners on the need for and benefits of higher-level language skills.

Summary of recommendations

- Department for Education introduces a mechanism for ensuring that an EAL marker is collected for students on the NPD beyond compulsory education and that marker is transferred across to ILRs, where appropriate, for the purposes of recording the education and employment outcomes of young people who speak languages other than English.
- Department for Education should ensure that funding models mean colleges are not disincentivised from offering ESOL provision, over free and affordable Functional Skills English.
- Department for Education should collaborate with colleges to develop, trial and conduct a robust evaluation of ESOL embedded within apprenticeships or T Levels to understand whether this improves accessibility, and education and employment outcomes for young people who speak languages other than English.
- Department for Education should consider removing the English qualification requirement from apprenticeships to bring them in line with T Levels and to ensure that young people who use ESL are not disincentivised from taking an apprenticeship.
- Department for Education should consider extending eligibility criteria for the Lifetime Skills Guarantee to allow for young people to have the funds to progress through ESOL levels and achieve a proficiency in English for employment.
- Department for Education should consider funding options which allow providers to offer free ESOL to all learners, including levels 1 and 2 with proper independent advice and guidance to learners on the need for and benefits of higher-level language skills.

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