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# **Submission to the House of Lords Industry and Regulators Committee inquiry on skills for the future: apprenticeships and training**

For further information, please contact:

Alastair Feeney  
Policy and Public Affairs Officer  
01223 275518  
[Alastair.feeney@bell-foundation.org.uk](mailto:Alastair.feeney@bell-foundation.org.uk)

[www.bell-foundation.org.uk](http://www.bell-foundation.org.uk)



## Skills for the future: apprenticeships and training

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 on education and skills outcomes for 16+ learners who use English as their second or other language.

This submission focusses on provision for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), as delivered in Further Education and Skills (FES): study programmes for 18–19-year-olds, adult programmes, apprenticeships, and provision for learners with high needs.

Second language speakers offer a positive demographic dividend because many have work-related skills and experience which are of value to the UK economy. They can make a significant contribution to the current and future workforce but are barely visible in the education and training sector. The Government's work to form Skills England offers an excellent position to enable employers to draw on the many talents and skills that second language speakers bring.

### **(1) What kinds of skills do you think will be needed for the future of the UK economy? Is the UK's skills and training system capable of equipping increasing numbers of people with these skills?**

Many second language speakers are well-qualified and bring a wealth of skills with them when they move to the UK: 50% of first-generation settlers are educated at tertiary level (compared to 39% of UK-born citizens). This proportion increased by 8% in the decade leading up to 2020<sup>1</sup>.

A large proportion do not need vocational/professional skills training, they are already trained and have significant experience. This target group particularly requires the right level of language skills so that they are able to function in the workplace.

The 2021 Census shows that foreign born second language speakers who self-assess as having good English skills have similar employment levels to the UK-born population<sup>2</sup>. However, those with low levels of English are unable to unlock their skills and experience. As a result, they are unemployed or under-employed and more likely reliant on state benefits.

As the 2021 Census data show, over one million people self-reported that they could not speak English well or at all, a substantial increase from the 726,000 recorded in 2011. Also, 35% of the people who had no, or low levels of English had UK nationality. Half of the 5.1 million second language speakers in England and Wales have been in this country for 10 years or more; and of the 5.1 million, 1.6 million have UK passports<sup>3</sup>.

Many employers face labour market shortages. For example, the CBI reported in October 2023 that 71% of UK businesses had been affected by labour shortages in the previous 12 months; and that this was stifling growth<sup>4</sup>. Employers prefer to recruit workers who are already in the country, well-trained and fluent in English. Second language speakers, with their existing skills and experience, can also be instrumental in filling jobs.

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<sup>1</sup> OECD/European Commission (2023), *Indicators of Immigrant Integration 2023: Settling In*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/1d5020a6-en>

<sup>2</sup> Office for National Statistics (2021) *UK Census* <https://www.ons.gov.uk>

<sup>3</sup> 2021 Census Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> CBI report October 2023: <https://www.cbi.org.uk/articles/labour-shortages-remain-a-blocker-for-business-potential/>

We note in the recently published “Skills England: Driving growth and widening opportunities”, Skills England’s stated intent is to “work with the schools system to emphasise that the foundation of any skills development is satisfactory levels of attainment in literacy and numeracy and support our schools in the provision of high quality advice to students on career opportunities and pathways”. We suggest that to this should be added ESOL for 16-19 learners who attend study programmes in further education.

**(2) What is the appropriate level of Government intervention in the development of skills policies? What should the Government’s proposed post-16 education strategy include in relation to apprenticeships and training?**

The involvement of Skills England will be key to achieving the appropriate planning and delivery of ESOL provision and progression into jobs. For example, second language speakers currently get hardly any training in language for work and careers advice. They typically leave ESOL provision with too low levels of English to be employable.

A second aspect where the role of Skills England is crucial is the collection of data on second language speakers. Currently, the Department for Education (DfE) Statistics Unit only collates annual data on learners on discrete adult ESOL provision, i.e. 19+ learners who have ESOL as their main learning aim. DfE does not collect data on ESOL learners on 16-19 study programmes, on vocational training, apprenticeships or non-ESOL adult provision. Yet we know anecdotally that second language speakers make up a substantial proportion of learners across all FES provision types. Many FE colleges, adult education and apprenticeship providers report that as many as 50% of their enrolled learners do not have English as their first language.

The lack of baseline data on the number of second language speakers enrolled, their retention and achievement hampers the monitoring of the quality of learning, and the impact on learners’ progress and progression. As a result, Government departments, Ofsted, FES providers themselves, and funding bodies do not know on which courses learners enrol, whether they stay on course or leave prematurely, or what their destinations are. This has implications throughout the education and training landscape. For example, Ofsted inspects adult discrete ESOL provision but not 16-19 ESOL discrete provision or the support and language training that learners receive on mainstream vocational training courses, apprenticeships and non-ESOL adult learning.

Furthermore, the sector does not collect data on ESOL learners’ skills and experience. Anecdotal evidence indicates that few providers identify and record learners’ prior qualifications, skills and experience, such as for medical doctors and nurses, health care workers, engineers, carpenters and joiners. Skills England should require providers to collect data on this so that learners get the training they need to get back into work; and Skills England and partners can match this information with skills shortages.

**(3) Are existing Government policies on skills, particularly apprenticeships and training, sufficiently clear? Have policies, funding, and the institutional set-up been sufficiently consistent over time? If not, what changes or reforms would you recommend?**

Regarding ESOL and apprenticeships and vocational training, there is a clear need to review the policy on training for 16-19 and adult second language speakers. For example, the current funding guidance stipulates Functional Skills English which was designed for first

language English speakers and is not appropriate for this target group<sup>5</sup>. As a result, the funding to develop English language skills is not well spent and learners do not usually learn the skills they need to function in the workplace.

**(4) Are the right institutions in place to ensure an effective skills system for the future? Should co-ordinating institutions be national, regional, or sectoral, or a mixture of each? What is your view of Government's proposal to establish a new body, Skills England?**

The Bell Foundation welcomes the introduction of Skills England and recommends that its role should be to co-ordinate across national, regional and sectoral perspectives. In the last two decades, political parties, think tanks and a multitude of reports have called for investment in ESOL and a national strategy<sup>6</sup>. The reality has been very different. ESOL policy, strategy and funding have lacked clarity and direction, and have been characterised by stop-start initiatives, cuts in funding, and changes to eligibility criteria.

Skills England presents an opportunity within the overarching skills framework to produce and implement ESOL policy. This should set out strategic goals and targets for the delivery of ESOL. Cross-government coordination is especially key, considering the very many departments and organisations involved with aspects such as policy, standards, qualifications, delivery, funding, examinations, teacher training, audit, inspection and lately the Mayoral Combined Authorities.

To give an example where Skills England can have a positive impact: the quality of local/regional information and the planning of provision for second language speakers is currently too inconsistent. While some Mayoral Combined Authorities have made real progress, in general Local Skills Improvement Plans and accountability agreements pay insufficient attention to the second language communities in their locality - even if the Census indicates that they are large - their knowledge and skills profiles, and strategies to upskill second language speakers so that they can enter the workforce.

Secondly, ESOL provision in England is inconsistent, leading to a "postcode lottery" of provision. The Lifelong Education Commission and the Respublica report *ESOL for Skills* (2022) have highlighted the "arbitrary and unfair" funding regime, with too much variability in the quality of ESOL provision and the number of hours taught. In addition, they comment rightly that **courses are offered according to what is funded**, rather than what is appropriate to learners' needs.

The Bell Foundation also sees an opportunity for Skills England to co-ordinate and set standard for Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance for people whose first language is not English. Job recruitment procedures can vary considerably from country to country. Second language speakers need access to advice which explains the job-search process in the UK, what employers look for and how they can best market their skills in the UK labour market context. Many ESOL teachers and managers work in the state system and may not have experience in recruitment practice in the private sector. The Gatsby Foundation's Good Career Guidance Benchmarks provide a good starting point to create effective advice and guidance tailored to the target group of second language speakers.

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<sup>5</sup> National Association for Teaching English and Community Languages to Adults (2021) Participation of ESOL learners on Functional Skills (FS) English courses

<sup>6</sup> For example, Kone, Z. et. al (2019) *Refugees and the UK Labour Market*. Oxford: Compas. <https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/2019/refugees-and-the-uk-labour-market>; Pager, A and Stevenson N. (2014) *On Speaking Terms* London: Demos <https://demos.co.uk/research/on-speaking-terms>

**(12) How does the UK's approach to skills and training compare to those of other countries? Are there examples of good practice that the UK should be learning from?**

There are lessons to be learnt from language provision for 16-19 and 19+ adult migrants and refugees. We highlight information about Australia and Canada below and can provide extended analysis.

*Australia*

In Australia, the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) provides **up to 510 hours of English language tuition** to migrants and asylum seekers, whereas England has no guidance on or entitlement to learn English<sup>7</sup>.

The testing standards used in Australia are the International Second Language Proficiency Ratings (ISLPR)<sup>8</sup>. This assessment system is well worth looking at because it provides in-depth testing of each of the four language skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing, whereas in England listening and speaking are assessed as one skill. Secondly, the Australian ratings are specific to second language acquisition whereas the ESOL core curriculum and exams in England are derived from literacy standards designed for learners whose first language is English.

Jobs and Skills Australia<sup>9</sup> co-ordinates skills needs on the basis of skilled occupation lists at state and national Government level. Applicants identify their occupation (which must be on the skilled occupation list) and submit an expression of interest based on self-assessment. Home Affairs invites applicants to apply for relevant visa based on factors such as points scores and medium/long term skills requirements. State governments have their own priorities/criteria and have access to the national expression of interest database.

*Canada*

Canada has English as a Second Language Benchmarks<sup>10</sup> to measure general English language achievement as well as job-specific benchmarks for the following professions: nursing, pharmacy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, audiology and ICT<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/settling-in-australia/amep/about-the-program>

<sup>8</sup> <https://islpr.org/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.language.ca/product/pdf-e-020-clb-esl-for-all>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.language.ca/benchmarked-professions/>

