

English for speakers of other languages (ESOL)

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Wherever you live, the ability to interact with those around you is crucial for playing a full and productive role in society. For many UK residents whose first language is not English, studying 'English for Speakers of Other Languages', or ESOL enables them to engage with their local communities, gain employment and access services like healthcare and education.

However, changes to funding and eligibility criteria for ESOL provision have led to significant reductions in the number of learning opportunities available.

Summary of recent changes to funding and eligibility for ESOL

ESOL has been subject to a number of changes in recent years. In 2011, funding for ESOL in the workplace was withdrawn, and full public funding for ESOL was restricted to those on 'active benefits' (Jobseekers' Allowance or Employment and Support Allowance). The funding 'uplift' for ESOL which acted as an incentive for colleges to run ESOL courses was also removed. (*NIACE, 2011*)

An ESOL mandate was introduced in 2014 with the aim of ensuring 'a rigorous, systematic approach to ensuring that Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) claimants [...] with poor spoken English improve their language skills in order to continue receiving benefit.' (*Skills Funding Agency, April 2014*)

The mandate, which was intended to allow recruitment of additional learners onto existing courses, was worth just over £30m in 2014-15 (split between 123 providers) and an estimated £45m in 2015-16.

On 21 July 2015, the government announced the withdrawal of this mandated funding as part of an in-year savings package. The decision was announced just a day after the Prime Minister said: '*At the moment we have parts of the country where opportunities remain limited ... where language remains a real barrier, where too many women from minority communities remain trapped outside the workforce, and where educational attainment is low.*'

The effect of ESOL changes on providers and the broader funding context

The Association of Colleges has said that the removal of the mandate affects 47 colleges and 16,000 learners, and several local authority adult education services are also seriously affected by the change. The mandate was withdrawn without warning, forcing some providers to cancel classes due to start in the summer. As a result of the changes, several services are reviewing their overall provision and a number have already issued redundancy notices to staff.

This latest cut has also come at a time when budgets for adult learning are under severe strain. The overall Adult Skills Budget has reduced by over 35% since 2009, leading to a wider loss of ESOL provision outside the mandate. In February 2015, it was announced that the budget for non-apprenticeship learning in colleges would be reduced by 24% in 2015-16, and a further 3.9% in-year reduction was announced in July alongside the removal of the ESOL mandate. Although a £210m ring-fence for community learning has been maintained, it has risen by just 2% in the last decade, and local authority budgets are under increasing strain.

The cuts to the adult skills budget have led to a drop in overall ESOL participation, which has fallen by 22% since 2009/10. However, a **survey** conducted by NATECLA in 2014 showed that over 80% of providers have waiting lists of up to 1,000 students for ESOL courses. 66% of providers cited a lack of government funding as the main reason.

The effect of ESOL funding rules on different groups of learners

The withdrawal of the ESOL mandate means that jobseekers will no longer be referred to free ESOL classes as part of a structured programme to improve their chances of finding employment. They will have to find alternative ways to access ESOL learning where this is available locally.

The impact of restrictions on access to ESOL is particularly acute for women. The latest **Statistical First Release** from BIS shows that two thirds (66%) of ESOL learners are female. The **2011 Equality Impact Assessment** by BIS also showed that changes to ESOL would have a greater impact on women, and that a reduction in ESOL provision could leave women isolated within their communities.

The ESOL rules around asylum seekers have also been brought into focus by the current refugee crisis in Europe. Asylum seekers are currently only eligible for ESOL once they have been in the UK for 6 months without a decision on their application. They are, however, only eligible for co-funded ESOL and therefore have to pay 50% of the cost of the course. The UK has recently committed to accommodate 20,000

Syrian refugees by 2020, but this rule is a major barrier to their successful integration to the UK.

The social and economic impact of cuts to ESOL

The withdrawal of funding for ESOL targeted at jobseekers will result in fewer people accessing the language learning they need to gain employment. This will inevitably increase their dependency on benefits and reduce many people's chances of finding work and becoming net contributors to the economy.

There is also an impact on public services when people are unable to access ESOL. Those who cannot speak good English rely on translators to interact with the local council, health and education services. The cost of translation services in the public sector was estimated to be over **£140m in 2014**, but this cost could be vastly reduced if more people were able to access the language learning they need.

Other potential social and economic benefits of ESOL include (**NATECLA, 2014**):

- **Reducing poverty:** studies have shown that the lowest levels of participation in education are amongst Britain's poorest migrant communities- Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Somali communities. Participation in ESOL helps people to move into further learning and employment.
- **Addressing skills shortages:** many sectors of the economy could benefit from the skills and experience of migrants who have gained professional qualifications but do not have the language skills to apply them in the UK. Some public services, including the NHS, rely heavily on migrant labour and greater access to ESOL could help more migrants meet the skills needs in their local economies.
- **Improving community cohesion.** The Commission on Integration and Cohesion (2007) and the Cantle Report (2001) highlighted that tensions between communities increase when people lead separate lives and do not integrate via a common language.

ESOL for all

UCU believes that ESOL should be fully funded and freely available to all those who need it to develop their language skills. This should include people on low incomes, benefits and those seeking asylum in the UK. We fully endorse Action for ESOL's **manifesto** and call upon government to ensure that a sustainable funding system is put in place to support ESOL for all.