Curriculum & Assessment Review 2024 - NATECLA response

Section 2: General views on curriculum, assessment, and qualifications pathways

Q10 What aspects of the current a) curriculum, b) assessment system and c) qualification pathways are working well to support and recognise educational progress for children and young people? What is working well?:

Background information about our organisation:

NATECLA (National Association for Teaching English and other Community Languages to Adults), a charity, is the national forum and professional organisation for ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) teachers. We have been operating since 1978 and have a strong reputation for supporting ESOL teachers and advising on ESOL issues both locally and nationally. The majority of our individual members are ESOL teachers, practising in Further Education (FE) and Adult and Community Learning (ACL) and other community settings, others are ESOL managers, and staff who work for universities, awarding bodies and voluntary organisations. In addition, there are over 100 institutional members ranging from large colleges to smaller organisations, whose ESOL staff use the membership.

We work in partnership with related organisations, such as the Association of Colleges, the Bell Foundation and the Committee for Linguistics in Education, and, although we differ from them in terms of capacity, the responses to your questions have been informed by interviews with ESOL teachers and managers of 16-19 provision and the contributors' first-hand experience of working in college settings with this cohort.

The focus of our responses:

We particularly welcome this call for evidence as our members work with some of the most disadvantaged 16-19 year olds in the country, whose needs are often overlooked because they are so different from the large majority of school and college students. They are 'late arrivals' into the UK education system, defined as those who arrive from Year 9 onwards, although most of the learners we will refer to have arrived into year 11 or later. Most are still in the earlier stages of acquiring English and need a very different approach to curriculum planning, different assessments and different qualifications, in order to build on their knowledge and skills and recognise their progress whilst they attempt to catch up with their English speaking peers and gain the qualifications necessary for life, further study and work in the UK. Their educational success is entirely predicated on the progress that they can make in their English language skills, so the curriculum that is available to them is of central importance.

Many of these learners are significantly disadvantaged, because their low English proficiency means that they are unable to access the school and college curriculum without significant support and language teaching. Some are further disadvantaged as

they have little or no previous educational experience. Some have also experienced significant trauma. A further subgroup are Looked After Children, particularly asylum seekers and refugees, who have to learn how to negotiate their life in the UK alone. This review offers the government an opportunity to reform the curriculum, assessment and qualifications system for these learners, so as to reduce the inequalities and inconsistencies in the current provision, and allow all our learners to flourish and achieve their potential for meaningful work and further study.

A very useful recent publication, which we will refer to throughout, is Ashlee, A (2024) Education for Late Arrivals. Examining education for displaced young people arriving in the UK late in the education system. Refugee Education UK.

Note on the 5 ESOL qualification levels:

Entry 1 (complete beginner in English) - Entry 2 - Entry 3 - Level 1 - Level 2 (GCSE equivalent).

We are pleased to have the opportunity to contribute our experience, professional evidence and suggestions for improvement to this review. Please contact us if you require further information or would like to know where to see examples of good practice, at info@natecla.org.uk

Q10 These aspects are working well:

c) Qualification pathways NATECLA supports community language teachers and we are pleased that there are now GCSE qualifications in 14 home/heritage/community languages, offered across exam boards, which provides some recognition of the multilingual society we live in, and raises the profile of a few of the many languages spoken in our society. However, more needs to be done to publicise these GCSEs and encourage schools to enter pupils, as the uptake is small (Fahim, Kim and Eppler 2024).

ESOL Skills for Life qualifications offer a flexible route for 16-19 students as there is separate certification for 3 'modes' at each level: Speaking & Listening; Reading; Writing. Learners with limited literacy skills can for example be entered for Entry 1 speaking and listening in their first year, whilst they develop basic literacy skills that a significant minority have not had the opportunity to learn before. [Member colleges report 10-25% of their 16-19 ESOL learners having less than 5 years' prior education, or none.]

Q11 What aspects of the current a) curriculum, b) assessment system and c) qualification pathways should be targeted for improvements to better support and recognise educational progress for children and young people? What should be improved?:

Secondary schools: pre-16

Pupils arriving in the UK during KS3-4 are often at a disadvantage because of their lack of English skills. The earlier they come, the better their chances of succeeding in

England's education system, as it takes over six years of education to become proficient in the English required for school studies. [Strand and Lindorff 2020] For those arriving into year 11 the prospects are particularly bleak. Firstly, many children wait up to a year or more for a school place,thereby missing out on crucial learning time. Secondly, once in a school, many make very poor progress because schools focus almost entirely on GCSEs, which they may be unable to tackle yet, and the intensive English language development that they need is often not provided. Ashlee (2024) .

a) Curriculum- this needs to be tailored to needs of new arrivals with intensive English alongside maths and a variety of other subjects, depending on their level of English.

b) Assessment should be largely formative assessment that identifies strengths and areas for development in terms of prior education and literacy, knowledge of school subjects and English skills.

c) Qualifications - It is inappropriate and very demotivating to enter those arriving aged 15-16 with few English skills for GCSE exams, and yet this happens because of school accountability measures. Learners with ESOL needs usually develop some conversation skills in English in school, but for many, their reading and writing remains very poor and nowhere near the level needed to take any GCSEs [evidence from college ESOL departments]. If qualifications are desirable, these pupils should work towards EAL/ESOL qualifications specifically designed for those learning English, which focus on the language they need and recognise their progress, and maths qualifications that do not require a good level of English need to be developed, as for 16-19s. NATECLA member colleges admitting pupils from schools find they are often very discouraged by their time in school.

16-19 education

Learners with ESOL needs arriving into post -16 education are usually better served than those joining year 11, but the curriculum needs to be a broad one to build on their prior learning and/or make up for 'lost years' of learning for those whose prior education has been short or non-existent. Most of these learners are in colleges, so we will refer to colleges throughout, although some 16-19 programmes are available in independent training providers, and some young people attend adult ESOL classes, if there is no bespoke provision for their age group.

The current generic curriculum for 16-19 assumes that most learners have had a similar school education and does not take into account the very disparate nature of the EAL and ESOL cohort. There is variation in the length of time in the UK, prior educational experience, proficiency in English, knowledge of the English writing system, and whether they have suffered trauma and disruption prior to arrival. Many have arrived as unaccompanied minors. Good pastoral support is often crucial for success, as is allowing enough time for learners to acquire the English language skills they need to access the curriculum. As a consequence, there are often many challenges for teaching

staff, who may lack training and support. Curnin (2009) 'Classroom management of traumatised teenagers'.

a) Curriculum for ESOL learners- this needs to be tailored to the needs of both new arrivals and those moving on from KS4, with intensive English, maths, IT, science, and a broader curriculum depending on their gaps in prior education. This may include 'school' subjects, vocational tasters, art, citizenship, etc, depending on their level of English. The English they learn needs to include both basic communication skills for their everyday life in the UK, and the more cognitive academic language that they will need for any vocational or academic course. This is based on Cummins' distinction between basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP), which draws educators' attention to the timelines and challenges that second language learners encounter as they attempt to catch up to their peers in academic aspects of the school language. Cummins, J (2008) BICS and CALP: Empirical and theoretical status of the distinction

Evidence: There are examples of good practice where this is happening of which we have anecdotal as well as case study evidence in Ashlee (2024) pp39-40. Such courses motivate the learners, enabling them to adjust to life in the UK, celebrating their identity and improving their physical and mental well-being.

b) Assessment should be largely formative assessment that identifies strengths and areas for development in terms of prior education and literacy, knowledge of school and vocational subjects and English skills.

c) Qualification pathways in 16-19 are heavily influenced by accountability measures such as the Condition of Funding. There are no Entry level maths qualifications available that do not require a good knowledge of English, so many young ESOL learners are required to enter for exams such as Functional Skills, which they cannot understand or pass even though their maths skills may be good. For English, the ESOL Skills for Life qualifications are flexible and allow different modes to be taken separately. They do not focus sufficiently on gradual development of the cognitive academic language needed for further study in FE and HE, and need improvement in various respects, but teachers in many colleges focus on this in their classes.

Beyond Entry 3, many colleges require ESOL learners to take GCSE maths and English even though these are inappropriate as they are designed for fluent English speakers. College managers report that this is often a funding decision, as every grade counts as an achievement, so funding for the following year is unaffected. What these learners need is further development of their language skills, including a strong focus on the language of maths (which some colleges have developed), rather than coaching for an unattainable exam. Teachers can and do work around the qualifications, using them to meet the condition of funding rather than to record progress. Although the current ESOL Skills for Life qualifications promote better language learning than qualifications for fluent English speakers, managers report that ESOL qualifications are recognised less

favourably within 16-19 progress measures than either GCSE or Functional Skills English. Evidence: Roden and Osmaston 2021

References

Ashlee, A (2024) *Education for Late Arrivals. Examining education for displaced young people arriving in the UK late in the education system*. Refugee Education UK.

Curnin, T (2009) 'Classroom management of traumatised teenagers', *Language Issues* Vol 20/ 2

Fahim, Kim and Eppler (2024)) 'Diverse tongues, unheard voices'. *Research Intelligence* 158:20-21

Roden, J and Osmaston. M (2021) 'ESOL Learners and Functional Skills English' Education and Training Foundation.

Strand and Lindorff (2020) 'English as an Additional Language: Proficiency in English, educational achievement and rate of progression in English language learning'. University of Oxford Department of Education

Section 3: Social justice and inclusion

Q12 In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways, are there any barriers to improving attainment, progress, access or participation (class ceilings) for learners experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage?

The UK recognises the right to education for displaced children, but our education system is failing many of them. Ashlee (2024) ESOL learners are one of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in 16-19 education, with colleges reporting between 30% and 70% of their ESOL students as Looked After Children (LACs), mainly Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASCs). The school system has an EAL marker, which goes some way towards identifying pupils who may need support with English. However, there is no such marker in the post 16 ILR (Individualised Learner Record), and no formal information is passed on from schools to colleges other than GCSE results. This means it is very difficult to compare attainment and progress for post 16 ESOL learners with the wider student population.

Learners with ESOL needs are currently disadvantaged in a variety of ways:

1. Lack of English, which prevents them from participating fully in a broad curriculum. They may arrive in the UK with limited or no English skills, and in some cases with little or no prior education. They may use a different writing system from English. Some have good prior educational experience but cannot progress as they would like because they need to rapidly improve their English. Ashlee (2024)

2. Lack of ESOL provision. They may not live near enough to a college offering ESOL, and those that do may have to wait a year or more for a place. These young people are therefore NEET without wishing to be, their learning is paused and their mental health suffers. Ashlee (2024) Evidence: A large city centre college in the north west of England reports that although they have 360 16-18s currently on ESOL programmes, there are a further 100 on a waiting list, most of whom have already been waiting nearly a year. In London, however, there are few 16-18s on waiting lists. [London ESOL managers]

3. Difficulty of getting a place on a vocational course. Some young people with ESOL needs can only find places in ESOL and Maths, and getting onto a vocational course is often difficult because they lack UK qualifications and some college departments do not recognise ESOL qualifications. Some colleges have developed ESOL Plus courses which allow suitable ESOL learners to study a vocational programme alongside 6 hours a week of ESOL at Level 1. This allows them to learn the language of their chosen subject in the vocational setting, mix with other students and make more rapid progress towards both their vocational and linguistic goals. Evidence: Ashlee (2024) p.28

4. Not enough time. Only 15% of all 16-18s do not achieve a full L2 by age 19 (DfE statistics) but the vast majority of ESOL learners are in this category. [College data: without an ILR marker there is no national data on this.] The cut-off for funding full-time education at 19 disadvantages many ESOL learners. Entitlement to more years of full time education after age 19, either 3 years from arrival in the UK or perhaps until age 23/24, like those with EHCPs, would recognise the additional time it will take them to achieve the Level 2 or Level 3 vocational or academic qualifications that they aspire to and need, for participation in the workforce and in society. It would also partly recognise the time needed to make up for 'lost years of learning', if their prior education in their home country has been very limited.

Evidence: Several colleges with high proportions of UASCs report that up to 40% of this vulnerable sub-group have had less than five years of school education in their own country, and sometimes none. These students need to work intensively on basic literacy and maths skills as well as learning English, and many of these only attain Entry 2 ESOL after 3 years of education, which is insufficient for progress to other courses or to most jobs.

5. Too little focus on the language of education. At present, there is often too much focus in the curriculum on everyday English and not enough on the academic English and written texts required in vocational and academic subjects, even at level 2. Discussions with ESOL teachers and managers suggest that this is partly because the ESOL qualifications and many of the materials used do not focus on the language of education, and partly a lack of awareness amongst teachers and little focus on this in ESOL teacher training. Young people who want to progress to university are then at a further disadvantage as they often struggle with academic skills and academic English

more than others on their Level 3 and HE courses. [Evidence from university Foundation Year module leader] Also see Qs 22, 47

Q13 In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways are there any barriers to improving attainment, progress, access or participation which may disproportionately impact pupils based on other characteristics (e.g. disability, sexual orientation, gender, race, religion or belief etc.)

ESOL learners come from a very wide range of racial and religious backgrounds, some of which are often stigmatised in public rhetoric and in local communities, including negative perceptions of asylum seekers and refugees, especially non-Europeans and Muslims. This can have an impact on mental health and contribute to poor attendance, which affects attainment.

Q14 In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways, are there any barriers in continuing to improve attainment, progress, access or participation for learners with SEND?

It is difficult to get assessments for ESOL learners who show signs of autism, ADHD, dyslexia, as the standard assessments rely on a good understanding of English. This means that support for multilingual students is often delayed. Dyslexia assessments for speakers of other languages are available, eg Cognitive Assessments for Multilingual Learners, but this is not widely known. [College ESOL departments' evidence]

On the other hand, there are still instances reported by colleges of learners in schools and colleges being assumed to have SEN when their only difficulty is a lack of English language skills. This can lead to them being placed in a Foundation curriculum, with low expectations and limited progress. Some colleges have reduced this risk by improving the understanding and awareness of ESOL needs amongst Foundation tutors [College ESOL departments' evidence]

Q15 In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways, are there any enablers that support attainment, progress, access or participation for the groups listed above? [e.g. socioeconomically disadvantaged young people, pupils with SEND, pupils who are otherwise vulnerable, and young people with protected characteristics]

Enablers: Many ESOL teachers go above and beyond their teaching to support their vulnerable students, providing practical and emotional support to their learners. Some have persuaded their college to accept in-year arrivals who will not be funded, so that these young people get immediate access to education. Many colleges also employ specialist support workers to help with accommodation problems, dealing with the authorities and social workers, additional literacy support and helping with vocational tasters. (Personal experience of contributors over many years, and evidence from college ESOL staff)

References

Ashlee, A (2024) *Education for Late Arrivals. Examining education for displaced young people arriving in the UK late in the education system*. Refugee Education UK.

DfE (2019) *English for speakers of other languages: access and progression*

Section 4: Ensuring an excellent foundation in maths and English

Q19 To what extent do the current maths and English qualifications at a) pre-16 and b) 16-19 support pupils and learners to gain, and adequately demonstrate that they have achieved, the skills and knowledge they need? Are there any changes you would suggest that would support these outcomes?

English and maths - qualifications:

a) Pre-16 Late arrivals to the UK need a pre-16 curriculum (and possibly qualifications) for English that are designed to support English language development for life in the UK and for accessing the school curriculum. Currently there is not enough focus in schools on ensuring that EAL pupils make progress in their English, and as a result, many late arrivals, especially in KS4, make very poor progress. GCSE English is entirely unsuitable for most of them. Ashlee 2024. Colleges report that some learners who have been in school for a year or more have barely learnt any English. [Evidence also from contributors' experience of many years in ESOL teaching]

They also need qualifications or assessments for maths that do not rely on a good level of English language skills but assess the maths skills that they already have and are learning. A good knowledge of English is assumed in all school assessments, and this denies EAL pupils the opportunity to show what they already know and can do in maths.

b) 16-19 ESOL students have access to ESOL Skills for LIfe qualifications which support language learning. These qualifications have many faults, but do focus on learning a new language in appropriate stages from Entry 1 to Level 2, and are therefore attainable for young people. Functional Skills English and GCSE are often used for 16-19s for funding reasons (see Q11), and also as they have better recognition than ESOL qualifications, but they do not support appropriate language teaching and learning, unless they are offered in conjunction with ESOL, in a separate cohort of ESOL learners with an ESOL-trained teacher. Roden and Osmaston 2021

They also need maths qualifications at Entry levels that are dependent on understanding maths rather than language (see also Q 21). This would allow them to demonstrate their maths skills without requiring the high level of English that is needed in qualifications such as Functional Skills maths. Once their English has improved, achievements are often higher in maths GCSE for ESOL learners than for others who are resitting. (College ESOL managers' evidence)

Q20 How can we better support learners who do not achieve level 2 in English and maths by 16 to learn what they need to thrive as citizens in work and life? In particular, do we have the right qualifications at level 2 for these 16-19 learners (including the maths and English study requirement)?

The almost exclusive focus on GCSEs for demonstrating English and maths skills needed to 'thrive as citizens' is very unhelpful. Alternative pathways would benefit many ESOL learners in this age group. In particular, the standard qualifications (GCSE and Functional Skills) are unsuitable for ESOL learners as they require a high level of English as well as subject knowledge: GCSE English is not just about language competence, but also about cultural content that needs to be learnt. Managers report that ESOL learners who are required to continue on the GCSE pathway, find that gaining a grade 1 is very demotivating when the learners know that they had no chance as they were unable to understand the paper. Roden and Osmaston 2021

English: Alternative pathways used in some colleges include ESOL Level 1 and then pre-access/pre-GCSE courses for those under 18s on an academic route. However, they then have to move to an adult programme such as Access to HE once they are 19. ESOL-Plus courses, where students take L1 or L2 ESOL alongside vocational courses, provide a broader and more academic focus for their language learning than ESOL alone.

It is important that we improve the recognition (in FE, HE and employment) of Level 2 ESOL qualifications, and we could also make more use of IELTS, the English language qualification recognised by all universities for admission of international students, which might be better preparation for access to HE or A levels, but would need to be allowed and funded for home students.

Maths: Late arrivals to the UK often need to improve their maths but in an environment that promotes the language for maths. The 'English for maths' courses offered by some colleges alongside maths allow these learners to progress with both maths and English, until both skills are good enough to take a Functional Skills or GCSE in maths.

Q21 Are there any particular challenges with regard to the English and maths a) curricula and b) assessment for learners in need of additional support (e.g. learners with SEND, socioeconomic disadvantage, English as an additional language (EAL))? Are there any changes you would suggest to overcome these challenges?

See Q 20 with regard to learners with EAL.

References

Ashlee, A (2024) *Education for Late Arrivals. Examining education for displaced young people arriving in the UK late in the education system*. Refugee Education UK.

Roden, J and Osmaston, M (2021) 'ESOL Learners and Functional Skills English' Education and Training Foundation.

Section 5: Curriculum and qualification content

Q22 Are there particular curriculum or qualifications subjects* where: a) there is too much content; not enough content; or content is missing; b) the content is out-of-date; c) the content is unhelpfully sequenced (for example to support good curriculum design or pedagogy);d) there is a need for greater flexibility (for example to provide the space for teachers to develop and adapt content)?Please provide detail on specific key stages where appropriate.*This includes both qualifications where the government sets content nationally, and anywhere the content is currently set by awarding organisations.

a) Subject content is missing, and some is inappropriate

ESOL Skills for Life (SFL) qualifications are the main qualifications used in 16-19 and adult ESOL in England. The only criterion from Ofqual for Awarding Organisations (AOs) is that the qualifications meet the requirements of the National Standards for Adult Literacy and demonstrate a clear relationship to the adult ESOL core curriculum. The Adult Literacy standards were designed for fluent/native speakers of English, so there is a heavy weighting towards literacy rather than oracy skills. However, the ESOL core curriculum tried to redress this balance and does contain far more than the literacy standards, focusing on language development at each of the 5 levels.

Whilst there has been a good deal of criticism of the ESOL core curriculum, and calls for a review, it is NATECLA's view that a much more urgent priority is to ensure that the qualifications based on the curriculum are revised and improved, to make them fit for purpose for language learning, and to support recognition.

The structure of the qualifications is helpful for learners with 'spiky profiles' and/or no prior education, as each of the 3 modes at a level is certificated separately. This meets the Condition of Funding and, for example, allows new arrivals with a low level of literacy to achieve a Speaking and Listening qualification at E1 during their first year. This also means that colleges can support learners through higher and more qualifications which allow for stretch and challenge.

Areas for improvement

1. The assessment criteria for all AOs and all levels cover too narrow a range of the ESOL Curriculum. Many of the assessment criteria focus on literacy-related aspects from the Literacy standards, such as spelling accuracy at Entry 1 and identifying genre, which are not a priority for ESOL learners. (Ofqual 2022) This leads to negative into teaching, potentially limiting the learning focus to what will be assessed. We need exams to sample from the whole curriculum, to encourage broader teaching and washback learning, with a broader range of topics. In particular, some papers cover just one topic area, chosen by the candidate and/or teacher, eg travel, which can lead to a highly undesirable narrowing of the curriculum and the vocabulary learnt. Ofqual needs to be much stricter with AOs on this.

2. ESOL qualifications need to include more focus on language for education as well as skills for life and work. The qualifications do not focus sufficiently on development of the cognitive academic language needed for further study in FE and HE, or indeed for a complex discussion in the workplace. This is based on Cummins' distinction between basic communicative fluency (BICS) and academic language proficiency (CALP), both of which are needed for ESOL students to catch up with their peers in academic aspects of the language of education. Vocabulary is an important part of this, and any revision to the ESOL Curriculum should incorporate much more about vocabulary expectations, but as the ESOL SFL qualifications are nominally mapped to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) levels, this would provide an immediate resource in terms of vocabulary at each level, along with the Academic Word List for Levels 1 and 2. [Cummins (2008)]

Q24 To what extent does the current curriculum (including qualification content) support students to positively engage with, be knowledgeable about, and respect, others? Are there elements that could be improved?

The ESOL curriculum has little focus on supporting learners to engage in activities that utilise the other language/s that they speak, although these languages are an important personal resource for plurilingual people.

Although the qualifications do not specify this, ESOL teachers do make use of the range of languages and cultures in the classroom (often 12 or more) to develop respect for others, and a few also use learners' languages to focus on discussing language awareness, eg. the similarities and differences between the languages that learners know, and what works for them in language learning. Language awareness activities can make a strong contribution to students' knowledge about and respect for others, but depend on teachers' knowledge and experience, so this area requires further training for ESOL teachers. [Evidence from NATECLA CPD Trainer]

Learning English whilst learning to negotiate life in the UK means that many local social, cultural, economic and political complexities need to be discussed, but curriculum time is very limited, with 'full time courses' for 16-19s only having 16.5 hours a week (580 hours per year). Again, cognitive academic language is needed for, and can be developed through, these discussions.

Q26 In which ways do the current secondary curriculum and qualification pathways support pupils to have the skills and knowledge they need for future study, life and work, and what could we change to better support this?

The school system and the secondary curriculum do not provide well for late arrivals into England's education system, and some wait for a year for a school place, or to reach 16 and get a college place. Until that time they have no access to any curriculum at all. Ashlee (2024)This is very serious because becoming proficient in the English

required for academic proficiency takes over six years of education. (Strand and Lindorff 2020). This means that the time a pupil arrives in the school system makes all the difference to their attainment.

Others get a place during KS4 but their English is often not good enough to participate in GCSE programmes. These children often waste one or two years of important educational opportunities, sit no external exams and some learn very little English. Others are entered for GCSEs that they have no chance of passing, setting them up to fail. [evidence from college tutors] Although multilingual classrooms are now the norm, funding cuts and lack of policy on EAL mean that many schools are ill-prepared to support pupils with EAL needs and particularly those from refugee backgrounds who may have suffered trauma. College provision can be more suitable but schools are reluctant to pay for it and/or Local Authorities are unwilling to place under 16s in a college setting. Evidence: Ashlee (2024)

Necessary improvements for pre-16

1. Ensure that all pre-16 learners get a school or college place as soon as possible after arrival in the UK, in a setting that can provide for their English language development.

2. Provide focused intensive English language support alongside some school curriculum subjects, to promote swift language development, with assessments that are designed for language learners and not for fluent English speakers.

3. Provide the support that traumatised young people and young carers need, in order to be able to study effectively.

4. Remove any expectation or requirement that learners with low levels of English should be entered for GCSEs that they cannot achieve, and which will only discourage them.

[Suggested improvements from college ESOL departments admitting pupils from schools]

Q27 In which ways do the current qualification pathways and content at 16-19 support pupils to have the skills and knowledge they need for future study, life and work, and what could we change to better support this?

Qualification pathways are somewhat better for ESOL learners at 16-19 than in schools. Research suggests (Ashlee (2024) that it is easier for new arrivals to the UK to get a place in college than in a school, but only for ESOL courses. Those capable of studying a vocational course are much less likely to be accepted on one, possibly because of their lack of UK qualifications. However, in some cities, there are waiting lists for places on 16-19 ESOL programmes, especially where the nearest alternative colleges are some distance away. This means that education is further delayed for these young people, who are therefore very unlikely to complete any vocational qualifications before they reach 19 and their funded full time education ends. This is likely to mean that their

employment options are limited and may put them at an economic disadvantage for life.

Some colleges offer pathways that combine ESOL learning and qualifications with vocational subjects, thus promoting language development at the same time as allowing students to start on their chosen pathway for the future. This is motivating and helps learners to develop the technical language that they will need, and also allows them to make a start on their route to work or further study as soon as their English allows.

Necessary improvements for 16-19

1. Ensure that all 16-19 learners get a college place as soon as possible after arrival in the UK, or direct from school KS4, in a setting that can provide for their English language development. Allowing colleges to include late arrivals in their lagged funding would provide an incentive for them to accept students for whom they would otherwise receive no funding.

2. Provide focused intensive English language support alongside vocational subjects, to promote swift language development, with assessments such as ESOL qualifications that are designed for language learners, and not those such as Functional Skills and GCSE that are designed for fluent English speakers.

3. Increase understanding and recognition across FE of ESOL qualifications and language levels, to allow more students to join vocational courses. Currently, some colleges place barriers to progression for ESOL learners, requiring certain English qualification levels for entry to vocational courses. This often means that learners reach 19 before making enough progress with the subject. (Roden and Osmaston 2021; DfE 2019) .

4. Provide the support that traumatised young people and young carers need, in order to be able to study effectively.

5. Make additional qualifications available at Entry level that match the cognitive and linguistic abilities of ESOL learners. This is particularly important for maths, as it is a condition of funding. Those that exist at this level are generally designed for learners with SEND and not for speakers of other languages. Evidence: Ashlee (2024)

References

Ashlee, A (2024) *Education for Late Arrivals. Examining education for displaced young people arriving in the UK late in the education system*. Refugee Education UK.

Cummins, J (2008) 'BICS and CALP: Empirical and theoretical status of the distinction'. In *Encyclopedia of Language and Education* (pp.487-499)

Ofqual (2022) Curcin, Cadwallader and Sweiry: *Understanding ESOL Skills for Life qualifications: Assessment properties, comparability, core curriculum and CEFR alignment*.

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Strand and Lindorff (2020) 'English as an Additional Language: Proficiency in English, educational achievement and rate of progression in English language learning'. University of Oxford Department of Education

Section 6: A broad and balanced curriculum

Q30 To what extent do the current qualifications pathways at 16-19 support learners to study a broad curriculum which gives them the right knowledge and skills to progress? Should anything change to better support this?

Young people with limited or no previous education would benefit from a broader curriculum post 16 that helped to fill some of the gaps. In some colleges this is done well, with a broad curriculum including the language of maths, to enable them to succeed in maths; IT to enable them to use computers and office software effectively; digital skills and digital safety, especially for young people at risk from grooming and gangs (such as young LACs); short vocational tasters to give them opportunities to learn practical skills and technical language and decide which courses and jobs might interest them in future. Many have done very little science and some colleges offer limited science teaching. [Evidence from a range of college managers]

One way that a few colleges introduce a broader curriculum is to embed subjects (such as Humanities) into the ESOL classes, in a method known as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). This concept should be shared more widely. However, the ability to do this depends on having ESOL teachers with the requisite subject knowledge, so there are teacher recruitment and teacher training implications. [Evidence from college managers]

A national strategy and/or clearer expectations about what should be provided for 16-19 ESOL learners would help to ensure that this good practice is shared and replicated. Unfortunately, some colleges place too many unnecessary linguistic and qualification barriers to ESOL learners joining vocational and academic courses, whilst others accept ESOL learners onto vocational courses without the language support that they need to be successful. (Roden and Osmaston 2021)

Q31 To what extent do the current curriculum (at primary and secondary) and qualifications pathways (at secondary and 16-19) ensure that pupils and learners are able to develop creative skills and have access to creative subjects?

Some colleges manage to include creative, volunteering and sport opportunities for young people. ESOL learners generally enjoy these and many find them very therapeutic, eg creating junk art, participating in team sports or drama, and this improves their mental health. [College managers' evidence] Also see background on mental health impacts in Jean-Berluche 2024.

References

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Section 7: Assessment and accountability

Q44 To what extent, and in what ways, does the accountability system influence curriculum and assessment decisions in schools and colleges?

Colleges

Accountability systems encourage colleges to enter learners for qualifications they will pass rather than ones that will benefit and challenge them. In colleges, accountability systems focus on achievement rates and also include financial penalties when students do not achieve their qualification, which creates perverse incentives to enter students for lower levels that they will definitely pass rather than those that will challenge them, and to choose ESOL Awarding Organisations whose qualifications are perceived to be easier, including those where all assessment is carried out by teachers. This also favours GCSE over other qualifications, as every grade at GCSE (from 1 upwards) counts as an achievement, whereas many other post 16 qualifications are pass/fail. However, GCSE English is an inappropriate qualification for most ESOL learners, except those already working at Level 2 in English. [Evidence from college managers; Roden and Osmaston 2021]

In some colleges, accountability via achievement rates and funding penalties has led to teaching to the test, so that students will 'achieve', rather than teaching them broader language skills that will prepare them fully for the next level of English, and for work and further FE or HE studies. See Popham Teaching to the Test? 2001 for background. [Evidence from college ESOL staff, as reported to NATECLA CPD trainers]

Q45 How well does the current accountability system support and recognise progress for all pupils and learners? What works well and what could be improved?

The current system in post-16 education does not support or recognise progress for those ESOL learners who have missed many years of education, and who may not be literate in English, or know the Roman alphabet, or may not be literate in their own language. There is no mechanism for recognising progress made, since the qualification goal posts are far out of reach of many new arrivals, who have to attempt to overcome the difficulties of 'lost years' of education in a short time period. In addition, the lack of an EAL marker in the ILR (Individualised Learner Record) means that the reasons for their lack of progress are obscured. College ESOL and English managers overwhelmingly support the inclusion of an EAL marker in the post-16 ILR. [Roden and Osmaston 2021]. In contrast, within the school sector the EAL marker is helpful in identifying differences in attainment between groups.

Q46 Should there be any changes to the current accountability system in order to better support progress and incentivise inclusion for young people with SEND and/or from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds? If so, what should those changes be?

We are aware that this review is not about funding, but as funding is used as an accountability structure in post -16 education, and as it can mean that education is denied to some of those who are entitled to and most need it, we have included it here as a form of accountability.

Many 16-19 ESOL learners are from the most disadvantaged communities and there is a high proportion of Looked After Children (Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children). The learners range from those with good educational backgrounds but limited English skills to those with little or no prior education at all, who need to spend time developing basic literacy and maths skills as well as learning English, to allow them to progress into further study and employment. Many are having to manage their life in a new country without any family to support them. Currently the accountability structures are a straitjacket and cannot provide the curriculum and level of support that some of these learners need.

Colleges need the freedom to provide what young ESOL learners need, rather than fitting them into existing accountability structures.

Problems:

1. The Condition of Funding means that some ESOL learners have to take maths qualifications that they cannot pass. All learners on a programme of more than 149 hours have to do maths and English as none of them have a Level 2 already. We strongly support teaching maths but there are no suitable maths qualifications at Entry level, as they all require high levels of English. We would like the assessment to be fairer to our

learners. There are, however, suitable English (ESOL) qualifications for almost all of them.

2. Lagged funding is a particular disincentive to inclusion for young people who arrive after 1st November. If a student starts in January as a beginner in English with low literacy, they both bring no lagged funding but have to meet the conditions of funding, ie they need to do a qualification in both English and maths. A speaking and listening ESOL certificate is usually possible in this time, but the maths (for the reasons above) is difficult. Only if a young person is admitted late in the year with less than 149 hours (9 weeks) remaining, will they be exempt from the maths and English Condition of Funding. However, they will still bring no lagged funding for the college the following year. As a result, some of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable learners may be kept on a waiting list until the following year in some cities, and therefore have no access at all to education. [Evidence from college managers]

3. Many young ESOL learners need an entitlement to continue their full time education beyond 19, as most do not achieve Level 2 by that age. Those who have started as a beginner with limited literacy skills aged 16 typically reach Entry 2 in three years of full time ESOL, which is not enough English to allow them to progress to a vocational course or to most jobs. [College manager evidence] Moving into Adult ESOL provision slows their progress, as there are fewer hours, and some find it demotivating to switch to studying with much older people. [college tutor evidence]

Solutions - to promote inclusion and progress for all young ESOL learners:

1. Remove the disincentives that prevent some colleges taking on learners mid-year. Allow those who arrive late (after 1 November) to be exempt from the Conditions of Funding but allow them to do more than 150 hours of study that year. Allow new arrivals after 1 November to be included in a college's lagged funding numbers for the following year, to incentivise inclusion of these vulnerable learners.

2. Extend learning years for those who have had the least prior education. Make available an entitlement to education beyond 19, perhaps until age 23/24, like those with EHCPs, for those learners with very limited previous education and the most 'lost years' to catch up, or perhaps an entitlement to 3 years of full time education for anyone arriving in the UK before age 19.

3. Include all nationalities equitably. Make funding uplifts, such as those for Ukrainian and Afghan pupils, available to all refugee and asylum seeking young people. This would support inclusion and fairness. [Ashlee 2024 4.2.1] Alternatively, make a 'very large programme uplift' available for ESOL learners at this age which would pay for more hours of tuition or targetted hours to enable them to progress.

[College managers' suggestions and evidence for all of above]

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Section 8: Qualification pathways 16-19

Q47 To what extent does the range of programmes and qualifications on offer at each level meet the needs and aspirations of learners? a) Level 3 b) Level 2c) Level 1 and entry level?

b) Level 2

Not all Level 2 English qualifications meet the language learning needs of ESOL learners. Some are preferred because they:

1. attract more funding, eg GCSE English,

2. have more recognition within FE and with employers (GCSE and Functional Skills English),

3. have been set by the government as the only acceptable English qualifications for apprenticeships (GCSE and FSE).

However, ESOL Skills for Life qualifications are designed for ESOL learners and usually promote broader and better language development. Unfortunately the quality is variable and the levels are not very reliably calibrated (Ofqual 2022) and they have not gained the full recognition that was intended when they were created.

Improved quality and recognition of L2 ESOL qualifications as equivalent to GCSE and L2 FSE would meet learners' language learning and recognition needs better. Public funding of IELTS exams would allow those ESOL learners progressing to university to demonstrate their English skills in the same way as international students and prepare them much better for academic English than would a GCSE in English. However, this exam is expensive and may not be available locally.

c) Entry level and Level 1

ESOL programmes at Entry and Level 1 are an essential ladder for ESOL learners to progress to the higher levels that they need for work and further study, as many arrive in the UK as beginners or at low levels of English. Used effectively alongside other programmes such as maths, science and vocational tasters, these programmes can promote very speedy progression for young learners.

Functional Skills English programmes do not provide a suitable language learning experience for these learners, as they are designed for fluent English speakers who have achieved the lowest grades at GCSE. GCSE English classes are also very unsuitable for the same reasons and also because the content is focused on literature and culture. However, both of these qualifications are used by colleges, sometimes alongside ESOL programmes and sometimes instead. In the case of GCSE, there is a perverse incentive for colleges to do so, as achievements are counted at every grade (from Grade 1 upwards) in GCSE and are therefore higher than for Pass/Fail qualifications such as ESOL and FSE. Evidence: Roden and Osmaston (2021) .

Q48 Are there particular changes that could be made to the following programmes and qualifications, and/or their assessment that would be beneficial to learners: a) AS/A level qualifications b) T Level and T Level Foundation Year programmes c) Other applied or vocational qualifications at level 3 d) Other applied or vocational qualifications at level 2 and below?

d) ESOL qualifications are in the category of technical and vocational qualifications

1. The most fundamental change that NATECLA would like to see is to remove the Adult Literacy standards from the ESOL qualifications and revise the assessment criteria to focus on a broader range of aspects across the whole of the ESOL Core Curriculum. This would avoid the focus on unsuitable literacy aspects, remove the very repetitive and predictable nature of the exams at each level and promote teaching of the whole curriculum rather than just those aspects that appear in the assessments.

2. There are quality issues with some of the assessment approaches and assessment instruments used by AOs, which are not always reflective of best practice in language assessment, leading to issues of assessment validity, eg the use of reading in a test of listening, rubrics that are linguistically more complex than the test itself, answers that can be easily guessed. Ofqual is aware of this (Ofqual 2022) but now needs to urgently address these issues.

3. There is variability in standards across the 10 Awarding Organisations (AOs) offering these qualifications. This undermines confidence in what the qualifications mean. Over time, it appears that the levels of some assessments have slipped in relation to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), particularly at Entry 3, and a few have crept up, eg Entry 1. This causes problems for learners moving from one level to another, as some now require a larger jump than previously. (Current levels and CEFR references from Ofqual 2022; past levels from the original mapping). Requiring the qualifications to be mapped more closely to the CEFR would be very helpful, as it provides a well known and respected description of language proficiency at each level, and would improve comparability between the ESOL qualifications from different AOs, and therefore confidence in ESOL qualifications in general. It would probably also help with recognition. This was proposed by Ofqual 2022 and should now be addressed urgently.

4. AOs vary as to whether assessment is marked externally by examiners or internally by teachers. Internal assessment leads to a greater loss of teaching time and is likely to be less reliable, due to the very large number of assessors with little training or guidance, but can be more flexible for student populations that are subject to sudden moves in location, eg refugees, prisoners and those in detention. Ofqual should investigate the standards of marking and ensure that grading is equivalent, regardless of whether assessment is internal or external.

Overall, much more stringent quality control and moderation of ESOL qualifications by Ofqual is needed, which would be made much less onerous if fewer AOs were offering ESOL. It is not only the assessments that need to be mapped to the CEFR, but also the assessed speaking and writing work. This aspect requires much more focus than at present, but is essential for the credibility of these important qualifications.

Q49 How can we improve learners' understanding of how the different programmes and qualifications on offer will prepare them for university, employment (including apprenticeships) and/or further technical study?

ESOL learners need very specific Careers IAG to help them navigate an unfamiliar education system, including mapping the equivalence of their existing overseas qualifications. (Ashlee 2024) Also advisors need specific training in careers advice for ESOL learners. EAL-specific orientation programmes, such as the case study described in Ashlee (2024) p41, provide support for late arrivals.

Educational institutions and employers also need more understanding of the value of ESOL qualifications and of what each level can tell them about the young person's proficiency in English. More rigorous monitoring of the standards of ESOL qualifications by Ofqual would help.

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Roden, J and Osmaston, M (2021) 'ESOL Learners and Functional Skills English' Education and Training Foundation.

Section 9: Other issues on which we would welcome views

Q52 How can the curriculum, assessment and wraparound support better enable transitions between key stages to ensure continuous learning and support attainment?

Recognition of prior learning and qualifications from learners' home countries is crucial. For EAL and ESOL learners, transitions are even more complex than for other pupils/students, particularly when they arrive during KS4 and have too little time to learn enough English to pass - or even take - GCSEs, and again aged 16 when they have 'failed' at GCSE and move on to college. They need easier recognition of any qualifications they may have, and of their prior learning, and recognition of any gaps in their prior education, and then need intensive English language learning so that they don't miss out on their education.

Transferring information about students with EAL to the post-16 ILR would be a great help for colleges in identifying language as a potential reason for lack of success at school. (Ashlee 2024)

Q54 Do you have any further views on anything else associated with the Curriculum and Assessment Review not covered in the questions throughout the call for evidence?

There should be a coherent England-wide strategy for supporting ESOL/EAL that guarantees access to ESOL and EAL for young people, allowing learners to progress quickly towards work and further study. In this way provision would be more equitable and consistent, and it would be apparent where there might need to be additional local flexibilities. See NATECLA (2016) Towards an ESOL Strategy for England

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