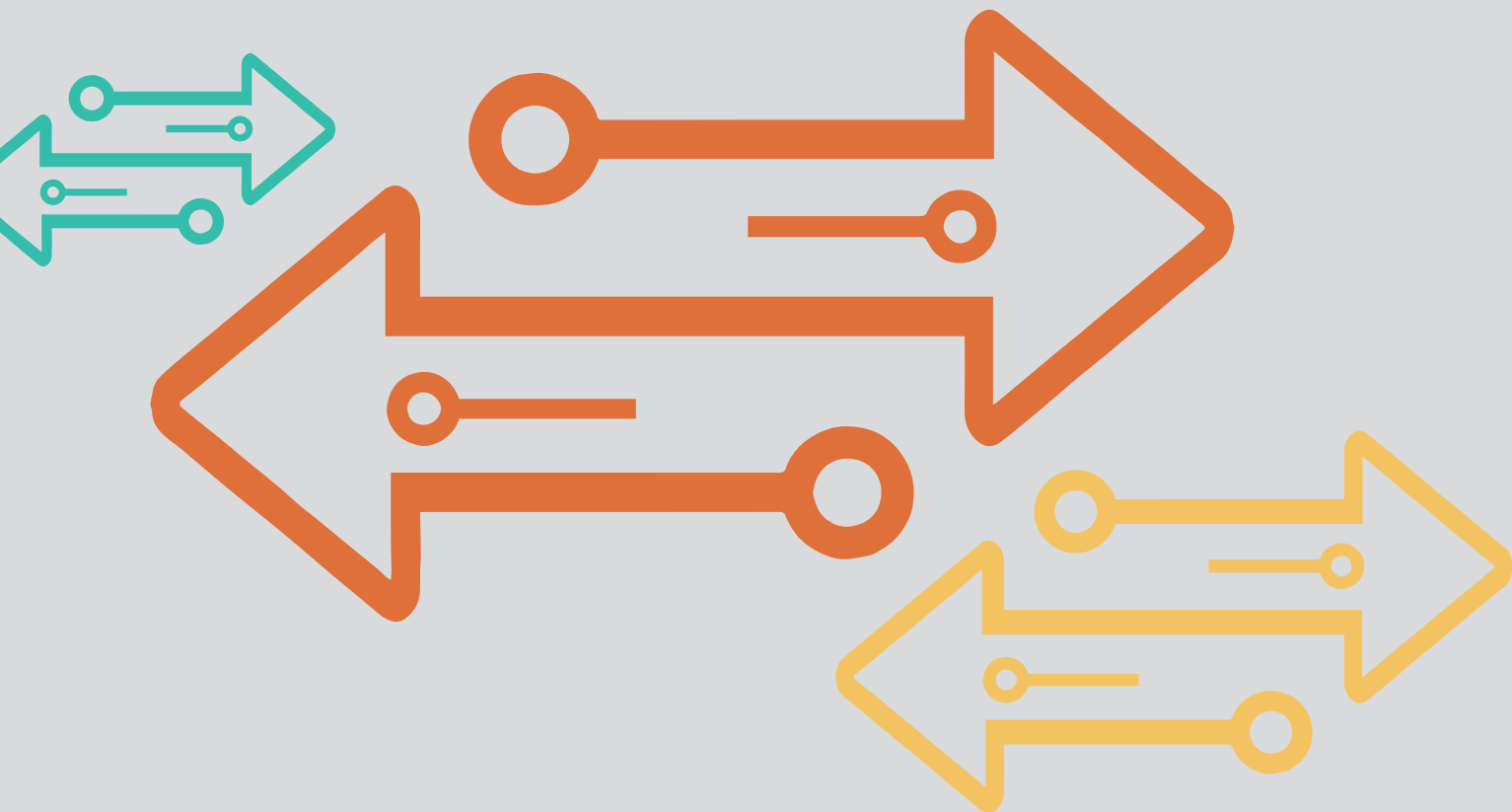


Migration and English Language Learning after Brexit

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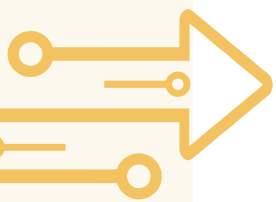
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Executive Summary

This paper takes stock of the current English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) landscape during a period of potential changes in demand for ESOL. Two developments are of particular importance: they are the new UK Points-Based Immigration System¹ and devolution of the Adult Education Budget (AEB). Like everything else in this new decade, the economic and learning impact of the pandemic is a further influence.

The end of free movement resulting from the UK's departure from the European Union is highly significant for the future of ESOL. Net migration from the EU has fallen since 2016, while it has increased from outside of the EU. Beyond this, people will continue to see the UK as a place for asylum and to be reunited with family members. Many of these new arrivals will wish to learn and improve their English. People who have already made Britain their home will also continue to wish to do the same.

The pandemic has both stalled and skewed migration patterns in the short term, but more stable ones may start to take shape as the UK, and world, recover from the pandemic and from recession. The pandemic has also moved some ESOL provision online, at least temporarily, and given providers the opportunity to consider its future role in learning.

All of these developments mean it is timely to take a step back and to consider the future for ESOL. As we emerge from the coronavirus lockdowns and economic recession, the needs of people whose English prevents full economic participation and realisation of their potential must be considered. The January 2021 Further Education White Paper, *Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth*, reiterates the Government's commitment to boost English

language learning, but contains few details of the measures or investment to achieve this².

This paper explores how new developments are likely to affect future demand for ESOL. It looks at research evidence on policy and provision incorporating over 70 reports, papers and grey literature on English for adults. To assist understanding of what might work to improve future provision, the research included a case study of ESOL in the West Midlands, for which seven stakeholders were interviewed. Whilst immigration policy is UK-wide, skills policy is devolved. This paper focuses on ESOL policy in England, although many messages will be relevant in other parts of the UK.

Findings

ESOL policy needs a stronger emphasis on economic and social integration

The emphasis in political rhetoric around ESOL has moved in focus from economic or social integration of migrants, towards placing expectations to learn English on new arrivals and settled communities. There has also been too much concern about the use of languages other than English in the home and not enough attention given to what level of English is needed for people to integrate socially and economically.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/new-immigration-system-what-you-need-to-know>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/skills-for-jobs-lifelong-learning-for-opportunity-and-growth>

Too often, this rhetoric has worked against the development and implementation of effective ESOL policy to actively enable economic and social integration. The role of ESOL provision in delivering a broad range of employment outcomes beyond labour market entry – including facilitating progression in work, and addressing underemployment – is also less widely acknowledged and understood, despite the well-recognised role of ESOL in supporting access to work. The state's willingness to fund ESOL has varied over time, with fully-funded provision usually linked to unemployment. ESOL has long been recognised as essential to get someone into work. However, its role in helping people advance and achieve their potential is rarely considered.

The UK Points-Based Immigration System emphasises the importance of English language for assisting integration and therefore as a requirement for many visas³. However, the Government has said very little about the benefits of language skills for workforce integration, for skills and for advancement. The emphasis of ESOL policy has often been lower levels, at tackling inability to speak basic English, rather on enabling a greater degree of fluency and communication across all areas of economic and social life. This emphasis also reflects demand, which is reported to be much higher at lower levels.

However, it is likely that many people work below their level of education and ability because of English language limitations. The emphasis of provision should therefore include opportunities to progress to intermediate and advanced courses, linked to skills and occupations. A strategy to enable full economic and social integration would look different to current and past approaches in a number of respects. It would involve more contact with employers and regional skills bodies and would use ESOL and vocational provision to reskill people for jobs in growth sectors.

Learning opportunities must meet diverse needs

ESOL learners are a highly diverse group. They include newly arrived asylum seekers and people who have lived in Britain for much of their life. Many have come to the UK to work and to build a new future for their families. Others come as new spouses or to join family. Some people, including refugees with vocational qualifications and skills, want to learn English quickly so that they can find work or renew their professional lives. Others will also want to settle and to reach the level of English required for leave to remain and citizenship. The wide mix of motivations, barriers and benefits needs to be better understood. ESOL policy, funding and provision must take account of the wide diversity in motivation and need.

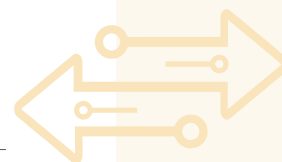
There is a range of options for people wishing to learn English, from formal courses delivered in Further Education colleges to conversation groups in community venues. These different options are often talked about as having pros and cons, and being suitable for particular types of learner. However, it might be more useful to think of them as options which suit people at different stages, and which they can move between.

Non-AEB funded community provision has benefits for people starting out and who may find the relative formality of a college setting off-putting. It should be afforded the same stability as AEB funded provision, to enable delivery to be planned and to respond to changing needs. Non-AEB funding, for example the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's (MHCLG) ESOL for Integration Fund⁴, should therefore be given a more permanent status.

Digital learning has been accelerated under lockdown. This provision has a range of benefits, enabling some learners to access provision when they experience barriers such as irregular working hours and childcare. However, learners

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-points-based-immigration-system-further-details-statement/uk-points-based-immigration-system-further-details-statement>

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/esol-english-for-speakers-of-other-languages-for-integration-fund-prospectus>



require digital skills, as well as devices and broadband. Providers see most benefit in blended learning, involving a mix of digital and classroom-based learning. However, for those who cannot attend classes, structured online learning is potentially a good option.

Barriers to ESOL need to be addressed through flexibility in funding and provision

The many barriers to studying ESOL are well documented in research reports. They include affordability for people ineligible for fully-funded provision, as well as transport and childcare. Providers report particular problems for learners combining learning with shift work and flexible hours. Confidence and health are further barriers, with some learners reported to be unable or lack confidence to travel out of their local area to learning venues. Awareness of provision is a further factor discouraging take-up, with groups such as Roma especially cut off from information sources.

Eligibility for fully-funded provision clearly restrict access to ESOL for some learners, including newly arrived asylum seekers, people on spouse visas and those in work but on low income. The end of free movement may also restrict eligibility to a wider group of migrants than in the past, if the three year residency rule is applied to migrants from within the EU. Given the goal of asylum seekers and refugees to rebuild their lives in the UK, it is important that they gain early access to ESOL and that it forms part of the process of integration and inclusion.

Evidence on barriers to participation in ESOL point to the need for provision to go to learners where possible, including within or close to workplaces, and in community sites. It also suggests a need for wider publicity and better information about ESOL classes, delivered through schools or other local venues, as well as online.

ESOL hubs play an important role in coordinating provision, distributing information and even sharing waiting lists in some areas, but in others

providers have little contact. Hubs should operate in all areas of significant ESOL demand to ensure that providers offer the full range of provision and can respond to the needs and preferences of prospective learners.

AEB funding needs flexibility to meet needs and skills agendas

ESOL policy to date has largely lacked a spatial dimension. The Casey Review⁵ referred to specific communities located in parts of Britain. However, policy makers have not considered how to address the very uneven distribution of people with ESOL needs. To some degree this can be addressed through funding allocations for ESOL, which ensure that areas have the AEB funding they need for college courses and non-AEB funding for community provision. It also calls for sharing of good practice between providers in areas with high levels of ESOL demand

Providers would like to use AEB funding for learners who are currently ineligible, particularly those who have to wait months or years for funded provision. While they are currently able to exercise some flexibility, this is not ideal and undoubtedly deters some people with ESOL needs from applying. There will be a need to strike a balance between the different public policy objectives across migration, economic development and social integration, and between immediate need for access and a general contributory principle. Investment in English language provision through the AEB and other funding streams will need to be complemented with contributions from employers (if sponsoring work visas, for example) and individuals who are not on low incomes.

AEB flexibility for Mayoral Combined Authorities allows for providers to fully fund some learners who are otherwise only co-funded, for example by defining the low income fee remission threshold locally, and to fund initiatives for particular learners and in partnership with stakeholders such as employers.

5 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-casey-review-a-review-into-opportunity-and-integration>



New immigration policy will affect the language profile of new arrivals

The impact of new immigration policies on future demand for ESOL cannot be predicted with any degree of uncertainty. While net migration to the UK has fallen, especially from the EU, over the period of pandemic and before, economic recovery may lead to an increase in net migration. This has been the experience of the UK as it emerged from previous recessions.

Free movement has ended and been replaced with a new, 'skills-based' immigration system with some new rules and categories. This will result in more workers arriving to the UK from outside of the EU on a skilled worker visa.

Some types of migration, to study and to seek asylum are also unpredictable, but less so than migration for work. Asylum seekers and refugees are a significant ESOL group since they are often strongly motivated to settle and achieve the opportunities denied to them in their countries of origin.

Other types of migration may also increase. The Youth Mobility programme has been extended to take in more countries; and Hong Kong nationals with the status of Overseas Nationals have

recently been given the right to live and work in the UK.

It is likely that future patterns of migration to the UK will be as complex as ever, and that the UK will be home to arrivals from varied backgrounds and levels of English. Demand for ESOL will therefore continue, though the balance between basic and higher level needs may change. The sector therefore needs to be ready to adapt to these changes in demand, and need.

Demand for ESOL may shift to higher levels and vocational needs

Immigration policy has changed, particularly in relation to work visas: many now require a language requirement. However not all visas do, and people will still arrive with little or no English. They include people on family visas and asylum seekers and refugees who generate considerable ESOL demand. The Youth Mobility route may attract young people who wish to learn or improve their English, either to use during their two year permitted stay or for future benefit.

There are likely to be significant numbers of new arrivals from Hong Kong, under the Hong Kong British National (Overseas) visa route: many



will be proficient in English but some may not and may generate a demand for intermediate or advanced ESOL. Given that many will wish to work, this will need to include vocational content and careers guidance.

The end of free movement means more economic migrants will enter via the skilled visa route than in the past: they will need to be at B1, intermediate level, before arrival. While this is sufficient for many work roles, English at a higher level is required for many jobs, particularly at management level. Depending on the demand for skilled visas, there may be a demand for advanced ESOL. This might include ESOL tailored to particular occupations and industries, and might be particularly well suited to workplace delivery.

Other types of demand will continue: existing demand for ESOL from people on spouse and family visas is likely to change only as people in settled communities become more proficient. However, people will continue to move to the UK to join family, and some will have little or no English. People will also continue to seek refuge in Britain and to see English as the route to settlement and a better life. All of these will need to reach intermediate level ESOL to gain leave to remain and citizenship. Levels of unmet need for ESOL are among the highest for people arriving for family reasons, and for asylum seekers and refugees. Provision needs to address outstanding needs as well as meet those of new arrivals.

Conclusions: the future for ESOL

As we recover from the coronavirus pandemic, it is time to take stock of the purpose of ESOL, the challenges it has faced in meeting needs and how these might be overcome. This should consider the diversity of need and to the role of ESOL in bringing about economic as well as social integration. ESOL can address underutilisation of skills, and enable people to reach their full potential. It should be part of debates on social mobility.

The potential benefit of ESOL to the UK economy is often ignored. ESOL strategy needs to align with economic goals and in particular the UK's agenda for skills. Providers should work with local stakeholders to plan provision which combines ESOL with vocational skills, at intermediate and advanced levels.

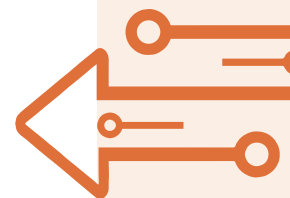
The sector needs to keep track of changes in need, as well as demand, and be ready to respond and to adapt. It is likely that people will continue to come to Britain to live and work, though the end of free movement means that many will face more restrictions than in the past. Demand for ESOL will therefore continue, though the balance between basic and higher level needs may change. The distribution of people with ESOL needs across the country may also change.

ESOL learners are a highly diverse group and provision must reflect their different needs and barriers to participation. AEB provision should continue to allow for formal learning leading to qualifications, and community provision can cater for less formal learning. However, learners' circumstances change and routes between the two need to be open. Local ESOL hubs can help ensure that provision is well-planned and varied.

Persistent barriers to ESOL participation need to be addressed through multiple strategies. Research consistently finds that some potential learners find travel to college difficult. The ability to hold smaller classes with AEB funding in local venues might help ease access for some. Workplace provision must be made viable despite fluctuating attendance and small classes. Digital learning has the potential to extend provision to some currently excluded groups, but can also cut off people without digital skills, devices and data.

Eligibility for fully-funded provision must be extended nationally, as well as in devolved AEB areas. The qualifying period for asylum seekers, or for others arriving on family or work visas should be removed, or reduced: early access to ESOL is good both for learners and has wider social and economic benefits.

Introduction



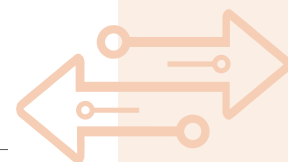
There is general agreement that people who live in the UK for any considerable length of time should be able to speak English. Successive reports from government and organisations with an interest in language and integration have stressed the importance of English proficiency for living and working in the UK, including for work, engaging with health and other services, and for social mixing.⁶ These have also highlighted barriers to learning English and shortcomings in provision of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). Many have focused on the drop in funding in recent years. Some reports also highlight regional variations in access to ESOL, resulting from diverse levels of demand, as well as supply.

The Government's promise of a national strategy for English language learning in England, made in its 2018 Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper, is still to be delivered. This strategy will be welcomed by many with an interest in ESOL who have expressed impatience at its delay. However, with current provision failing short of needs, there are concerns that an ESOL strategy cannot be delivered without consideration of the wider context.

This paper takes stock of the current ESOL landscape during a period of change in demand for ESOL and in supply of classes and other provision. Provision of learning always takes place against a policy backdrop which both enables and constrains, and this is particularly true of adult learning and of ESOL. Two developments are of particular importance: they are new immigration policy and devolution of the Adult Education Budget in England. Like everything else in this new decade, the economic and learning impact of the pandemic is a further influence.

On the first of these, the end of free movement resulting from the UK's departure from the European Union is highly significant for the future of ESOL. Net migration from the EU has fallen since 2016, while it has increased from outside of the EU. The pandemic has both stalled and skewed migration patterns in the short term, but more stable ones may start to take shape as the UK, and world, recover from the pandemic and from recession. People will continue to see the UK as a place for asylum and to be reunited with family members. Many of these new arrivals will wish to learn and improve their English. People who have already made Britain their home will also continue to wish to do the same. The paper explores how new patterns are likely to affect future demand for ESOL.

Secondly, in recognition of the need for local responses to ESOL and other learning needs, in 2019 the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) gave eight of the ten devolved Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs) control over their Adult Education Budget (AEB). These authorities



⁶ Gov UK (2018) Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper [Link](#) NATECLA, (2016) Towards an ESOL Strategy for England [Link](#); Bell, R., Plumb, N., Marangozov, R. and Kere, A. (2017) Integration not demonization, APPG on Social Integration [Link](#)

are Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, Greater Manchester, Greater London, Liverpool City Region, Tees Valley, West of England, West Midlands and North of Tyne. This has given more control to MCAs to extend fully-funded provision to people who would otherwise be required to pay or contribute to fees. It also allows MCAs to use unspent funds for specific ESOL interventions and projects. The transfer of powers to MCAs is therefore a significant development which has the potential to extend the reach of current provision or for services to focus AEB provision on people who are considered in most need or which is most effective.

The coronavirus pandemic and lockdown is a further factor to be considered. People with ESOL needs have undoubtedly been disproportionately affected: they are likely to have experienced greater social isolation, to have lost insecure jobs and to have struggled to help children keep up with school work. They will also have found it harder to have health, financial and other needs addressed. Opportunities to learn English have also been affected with colleges and other learning venues closed. Some learning has moved online and providers who had intended to move towards a blend of classroom and digital learning have accelerated their plans. This has allowed for providers to test out the feasibility and effectiveness of online learning, and is a development we explore in the paper. As we discuss later, this has particular implications for ESOL learners.

All of these developments mean it is timely to take a step back and to consider the future of

ESOL in Britain. As we emerge from coronavirus lockdown and economic recession, the needs of people whose English prevents full economic participation and use of their potential must be considered.

About this report

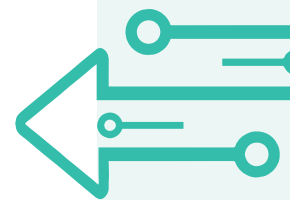
This report looks at research evidence on policy and provision incorporating over 70 reports, papers and grey literature on English for adults⁷. To assist understanding of what might work to improve future provision, the research for the piece included a case study of ESOL the West Midlands. Seven stakeholders involved in planning ESOL were interviewed, with insights incorporated into this report.

The remainder of the report is set out as follows:

- **Section 1** looks at the current policy context
- **Section 2** establishes who needs ESOL and how it is delivered
- **Section 3** examines funding, eligibility and the role of MCAs
- **Section 4** identifies who learns ESOL and who is left out, as a result of current funding and delivery structures.
- **Section 5** provides an overview of changing immigration patterns to the UK, the language requirements attached to many visas needed to live and work in Britain and the implications for ESOL demand
- **Section 6** draws some conclusions and returns to the central question of how English regions can plan ESOL services to meet the needs of residents in the coming years.

7 English as an Additional Language (EAL) for children and young people involves different issues and was not included here

1. What's behind ESOL policy in England?



The arrival and settlement of people whose first language is not English has been a permanent feature of British society. Historically, informal and self-learning methods predominated and are likely to have made the pace of economic and social integration slow. Migration from the mid-20th century onwards has included groups with fluent English, and with little: the former includes the Windrush settlers; newcomers from other commonwealth countries have included some with little or no English.

From the late 1980s Britain saw an increase in people seeking asylum and refugee status, from countries including Sri Lanka, Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq, the former Yugoslavia and more recently Syria.⁸ The linguistic profile of migrants diversified further as a result of free movement within the European Union, and especially with its extension to Eastern and Central European countries from 2004. Many of these new migrants arrived with little more than basic level English.

Britain's patterns of migration have increased demand and supply of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). Formal and publicly funded provision has gradually replaced a service delivered largely by volunteers common before the 1990s.⁹ Policy makers have frequently stated the importance of English for social and economic integration and have looked for ways to encourage take up of ESOL classes.

The emphasis of policy has moved between governments and in focus from economic and social integration, between new arrivals and settled communities. Fully-funded ESOL provision was included in the national Skills

for Life strategy for improving adult literacy, language and numeracy launched by Tony Blair's Labour Government in 2001. The 'New Approach to ESOL' published close to the end of the Labour Government signalled a stronger emphasis on integration, rather than skills.¹⁰ ESOL was repositioned from Skills for Life and local authorities became responsible for its coordination. The policy placed emphasis on the ESOL needs of settled communities and migrants who are committed to staying in the UK.

The New Approach was discontinued under the coalition government formed in 2010 and at national level ESOL became incorporated again into active labour market policies. Under Skills Conditionality rules jobseekers could be mandated to ESOL where English language was considered to present a barrier to employment. This resulted in a shift in ESOL funding in 2014-15 to providers in areas identified as likely to experience increased demand. This was relatively short-lived and withdrawal of ESOL Plus Mandation in 2015-16 led to a significant fall in funding for ESOL.¹¹

⁸ Walsh, P., (2020) Asylum and refugee settlement in the UK, Migration Observatory Briefing [Link](#)

⁹ Rosenberg, S. K. (2008) A critical history of ESOL in the UK, 1870 – 2006. Leicester: NIACE

¹⁰ DIUS (2009) A New Approach to English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)

¹¹ Hubble, S., Roberts, N., Bolton, P., Wilkins, H., Bellis, A., Steele, S., Jap, B. (2019) Investment in the provision of English for speakers of other languages, House of Commons Library [Link](#)



Community vs economic integration

Current government thinking and strategy towards ESOL has a strong focus on community integration. This has run in tandem with the longer-standing aims of the Adult Education Budget to provide skills to enable labour market participation, but has received more attention in public debates. The 2016 Casey Review into integration and opportunity highlighted the English language needs of some of Britain's isolated and deprived communities: these concerns were often directed towards women in settled Asian communities. Whilst recognising the importance of English language skills, organisations representing Muslims questioned the Casey Review's narrative of 'self-segregation', citing underpinning inequalities and discrimination in the labour market and wider society¹².

The concerns expressed in the Casey Review were explicitly in response to public attitudes, largely as measured in opinion polls. The 2014 British Attitudes Survey found almost universal agreement with the view that to be 'truly British' you must be able to speak English.¹³ Other, more recent, surveys also find the public attaches importance to speaking English, though this is often when asked in connection with being 'British' rather than living here.¹⁴ Reflecting a preference for migrants to speak English, a recent YouGov poll on attitudes towards new immigration policy found having to speak English to 'a required standard' was supported by 84% of respondents.¹⁵ However, views on what constitutes an appropriate standard may vary considerably – from very basic to fluent.

In the wake of the Casey Review, the Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper¹⁶ made a range of proposals for ESOL. They included

opening new routes through community-based programmes, coordinated referral services and an infrastructure fund. Five new integration areas in different parts of the country were identified as the focus for some of these measures; they received funding for provision through the MHCLG's Integration Areas Programme.¹⁷

A consultation on the Green Paper led to the publication of the Government's Integrated Communities Action Plan¹⁸. The plan included funding new community-based language provision under the Integrated Communities English Language programme¹⁹, now known as the ESOL for Integration Fund²⁰. Some parts of the programme will have been delayed by coronavirus, but it has the potential to boost provision in community settings such as schools and through less formal provision such as conversation clubs.²¹ The plan also included a commitment to a new national strategy for English language in 2019. However, to date, the ESOL strategy has not been published.

Alignment of ESOL with economic need

The principles and emphasis of an ESOL strategy are important to get right. They need to be relevant to current and projected needs of Britain's non-fluent English speakers and respond to demand and need for college-based provision, delivered largely with AEB funding and community-based provision using other funding sources. At the same time, it is important to consider how the UK can benefit from a population with better English language skills. Debates are often focused on the needs of individuals and specific communities and less on wider benefits to society and to the UK's economy. ESOL strategy therefore needs to align with economic goals and in particular the UK's agenda for skills.

12 The Guardian (2016) Casey Report Criticised for focus on UK Muslim communities [Link](#)

13 Park, A., Bryson, C. and Curtice, J. (2014) British Social Attitudes Survey 31, NatCen [Link](#)

14 Arslanagic-Wakefield, P. (2020) A better reward? Public attitudes to citizenship, Bright Blue [Link](#)

15 Nolsoe, E. (date) What do Brits think of the Government's new immigration rules? You Gov [Link](#)

16 <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/integrated-communities-strategy-green-paper>

17 <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/integration-area-programme>

18 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/integrated-communities-action-plan>

19 Gov UK (2020) Thousands to benefit from new English Language Classes [Link](#)

20 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/esol-english-for-speakers-of-other-languages-for-integration-fund-prospectus>

21 Gov UK, Thousands to benefit from new English Language Classes

Policy makers have tended to view economic migrants largely as a means of meeting skills and labour gaps. While it is known that the UK's migrant labour force includes a proportion with very limited language skills, policy concerns have been quite narrowly focused. Reflecting this, guidelines on Health and Safety at Work and English language requirements for public sector workers emphasise safety, communications, productivity and sometimes protection from exploitation.²² These policies in relation to the workplace largely stop at what is needed to get by: they have not included issues of skills, learning and progression. This has resulted in a large policy gap and limited thinking on the role of ESOL in economic integration, particularly

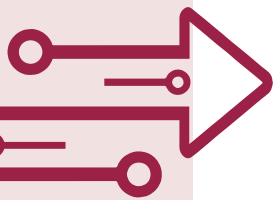
in the context of the recover from coronavirus. L&W's research into the impact of the pandemic on low-paid workers in London²³ shows that people from ethnic minorities, including migrants, and those with lower levels of skills are more likely to have a reduced income, to have accessed support (e.g. Universal Credit) and to face greater job insecurity. For many, their chances of finding new or more secure work will be higher if they have good spoken and written English.

We return to the case for an ESOL strategy and approaches which consider both community and economic integration, as two sides of the same coin, later in the paper.



²² Health and Safety Executive (undated) Migrant workers: advice for employers, accessed 12th March 2020 [Link](#); Gov UK (2016) Code Practice on the English language requirements for public sector workers [Link](#); Unison (undated) Negotiating for workplace ESOL learning, accessed 12th March 2020 [Link](#)

²³ <https://learningandwork.org.uk/resources/research-and-reports/the-impact-of-the-coronavirus-outbreak-on-londons-low-paid-workers/>



2. Who needs ESOL?

Britain's migration history has shaped ESOL demand

Demand for ESOL in the UK has been shaped by inward migration, the patterns of which have constantly changed according to national and international events and influences. In the later part of the 20th century much migration was from Commonwealth countries where English is widely spoken but included people with low levels of proficiency from countries including India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.²⁴ This century, and especially the last ten years have been steady increases in migration, largely accounted for by free movement within the European Union and its expansion through accession of new member states in Central and Eastern Europe.

EU migration is, of course, only part of the picture and non-EU migration has been consistently higher than from the EU, with the exception of the period 2012-16.²⁵ Much of this has been for study or on skilled visas, for which English proficiency is required and tested. However, it has also included family members, usually spouses, who have only needed basic level English to obtain a visa and may have low levels of English proficiency. The UK also gives asylum to somewhere between 6,000 and 15,000 people each year, many of whom will have ESOL needs.²⁶

How many people have ESOL needs?

Participation in ESOL courses funded through the AEB fell from 179,000 in 2009-10 to 114,000 in 2016-17.²⁷ There were 120,490 learners in

AEB-funded ESOL provision 2018-19²⁸. This figure doesn't include people who learn through programmes supported by other funding sources, including MHCLG and the European Social Fund.

However, figures of ESOL take-up alone are a poor measure of need. Although political debate sometimes uses data about languages other than English spoken in the home²⁹ as an indication of ESOL needs, this is also a highly imperfect measure. Speaking a first language other than English in the home might indicate ESOL needs, but it also reflects multilingualism: it is therefore an imprecise and invalid measure.

A number of measures have been used to calculate how many people living in the UK speak little or no English and could therefore

24 Rolfe, H., Hudson-Sharp, N. and Runge, J. (2019) Immigration policy from post-war to post-Brexit, National Institute Economic Review [Link](#)

25 Sumption, M. and Vargas-Silva, C. (2020) Net Migration to the UK, Migration Observatory [Link](#)

26 Government Statistics on Asylum [Link](#)

27 Foster D. and Bolton, P. (2018) Adult ESOL in England 2018, House of Commons Library Briefing Paper [Link](#)

28 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/fe-data-library-skills-for-life>

29 Analysis of the Labour Force Survey by the Migration Observatory found that in 2018, just over half (51%) of foreign-born adults (3,200,000) said they spoke a first language other than English at home. Speaking a language other than English at home is highest among migrants from Eastern and Central Europe (63%), and from Pakistan and other South Asian Countries (57%). Fernández-Reino, M. (2019) English language use and proficiency of migrants in the UK, Migration Observatory [Link](#)

benefit from ESOL classes. Census data shows that approximately 770,000 adults in the UK do not speak English well or at all.³⁰ Since it is now ten years old, Census data from 2011 is unlikely to be accurate both in terms of overall numbers but also the languages spoken by people who are not proficient in English. Numbers of non-proficient speakers may be higher given the large increase in European immigration which took place from 2011. Equally, it may be lower owing to settlement and ESOL participation: analysis of the Labour Force Survey by the Migration Observatory has found that in 2018, about 68% of foreign born people in the UK living in the UK for at least 15 years spoke English as their first language at home. This compares to 29% of those who had been in the country for up to two years.³¹ This suggests that, either through formal or informal means, migrants learn to speak English the longer they stay.

Demand for English is reported to be high among asylum seekers and refugees both because many have come from countries of origin where English is not widely spoken, and also because they wish to make the UK their permanent home. Fewer than 5% of international migrants living in the UK are asylum seekers.³² Although data on application and numbers is published by the Home Office, there is no dataset containing the characteristics of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK. Arrival numbers fluctuate according to circumstances in countries across the globe: In 2002 more than 84,000 people sought asylum in the UK, but fewer than 18,000 in 2010.³³ There were 35,099 asylum claims in the year to March 2020, similar to the previous year's figure of 35,737. By the nature of asylum, future figures are not predictable.

Applications for family reunion, around half of whom are aged 18 or under, add to the number of people seeking asylum: in 2019 7,456 came to the UK via this route³⁴. In addition to people arriving in the UK as asylum seekers, refugees are resettled in the UK through international schemes. Between January 2014 and March 2020, 26,308 people settled in the UK through this route, mainly from Syria.³⁵

Analysis by the Migration Observatory has found that, in 2019, the top five most common countries of nationality of people seeking asylum in the UK were Iran, Albania, Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.³⁶ However, rates of success vary widely so that the nationality of those granted refugee status is somewhat different: for example, China and Syria both account for about 3% of asylum claims, yet 88% of Syrians are granted asylum or other leave, compared to only 18% of Chinese asylum seekers.³⁷ Research on ESOL frequently refers to the importance of English language in facilitating settlement of asylum seekers and refugees, especially through accessing education and employment.³⁸

Secondary data analysis and new research provide some insight into ESOL needs of refugees and asylum seekers. Research by the Welsh Government found diverse English language skills and qualifications among people surveyed 257 refugees and 197 asylum seekers.³⁹ A survey which included 152 Syrian refugees in the UK by Deloitte and the Refugee Studies Centre at Oxford University found more than a third said they could speak English well or very well, while almost two-thirds said they spoke a bit or none at all.⁴⁰

30 Office for National Statistics. (2013) 2011 Census: Detailed analysis - English language proficiency in England and Wales [Link](#)

31 Fernández-Reino, M. (2019) English language use and proficiency of migrants in the UK, Migration Observatory [Link](#)

32 Sturge, G. (2020) Asylum Statistics, House of Commons Briefing Paper Number SN01403 [Link](#)

33 Sturge, Asylum Statistics

34 Office for National Statistics (2020) Long-term international migration Statistics [Link](#)

35 Sturge, Asylum Statistics

36 Walsh, P. (2020) Asylum and Refugee Settlement in the UK, Migration Observatory [Link](#)

37 Walsh, Asylum and Refugee Settlement in the UK

38 Refugee Action (2017) Locked out of Learning [Link](#); UNHCR and IOM (2019) Tapping Potential for employment – guidelines to help British businesses employ refugees [Link](#)

39 Holtom, D. and Iqbal, H. (2020) Refugee Employment and Skills Support Study People and Work, Welsh Government [Link](#)

40 Betts, A and Buith, J. (2017) Oxford University Talent displaced. The economic lives of Syrian refugees in Europe, Deloitte and Oxford University [Link](#)

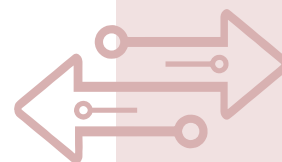


Figure 1. Estimated resident population of the UK, by country of birth, 2019 (thousands)

Nation/Region	Number					%				
	UK	EU27	EU14	EU8	Non-EU	UK	EU27	EU14	EU8	Non-EU
England	46,977	3,214	1,487	1,113	5,434	84%	6%	3%	2%	10%
North East	2,469	55	32	16	97	94%	2%	1%	1%	4%
North West	6,509	258	115	111	453	90%	4%	2%	2%	6%
Yorkshire & Hum.	4,903	209	76	103	313	90%	4%	1%	2%	6%
East Midlands	4,149	275	74	146	329	87%	6%	2%	3%	7%
West Midlands	5,030	294	108	123	521	86%	5%	2%	2%	9%
East	5,393	376	156	158	420	87%	6%	3%	3%	7%
London	5,659	1,055	552	241	2,262	63%	12%	6%	3%	25%
South East	7,848	452	252	132	763	87%	5%	3%	1%	8%
South West	5,017	239	123	84	277	91%	4%	2%	2%	5%
Wales	2,914	80	40	30	121	94%	3%	1%	1%	4%
Scotland	4,881	235	91	121	267	91%	4%	2%	2%	5%
Northern Ireland	1,730	87	44	38	44	93%	5%	2%	2%	2%
United Kingdom	56,502	3,616	1,662	1,303	5,866	86%	5%	3%	2%	9%

Source: House of Commons

Where in the UK do people with ESOL needs live?

The migrant population of the UK is unevenly distributed across the UK, reflecting patterns of migration, including long term settlement. As Figure 1 shows, London has a much higher concentration of migrants than anywhere else in the UK: around 35% of UK residents who were born abroad live in the Capital. People born outside the UK are around 37% of the city's population. This compares to 14 per cent for the UK as a whole. Outside of London, areas with the highest proportions of migrants, each with around 13 or 14 per cent, are the South East, the West Midlands, the East of England and the East Midlands⁴¹.

The UK's migrant population is very diverse, with those born in non-EU countries outnumbering EU migrants across all regions in 2017, with the exception of Northern Ireland. In London for example, non-EU migrants made up 26% of

the population and EU migrants just over 12%. However, in some areas, including Scotland and Wales, EU and non-EU born populations were of a similar size reflecting the highly dispersed nature of Central and Eastern European migration since 2011.⁴²

As we have noted, migrants do not necessarily have ESOL needs: while 14 per cent of the UK's population were born abroad, only 1.3 percent say they can't speak English well and 0.3% not at all. They are distributed across the UK slightly differently although census data shows London and the West Midlands as having the highest percentages of people in these groups. As with data on the migrant population, this is likely to have changed in the period since 2011, especially the East of England which has seen an increase in its migrant population from Central and Eastern Europe. For the same reason, the ethnicities of those with little or no English are likely to have changed.⁴³

41 House of Commons Library (2020) Migration Statistics Research Briefing [Link](#)

42 Rienzo, C. and Vargas-Silva, C. (2020) Migrants in the UK: An Overview, Migration Observatory Briefing [Link](#)

43 HMSO, English language skills [Link](#)

Although asylum seekers and refugees comprise a relatively small proportion of migrants in the UK, they feature strongly in policy and research literature because they often need English language skills to integrate economically and socially. Those who receive state support are allocated accommodation in specific (dispersed) areas of the UK, so that the demand for ESOL and other services from this group varies considerably by location. In 2019 the North West had the highest number of dispersed asylum seekers relative to its population and the South East had the lowest: among local authorities, Birmingham and Glasgow had the highest.⁴⁴ Resettled refugees are also housed in designated areas of the UK, so that demand for ESOL is unevenly spread.⁴⁵ However, as time passes, people who arrive in the UK for asylum tend to gravitate towards London, possibly because of the attraction of stronger social networks for migrants.⁴⁶

In addition to seeking asylum, the reasons for which migrants came to the UK are similar across regions. However, migrants in London are less likely to have come for family and more likely to have come for work or asylum than in other regions.⁴⁷ This may impact on motivations to learn English, although intention to settle is more likely to be a factor: there is no reliable data on migrants' long term plans.

English language needs and the labour market

For many migrants, language difficulties do not prevent their participation in the labour market.

Indeed, it is a motivation for many to live in the UK and the employment rate is higher among EU migrants, at 82 per cent compared to 77 per cent for British nationals. However, the employment rate for nationals of some non UK/EU nationals is lower, with the overall rate at 67 per cent. This partly reflects lower participation in the labour market from some groups, in particular those originating from Pakistan and Bangladesh.⁴⁸ This may reflect language needs, though it may also reflect a life focused on home and the community.

Economic activity or unemployment is only part of the picture, with many migrants experiencing problems in work or education as a result of limited language skills. Analysis by the Migration Observatory of the Labour Force Survey (LFS), presented in Figure 2, shows that one in ten of the foreign-born population report such problems. The highest levels are reported by some Asian groups and Central and Eastern Europeans: around a quarter of people from North Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia and 15% of Central and Eastern Europeans say they have experienced problems in work or education because of their limited English language skills.⁴⁹ Drawing on analysis of this data, the IPPR describes the role of language in underutilisation of skills: showing evidence that it reduces for individuals over time, it suggests that English language may play a role in this improvement.⁵⁰

44 Sturge, G. (2020) Asylum Statistics, House of Commons Briefing Paper Number SN01403 [Link](#)

45 Sturge, Asylum Statistics

46 Kone, Z. (2018) Where do migrants live in the UK, Migration observatory [Link](#)

47 Kone, Z. (2018) Where do migrants live in the UK, Migration observatory [Link](#)

48 Office for National Statistics (2020) UK and non-UK people in the labour market [Link](#)

49 Fernández-Reino, English language use and proficiency of migrants in the UK

50 Morris, M. and Hoclaf, D. (2019) Measuring the benefits of integration: the value of tackling skills underutilisation, IPPR [Link](#)

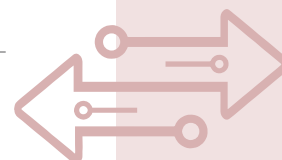
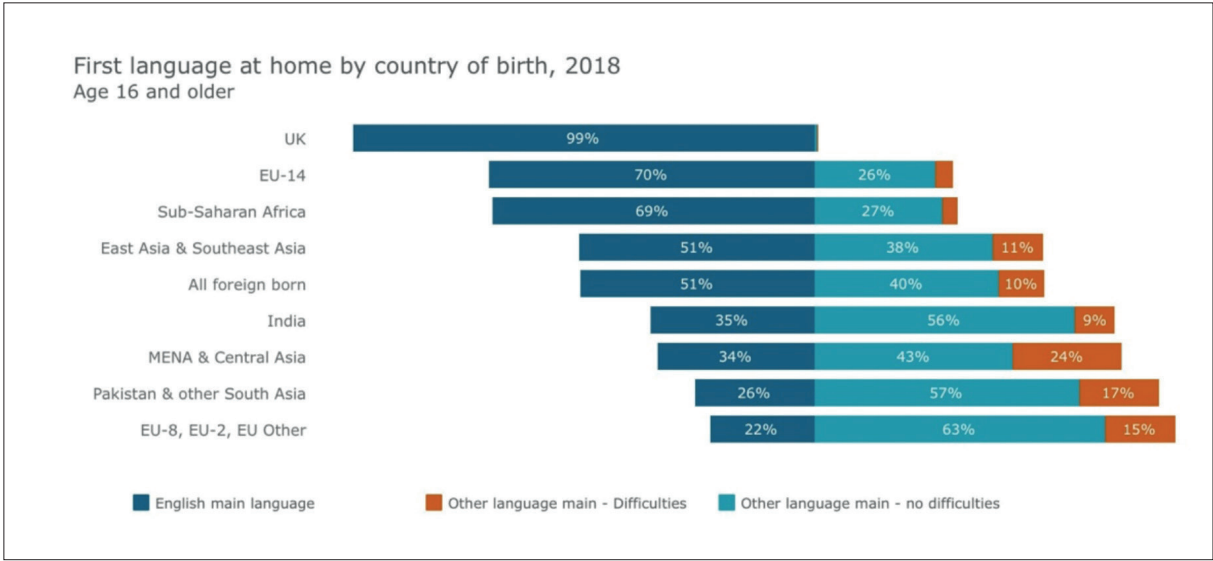


Figure 2. First language at home by country of birth



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the Labour Force Survey (June-September 2018)

Analysis of the Labour Force Survey has found worse labour market outcomes among asylum seekers and refugees than other migrant groups. People migrating to seek asylum are on average 22 percentage points less likely to be in employment than UK born and have the lowest rates of employment of all migrant groups.⁵¹ Fifty-six per cent of refugees are in employment, with an unemployment rate three times higher than UK born. Those who migrated to seek asylum also achieve lower earnings than UK

natives and other migrants.⁵² English language has been identified as one of the main barriers, followed by employers' recognition of skills and experience as well as confidence and practical barriers.⁵³ There is evidence that this changes over time, so that employment rates of refugees improve relative to other migrants over time. This may reflect language acquisition. However, there is less evidence that they catch up in terms of wage rates and this may be due to gaining some, but insufficient English language.⁵⁴

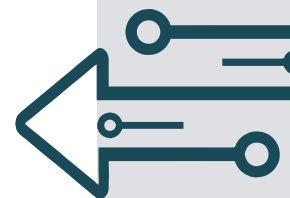
⁵¹ Ruiz, I. and Vargas-Silva, C. (2018) Differences in labour market outcomes between natives, refugees and other migrants in the UK, *Journal of Economic Geography*, [Link](#)

⁵² Ruiz and Vargas-Silva, Differences in labour market outcomes between natives, refugees and other migrants in the UK

⁵³ UNHCR and IOM (2019) Tapping Potential for employment – guidelines to help British businesses employ refugees [Link](#)

⁵⁴ Ruiz and Vargas-Silva, Differences in labour market outcomes between natives, refugees and other migrants in the UK

3. ESOL funding, provision and new flexibilities



The Government funds adult ESOL through the Adult Education Budget (AEB) held by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) and delivered by Further Education (FE) Colleges. The Government funds provision in most areas of England directly. However, from April 2019, responsibility for the AEB was devolved to the eight Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs) and the Greater London Authority (GLA). These areas have been given flexibility over how they use their AEB and the opportunity to put in place a more strategic approach in line with local priorities. MCAs can therefore decide to extend fee remission for ESOL. In this section we look at the flexibilities that have been exercised by some MCAs to date.

Further Education ESOL funding and provision

FE colleges account for a major part of ESOL provided through the Adult Education Budget (AEB). The AEB is intended to help adults aged 19 and over to obtain skills and qualifications needed for life, work and further learning. Courses include ESOL and Functional English and Maths. ESOL courses are fully funded for some learners, while others have to make a contribution. Functional Skills English courses are intended for adult literacy learners whose first language is English and their content is not explicitly aimed at ESOL learners. However, colleges often enrol ESOL learners on Functional Skills courses, which are free of charge.

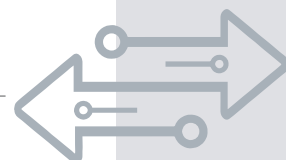
Most FE college provision is accredited, and learners are required to meet attendance requirements. FE courses are scheduled at different times of the day, including in the evening and weekends. Classes follow a curriculum with delivery by qualified teachers,

though not always with specific ESOL training. As we show later, FE colleges are very popular and many are able to fill classes relatively easily. This is partly explained by their high visibility in towns and cities across the UK.

Despite the range of provision available, providers report high levels of unmet demand for ESOL courses. A survey of 74 colleges by the Association of Colleges (AOC) in 2019 found 69% had waiting lists though most had fewer than 100 applicants and wait times were less than three months for 4 in 5 colleges.⁵⁵ Another recent survey, for the Department for Education, found almost three-quarters of providers reported 'significant demand' for English language provision in the communities they covered and the majority said they struggled to meet demand.⁵⁶ Courses at pre-Entry are consistently reported to be most over-subscribed, followed by other Entry Levels. Those at Levels 1 and 2 were less oversubscribed, which may reflect

⁵⁵ AOC (2019) College ESOL Survey [Link](#)

⁵⁶ Department for Education (2019) English for Speakers of Other Languages [Link](#)



ESOL learners at these levels being enrolled in Functional Skills English provision⁵⁷. **Funding is reported as the main reason for the mismatch between demand and supply, with colleges unable to expand provision**, though other factors include shortage of qualified and experienced ESOL teachers and venues.⁵⁸

Community ESOL funding and provision

Local authorities also play a significant role in funding and delivering ESOL, typically through community learning and a mix of formal, accredited and non-accredited provision.⁵⁹ This includes receiving a share of the AEB. The mix of funding channelled and procured by local authorities helps to ensure that people who are not eligible for AEB-funded college courses can still learn English, an issue which we look at in the following section.⁶⁰ Funding sources for non-AEB provision have included ESOL funding via the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS)⁶¹ managed by local authorities, the European Social Fund and the Controlling Migration Fund.⁶² In 2020 up to £6.5 million was available to local authorities through an ESOL for Integration fund for provision at pre-Entry to Entry Level 1.⁶³ The downside of non-AEB community funding is that it is very largely temporary, allowing for little continuity in provision. This makes it difficult for some providers to plan in the long-term and to develop and achieve strategic goals. **Consequently, third sector providers interviewed for the research made a plea for greater continuity in non-AEB ESOL funding, in particular through government channels.**

Community ESOL includes provision by registered charities as part of support services provided to groups such as asylum seekers and refugees and community organisations. This provision covers informal support, for example conversation groups as well as regular classes. Provision of this kind often relies on volunteers as well as professional teachers. It is often at pre-Entry or Entry Levels, does not follow a formal curriculum or lead to qualifications but is able to be flexible in how it meets learners' needs.⁶⁴ It takes place in a range of types of venue: a local authority representative interviewed for this paper described provision through community centres, schools and places of worship. This allows provision to be brought to the attention of new arrivals as well as people in settled communities with ESOL needs. For some, it can be a first step which will take them to more formal, college-based provision.

In many regions there is close contact between colleges, largely funded through the AEB, and community providers, with local authorities as the main link.⁶⁵ FE colleges often refer learners to community providers where they are not eligible for AEB funding. Providers do outreach work to communities to raise awareness of their provision and to encourage take-up. Some areas, including Mayoral Combined Authorities, have set up ESOL hubs. There is evidence of variation in the existence of hubs and extent of their activities.⁶⁶ However, their activities include discussing provision and helping to join up provision by sharing waiting lists and other intelligence. They also help learners to find provision that suits their needs.

57 See NATECLA / ETF (2021) ESOL Learners and Functional Skills English [Link](#)

58 NATECLA, (2016) Towards an ESOL Strategy for England [Link](#); Stevenson, A., Kings, P. and Sterland, L. (2017) Mapping ESOL Provision in Greater London [Link](#)

59 Department for Education (2019) English for Speakers of Other languages [Link](#)

60 Learning and Work Institute (2017) How to Guide – Commissioning ESOL for Refugees in the South East of England [Link](#)

61 Now the UK Resettlement scheme.

62 Department for Education (2019) English for Speakers of Other languages [Link](#)

63 MHCLG (2020) Press Statement, Thousands to benefit from new English Language Classes [Link](#)

64 Refugee Action (2016) Let Refugees Learn [Link](#); Refugee Action (2017) Locked out of Learning [Link](#);

65 Department for Education (2019) English for Speakers of Other languages [Link](#)

Learning and Work Institute (2019) Resources to support the development of local ESOL partnerships [Link](#)

66 Learning and Work Institute, (2021) ESOL Provider Planning, private report to DfE



AEB flexibility

Under the AEB's eligibility rules⁶⁷, colleges and other providers are able to offer fully funded provision for ESOL courses up to Level 2 to people who are unemployed and claiming benefits. These benefits are currently Jobseekers Allowance, Employment and Support Allowance (in the work-related activity group, Universal Credit (earning below an earnings threshold)).⁶⁸ Asylum seekers are also eligible for co-funded ESOL, where they have been waiting for over six months for their asylum claim to be processed. Those with less than six months residency are not eligible. Family members (e.g. 'new spouses') of non-EU and non-European Economic Area (EEA) citizens who are ordinarily resident in the EEA for three years are only eligible for funding once they have been ordinarily resident in the EEA for three years themselves. Other learners are required to pay up to 50 per cent of course

fees.⁶⁹ However, there is an exemption for people employed on low wages, who are eligible for full funding.

Some colleges therefore turn down some applicants who say they cannot afford to contribute to fees. Others say that the Learner Support Fund is sometimes used for this purpose. It is also likely that people who know they are not eligible for fully-funded provision do not apply, and that colleges are not aware of at least some unmet need.⁷⁰

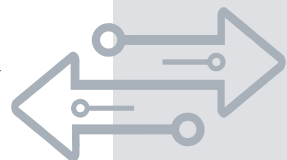
As explained earlier, ESOL learners are sometimes enrolled on Functional Skills English courses, which are fully-funded for learners eligible for AEB provision. Colleges are using this provision for ESOL learners to help meet demand and to provide ESOL free of charge to low earners and others unable to pay ESOL course fees. Functional Skills English is seen to have the benefit of leading to qualifications recognised by

67 Adult Education Budget Funding and Performance Rules 2021 – 21 [Link](#)

68 Foster, D. and Bolton, P. (2018) Adult ESOL in England. Briefing Paper no 7905, House of Commons Library [Link](#)

69 Tyers, C. and Aldridge, F. (2020) Evaluation of the AEB Low Wage Remission Flexibility Trial, private report to DfE

70 Learning and Work Institute (2020) ESOL learners' progression to Functional Skills [Link](#)



employers. However, it has drawbacks for many ESOL learners: Functional Skills courses lack a specific focus on the development of listening and speaking skills, neither do they include the study of vocabulary or grammar. There is evidence that they are largely used for funding considerations, rather than because they suit ESOL learners' needs.

Eligibility rules for AEB funding⁷¹, updated in line with changes to immigration policy, include residency status, with a general requirement to have lived in the UK or European Economic Area (EEA) for three years in order to take a funded place, though there are different criteria in the case of refugees and asylum seekers. These requirements impact particularly on new entrants, usually women, arriving on spouse and family visas. EEA nationals will need to demonstrate settled or pre-settled status through the EU Settlement Scheme if they have not been resident for 3 years. This could have a significant impact on the eligibility pool, and continue to affect people entering the UK on spouse visas.

AEB flexibility measures introduced by MCAs

AEB devolution has given MCAs the option of extending fully-funded provision for ESOL and funding different types of provision. For much of the period since flexibility was allowed, the UK has been under lockdown and college provision severely curtailed. Much is still in the early stages with some MCAs yet to publish their plans. This section describes some of the progress made to exercise flexibility to date, particularly the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) where we carried out stakeholder interviews.

A number of the MCAs have extended fee remission for ESOL courses to people on low wages. In WMCA learners who are employed or self-employed and under AEB rules would

have to co-fund are eligible for full funding for courses from pre-Entry to Level 2. Full remission is applied to learners earning less than the Real Living wage. A similar extension of eligibility is offered by Liverpool City Region and the Greater London Authority. In Cambridgeshire and Peterborough and Greater Manchester, full remission is offered to younger learners aged 19-24 years old. Some respondents in the WMCA said that they are sometimes able to waive fees where a course had sufficient funded places, though referral to free provision was also common practice.

In some MCAs funding flexibilities have gone beyond fee remission to deliver specific courses, largely designed as short and leading to outcomes other than qualifications. The WMCA has a strategy for ESOL which includes a closer link to the labour market and job opportunities. In 2019 the Authority announced that non-English speakers could get free language lessons linked to job training.⁷² It formed a group of ESOL delivery partners to review ESOL in the region which led to a report 'Unlocking Potential – Making Sense of ESOL in the Region' with recommendations for the 2020-21 academic year.⁷³

WMCA plans include developing new vocational with ESOL training provision in key WMCA priority areas enabling access to highly skilled jobs. This provision includes fast-track supplementary courses for people with professional skills in areas such as engineering, teaching and medicine.

WMCA plans also include embedding ESOL within vocational training in sectors of regional importance.⁷⁴ They also include developing an ESOL hub to improve Information Advice and Guidance and to develop online learning options. Live from April 2021 this brings together provision from colleges and third sector providers,

71 <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/adult-education-budget-aeb-funding-rules-2021-to-2022>

72 West Midlands Combined Authority (2019) Free language courses linked to online training [Link](#)

73 ESOL Review Group (2019) Unlocking Potential: making Sense of ESOL in the Region [Link](#)

74 West Midlands Combined Authority, Free language courses linked to online training; ESOL Review Group, Unlocking Potential: making Sense of ESOL in the Region

enabling people to search for courses and to complete a standardised screening test. The hub is expected to reduce waiting lists by signposting people to courses which meet their requirements for level, location and time of day. By tracking demand, the hub will also be used by providers to plan future provision, including by location and level.

The hub will also include access to an app with online learning materials modelled on a system developed and implemented by Greater Manchester Combined Mayoral Authority. These are intended for use as part of blended learning and use materials from the 'Talk English' programme. The app is set up using a similar style to WhatsApp which is familiar to many ESOL learners. The app is seen to have particular potential for use by shift workers, people with young children and others who find it difficult to attend classes at fixed times of the week.

Progress has been made in bringing the skills and ESOL agendas closer together in the WCMA. Providers link provision to the local skills plan developed by Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs). Some ESOL provision has been embedded into vocational training so that people with language needs are not excluded. This has led to increased take up from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) learners. Providers have also achieved success in moving learners into work through combining ESOL with vocational provision in the areas of social care and construction.

The Combined Authority plans to extend its delivery of courses focused on ESOL for employment, to equip learners with language skills more appropriate to the labour market than courses would usually offer. These measures are seen to have the dual benefit of enabling people with ESOL needs to find skilled jobs, and to help to address recruitment difficulties among employers in the region.

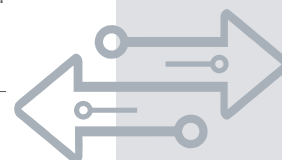
One feature of its plan, to develop online learning modules to make ESOL training more accessible, has been given an unexpected boost by lockdown, with providers delivering digital and blended learning during college closure. The WMCA is in the process of developing an online platform for digital learning, led by South and City College Birmingham.

MCAs have also been permitted to use unspent AEB funds which would normally have gone back into the national AEB. In Cambridgeshire and Peterborough these unspent funds have been used for innovation and targeted at people with ESOL needs as well as those who are unemployed or at risk of redundancy, or who face disadvantage in the labour market. As part of the initiative, a college in the region has delivered a digital literacy course to ESOL learners in an area of high deprivation. This is intended to enhance digital literacy and enable learners to progress on to other courses and to apply for jobs requiring IT skills.

The Greater London Authority also launched a Skills for Londoners innovation fund. This has been used to deliver a series of 'ESOL Plus' pilots focused on addressing barriers to learning such as childcare. The GLA has also funded an ESOL Plus – Employer Partnership to work with partners to meet gaps in ESOL provision for workers, particularly those in low-paid work and insecure employment.⁷⁵ The aim of the pilots is to inform future decisions over AEB allocation. Liverpool City Region has also used AEB flexibility, allocating more than £2 million to fund innovation projects for 'Test and Learn' pilots in ESOL, digital or literacy and numeracy skills. These have included a staffed 'Talk Café' at City of Liverpool College to provide opportunities for peer language practice.

We will return to the potential for wider take up of AEB flexibilities and implications for ESOL delivery and outcomes in our concluding section.

⁷⁵ London Gov (undated) ESOL-plus employer partnership, accessed 18th March 2021 [Link](#)





Digital learning

Boosting online provision is often suggested as a solution to meeting demand and increasing participation in ESOL through more flexible delivery. The experience of the coronavirus pandemic has allowed for some testing of the feasibility and effectiveness of online ESOL learning. Although many ESOL classes were discontinued for much of the year from March 2020, some providers interviewed for this paper moved at least some learning online. For some providers, digital provision was a completely

new venture; others had intended to develop digital learning so the circumstances led them to accelerate their plans.

Providers reported mixed experiences with online delivery of classes. The benefits were seen to lie largely in the continuation of teaching and learning where physical access is not possible. Outside of a pandemic, such circumstances included shift work, childcare and transport difficulties. Given that these are frequently identified as barriers to ESOL participation, this is a significant benefit.

Digital poverty and exclusion were identified by providers as barriers to online learning. During lockdown it was apparent that many lacked both equipment such as laptops and smartphones of their own, and access to data. A third sector organisation delivering community learning had found take up among settled Pakistani and Bangladeshi women low, largely because of lack of personal space and reticence about allowing digital access to their homes. Some learners were also reported to prefer direct contact with a teacher, rather than mediated through a screen and through unfamiliar platforms such as zoom. Some other providers also said age was a factor in the popularity of online learning, with learners aged over 50 preferring classroom or other face to face methods.

Opinions were mixed on the suitability of online learning for lower or higher ESOL levels: some providers believe they are more suited to learners with some degree of proficiency, rather than those who are new to English. However, others felt that this was only an issue where more basic level learners were unused to accessing digital content, and experienced learners were simply more likely to have done so. Respondents therefore highlighted the need for online learning to have clear instructions over joining classes and accessing content.

Existing research has highlighted the slowness of progression as a shortcoming of some ESOL provision, with learning hours too short to enable some learners to advance through the levels.⁷⁶ Providers interviewed for this research also expressed this view. It was felt that more opportunities for structured online learning could help some learners dial up the intensity of their engagement and speed up progression.

Some providers had experienced more success than others in engaging online learners. One local authority said that community providers in their area had reached 2,000 learners, including

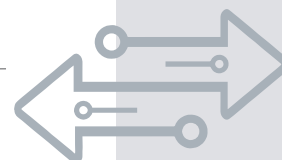
through short parent and child zoom learning sessions. Another provider had introduced a network of volunteer digital ambassadors to work in family networks to facilitate tech access and online learning. A college had started piloting online-only recorded sessions that could be accessed anywhere during the week and through which students could submit their work. This was found to be quite popular among learners. Some providers therefore reported increased attendance rates from learners who were quite often prevented from attending classes due to commitments including shift work and childcare.

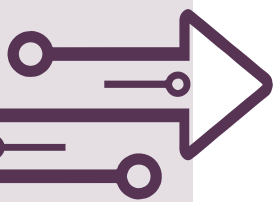
Some interviewees identified key features of online learning which would facilitate wider roll-out. They include smaller classes, shorter and more frequent sessions. There was also a view that ESOL tutors do not yet have the skills to deliver quality teaching and learning online and that training is needed before it can be rolled out widely.⁷⁷ A further challenge for AEB online provision is that online classes need to be smaller and this may therefore not be financially viable.

Overall, providers tended to conclude that learners, and tutors, generally prefer and benefit from a mix of classroom and digital learning. It is therefore likely that this will become a more usual delivery mode than in the past. At the same time, there is the potential for online learning for people who are simply unable to attend classes. These include people in rural areas, or parts of the UK with very low levels of demand, as well as shift workers and parents with young children. Digital learning may also have particular value for people at intermediate level and above who are currently least well catered for across all types of provision. There is also scope for ESOL to be combined with higher level vocational and technical training. As we see later, these will include migrants on skilled worker visas.

⁷⁶ Learning and Work Institute (2019) ESOL Stakeholder Engagement

⁷⁷ Learning and Work Institute (2021 forthcoming), ESOL Workforce Development. Report to the Education and Training Foundation.





4. Who learns ESOL and who is left out?

ESOL learners are a diverse group. It is difficult to give a precise figure for people who are learning ESOL since they do so through many different routes. As described earlier, most formal learning takes place in FE colleges and local authority adult education providers, through AEB funding. Numbers have fallen in recent years as a result of funding cuts: as noted above, participation in ESOL courses funded through the AEB fell from 179,000 in 2009-10 to 114,000 in 2016-17.⁷⁸ In the year 2018-19 there were 120,490 ESOL learners. However, as we explained earlier, AEB-funded ESOL courses are only part of the picture, with many others learning English through Functional Skills provision and on non-AEB courses in community venues.

Survey data on learner characteristics shows that a high proportion of learners are women (70%) and many are from ethnic minorities (70%).⁷⁹ More detailed data on the characteristics of people who attend ESOL courses are available through smaller scale surveys and qualitative research. Learning and Work Institute has identified four broad, and sometimes overlapping, categories of ESOL learners:⁸⁰

- People from settled communities already living in Britain who still need to develop spoken or written English language skills.
- Spouses, partners and dependents of or European Union citizens who may come from inside or outside the EU, with a range of levels of education, skills and work experience. These include economically inactive women joining established communities.

- Migrant workers who come to the UK for better job opportunities or better paid work, many of whom come from European Union countries. This group also varies in qualification levels, but many have under-utilised skills.
- Refugees and asylum seekers, again range of education and skill levels, ranging from professionals to those with little education due to civil war or unrest.

ESOL learners' motivations

Reflecting their diverse makeup, ESOL learners' motivations are varied. They include employment and progression, civic engagement and integration, life skills for health appointments, support for children and their school work and accessing services and benefits.⁸² Research with

⁷⁸ Foster D. and Bolton, P. (2018) Adult ESOL in England 2018, House of Commons Library Briefing Paper [Link](#)

⁷⁹ Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, *Evaluation of the Impact of Learning Below Level 2*, (October 2013) [Link](#)

⁸⁰ Stevenson, A., Kings, P. and Sterland, L. (2017) Mapping ESOL Provision in Greater London [Link](#)

⁸¹ Learning and Work Institute, (2021) ESOL Provider Planning, private report to DfE

⁸² Department for Education (2019) English for Speakers of Other Languages [Link](#)

migrant workers finds motivations include being able to progress at work and to gain access to skilled and better paid jobs. Gaining social contacts is a further motivation.⁸³ Reflecting this diverse range of needs and motivations, studies also report a wide range in demand by level, from beginner to advanced, and between spoken and written English⁸⁴. Reports by migration organisations, including Refugee Action, have included case studies of individuals who have benefited from ESOL classes.⁸⁵ These often highlight employment, life skills, integration and access to services.

Broadly, college providers often describe learners as having motivations to work, as well as to use services such as health and housing, and to integrate. Community providers interviewed for the paper said that while some learners will aspire to work, many learners had social motivations, rather than economic; these were often linked to communicating with schools and health services.

Preferences for different types of learning

Patterns of preference for college or community provision vary according to availability and prior experience of learning. According to providers, the more formal college environment often appeals to those with more experience in such settings; others who are less used to learning may prefer to attend classes in smaller venues close to home. Learners also move between formal and less formal provision: for example, in the West Midlands the WMCA has funded 'bridging courses' to encourage people to progress from community to college provision at an appropriate stage in their learning. This

aims to address barriers to enrolment in college courses and to encourage further progression in learning.

Learner preferences also include factors such as the availability of accredited or non-accredited courses and day-time or evening classes, among other considerations. Providers interviewed for the research, from both college and community provision, expressed the view that some learners feel deterred by elements of formal provision, including the requirement to work towards formal qualifications.

It is also important to recognise that learning also takes place outside of either formal or informal provision, in the form of self-directed learning. Research on migrants in low-paid work in London found these to include reading newspapers and local volunteering.⁸⁶ As we discuss later, there is scope to improve opportunities for such learning.

Barriers to participation in ESOL

Research with providers and migrant organisations identifies multiple barriers to ESOL, including eligibility and practical obstacles. These exclusions mean that new arrivals who plan to settle in the UK are not able to make early progress with English, effectively slowing progression into work for many. For example, asylum seekers are only eligible for co-funded ESOL if they are still waiting for a decision on their asylum claim after 6 months. If they enrol before this period, they are classified as overseas students are charged accordingly: few if any are able to afford these fees⁸⁷. New arrivals on spousal visas are not eligible for AEB-funded provision until they have three years' residence in the UK.⁸⁸

83 Miller, L., Braddell, A. and Marangozov, R. (2013) Migrants in low-paid low-skilled work in London [Link](#); Porteous, H. (2017) Migrants and employment in Aberdeenshire [Link](#)

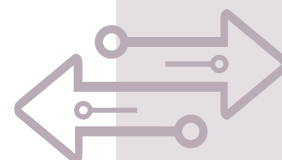
84 Learning and Work Institute, (2021) ESOL Provider Planning, private report to DfE

85 Refugee Action (2017) Locked out of Learning [Link](#)

86 Miller, L., Braddell, A. and Marangozov, R. (2013) Migrants in low-paid low-skilled work in London [Link](#)

87 Refugees with leave to remain are eligible for funding as home students, and subject to usual AEB criteria for fully-funded places.

88 Education and Skills Funding Agency (2021) ESFA funded adult education budget (AEB) funding and performance management rules [Link](#)



Some prospective learners are unable to prove residency requirements and are therefore not eligible.⁸⁹ Others who are largely excluded from fully-funded ESFA provision include migrants in work and on low wages, fluctuating income or moving on and off benefits.⁹⁰ Providers also report unmet demand from women who are either not recognised by JCP as an eligible dependant, or whose household income makes them ineligible yet they are unable to pay for ESOL courses.⁹¹ Stakeholders interviewed for this research also reported that some people fear they will be asked to pay for items such as certificates, although under AEB Funding Rules, ESOL providers are not allowed to charge fully-funded learners for examination or other administrative costs.

Other barriers are of a more practical nature, ranging from balancing work and care commitments around course times, to health and travel considerations. People with irregular patterns of work, such as shift workers and those on zero hours contracts, are often unable to attend evening courses as well as day time provision. Health is a barrier to both take-up and attendance, with poor health particularly prevalent among asylum seekers and refugees.⁹² Some people in settled migrant communities, in particular Asian women, are reported to be

reluctant to travel to classes outside their local area, and therefore tend to opt for community provision for this reason. Lack of confidence has also been found to be a factor, including among women with young children and adrift from supportive networks.⁹³ More generally, awareness of provision has been found to be low as a result of inadequate publicity and coordination with other services.⁹⁴ Some groups are reported to be especially cut off from information sources and public services generally, for example Roma.⁹⁵

Lack of access to good Careers Information Advice and Guidance (CIAG) is thought to contribute to wider lack of awareness about provision.⁹⁶ A provider interviewed for the research had found that colleges often advise about their courses, referring to community provision to those ineligible for AEB. ESOL referrals by Jobcentre Plus are largely for people needing ESOL to find work. The National Careers Service is not designed to meet the variety of information and guidance requirements of people with ESOL needs: these include the level of English needed in some occupations and how to recognise prior learning abroad.

89 Learning and Work Institute (2019) ESOL Stakeholder Engagement

90 Learning and Work Institute, Stakeholder Engagement; NATECLA, (2016) Towards an ESOL Strategy for England [Link](#)

91 Pomati, M., Cabral, D. and Doyle, R. (2020) Left Out, Left Behind: a study on the barriers to ESOL in the London Borough of Waltham Forest [Link](#); Refugee Action (2016) Let Refugees Learn [Link](#)

92 Pomati and others, Left Out, Left Behind

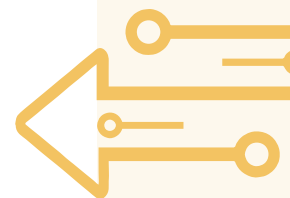
93 Simpson, J., et al. (2011) ESOL Neighbourhood Audit Pilot (Harehills, Leeds) [Link](#)

94 Simpson, ESOL Neighbourhood Audit Pilot (Harehills, Leeds)

95 Learning and Work Institute, ESOL Stakeholder Engagement

96 Learning and Work Institute, ESOL Stakeholder Engagement

5. Changing immigration patterns, visa requirements and their impact on ESOL demand



This section looks at trends in migration over the last decade, at English language requirements and how these have recently changed. We then look at the implications for future migration, and the English language needs of new migrants arriving from 2021 onwards. Patterns of migration to and from the UK have changed significantly in recent years and their trajectory is likely to continue to change, reflecting the economy and policy changes, among other developments. Changes in the scale and composition of migrants will affect future ESOL demand, as they have done in the past. This section considers how new immigration policy is likely to affect ESOL needs, and therefore future demand for provision

29

Trends in migration to the UK

The impact of new immigration policies on future demand for ESOL is dependent on a number of factors, including whether migration is likely to fall, rise or remain stable, and the characteristics of migrants who decide to come to the UK. In turn, these variables are determined by immigration policy and wider economic and social factors. All of these are currently unstable and uncertain: the UK's new points-based immigration system has only just been introduced and the world is still in the throes of a pandemic.

The main reasons for coming to the UK are for work and for study, with percentages in these categories at around 40 and 30 respectively, with yearly fluctuations. The other main category – accompanying or joining family – accounts

for around 13 per cent of new arrivals, but again fluctuates. The actual number of those who come to the UK with the main motivation to work has varied between 200,000 and 300,000 a year between 2009 and 2019, forming between a third and a half of new arrivals. The number migrating to the UK for family reasons has fluctuated between 60,000 and 80,000 a year in this period.

The general trend in recent years has been for net migration to fall, with net migration lower since the UK voted to leave the EU in June 2016. However, while net migration from the EU has fallen since June 2016, net migration from outside the EU has increased. This is largely because of an increase in international students. However, the proportion of non-EU migrants coming to the UK to work has risen, accounting for more than two-thirds in 2019.⁹⁷



The recent trends which show a decline in net migration from the EU since 2016 are accounted for by emigration from the UK. However, despite the decline, this still means that more EU migrants are arriving than leaving; and when considering future demand for ESOL it makes more sense to look at the inward, rather than net, migration. **Figures for inward migration, from the EU and outside, show that the number of arrivals has remained quite steady at more than 600,000 each year since 2014.**

In the short-term, it is also clear that the coronavirus pandemic has impacted migration. Early analysis of the Labour Force Survey by Portes and O'Connor suggests a large increase in return migration, which appears to be fuelled by job loss, particularly from within the hospitality sector. The fall is estimated to be as much as 700,000 in London and overall by more than 1.3 million.⁹⁸ These will include EU nationals who have been granted settled status and who can return. It will also include others with 'pre-settled' status who may lose their right to live and work in the UK. The number who will return is therefore uncertain.

Future demand from employers for migrant workers is also currently very unclear. Currently, in unemployment is high at 5.1 per cent (February 2021); and the number of job vacancies in the three months to January 2021 was 26 per cent lower than the same period in 2020. Unemployment is also predicted to increase once the job retention scheme ends. The current circumstances make it more feasible to recruit British workers than in recent years of low unemployment. It is too early to tell when the economy is likely to recover and demand for labour, including for migrants, will increase. The experience of past recessions, in particular the period following the financial crisis in 2008 suggests that migration will have a role to play in recovery but its scale is not possible to

predict.¹⁰⁰ We return to this question in Section 6 (conclusions)

New work-related migration routes from 2021

As the new immigration system has switched off the supply of migrants through free movement from the EU, any role that migration plays in economic recovery will be in a different policy context than in the past. It is intended to change the type of immigration, and therefore migrants, to the UK. This quite explicitly includes factors such as their ability to speak English. Features of the new system – detailed in this section – therefore have the potential to affect the level and different kinds of demand for ESOL provision. We consider this more fully below.

Free movement ended on 31st December 2020 and a new, skills-based, immigration policy has been in place since 1st January 2021, replacing the previous tier system. Based on previous patterns of immigration, this is likely to affect between a third and a half of new arrivals – those whose main reason to come to the UK is to work. While a range of work visas are available, as we describe later, the main route is the Skilled Worker visa. It is points based system which requires potential migrants to accrue a minimum score of 70 to be eligible: visas are attached to a specific job with a sponsoring employer and must be obtained before arrival in the UK. Minimum salary levels are set at £25,600 (or the going rate if higher) but can be as low as £20,480 for shortage occupations or applicants with a relevant PhD. Eligible jobs have to be at RF3, intermediate skill level roughly equivalent to 'A' level. There is no maximum period of stay for this visa and holders can apply for indefinite leave to remain after five years.

Some existing work routes have generally been extended to include EU citizens. These include the Global Talent route, which requires sponsorship through a recognised UK body,

98 O'Connor, M. (2020) Labour Force Survey: the mystery of the shrinking migrant workforce, UK in a Changing Europe [Link](#)

99 Gov UK (undated) Apply to the EU Settlement Scheme (settled and pre-settled status), accessed 12th March 2021 [Link](#)

100 Rolfe, H. (2020) The role of immigration in the UK's post-Covid recovery, UK in a Changing Europe, [Link](#)

rather than an employer. They also include the Intra-company Transfer (ICT) route allowing temporary stays for key business employees.

Other work routes included in the new immigration system are for students and for specialist occupations including ministers of religion and sportspeople. The existing Youth Mobility Scheme has been extended: it involves arrangements with eight countries and territories for around 20,000 young people to come to the UK to work and travel each year. Applicants must be 18 to 30 years old and can stay up to two years. There is also a pilot seasonal agricultural workers scheme, currently offering 30,000 places for visas of six months.¹⁰¹ Of less relevance for our purposes here, the Graduate Visa will be available to international students who have completed a degree in the UK from summer 2021.

As we show later, arrangements for visas to join relatives living in the UK, joining relatives are unchanged. However, the UK Government has opened a new route for people with the status of British Overseas National living in Hong Kong. The scheme, which opened for applications in January 2021, gives the right to live and work in the UK to 2.8 million people and their dependants, and to eventually obtain British citizenship. Researchers at the Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR) identify two main groups of potential migrants: the first is the 350,000 people who have maintained their British National passport. The second group is the 800,000 engaged in political protests, many of whom will be among the estimated 400,000 people who have applied for BNO status since 2019. Clearly, only a minority of those eligible are likely to come, and the authors give a cautious estimate of 300,000 and a less cautious one of 1 million.¹⁰² Cost will

undoubtedly be a factor with immigration fees alone estimated as high as £12,000 for a family of four.¹⁰³ Arrivals from Hong Kong will not be considered part of the refugee system, but there may be some people from the region who seek asylum.

Providers' perspectives on changes in migration to the UK

Providers interviewed for the research agreed that future migration patterns are impossible to predict. However, many said that with levels of unmet ESOL demand persistently high, a reduction in migration levels might reduce some kinds of demand to an extent, but it would nevertheless remain high overall. One provider predicted that pandemic-induced unemployment is likely to increase demand for ESOL in the short-term, including from people referred by Jobcentre Plus.

Some providers said that demand from economic migrants, in particular from Central and Eastern European member states, has fallen in recent years. They explained this with reference to lower levels of net migration, and the fall in arrivals and rise in departures that represents. At the same time, some commented that many new learners in the West Midlands region are refugees and asylum seekers, who will continue to come and that new comers on family visas, along with settled communities, will want to improve their English. Providers did not therefore expect new immigration policies to result in a noticeable fall in demand, at least in the short term. What they felt was most important was that ESOL is offered at a range of levels, to meet people starting out and to enable them to progress to the level they need.

101 Gov UK (2020) Seasonal Workers Pilot request for information [Link](#).

102 Niculescu-Marcu, C. and Park, D. (2020) UK GDP could be boosted by 12-40 billion from migration of skilled Hong-Kongers, CEBR report [Link](#)

103 CNN (2021) UK prepares to welcome thousands fleeing national security law [Link](#)



English language visa requirements and their impact on ESOL demand

As noted above, features of the new immigration system have the potential to affect demand for ESOL provision, in particular the English language requirements for new entrants to the UK. The requirement to speak English at a specified level is attached to some visas and not others.¹⁰⁴ While there has been no change in the requirement to speak English to obtain a skilled work visa, it will effectively apply to substantially more migrants than in the past. It is also an intentional measure to reduce the number of migrants with little or no English.

The Immigration White Paper (2018) emphasised the importance of English for enabling integration:

We plan to continue to require an assessment of language skills to support integration and protect our key public services by ensuring that workers have sufficient finances of their own to support themselves and their families without access to public funds.¹⁰⁵

Policy emphasis is therefore on integration and reduced demand on the state. It includes no direct reference to the benefits of English language in the workplace, for integration with colleagues and for training, utilisation of skills and for advancement. These considerations are not part of Home Office migration policy. However, as we discuss later, they could be pursued through other government agendas, employment and skills in particular.

The White Paper also states that *'Those coming to the UK on a family visa with only basic English are required to become more fluent over time'* and suggests this will be clarified through a future ESOL strategy. As already noted, this has yet to be announced.

Visa requirements for English language

Longstanding visas for work, family and study have included language requirements: the main visa for skilled workers from outside the EU required language at B1 (intermediate); family visas require A1 (very basic) for entry and A2 for extension; and indefinite leave to remain or citizenship required B1. Most of these requirements have not changed: the important exception is the skilled work visa which has been extended to EU citizens who could previously work in the UK via free movement, with no English language requirement. As we noted earlier, in 2019 just under a third of migrants who came to work in the UK were from in the EU and were not required to speak English. From January 2020 everyone needing a work visa will need to meet a language requirement.

The Home Office has produced a full list of visas which include an English language requirement. Some of these have been in place for some years, while others are new: this applies particularly to the skilled work visa. As Table 1 shows, requirements are different for specific visas and in some cases, they are different for entry and for settlement: The scale starts at A1, the most basic level at which someone can understand and use very basic expressions to C2 the level at which someone has mastered the language. However, the highest level required by any current visa category is B2, where they can communicate easily and spontaneously in a clear and detailed manner. Many visas require either A1 (basic) or B1 (intermediate).

104 Home Office (2020) Assessing the English Language Requirement [Link](#)

105 UK Government (2018) The UK's future skills-based immigration system [Link](#)

Table 1. English language requirements for the main visa categories

Application type	CEFR level required
To live in UK	
Further leave to remain, family (parent or partner)	A1
Further leave to remain (visa extension), family (parent or partner)	A2
Indefinite leave to remain – settlement/permanent residency	B1
British citizenship	B1
To work in UK	
Skilled worker	B1
Health and care worker	B1
Representative of an overseas business	A1
Sportsperson	A1
Minister of religion	B2
Innovator	B2
Start-up visa	B2
To study in the UK	
Student visa below degree level	B2
Student visa – degree level and above (institutions' requirements will be higher)	B2

Applicants for the visas from 17 designated countries where the official or majority language is English meet the requirement without needing to demonstrate it. The same applies to graduates of those countries or from a course delivered in English elsewhere. Exemptions can also be given on grounds of age, for settlement visas, and on grounds of health. Other applicants for visas which include an English language requirement have to take a test in the form of a Secure English Language Test (SELT). This has to be done in their country of origin and through a

provider on the Home Office's approved list. Some visas do not include a language requirement at all. Those which do not are in the main temporary visas or for migrants who are considered exceptional. Intra-company visas have no English language requirements, neither does the Global Talent visa. The visa enabling Hong Kong nationals to live and work in the UK has no English language requirement, though Hong Kong nationals coming to the UK via the skilled worker route will need to have English at level B1.



The youth mobility programme has no English language requirement and is open to students from countries which do not have English as a main language. These visa holders are also not permitted to study during their maximum two year stay. Other temporary visas, which require employer sponsorship, also do not have a language requirement, but do permit study.

Language requirements for skilled visas

As the table shows, the new system for skilled visas includes requirements for English language at intermediate level (B1). The requirement for a skilled visa is set at level B1, intermediate level, in the Council of Europe's framework¹⁰⁶. At this level speakers should be able to understand main discussion points, deal with most day to day situations and can produce simple texts on topics of interest. This is the most significant of the English language requirements since migration for work has accounted for between a third and a half of all new long term migration annually since 2009.

The requirements for migrants arriving through the family migration route, who account for around 1 in 8 new migrants, have stayed the same. Applicants for family visas are required to have English at level A1, the most basic level at which someone can understand and use very basic expressions such as personal introductions. People entering the UK through this route are expected to improve their English and to be at level A2 to remain. At this level users are able to communicate in everyday situations with commonly-used expressions and elementary vocabulary.

How will visa requirements affect ESOL demand?

As a result of changing immigration patterns, some types of demand for ESOL will reduce, while others will stay the same. It is possible that others might increase.

Demand from new arrivals for work is likely to reduce. This is not because the language requirements for skilled jobs are new: free movement has cut off the route to enter for work without them. However, numbers coming through the skilled visa route are likely to be much higher than before the end of free movement. This is because some restrictions have been removed, in particular the removal of the cap on numbers and lower salary requirements. Despite these changes, with a language requirement at B1, few arrivals via the skilled worker route are likely to be demanding courses at FE colleges. However, many are likely to wish to improve their everyday English and may generate demand for conversation classes and less formal provision.

Some English language requirements will have little impact on demand for ESOL. These include those relating to students, overseas business representatives, ministers of religion and sportspeople. This is because these groups do not typically access ESOL, for example student who access support through universities or because numbers are relatively small and those in need of English are likely to make private arrangements.

Demand for ESOL from people on spouse and family visas is likely to stay the same, or at least unaffected by the new immigration

106 Council of Europe (undated) Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, accessed 12th March 2021 [Link](#)

policy. They need to learn English to B1 level for Leave to Remain and Citizenship. Likewise, the requirements do not affect asylum seekers and refugees whose numbers are driven by international circumstances and events but will also be motivated to achieve citizenship. These are key groups of ESOL learners, including for courses at pre-Entry and Entry Level. These are groups who may already be underserved by provision.

We described earlier how Hong Kong nationals with British National Overseas (BNO) status have recently been given the right to live and work in the UK. It is not possible to predict numbers with any degree of accuracy, neither is it possible to say whether new arrivals will need ESOL. Cantonese is the main language for almost 90 per cent of Hong Kong's citizens. However, English is one of the official languages in Hong Kong and is used in business, government and other areas. The 2016 census update found a majority of Hong Kong citizens saying they can speak, read or write English, at 51.1%, 63.5% and 65.6% respectively. Levels are even higher among younger Hong Kong citizens who are expected to compose the majority of new arrivals.¹⁰⁷

Research by L&W suggests that there may be little demand for basic English, but that some new arrivals will have 'spiky' profiles as a result of the system for language teaching in Hong Kong: some may therefore have strong reading and writing skills but be weaker at speaking and listening. L&W identify a number of learning routes for new migrants from Hong Kong: EAL support in schools; language support for students in FE and universities; and ESOL, especially for beginners. Specific

language needs for settling into daily life will be very similar to other new arrivals. Many will be also be seeking to find employment and will therefore need guidance on job search, career planning and occupationally specific language and skills¹⁰⁸. Arrivals on the Hong Kong BNO visa route will not be eligible for AEB ESOL provision until the ordinary residency criteria (3 years) are met. This may mean that prospective learners who can afford fees seek provision in the private English as a Foreign Language sector. Additionally, MHCLG has announced a targeted support fund open to local authorities, which can provide up to £800 per head to support ESOL needs where necessary¹⁰⁹.

On the whole, **it seems likely that the end of free movement and entry via work visas with language requirements will reduce some demand for ESOL.** This is likely to affect college provision, where a fall in demand from European migrants has been noted for some time. But visa requirements, and new arrivals, are of course only part of the picture. There is evidence of substantial unmet demand and its impact on concentration of migrants in low skilled work, unable to progress for reasons which include their language skills. They include some of the 4 million people who have registered for the EU settlement programme.¹¹¹ Demand from people coming to the UK on family visas, and from people who have lived here for some time, will also remain; and asylum seekers will continue to see Britain as somewhere to rebuild their lives. We have described the needs of these groups as varied, along with their preferences and for provision. In the final section we take a more detailed look about how the ESOL sector should respond to future needs.

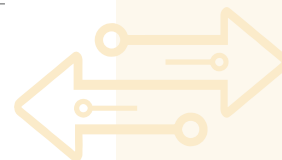
¹⁰⁷ Hong Kong population by-Census (2016) [Link](#); Bacon-Shone, J., Bolton, K. and Luke, K.K. (2015) Language use, proficiency and attitudes in Hong Kong, Social Sciences Research Centre The University of Hong Kong [Link](#)

¹⁰⁸ Learning and Work Institute (2021) New Arrivals from Hong Kong – Language and Other Learning Needs. Briefing to the South East Strategic Partnership for Migration. [Link](#)

¹⁰⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/hong-kong-uk-welcome-programme-guidance-for-local-authorities>

¹¹⁰ Learning and Work Institute (2021), ESOL Provider Planning, private report to DfE

¹¹¹ Gov UK (2020) More than 4 million applications to the EU Settlement Scheme [Link](#)





6. What is the future for ESOL and how should the sector respond?

In the introduction to this paper we talked about three factors which are likely to shape demand for ESOL in the coming years. The first is the new immigration policy; the second is the pandemic, lockdown and economic recovery; and the third is devolution of the AEB which gives Combined Mayoral Authorities greater flexibility over ESOL funding. Writing in May 2021, we are in the early stages of all three of these but the research for this paper has provided some very clear indicators of the challenges and opportunities which each of these represents. In this final section we bring together the evidence to lay out the implications for future demand and delivery of ESOL

1. Migration trends: their impact on ESOL

Recent and future trends in migration have implications for ESOL demand. **Free movement has fuelled demand for ESOL, especially in the last decade, and its end will have an impact.**

In fact, providers say it already has: enrolments from European migrants are reported to have fallen since the EU referendum in 2016 and the departure of many during the pandemic will reduce future demand. Writing in Spring 2021, it is too early to know whether migrants who left during the pandemic will return.

It is also too early to tell when the economy is likely to recover and demand for labour, including for migrants, will increase. The experience of past recessions, in particular the period following the financial crisis in 2008 suggests that migration will have a role to play

in recovery.¹¹² When and how it happens, an economic and immigration bounce-back will take place in quite a different policy context than in the past.

Importantly for ESOL, people on work visas are now required to speak English at intermediate level. This was required for people arriving on skilled visas in the past, but the passage of people via this route will be much higher, and **the arrival of economic migrants with limited English will be much lower.** Changes in migration policy will also likely mean an increase in migrants from English speaking countries, who are not required to take an English language test. While most of these will be fluent, they may include some who are not.

The skilled worker route also accounts for only a proportion of migration to the UK and

¹¹² Rolfe, H. (2020) The role of immigration in the UK's post-Covid recovery, UK in a Changing Europe, [Link](#)

others bring people with ESOL needs. **Arrival of spouses and others through family visas will continue, as will people seeking asylum. These have generated a substantial proportion of demand for ESOL in the last decade, especially in cities and towns.** They include people wishing to achieve B1, the level required for Leave to Remain and citizenship.

The right of Hong Kong citizens with British National Status to live and work in the UK could bring quite substantial numbers of newcomers. Many will be proficient in English, but some will not and could generate demand for ESOL to enable them to achieve citizenship in due course. Many will wish to work and would benefit from provision which includes guidance on job search, career planning and occupationally specific language and skills.

The varied types of migration which Britain is likely to experience in the coming years needs suggests a need for ESOL provision at a range of levels and through delivery mechanisms compatible with personal circumstances and preferences. **In MCAs where AEB budgets are devolved, they will need to work with providers to ensure they understand what these are and to respond accordingly. Outside of devolved areas, there is a need for a national ESOL strategy, as the Government has promised.** This needs to ensure that areas outside of the large conurbations covered by the MCAs do not lose out, and have sufficient funding to meet their ESOL needs. Without this, there is a risk of a two-tier system developing.

2. Unmet demand: a reset moment for ESOL

Providers, particularly colleges, say that demand for ESOL is high, that they are able to fill places easily, that classes are popular and an important part of their learning offer. However, they also say that weekly teaching hours are too low and learners progress slowly. Colleges are also aware that they cannot meet all demand, particularly

from people who are ineligible for full funding via the AEB: these include some with the greatest need for ESOL, including women who have no resource to public funds, new asylum seekers and low earners.

Devolved AEB has enabled MCAs to extend fully-funded provision to groups who have previously been required to contribute, but eligibility rules are still complex and some potential learners may not be aware they do not have to pay.

The current practice is for AEB funded providers, typically colleges, to refer people to non-AEB funded community provision where they have no spaces or where applicants are not eligible. **The expansion of ESOL hubs would make sharing of information about spaces and provision more easily available to providers and to prospective learners. Ensuring good communication and coordination through ESOL hubs should be a priority for MCAs.**

Available data suggests a high level of unmet need, some of which will only generate demand if providers are more proactive in encouraging take up. At least some unmet need is from people who do not want to take college classes, either because it is seen as formal or outside of their neighbourhood. Some learners are attracted by local provision in familiar venues; classes in venues such as children's centres, mosques, community centres and schools have been found to be popular. Provision in schools has been found to have the additional benefit of engaging parents in their children's learning.

Local areas also need to have a better understanding of need, rather than just respond to demand. This would enable providers to identify hard to reach groups, for example Roma, who are often excluded from economic and social life and are less likely to proactively seek ESOL opportunities. The focus of identifying and responding to need should also be at all levels, and should ensure that learners are able



to continually progress. This includes identifying the gap between proficiency and fluency, which could lead to an increase in provision at the higher end, as well as ensuring sufficient opportunities for beginners.

3. Employers: a stronger partner in ESOL learning?

Government policy has emphasised the importance of English language for assisting integration and it is a requirement for many visas. However, **the Government has said very little about the benefits of language skills for the workforce integration, for skills and advancement. While these considerations are not necessarily part of Home Office policy, they could be pursued through the agendas of other government departments.**

Under AEB rules, ESOL cannot be delivered in the workplace and initiatives to deliver ESOL in work settings have often been short-lived. Providers report problems with time off during shifts, small class sizes, fluctuating attendance and a variety of levels and learning needs. At the same time, colleges find it difficult to accommodate the needs of people who work irregular hours.¹¹³ It is likely that many workers reach a basic level of English and discontinue their learning, gaining only through informal methods and their own efforts.

The failure of workplace ESOL is likely to contribute in no small part to the underutilisation of skills which is so common among many migrant groups, in particular Eastern and Central Europeans in low skilled work. Other migrant groups, for example refugees, also work at levels below their standard of education or professional training. This represents both lost potential for individuals but also an opportunity for employers: performance, productivity, innovation and team cohesion can all be improved through

the language skills of individuals and teams.

Successive reports have expressed concern at the underutilisation of skills resulting from difficulties in accessing ESOL.¹¹⁴ While for some learners, English could be the key to promotion, for others it could be the route to a different occupation or one they left behind. **This suggests a need for more vocational and workplace-orientated provision, combined with ESOL. It also points to the need for Careers Information Advice and Guidance (CIAG) targeted at the needs of migrants.**

Despite the range of benefits for greater English proficiency at work, policy makers have largely regarded these benefits as up to employers. Guidelines for English language at work have been introduced only intervening only where English language is seen to affect public service or health and safety.¹¹⁵ They have not included issues of skills, learning and progression; and the many benefits and beneficiaries of better English in the workplace go unrecognised.

Devolved authorities could encourage employers to more actively help employees to improve English, through making it easier to attend classes or online learning. The GLA provides an example of where this has been achieved for workers in low paid and insecure work.¹¹⁶ As a further step, an award or standard could be introduced to encourage good ESOL practice by employers.

There is also a potential role for ESOL providers to assist employers wishing to recruit people from overseas who do not have the standard of English required for a skilled visa. Provision of ESOL to prospective employees overseas has been practised in the past, where employers have provided training and English tuition to recruits prior to arrival in the UK.¹¹⁷ Given providers' interest in improving online provision,

113 Kere, A and Bell, R (2017) Social Integration, Interim Report into Integration of Migrants, APPG on Social Integration [Link](#); Bell, R., Plumb, N., Marangozov, R. and Kere, A. (2017) Integration not demonization, APPG on Social Integration [Link](#)

114 Bell, R., Plumb, N., Marangozov, R. and Kere, A. (2017) Integration not demonization, APPG on Social Integration [Link](#)

115 Health and Safety Executive (undated) Migrant workers: advice for employers, accessed 12th March 2020 [Link](#); Gov UK (2016) Code of Practice on the English language requirements for public sector workers [Link](#); Unison (undated) Negotiating for workplace ESOL learning, accessed 12th March 2020 [Link](#)

116 London Gov UK (undated) ESOL Plus – Employer Strategic Partnership, accessed 18th March 2021 [Link](#)

this may represent an opportunity. To work, it requires stronger partnerships between providers and employers. These might be brokered by ESOL hubs, coordinated by MCAs and non-devolved authorities. **Across all areas, ESOL planning and provision could benefit from input from sector based employer bodies, local chambers of commerce and business improvement services. Trade Unions could also be part of local ESOL hubs.**

4. ESOL: part of the post-Coronavirus economic recovery

We have described the benefits of ESOL for workers and employers. And it is common for policy debates on ESOL to focus on the needs of individuals and communities. However, there are also wider economic benefits where ESOL can enable people to move from unemployment into work, and to help meet labour and skills shortages. A future ESOL strategy, at national and regional levels, should therefore align with economic goals and in particular the UK's agenda for skills. This needs to include both new migration, but also existing migrants and settled communities who are either unemployed or working below their potential because of ESOL needs.

In making the case for new immigration policy, and particularly the lack of an unskilled route, the immigration White Paper referred specifically to the potential of other migrants for low skilled work.¹¹⁷ These were specified as including 'Dependants of skilled workers; students; refugees; those coming on a family visa; or a youth mobility visa'. However, many people in these groups will have low levels of English, and will need access to ESOL both to enable them to work effectively but also for Leave to Remain and citizenship. For many, a combination of ESOL

and vocational training could be beneficial.

In addition to enabling participation among inactive people, including for example women from settled Asian communities who would like to work, some people who have lost their jobs during the pandemic will have ESOL needs. We know that those who have been furloughed or who have lost their jobs are more likely to be people from ethnic minorities, including migrants: their chances of finding work will be higher if they have good spoken and written English.

Devolved authorities should not just use ESOL to get people into work. ESOL should be part of their skills-based post-Coronavirus recovery plans. Vocational training in selected growth industries should therefore be combined with ESOL. **MCAs, colleges and other providers should therefore work closely and in alignment with economic development goals to deliver the vocational skills needed, alongside ESOL.**

5. Meeting diverse needs through diverse routes

Everyone who learns or wants to learn English has their own motivations. The most common include wanting to work, to mix socially, to access services, to help with children's education and to obtain citizenship and settle in Britain. Some people may wish to learn enough to get by, while others will want to achieve fluency. **There should be room to learn at all levels through publicly funded ESOL, so that people are able to easily progress from beginner to advanced levels.** This will require adjustment of funding levels to develop provision that better meets the needs of learners, for example by increasing the available course hours to support progression, and ensuring that smaller classes

117 Metcalf, H., Rolfe, H. and Dhudwar, A. (2008) Employment of migrant workers: case studies of selected employers in Wales and Scotland, Governments for Scotland and Wales [Link](#)

118 UK Government (2018) The UK's future skills-based immigration system [Link](#)



which cater for specific needs (e.g. linked to vocational study, or in community venues) are financially viable. While politicians have voiced support for fluency, this should not be the ultimate aim: some people may not be planning to stay or prefer to speak their first language where possible. At the same time, **there are considerable individual and societal benefits for increased proficiency, and this should be encouraged through diverse learning opportunities. MCAs should ensure that a wide range of options is on offer.**

Research, including for this paper, consistently finds that when it comes to ESOL provision, there is 'no one size fits all'. Some people prefer structured classes in a college, others like to learn close to home in familiar venues or through conversation groups, cookery classes, walking groups or online. Some who opt for college provision like to take bespoke ESOL classes, while others prefer functional English and Maths. Some learners want to take tests and exams, receive certificates and progress quickly: others like to take their time and to assess their own progress.

ESOL provision should be able to meet all of these needs and preferences. It should also allow for movement between types of provision, as needs and aspirations change. ESOL hubs, referred to earlier, can play a role in this process.

Given the role of non-AEB funding in much community provision, there is a case for ensuring a more permanent funding route. This would give these providers greater security; it would also allow for reputations to be more strongly established and for expertise to be embedded. **An alternative would be to increase the AEB budget and for more community provision to be delivered via this route.**

6. The future is only partly digital

Digital learning is included in the plans for MCAs and has been accelerated under lockdown. This provision has a range of benefits, enabling learners to access provision when they experience barriers such as irregular working hours, childcare and transport difficulties. Given that these are frequently identified as barriers to ESOL participation, this is a significant benefit. However, learners require digital skills, as well as devices and broadband and these barriers need to be resolved if online learning is to be expanded.

There has been no research on learner preferences for online learning and providers accounts of who it suits, and who it doesn't vary. These issues need to be better understood before it is used extensively. There is will also be a need for teachers to be trained in online learning methods and for high quality materials to be developed and tested.

Online learning, with no classroom provision, may have particular value for people at intermediate level and above who are currently least well catered for across current types of provision. It may also benefit those who live in areas with little or no ESOL provision. There is a view from providers that learners benefit most from a mix of classroom and online learning and it is likely that this will become more usual practice. Blended learning, by allowing access to additional materials between classes, may also allow for accelerated learning and faster progression by learners who want it.

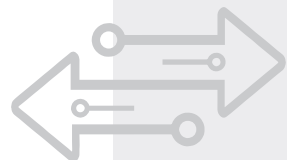
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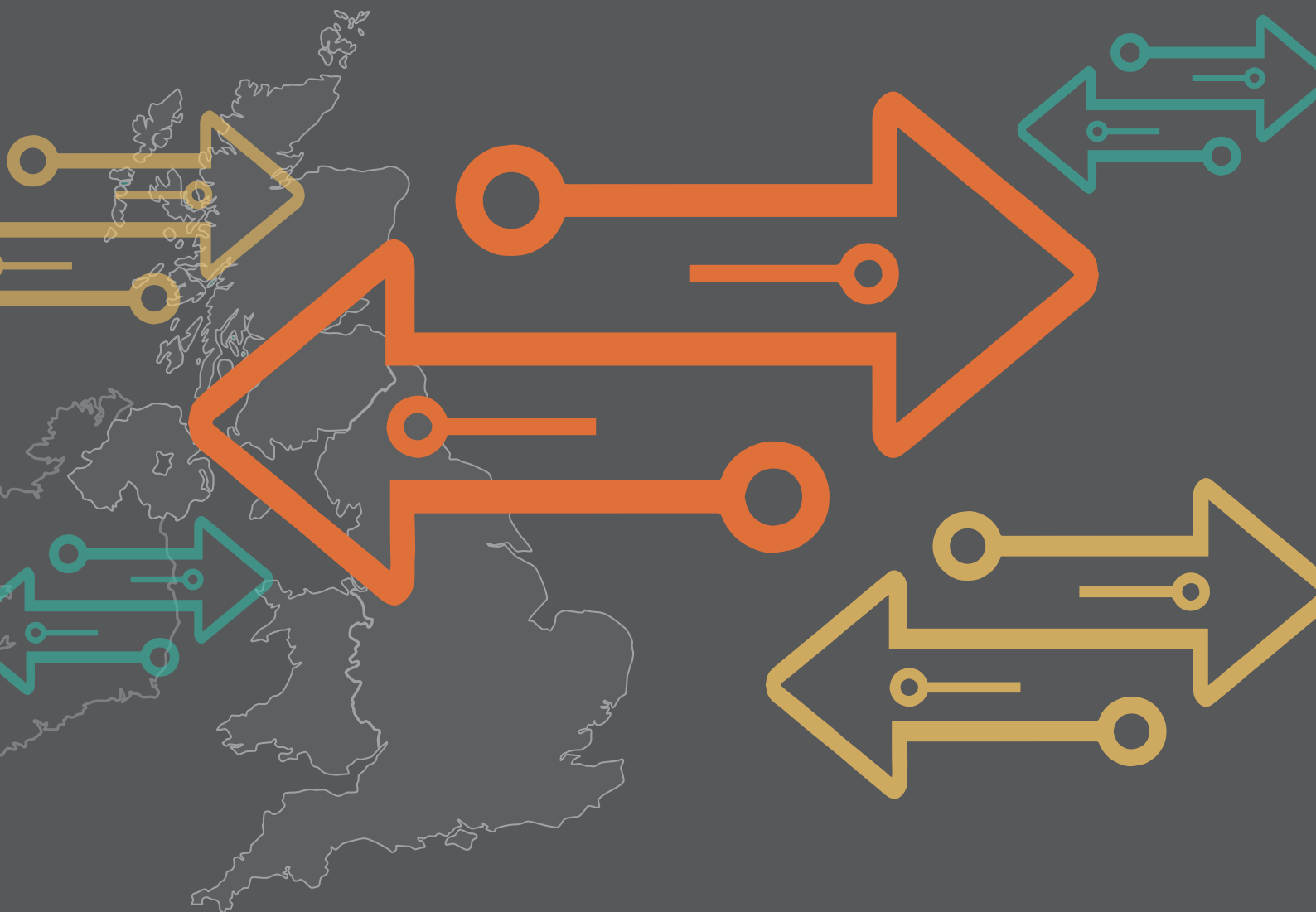
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