

LET REFUGEES LEARN

Challenges and opportunities to improve language provision to refugees in England



This report depended on the refugees who participated in interviews and their willingness to discuss their experiences with learning English since they have lived in England. Additionally, the professionals, who work in various roles in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) course provision, are greatly appreciated for taking time to be interviewed. Refugee Action colleagues based in offices throughout England made time to provide insight into the issues investigated despite their heavy workloads. Thanks also to the experts on ESOL, representing Action for ESOL, the Learning and Work Institute, and Refugee Council, who reviewed the report.

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Executive summary

Introduction

Refugees are people, like you and me. They have been forced to flee their homes by war or persecution, often leaving behind virtually all their worldly possessions. Once they have been recognised as refugees here in the UK, they have a chance to rebuild their lives in safety.

But new challenges very rapidly arise. This report is concerned with one such challenge – learning English.

Refugees in the UK have great determination and desire to learn English. They know that it is essential to making friends with their neighbours, to education, and above all to finding work. It is critical to their independence and to successful integration.

The primary way for refugees to access English language learning is through classes for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). This is a regulated programme made available through ESOL providers (usually Further Education colleges) and, in some instances, is fully financed by government.

However, in recent years funding cuts have resulted in shortages of provision, waiting lists, and other barriers to participation, particularly for women.

As a result, refugees in the UK are finding it harder to acquire vital language skills to put them on track to successful integration. This needs to change, fast, so that refugees can access the classes and support they need. This not only benefits the individual, but also benefits the wider society to which the individual can contribute.

For this report, Refugee Action has investigated refugees' experiences of learning the English language through ESOL. Our research explores

not only individuals' experiences with accessing courses, but also their backgrounds and aspirations. It provides a picture of what refugees have done, can do, and what they wish to do with their lives now that they live in the UK. This report focuses on provision in England. ESOL provision in the UK is a devolved issue – each UK nation operates and funds its own system.

So what's our government doing so far?

Government research shows that English skills are critical to integration in UK society, to social and academic development, and to meeting basic needs. Successive UK governments have repeatedly identified the social and economic benefits of being able to speak English as one of the key drivers behind the provision of ESOL. Politicians on all sides have highlighted the importance of this.

“We want a strong and unified country with opportunity for everybody. Opportunity isn't there if you're discriminated against or you can't speak English” – David Cameron, Prime Minister (January 2016)

“Everyone coming to live in Britain should speak English, or learn to speak English as a first step to integration” – Yvette Cooper, Shadow Home Secretary (April 2014)

Despite this, there have been year on year cuts to ESOL. Funding has gone from around £212m in 2008-09 to just £95m through the Skills Funding Agency (SFA); and a one-off extra £20m in 2016 for projects over the next few years. This means that ESOL funding has been cut by 55% since 2009.

In addition to this decline in funding, the prospects for high quality provision are reduced by the fact that England – unlike Scotland and Wales – does not have a strategy for ESOL, to set and measure progress against clear agreed objectives. Instead, while responsibility for ESOL provision in England is led by the SFA,



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provision is split across multiple government departments, each with their own objectives and priorities. This creates an unclear picture of what funding is available and how many students are accessing it.

The Prime Minister's announcement in January of £20m funding for English language teaching for Muslim women to help combat the threat of radicalisation demonstrated that where there's a perceived political need, leadership can be shown and funding sourced for ESOL. While this additional funding is welcome, it doesn't come close to matching ongoing cuts to ESOL provision.

Refugees' experiences

Refugees have a strong drive and desire to learn English as part of building their new life in Britain.

Refugees' level of education and experience of learning before arrival in the UK of course

varies greatly and this affects their experience of learning English and how much support they need here. There is no 'one size fits all' English course – for all learners and most especially refugees it must be tailored to the individual's need.

Our research shows that refugees are extremely resourceful. If they are not getting the provision they need they are finding ways to learn for themselves by, for example, using online resources. This is a great illustration of their appetite to learn, but it often doesn't lead to the best learning outcomes.

The reasons that refugees want to learn are multiple. Without exception those we interviewed want to work – our research includes a nurse, teachers, an aspiring mechanic and a sportsman, all of whom want to get back into work. It's clear that, with English, they are more likely to achieve this. Refugees also want to learn so that they can meet their

neighbours, go shopping, visit the doctor and volunteer their time to their community. Refugees with low levels of English often feel isolated.

“ESOL classes – it helps me to speak to neighbours. When the GP asks if I need an interpreter, now I say, ‘No. I will try. I will speak to the doctor myself.’ Going to ESOL is very important to me because the language we speak in this country is English”

– Michael

“I want to learn English because I want to continue studying in the UK. I want to study education [so that I can become] a primary school teacher here” – Sarah

In theory, refugees in England are eligible for fully-funded provision on the condition that they have attained refugee status and meet the necessary income requirements. Once a learner is in paid work they have to co-fund the course. However, our research demonstrates that in reality refugees often face significant barriers to learning and accessing a course. These include:

- **Long waiting lists.** We spoke to refugees still on waiting lists who have been in the country for several months and others now in classes who experienced lengthy waits.

“I am waiting for the college to get me into Entry Level 1 for ESOL. I’ve been on the waiting list since I arrived. When I arrived I enrolled myself and I’m still waiting for the course”

– Marcus

- **Being assigned the wrong class.** Among the refugees we spoke to were some who were enrolled on classes lower than their assessed level because the more suitable class was full. They expressed frustration at not progressing their learning, and as a result some stopped attending their classes.

“Two weeks and there was nothing new to me. They did not teach me anything new. So I dropped the class. I asked them to transfer me but they said no. So I went to the Job Centre, told them of my situation, and [the representative] called three different colleges to enrol me into Level 1 but all were full. Job Centre advised me to learn online – he advised me to learn from the internet like I already do.” – Mo

- **Gender barriers.** Women can be particularly affected – often it’s the male member of the household who is enrolled at the Job Centre, women may not get the same support to join an ESOL course. Furthermore, many women with child care responsibilities find it very difficult to attend classes. Refugee Action case-workers try to find provision that includes a crèche but this often proves difficult.

“If I get a school now, I’m ready to start. Even if I’m asked to come with my baby, I’ll come with my baby. I’d love a school close to where I live so I can get my daughter from school. I really want to go to school” – Jane

- **Distance.** Colleges with places available can be very far from refugees’ homes, and in these cases travel time and costs are often prohibitive.

“It’s hard because I have children...it’s hard”
– Sarah



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- **Learning hours.** Some of the refugees we spoke to were unhappy to spend so little time in the classroom each week; cutting the hours of learning is a further direct consequence of funding cuts.

“Smaller classes would help. The most important is the time. Two hours in one week is nothing. There needs to be three or four classes per week” – Amal

Recommendations

Refugee Action believes that if the UK recognises an individual’s status as a refugee and grants them protection, we should provide that person with the tools to fully integrate into our society and successfully build a new life for themselves. Access to high quality English provision is absolutely essential to this.

Refugee Action calls on the government to act on five essential recommendations:

1. Create a fund to specifically support refugees learning English.

This should enable all refugees that require English lessons to have free, accessible ESOL for their first two years in England. It would be beneficial to the refugees involved, to their new neighbours and communities, and to the UK as a whole. Our analysis shows this would cost around £1600 per refugee per year. This would require the Government to invest £47m a year to achieve this goal.

The cost of two years’ ESOL for each refugee is effectively fully reimbursed to the taxpayer following an individual’s first eight months of employment at the national average wage; and within 15 months at the lower wage of £18,000 per year.

2. Publish an ESOL strategy for England.

This should set clear national targets for ESOL provision and attainment. It should also enshrine refugees’ access to ESOL as an entitlement and ensure that refugees do not wait to enrol in

ESOL and access the provision they require. It can draw on the experience of those already in place in Scotland and Wales.

3. Ensure full and equal access to ESOL, particularly for women.

Female refugees’ ability to attend English language classes can be improved by ensuring they have access to childcare facilities. In addition, in all cases where ESOL providers are located far from the homes of refugees and public transport is required to participate, funding should be made available to cover travel costs.

4. Provide asylum seekers with the right to access free English language learning.

This would support their integration from the point they initially make their asylum claim. Currently, people seeking asylum are not eligible for government-funded English language teaching until they have waited six months for a decision on their asylum application, at which time they can receive partial funding to cover 50% of the course.

This learning can be delivered through a combination of formal and informal means; however, given the very low levels of income which asylum seekers are required to live on, it is essential that this teaching is available without charge. Free English teaching from the point of claiming asylum is currently available in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

5. Facilitate a national framework for community-based language support.

Community support for refugees wishing to learn English can be a vital compliment to (but not a replacement for) formal, accredited ESOL learning for refugees. Government should bring together civil society, the private sector, local government and other key stakeholders, to develop a framework which enables all interested parties to pool resources and good practice to increase the provision and quality of community-based language support.

1 Introduction

Refugees are people who have been recognised as requiring protection. They leave not because they choose to make a better life, but because they are forced to flee war and persecution.

The decision by a country like the UK to grant them refugee protection gives them the security they crave. However, new challenges very rapidly arise as they seek to rebuild their lives. This report is concerned with one of the main challenges – learning the English language – and the many ways in which it affects the lives of refugees.

Refugees in Britain have great determination and desire to learn English in order to integrate. Integration means speaking with neighbours and interacting with communities, going to further or higher education, working, and in all ways being able to participate in British society.

Refugee Action's long experience of working with refugees and asylum seekers shows English is perhaps the single most important tool to enable refugees to build independent lives, socially and economically integrate, and contribute to life in the UK.

English language provision through English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) is regulated and, in some instances, fully financed by government. However, in recent years funding cuts have resulted in waiting lists and other barriers to participation. In other words, current government policy is creating unnecessary hurdles that make integration more difficult.

This research investigates refugees' experiences with learning the English language in England. It explores not only individuals' experiences with accessing formal ESOL and community-provided courses, but also their backgrounds and aspirations. In doing so, it

provides a picture of what refugees have done, can do, and what they wish to do with their lives now that they live in England. It argues that current arrangements are inadequate and more needs to be done to ensure that refugees can access ESOL provision in a timely manner and that meets their needs.

Charities, communities and English for refugees

This report focuses primarily on the provision of professional, regulated, English language tuition to refugees, because these are essential to enable refugees (and other groups) to learn to read, write and speak English successfully. At Refugee Action we believe passionately that this can be effectively supplemented through additional support from charities like us and from volunteers in the community. This is particularly relevant for spoken English.

There are already a huge range of initiatives of this kind. Some are provided by registered charities as part of their services to asylum seekers and refugees. Others are delivered by community groups. Many groups provide regular classes for groups of refugees, taught by professional teachers and volunteers. Others run schemes enabling volunteers to meet regularly with asylum seekers and refugees to practice and improve their spoken English.

Many of these programmes have been running for many years. Others are expanding to support Syrians now arriving through the resettlement programme. We welcome this. Our recommendations later in this report include a proposal for a national framework to connect and strengthen these initiatives.

At Refugee Action we:

- Train and support volunteers to provide English language support to refugees in the North West of England through our long-standing resettlement programme, and in time through new Syrian resettlement programmes in the Midlands and London.

- Train and support volunteers to provide English language support to refugees through all our resettlement programmes, in the Midlands, North-West of England, and London
- Provide weekly ESOL classes for refugees at different levels of English language, delivered by volunteers in Bradford.



Refugee Action

2 Methodology

Our research is comprised of six substantive parts. We start by providing an analysis of current and recent policy analysis. This is followed by an international comparison of policy on language provision. Case studies are then presented, which precede a discussion of our key findings. We then conduct a costings exercise, before finishing with a conclusion and our recommendations.

The case studies and discussion used qualitative analysis, drawing on 10 semi-structured interviews with refugees based in Birmingham, London, and Manchester. Interpreters were used in eight of the interviews. Due to time-scales, participants were identified through convenience sampling. However, external research is drawn upon in the discussion to contextualise and support findings.

Variables to be investigated by the research were identified through consultation with experts in the field, caseworkers, and external research. These variables focus on barriers to accessing ESOL provision; refugees' aspirations; the impacts of not speaking English; and time spent in the classroom. These informed parameters which were shared with caseworkers in order to identify potential participants.

In addition to interviews with refugees, six semi-structured interviews were conducted with specialists in the field of ESOL. Participants included providers, advocates, and government officials. Specialists were identified through a snow-balling approach, beginning with caseworkers.

All participants agreed to be interviewed on the condition of anonymity.

Given the methodology used, an important caveat to the research is that findings are not generalisable to the population. Furthermore, because all the participants were resettled, they necessarily have a distinct experience from refugees who attain status through the asylum route. Resettled clients are ensured a caseworker to facilitate their integration experience – something not guaranteed to asylum-route refugees. Therefore, it should be kept in mind that where barriers are identified, this occurs even when the participant has a comparatively privileged experience.

Two parts of this research were conducted by external consultants: part 4, an international comparison of policy on language provision with respect to refugees, the contents of which were verified by the researcher; and part 7, an examination of the costs provision at present and a prescription of what they could be to meet the varied needs of refugees.

The costings exercise methodology can be found in the briefing produced which is available on Refugee Action's website.

3 Current government policy and practice on English classes for refugees

This section outlines the current funding and the rules governing access to classes for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL).

Refugees in the UK, like other groups wishing to improve their English, are eligible for funded ESOL classes on the condition that they have the right to remain in the UK and receive benefits. However, in practice they are often unable to access the classes they need.

3.1 Government recognition that ESOL matters

Successive UK governments have identified the social and economic benefits of being able to speak English as the key drivers behind the provision of ESOL.

“We want a strong and unified country with opportunity for everybody. Opportunity isn’t

there if you’re discriminated against or you can’t speak English” – David Cameron, Prime Minister (The Telegraph, 2016).

“We know that speaking English is key to integration” – Theresa May, Home Secretary (May, 2010).

“Everyone coming to live in Britain should speak English, or learn to speak English as a first step to integration” – Yvette Cooper, Shadow Home Secretary (Cooper, 2014).

“UKIP does want people to integrate and... we are also committed to promoting the English language as a common ingredient that will bind our society together.” – UKIP General Election Manifesto (UKIP, 2015).

England – unlike Scotland and Wales – currently has no strategy for ESOL to provide a coherent framework for ESOL objectives or to measure the impact of the provision.



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ESOL policy: devolved governments

In contrast to England, the devolved governments in Scotland and Wales both currently have comprehensive ESOL strategies. These map how policy objectives will be achieved and how progress will be measured (Education Scotland, 2015 & Welsh Government, 2014).

In addition, in Scotland and Northern Ireland all adult asylum seekers are eligible for free ESOL classes on arrival; and do not need to meet the 6-month period of residence requirements which apply for asylum seekers in England (Scottish Government, 2013 & Good, 2015).¹

The coalition government in 2010 produced the most recent ESOL policy within its *Skills for Sustainable Growth* strategy (SSG). In it, ESOL is identified as the means by which those who cannot speak English can “gain employment and contribute to society” (BIS, 2010; 32). Under Labour in 2009, *A New Approach to English for Speakers of Other Languages* identified that “more than any other factor” learning English demonstrates “commitment to adapting to life in the UK” and enables “productive contribution to the nation’s economy” (Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, 2; 2009). The relationship between English language learning with social and economic integration and participation is borne out in external research that has been conducted over a number of years.

A 2004 report for the Home Office found that refugees and non-refugees felt that communicating in English is a particularly important part of integrating into UK society and linked it to developing socially, academically, and in meeting basic needs (Ager and Strang, 2004; 10). Similarly, qualitative research produced by Refugee Council and the University of Birmingham in 2007 identified that ESOL courses were viewed by refugee participants as crucial for integration in the UK and that those respondents who were unemployed and out of education, particularly ESOL classes, “felt that not learning English was one of the most significant barriers affecting their ability to integrate” (Brahmbhatt, et al, 2007; 19,21).

This relationship was later tested quantitatively in a Home Office report published in July 2010, which analysed refugees’ integration over 21 months. It found that English language ability was strongly linked to integration, including employment (Cebulla, et al, 2010; 5). Significantly, and key to this report, the research highlighted that participation in ESOL courses was associated with improved English language skills (ibid.; 6).

In January 2016 Prime Minister David Cameron demonstrated the high importance placed by the current government on learning English when he announced a £20 million funding package designed primarily to enable Muslim women to learn English. The programme was reported as aiming to “help them resist the lure of extremism” (BBC, 2016). Whereas economic and social integration may still result from this initiative, it appears that there is an increased focus on security through English language learning and social integration. However this renewed attention has not made up for the reductions made in previous years, as set out below.

¹ In addition, as of January 2016, the Northern Ireland Executive announced that all refugees are entitled to free ESOL classes regardless of their employment status.

3.2 ESOL funding

Despite the growing importance placed on the provision of ESOL, there have been a series of cuts to funding for ESOL provision. These have led to a growth in waiting lists, reduction in teaching hours, and a general increase in hurdles to attain and maintain English language teaching for groups including refugees – in marked contrast to the stated policy ambitions and political rhetoric (NATECLA, 2015a; 13).² Indeed, according to a 2014 study by NATECLA, of 212 colleges and adult education centres surveyed, over 80% had waiting lists of up to 1,000 students for ESOL courses (NATECLA, 2014). Sixty-six per cent of providers identified government funding as the main reason for this (ibid., 2014).

This has taken place despite strong concerns about the impact of funding cuts both within and outside parliament. For example, earlier this year, the House of Commons International Development Select Committee's stated in its report on the Syrian refugee crisis: "We urge the Government to reconsider the cuts to ESOL funding as we believe that they are counterproductive to integration plans" (House of Commons International Development Committee, 2016).

ESOL policy in England for adult learners, which covers funding arrangements and eligibility for full- and co-funded courses, is the responsibility of the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) and is financed by the Adult Education Budget.³ The SFA is an independent agency that sits within the Department for Business, Innovation, and Skills. Other government departments known to provide ESOL include the Department for Work and Pensions through its flexible support fund; the Department for Communities and Local Government through specific programm-

es; Local Authorities as they are financially able and see fit; and the Education Funding Agency which is sponsored by the Department for Education and focuses on minors.

Within the UK, ESOL policy is a devolved matter at the discretion of the countries within the UK (see Good, 2015 and Education Scotland, 2015). At present there is no strategy for ESOL in England. However, beginning in 2001 ESOL provision was delivered under the *Skills for Life Strategy*, which centralised management of the service and, on the heels of a funding expansion, sought to rein in expenditure by "tying ESOL to an employment and skills agenda" (Paget and Stevenson, 2014; 38).

Between 2001 and 2008/9, there was a significant demand increase for ESOL which was met by a three-fold increase in funding to around £300 million (Hubble and Kennedy, 2011; 5).⁴ According to the same House of Commons Library standard note, "ESOL arguably became a victim of its own success and expenditure on ESOL increased significantly [; consequently...] in 2007 the further education minister Bill Rammell announced that the Government would withdraw automatic fee remission and introduce fees for these courses" (ibid., 3).

By 2009 *A New Approach to English for Speakers of Other Languages* was released which de-centralised coordination of ESOL at the same time as increasing cuts to local government (Paget and Stevenson, 2014; 38). Demos' report, *On Speaking Terms*, includes the Skills Funding Agency's estimates on ESOL spending within the Adult Skills Budget, demonstrating a fairly consistent nominal decrease in ESOL funding over time and as a proportion of the broader Adult Skills Budget (ibid., 2014; 40).

² NATECLA is the National Association for Teaching English and Other Community Languages to Adults.

³ This was formerly the Adult Skills Budget.

⁴ The £300 million figure does not conform to findings within the referenced Demos report. This may be due to different funding streams being aggregated or it may be due to a calculation error. For the purpose of this report, the Demos figure will be used as it was acquired through a Freedom of Information request.

Academic year	Adult Skills Budget notional funding (£ million)	Of which ESOL notional funding (£ million)	ESOL as a proportion of Adult Skills Budget (%)
2008/09	2,786	212.3	7.62
2009/10	2,741	204.7	7.47
2010/11	2,448	168.6	6.89
2011/12	2,458	118.7	4.83
2012/13	2,631	128.3	4.88
2013/14		140 ⁵	
2014/15	1,500 ⁶	95 ⁷	6.33

In 2015 the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, Sajid Javid, revealed that ESOL Plus Mandation funding would be cut in the financial year beginning in August 2015. This is the pot of money available to DWP, targeted at Job Centre Plus claimants, which is used to pay for ESOL referrals made to providers on behalf of individuals with 1) limited English, 2) who receive benefits, and 3) whose ability to obtain work is prohibited by their language ability (Javid, 2015).

The cut, amounting to £45 million, was not supplanted with new funding (NATECLA, 2016). Instead, the £45 million was cut on top of an additional 27.9% funding cut to the Adult Skills Budget (NATECLA, 2015).

Even as funding is being cut colleges continue to receive referrals, in addition to direct engagement from prospective students. Their shrinking Adult Education Budget income stream is meant to cover all demand for their services. But, because colleges and further education

providers have discretion over spending, they are left to "innovate." Or, in Javid's words,

"Learners mandated to English language training to support them into work remain entitled to funding for this provision and colleges have the freedom and flexibility to put on provision to address these needs where they arise" (Javid, 2015; 2).

In conclusion, given these figures, there has been a 55% cut in funding for ESOL between 2008-09 and 2014-15.

3.3 ESOL eligibility criteria funded courses

In England refugees are in theory eligible for fully-funded ESOL provision on the condition that they have attained refugee status and meet necessary income requirements. Asylum seekers, on the other hand, are only ever eligible for co-funding at 50% of cost once they have waiting on the outcome of their asylum claim for six months.

⁵ This figure was included in a letter dated July 2015 from the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, Sajid Javid.

⁶ See Sterland and Watts (2016).

⁷ See costings briefing paper. Gaps in this chart represent unknown values. In addition to the £95 million, the £20 million targeted to teaching English to Muslim women (discussed below) was excluded from this as it is a one-off payment to be used over the next four to five years.

⁸ In particular, Train to Gain would be abolished and, as government funds were limited, "funding support for learners with very low levels of skills or the disadvantaged" was prioritised (BIS, 2010b; 6). This policy shift intended to refocus publicly-funded ESOL provision to individuals whose lack of English prohibits them from obtaining work so that "full funding will only be available for those actively seeking work on Jobseekers Allowance or Employment Support Allowance (work related activity group) benefits" (BIS, 2010., 32).



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Since 2007 eligibility for fee remission, or government's funding of courses, has been restricted to individuals receiving "various means-tested benefits" (Hubble and Kennedy, 2011; 3). In late 2010, with the publication of *Further Education – New Horizon Investing in Skills for Sustainable Growth*, the then-Government announced that funding for ESOL would be cut from September 2011 and prioritised disadvantaged learners for full-funding (BIS, 2010b).⁸ This policy change shifts the burden of ESOL costs onto learners as soon as they gain employment – which they are strongly encouraged to do by Job Centres – even if their employment is low-skilled and below their capabilities. In other words, they face punitive measures with regard to ESOL if they comply with Job Centre requirements.

Following the *Skills for Sustainable Growth* reforms, an Equality Impact Assessment was conducted in 2010 in order to examine concerns put forward by not-for-profit organisations and ESOL providers around impacts on protected groups. Some of the organisations in-

cluded focused on impacts related to refugees, asylum seekers, and women in the context of the Equality Act raising, in particular, concerns around family members who were not accessing benefits (BIS, 2010a; 20). These concerns appear within the case studies of this report, highlighting the possibility of how current provision impacts women, in particular. While the Assessment asserted that asylum seekers are not a protected group under the Equality Act, the then-Government nonetheless committed to reinstating their eligibility for fee remission (the criteria for which are elaborated below) (ibid., 6).

Eligibility criteria for refugees and asylum seekers' access to ESOL courses are found in the SFA's Funding Rules 2015-2016 and 2016-2017. According to the 2015-2016 rules, refugees and asylum seekers are not subject to the three-year residency requirement necessary for eligibility to receive funding (Skills Funding Agency, 2015; 37). Whereas the eligibility of refugees as well as their spouse, partner, and children is activated upon receiving their status, asylum

seekers' eligibility for funding requires that they wait for an outcome of their asylum application for at least six months (ibid.; 37).⁹

Without reference to these eligibility criteria, the 2016-2017 Adult Education Budget funding rules instead focus on the employment status of potential learners. The rules stipulate that individuals 19 years old or older will be fully funded where they are unemployed (Skills Funding Agency, 2016; 7).¹⁰ All other individuals in this age group will receive co-funded ESOL provision. Like earlier funding rules, providers may also use their discretion to fund other learners.¹¹



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3.4 Accredited ESOL provision

Before starting an accredited course, potential learners are required to take an initial assessment to determine what course level is appropriate. ESOL for adults is comprised of five levels of courses intended to meet increasing skill levels (SFA, 2015a; 20). The objective of such progression is to improve learners' prospects of employment and enable them to progress to a GCSE grade A* to C in English language or Function Skill (English) at Level 2 (SFA, 2015;59). At the discretion of ESOL providers, voluntary organisations, and individuals, additional non-accredited courses may be offered. These vary by location and can, for instance, be implemented around skills-based learning (e.g. supporting language learning through the use of ICT). Furthermore, non-accredited courses may be non-regulated and funded by government or they may be community-based and provided by voluntary organisations or individuals.

All ESOL courses are taught by specially qualified teachers. The availability of courses varies widely and can be provided by colleges, local authorities, or other qualified centres. Upon completing an ESOL course, learners are awarded a qualification as a certificate, which is intended to validate successful completion of the course for the purpose of further education, employment, or in applying for citizenship.

⁹ Or where the asylum seeker is in the care of the local authority and is receiving "support under section 23C or section 23CA of the Children Act 1989 or section 231 of the National Assistance Act 1948". Additionally, refused asylum seekers are eligible for funding where they have appealed against a refusal and a decision on their appeal has not been made for at least six months, they are granted section 4 support under the Immigration Act 1999, or they are in the care of a local authority (SFA, 2015; 38).

¹⁰ For the purposes of the Adult Education Budget funding rules, "unemployed" status is met where a learner either receives Jobseeker's Allowance, including those receiving National Insurance credits only; they receive Employment and Support Allowance and are in the work-related activity group; they receive Universal Credit, earn less than 16 times the National Minimum wage per week and are determined by Job Centre Plus as being either within the all work related requirements group, work preparation group, or the work focused interview group (SFA 2016, 3)

¹¹ "If...the learner receives other state benefits and earn less than 16 times the National Minimum Wage a week...and the learner wants to be employed and [the provider] is satisfied that the learning is directly relevant to their employment prospects and the local labour market needs" (ibid., 4).

4 International comparison

This section outlines the approach taken by seven other countries to the provision of language support to refugees. The comparison yields findings on issues including eligibility criteria, funding, and provision for women or carers.

The following countries were selected on the basis of the size of their economy and the amount of refugees they have received in recent years as a proportion of their population. The countries are Canada, France, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Scotland, and Sweden.¹²

4.1 Eligibility and funding criteria

4.1.1 Refugees

Eligibility for fully-funded courses is assessed in a number of different ways across these seven countries.

For example, in France language courses are conditional on signing a *'contrat d'accueil et d'intégration'* on being granted refugee or protection status (Ministry of Interior, 2016). In Canada, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Scotland, and Sweden, there are no such requirements (Learn, Speak, Live, nd; Government of Canada, 2014; Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, 2016). Rather, an individual must demonstrate that they have status, are resident, and require improvement in speaking the native language.

In France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Norway, refugees are obligated to take language courses (European Resettle-

ment Network, 2013; Dienst Uietvoering Onderwijs, nd; Nasjonalt Fagorgan for Kompetansopolitikk, nd).¹³

All countries in the comparison make fully-funded courses available. How full funding is implemented varies. For example, France identifies language courses as a right of refugees. Free courses are made available for up to 400 hours where a refugee's French is identified as insufficient (Ministry of Interior, nd). In the Netherlands, there is a loan scheme, "DUO," available to all migrants including refugees. However, refugees are not obliged to repay loans if they complete their integration (which includes language) programming (Dienst Uietvoering Onderwijs, nd). In Germany, courses are fully funded where individuals receive unemployment benefit and the benefit-providing office requires them to attend. Otherwise, where individuals do not receive benefits, they are required to pay 1.55 euros per hour. A general integration course consists of 660 hours and this will therefore cost 1,023 euros (Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, 2016).

4.1.2 Asylum seekers

In three of the countries investigated, asylum seekers are not eligible for language provision. France, Germany¹⁴, Norway, and Scotland each include asylum seekers as eligible for free language tuition – in some cases this is contingent on certain conditions. For instance, in France and Norway policy indicates that asylum seekers who reside in specific accommodation are eligible for language tuition (France Terre d'asile, nd; UDI, nda). This has proven problematic due

¹² DLA Piper provided consultancy to acquire the information used in this section. The information and sources were then reviewed by the researcher prior to publication. Due to timescale, the analysis is necessarily superficial and therefore policy nuance may be overlooked.

¹³ In Germany, recipients of residence permits after 1 January 2005 who cannot make themselves understood in German at a simple, adequate level must attend an integration course. The immigration authority decides if attendance is required when the residence title is issued.

In Norway some immigrants have both the right and obligation to attend instruction in Norwegian and social studies. This applies to refugees, persons who hold a residence permit on humanitarian grounds, persons subject to public protection, and persons reunited with a family member who falls under one of the above groups.

¹⁴ "Asylum applicants and other groups of individuals with good prospects to remain may be admitted to attend an integration course in accordance with section 44 subs. 4 sentence 2 Nos. 1-3 of the Residence Act (AufenthG), assuming places on the courses are available" (Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, 2016a).

to the increase in asylum seekers, resulting in the use of temporary accommodation, therefore making language courses inaccessible (UDI, nd).

4.2 Timing

While in England refugees become eligible for ESOL as soon as they receive status, waiting lists prevent enrolment from being so seamless. Similarly, the policies of the other countries within the international comparison demonstrate that individuals may enrol as soon as they meet appropriate requirements.

There is some variation around when a refugee becomes eligible and who is responsible for enrolling. In France, where refugees are found to require tuition, they are then responsible for seeking out language classes within two months of their assessment (Office of Immigration and Integration, nd). In Germany, refugees should, upon finding a course provider, register and the provider will provide a course within three months and tell them whether a course will be unavailable in that time period (Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, 2016b). In Norway, where refugees are obligated to participate in a language course, they must seek out tuition as soon as possible and within three months after settling. This is a legislative deadline and municipalities provide an introduction programme.

In practice, waiting lists were reported in a number of countries; however, their extent was not clarified.

4.3 Resources for women and carers

In England, resources available to women and carers (i.e. special tuition or child-minding facilities) fall outside of policy and are at the

discretion of providers with access to Discretionary Learner Support (www.gov.uk, 2015). Canada, Germany, and Scotland, however, ensure through their respective policies that resources are available for individuals with caretaking responsibilities so that they may be able to access language courses.

Canada, for example, makes evening and weekend classes available. Like England, some providers will offer child-minding services (Government of Canada, 2014). Germany's "Integration Course for Women" is more comprehensive than the general integration course. Participants get to know their children's schools, have a female teacher, meet other women with similar interests, use course time to discuss matters of interest, and learn about how life for women in Germany is similar and different to their respective countries of origin (Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, 2016c). Finally, in Scotland individuals (men and women) with children may be eligible for assistance under the College for Childcare Fund.

4.4 Summary

This brief examination of other countries' language provision highlights some key areas from which England may wish to model ESOL for refugees and asylum seekers. Key amongst these, from our perspective and substantiated in the following sections, are special provision to women and carers to ensure that they can access courses and are not penalised for having caring responsibilities; ensuring that refugees, providers, and government are each responsible for course participation in such a way that access is ensured, or encouraged, within a given time period after receiving status; and expanding free ESOL access to asylum seekers.

5 Case studies

In this section 10 case studies are presented. They highlight participants' experiences with early integration, discussing in detail issues around social, economic, and education development and the central role of English in each. From the point of view of this report they are particularly important as they highlight experiences with ESOL – or the lack thereof.

AMAL

Amal is 23 and from Syria.

He arrived in the UK in December 2015 with his wife and infant child.

Amal speaks Arabic but knows some French. Since being in the UK, and especially after his time with a Refugee Action caseworker ended, he's come to realise how difficult life is without someone providing interpreter support.

"I woke up. We faced real, real problems. Then we understood that no one understands us. Everywhere we face daily problems. It has a huge impact on us here. Almost all of life is restricted because we don't speak English at all. It is not a good situation."

Growing up, Amal completed secondary school and became a wrestler. In school he studied English but didn't put much effort into it – he didn't know then that war was coming and he'd be forced to flee his homeland. Arriving in the UK he could only say a couple of words.

"I never took it seriously. I feel really sorry that I have no good knowledge in English – I wish I did."

He was a member of a team which provided him income, sustaining him and his family. However, since being in England he hasn't

been able to meet people or make friends, find work, pursue his passions, or volunteer.

"I try to do something in the UK but I haven't started anything. I'm disappointed by this. I wish I could get some help to go farther with wrestling. I'm very advanced. I hope to someday represent the UK and make a career."

Amal now wants to learn English because he views it as a means for building his life in the UK. He also sees it as a way of becoming self-sufficient.

"I live in this country. It's my destiny and my future. Language is very important. I feel like an outsider. I want to speak to people. Everything is closed to me. I do not feel good about it."

English has been a barrier to Amal when interacting with the Job Centre. This has been a strain on Amal and made him feel ill at ease when meeting with representatives regarding his benefits.

"Because I do not speak English I go and they do not understand me or me them. When I ask for interpreter, no interpreter. Often payments are delayed because of this. They often say they don't have access to an interpreter. The Job Centre said they couldn't find one and make excuses."

A missed or delayed benefits payment introduces severe challenges to his family's budgeting. On these occasions, Amal uses money from his Child Tax Credit for the family to get necessary things. He feels badly for using the money in this way.

Amal was placed in an Entry Level 1 English course in January, very shortly after his arrival. Since attending, he's been disappointed because the course is only once a week for two hours and there are a lot of students for the teacher. Additionally, the classes do not always

take place and he feels that the school does not care about the students.

"It's not help, it's really limited help. There's no support."

He thinks it can be improved if the amount of classes per week and the number of hours per class were increased.

"Smaller classes would help. The most important is the time. Two hours in one week is nothing. There needs to be three or four classes per week."

Asked whether he feels his English has improved since taking the course, Amal explained he has only learned very simple things – saying 'hello', 'how are you,' and doesn't know if the course is helping him.

ABDUL

Abdul is 50 years old and from Sudan.

He was resettled to the UK in December 2015 from Egypt with his wife and two children aged two and ten years old. Abdul was a critic of the dictatorial Sudanese regime. Since fleeing Sudan he lived in three different countries before coming to the UK.

After completing his secondary education in Sudan Abdul was unable to pursue higher education due to his political activity. He worked

after secondary school and wanted to become an engineer but because of the problems that led to his flight, he was not able to.

While in Egypt, Abdul trained in electronics and got work as a TV and home internet engineer. After first training, he worked with a company but later worked for himself.

Abdul never had the opportunity to study English. His school didn't offer it and, later, he was too busy working to support his family. However, he now feels sorry that he didn't. As a result, upon his arrival he was unable to speak any English at all.

"I know some simple words to deal with people. Now I'm in the school and I try to make sentences correctly. I really enjoy learning in order to communicate with people around me."

Without English, life was very difficult on his arrival. However, Abdul explained that people were patient with him.

"I really don't speak well but they try to understand me and help me."

Now Abdul wants to learn English. He sees it as essential for work and life in the UK, including engaging people in public. With regard to work, he explained,

"Really, I'd like to learn English but because now I'm an old man, I don't have any particular job to work in. I want to work with people and on the internet. I'd like to work with people."

Since arriving in the UK, Abdul attended pre-entry and is now enrolled in Entry Level 1. He began pre-entry two weeks after his arrival. He had to wait to get into Entry Level

"Almost all of life is restricted because we don't speak English"

1, however, because there were not enough teachers. While he initially attended only one day a week, he now attends four days a week.

In addition to ESOL, Abdul takes classes in maths and computers. He said the computer course is good, in that it's helping him with his typing, but he'd prefer to be learning about hardware.

Abdul would go to more English courses if they were available, but he is unfamiliar with courses offered by voluntary organisations. He discussed wanting to take longer ESOL classes and more often: four to five hours, rather than two and for five days a week, rather than four.

Despite this, he feels that his English is improving. He's been learning new words and letters. Reflecting on when he first arrived in comparison to how he feels now, Abdul explained,

"Before I was very upset about how I can live in England. I feel a bit better. Now the programme [Entry Level 1] is better than before [pre-entry]. I feel I am in the right place."

BEATRIZ

Beatriz is 19 and from Syria.

She came to the UK in late 2015 alone, speaks some English and is working to improve her vocabulary, reading, and writing.

"[I learned] from movies. And my brother always spoke English. I studied English in school. They taught us grammar."

Beatriz graduated high school while living as a refugee in Jordan. She enjoys maths and

aspires to become an accountant. These aspirations, in turn, motivate her to learn English.

"I want to go to university. I want to study accounting."

In addition to seeing English as pivotal to meeting her academic and professional aspirations, Beatriz views it as a means for her social development.

"If I want to communicate with the people and make relationships [I need to learn English]."

Thinking back on when she first arrived, Beatriz considers herself fortunate that she could speak some English. Asked whether English helped her in any way, she explained,

"Of course! Because if you go to any shop to buy anything, you have to speak English. If someone comes to your house, or if you see your neighbours, you have to speak English. I get along with some of my neighbours."

Beatriz started Entry Level 3 ESOL classes at an adult learning centre one month after arriving in the UK. She goes to English classes two days a week and attends an accounting course at college one day per week. ESOL has helped her to improve her English and has led her to feel more comfortable in the UK. Reflecting on her accounting course, Beatriz explained

"Studying accounting has helped me learn a lot of English. There are a lot of words in maths in English I don't know. I learn a lot of new words and can improve my English [through my studies]."

In addition to classes, Beatriz tried to volunteer with a national charity but was told she had to wait until she had been in the UK for a certain amount of time. She's also been applying to jobs but, as she explained due to her age and background,

"No one accepts me because I don't have [experience] yet."

As a result, she continues to receive JSA despite her strong ambition to find employment. The rules around receiving benefits have confused her and, because she doesn't have work experience, she's worried she won't get a job.

Despite this setback, and although her English is still improving, Beatriz is pursuing internships in accounting.

"I hopefully have an internship very soon. I did an interview [...]. They asked me questions in English, and I answered in English. I managed. They want to help me get work experience with a big company. The internship will begin in September [...]. It's a big chance."

JANE

Jane is 29 and from Rwanda.

She arrived in the UK with her two young children and husband in February 2016. She speaks two languages, Kinyarwanda and Kirundi, but prefers to speak the latter.

Having only completed three years of school, her formal education suffered because of the problems she and her family experienced in Rwanda. Her flight necessitated sacrificing an education. Additionally, she has not previously worked. Before arriving in the UK her husband,

was a teacher, earned income that supported the family. Due to not having gone to school, Jane never had the opportunity to learn English.

"I never got an opportunity – there was no person or school that teaches English."

Despite her lack of formal education and experience in English, she dearly wants to learn it now.

"I want it very much. I really want to learn English. Yes, I have a reason. There is an advantage. I want to talk to other people so they can tell me how they live and I can tell them how I live."

Jane feels unable to meet people and make friends. While she goes to church, she doesn't understand anything during the sermons.

"If I learn English, I can understand and help others with their English."

Jane also identified the practical benefits of speaking English, including (but not limited to) taking care of herself and her family in a range of social interactions.

"When I go to the market, it's hard to do shopping because I don't understand the money. Another thing, I'm always at home – I'm afraid to go out because I'm afraid to get lost. If I know the language, I can ask people [for help]."

On one occasion she suffered a medical emergency with blurred vision and significant pain. At the time, her caseworker was ill and unable to support her.

"I could not see properly and it was very hard. I couldn't even carry my child. I went to buy

"If I learn English, I can understand and help others with their English"

tablets – it was very difficult for me. It was very hard to buy the tablets because we [my husband and I] didn't know the language. We met someone who spoke our language. He who told me to buy paracetamol. I drank a lot of water. The pain has reduced but not too much. I went to see the doctor and they gave me medicine. When I go to the doctor they had an interpreter so I can explain how I'm feeling."

Jane also sees English as essential to obtaining work.

"I would love to work but the problem I have is the language. Because I've never been in the country, I don't know the jobs they can have. But any job I can have, I can do it."

Jane hasn't yet been enrolled in an English class and hasn't been told whether or not she's on a waiting list. Her husband, however, is enrolled. She doesn't know why this happened, but assumes it has to do with the fact that she takes care of the children.

"If I get a school now, I'm ready to start. Even if I'm asked to come with my baby, I'll come with my baby. I'd love a school close to where I live so I can get my daughter from school. I really want to go to school."

MARCUS

Marcus is 19 and from Sudan.

He and his mother arrived in the UK in November 2015. Before arriving they lived in Egypt.

He speaks Arabic and a Nubian language. He completed high school and earned a certificate, but didn't study further. While studying in Egypt

he also worked in factory. The job was a way for the family to earn income. However, he found that

"The Egyptian people were not good to me. I was discriminated against."

Marcus studied English but doesn't feel that his knowledge is very good. He can understand some spoken English, but his comprehension remains limited.

"I can read without any problem. My spelling is not good. It's fifty-fifty; I have writing problems. My writing skills are not good and I can't say very much. I will understand people when they talk to me and I can talk. My limited knowledge of English...I can manage."

Marcus wants to learn English so that he can develop skills and find work. He recognises that English is necessary for the job market.

"I want to be a mechanic. I want to work on planes. I tried to find an apprenticeship but they told me I need ESOL first. I tried to volunteer with a mechanic but there were no positions available. It's almost impossible to find volunteer positions as a mechanic. I tried to talk to companies but there are no positions."

Marcus wants to go to school to achieve these goals but is limited by his English skills. He's currently in a pre-entry course at a local college but is dissatisfied with it.

"I don't want to go anymore. The level is too low and it moves too slow. The teachers – I'm not happy with the teachers."

In addition to the course not providing Marcus sufficient support, the college is far from where he lives and travel money is difficult to balance with his and his family's limited income. When reflecting on whether he's progressed, Marcus explained,

"My level is the same as before I started.[...] I don't want to wait for another English course. I just go to the library and study on my own. It's better for me I gave up on the course. I believe in myself now more. I am waiting for the college to get me into Entry Level 1 for ESOL. I've been on the waiting list since I arrived. When I arrived I enrolled myself and I'm still waiting for the course."

MICHAEL

Michael is from a village in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Because of the war he fled to Burundi where he lived for 14 years before being resettled in the UK with his wife and three young children.

He attended secondary school where he studied English, but most of what he learned was basic and he didn't retain it. Michael is fluent in Swahili and French. Upon arriving in the UK in early 2015 he couldn't speak English at all. In the first months of being here, he explained that his English was poor,

"I could understand when people spoke, but I didn't know how to answer. Now I speak it, I try to answer some things."

Not being able to speak English made everyday interactions difficult. Michael and his family relied on translators in shops, when buying food, or when going to see the GP. When he went shopping for necessities or to the Job Centre, without a translator, he often felt stranded.

"[In grocery stores] we didn't know how to ask 'how much'. We didn't hear them very well. At the Job Centre, they sometimes didn't call the interpreter.... Sometimes they do, sometimes they don't. When they don't, you don't understand. They say, 'OK, that's not a problem'. But I just didn't know what was happening. I didn't know it – if it was important or not."

Even though he couldn't speak English when he arrived, Michael still wanted to know and learn everything he could in order to assist his integration into British society. He tried to meet the neighbours, and talk to people, but it was difficult because he didn't know how.

After finishing secondary school, Michael studied and gained a Diploma of Medical Techniques and became a nurse. While in Burundi he used his medical knowledge by working with a number of international aid agencies, including Doctors Without Borders, Action Against Hunger, and a Catholic charity.

"It was very, very good. Because I learned to become a nurse. I really enjoyed that. I am very passionate about the job."

Now that he is in the UK, Michael is unable to get employment in his former occupation. He knows he needs to take a test in order to be qualified as a nurse here and, because his English is limited, he's unable to move forward as quickly as he would like. Communicating in English is very important to Michael to establish his life and make connections with people, and it is fundamental to returning to his career.

"You go to the Job Centre and they tell you that you must get a job – I feel bad. I tell them I used to work as a nurse and I like to work. When I arrived here and they ask me to look for a job – the barrier is language. I am a nurse

"I really want to go to school"

but they say to work as a nurse I must do a test in English...but I don't know English."

And so Michael is working towards English fluency with these goals in mind. In the meantime, while learning English, he keeps involved by volunteering.

"I looked for [volunteering positions for] a long time but couldn't get anything. I think it is the language. Sometimes when I looked, and when they ask and I don't understand very well and ask them to repeat, sometimes the person finds out what I can't do. Now I volunteer in church. I sell coffee every Sunday[...]. I do it very well."

Michael has been attending ESOL classes since April 2015, which his Refugee Action caseworker helped him access. Because he has some basic English skills, he started in Entry Level 2 and knows that his writing needs the most work. He waited two months to get into a course after arriving. Michael explained it was easy getting into the class, but the wait gave him stress.

"I wanted to learn quickly – immediately. I want to learn to speak to everyone."

In addition to ESOL classes, Michael attends classes on Life in the UK provided by Refugee Action. There he learns language skills in context – how to budget benefits, how to live in the UK, and other skills necessary to establish his new life in the UK.

Although he's still improving his English and working towards his goals, Michael explained that he feels more confident and self-reliant.

"ESOL classes – it helps me to speak to neighbours. When the GP asks if I need an interpreter, now I say, 'No. I will try. I will speak

to the doctor myself.' Going to ESOL is very important to me because the language we speak in this country is English."

MO
Mo is 29 and from Syria.

He arrived in the UK in December 2015 and is single.

While in Syria, Mo studied to be a veterinarian. After graduating, he decided to change career and so began to study law. He hadn't yet begun to work.

Although Mo did not study English at school, his ability to communicate and understand English is advanced. He explained this was because,

"I taught myself from the internet...from YouTube."

Speaking English, Mo explained, was advantageous in a number of ways.

"I can ask people if I need something. I can explain what I need. I can say problems. It's easier for me. Other Syrians, they can't say anything. If they have problems, they can't ask for any help. It's easier for life. If I want to ask any question to any person, I can."

Mo linked his ability to speak English with social benefits.

"It's easier for me to make friends. Everywhere, when I attend classes, in shops, in a restaurant...sometimes at the bus stop I make conversation. People are friendly – very friendly."

"I taught myself from the internet"

Eager to return to his goals, Mo wants to finish his studies at university and get to work.

"I want to study at university, I want to talk to people, I don't want people to think I'm different from them. It's for life here. I need the English to communicate with people."

Mo has plans to attend university in the autumn of 2016, having been awarded a full scholarship. He'll be studying business management. However, enrolling requires a certificate in English. When he arrived, Mo was assessed at Level 1 but no courses were available. He was told to attend Entry Level 3 instead and, after attending, he found that it was too simple.

"Two weeks and there was nothing new to me. They did not teach me anything new. So I dropped the class. I asked them to transfer me but they said no. So I went to the Job Centre, told them of my situation, and [the representative] called three different colleges to enrol me into Level 1 but all were full. Job Centre advised me to learn online – he advised me to learn from the internet like I already do."

Not wanting to delay attending university, Mo decided to study English on his own and take the ILETS¹⁵ test over the summer. Problematically, while internet tools can help him with speaking, listening, and reading, they can't help him with writing.

"I practice every day – my writing is improving now. I borrow books from the library. I read the paragraphs, then write them again. It's not a good way – I need someone to advise me."

Mo was offered a free course by a local charity but found that it wasn't helping him with his English.

PAULINE
Pauline is 22, from the Democratic Republic of Congo.

She was resettled with her husband and child from Burundi. Arriving in February 2016, Pauline doesn't speak any English and has never had the opportunity to study it. She graduated from primary school but because of the war, she was unable to attend secondary school where she could have had some lessons.

Neither Pauline nor her husband have worked as they have lived in a refugee camp where UNHCR provided them with essentials. Now that she's in the UK, Pauline wants to learn English. She explained,

"One thing I've realised, when you can't talk to people, it's really very hard. They smile but can't talk to you and you can't talk to them."

Pauline views English as a means of building social relationships as well as enabling her to become self-sufficient through education and work.

"I want to learn the language so that it can help me go to secondary school[...]. I'm able to work but can't because I don't know the language. I would love to work in shops or restaurants. I can't ask for a job because I can't speak the language. Although I don't know the language, those are my desires – to work with the people."

¹⁵ ILETS is the International English Language Testing System used for testing into England language higher education.

Since arriving in the UK Pauline has had some difficult experiences that would have been a lot more manageable if she was able to speak English. For example, her daughter became very ill and, worried, she brought her to the GP but had a difficult time communicating what was wrong.

“I didn’t know how to explain how my daughter was feeling. They couldn’t get an interpreter in Kinyarwanda and they gave me one from Kenya who spoke Swahili, but it’s different from the one that I speak. I left without getting help. It made me feel the importance of speaking the language.”

Despite her goals and willingness to learn English, Pauline hasn’t had the opportunity to study.

“I’ve not had a chance to go to learn English. I don’t know why. Since I came, I’ve spent about two months in the house. I’ve not had any chance to learn English. My husband told the Job Centre that he wants to learn English but they haven’t gotten him a class. He tells them all the time when he goes to sign on.”

RICHARD

Richard is 41, from the Democratic Republic of Congo.

He was resettled to the UK in late 2014 from a refugee camp in Burundi. He lives with his wife and five children whose ages range from 1 to 11 years old.

Richard spoke no English when he arrived in the UK. However, he is fluent in Swahili and French and speaks another local language. Not speaking English made life challenging initially. Reflecting on his first few months in the UK,

Richard explained,

“I was happy to be here. English is a language I like. The [Refugee Action] caseworker visited and they provided an interpreter. I was happy and I was thinking that in the future I would be able to learn it.”

I found lots of changes. There was change in terms of food. We could speak to neighbours but just greetings. Those kind of things. Just one greeting. At meetings with Refugee Action, I met with people and spoke to them. They were refugees as well. I could talk with them. At school, I would meet with people who spoke English and could talk to them – my kids’ school and at English classes.”

Richard is committed to learning English and when discussing the reasons for this he recognised,

“It is the language here. That’s the first reason. Second, it’s an international language in the world – you have to speak it. Third, it’s the language my kids are learning and I hope it’s the language my kids will speak in the future.”

While nodding to the social implications of speaking English, Richard also recognised its economic value and ability to enable him to establish his life here.

“I want to learn English because it will help me to open different doors. For example, going to university[...]. The other thing is we have done an association here, if I can communicate in English, then it will help me network with people to support us. It’s called ‘Friends Without Limits’ and its aim is to teach and help people to live in peace, to live and work with other people, also to do some development projects[...]. It’s an idea from back home [in DRC] and we brought it here.”

Before leaving DRC, Richard finished secondary school. During his school years he studied

English at a basic level. He also studied English while in the refugee camp in Burundi but teaching was inconsistent and so he gained little from it.

After graduating he worked as a primary school teacher and held a number of other jobs simultaneously. He was a secretary at his school and helped manage his church’s finances. In Burundi he did a number of jobs, working as a secretary of a primary school, as a teacher, taught sexual education with a focus on avoiding HIV, and also assisted an NGO help people with mental health problems. Richard wants to work now, as well as volunteer, but acknowledges that his English is keeping him from employment.

“There’s too many barriers because of English. I’m not able to read and understand requirements. My English is very low. It’s the biggest barrier.”

Richard started in Entry Level 1 and has now advanced to Entry Level 2. Before starting Entry Level 1, Richard explained he and his wife were put on a waiting list and had to wait *“many, many months”* but cannot recall exactly how long. He was told by his Refugee Action caseworker that this was the typical experience for new refugees and so he and his wife managed their expectations. The course they attend is far away, and so they have to catch a bus and use their limited benefits payments for travel making managing their finances difficult.

In addition to ESOL, Richard attends two community-provided courses. One of them helps him with his reading, the other helps him learn about English culture and society. He explained *“it’s like ESOL but not a proper*

programme” and that they give him *“extra, new skills. The extra courses give some skills... ESOL is general English. The other things – we do extra – geography, history, which is different to ESOL. I learn better through other subjects.”*

SARAH

Sarah is 26 and from Syria.

She arrived in the UK in September 2015 with her husband, two young children, and mother-in-law.

Sarah graduated from university with a degree in education. While living in a refugee camp in Jordan with her family, she volunteered with a Swiss organisation teaching children who had fallen behind academically. She also provided psychological support. No paid work was available in the camp.

Sarah speaks Arabic and studied English while in university. Studying English has enabled her to understand but she cannot speak, read, or write. As she explained,

“[My English] is not good because it’s not helpful. I can understand but can’t communicate what I want to say. When we just arrived we wanted to shop and buy stuff for the kitchen but it was so difficult to communicate.”

Not being able to speak English affects everyday life – everything from buying necessities to picking up kids.

“If I can communicate in English, then it will help me network with people to support us”

"[I] went to get my daughter from nursery. I got on the wrong bus and got off in an area I didn't know and didn't know what to do. It was cold and rainy and my daughter was with me. I waited for my husband to pick me up. It was difficult because I didn't have any credit on my phone."

Sarah wants to learn so that she can study in the UK. Ultimately she wants to return to education and teach in a primary school. She also wants to be able to speak with people, work, and volunteer. Her English skills currently keep her from doing these things.

"No, no. I don't volunteer. I don't because I haven't learned English. I haven't been to an English course. I am a bit scared."

Although she's not in classes, Sarah tries to learn English by other means.

"I meet people at the children centre. I get to talk to them and I feel that improves my English."

Her young child currently attends a nursery class and brings English home with her, whether through songs, new sentences or games.

"Even when she says to me, like she forgets the song, I search on the internet and try to continue with her."

Sarah has also sought out other opportunities to learn English. She found one charity and

attended a couple classes but decided it was too basic. The group promised that more advanced courses would be made available, though this hasn't happened.

Since arriving in September 2015, Sarah has been placed on a waiting list and has not been able to attend an ESOL course. She took the assessment in March 2016 and was tested at Entry Level 2. In addition to waiting for more than half a year to join a class, the college Sarah was assigned to attend is very far away, taking over two hours back and forth.

"It's hard because I have children...it's hard."

Sarah went to the Job Centre where a representative tried to help her get into a college closer to her.

"I told them I wanted to learn English and was promised a college closer to me but it didn't happen."

Ultimately, while Sarah feels English is key to fulfilling her aspirations, she thinks that

"English is key to live here. If you learn English you can do whatever you want."

However, she feels left behind. She explained that her uncle, who is in the USA, told her that she should be learning it already.

"He said that after one year you should be OK with your English but until now I haven't done anything with my English."

"It's hard because I have children...it's hard"

6 Discussion

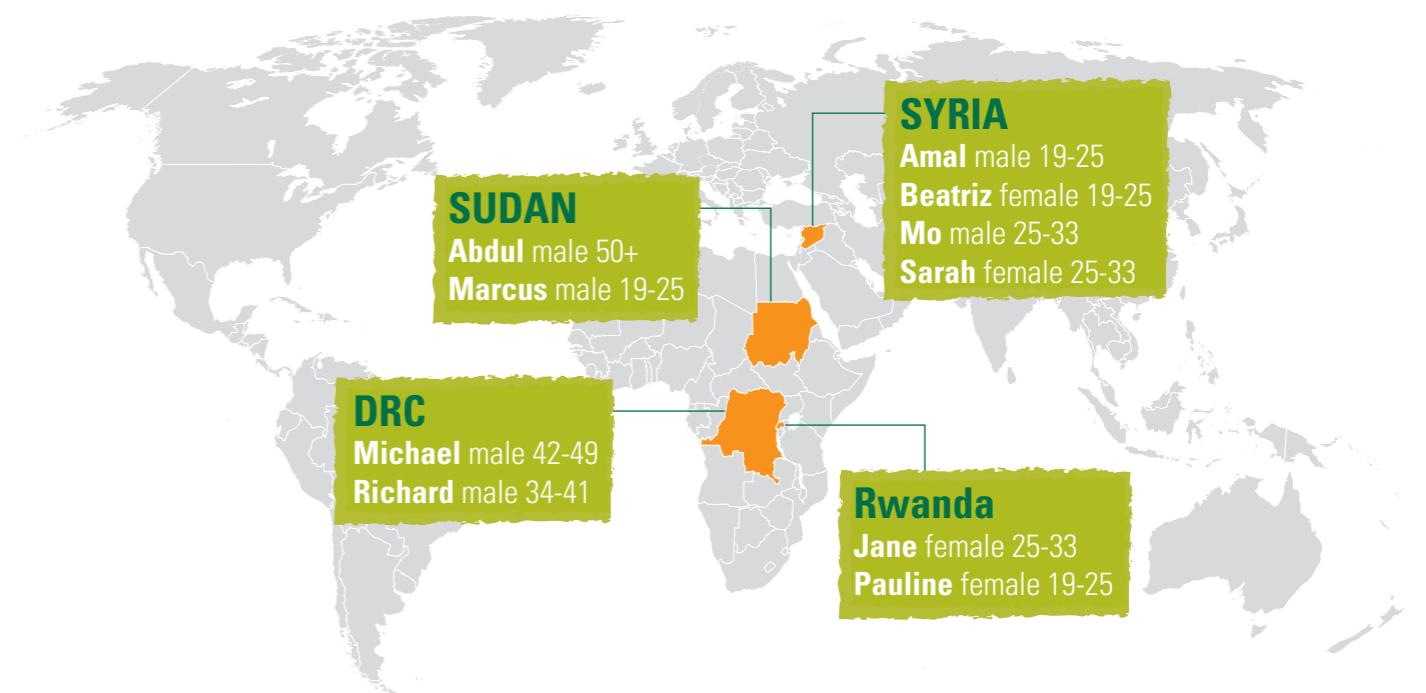
The case studies provide an in-depth look at participants' experiences with English; the challenges of not being able to speak English; as well as the aspirations and barriers they face in terms of integration. Furthermore, they highlight reflections on accessing ESOL and what experiences of ESOL are like for the few participants who are in courses.

This section focuses on themes within the case studies and contextualises them within existing research and policy. It demonstrates that the issues around learning English, the challenges faced by not speaking English, as well as the deeply-held ambitions of refugees to integrate remain consistent between individuals. The research further suggests that existing policy is not able to meet the basic needs or aspirations of refugees.

6.1 Demographics

The participants within this research predominantly expressed that their English language capability was poor at the time of arriving in the UK, limited to understanding a few words and with minimal speaking, reading, or writing ability. Therefore, there was a consistently demonstrated need for English language provision.

External research investigating refugees' language ability at the time of receiving refugee status focuses on individuals who have received their status through the asylum route rather than through resettlement. It finds that around 49% to 57% of their sample "reported that they understood, spoke, read, or wrote English well at the time of grant" while "around one in ten reported no English language ability at all" (Daniel et al., July 2010; 13). Unlike the asylum process, however, individuals who are resettled do not have the opportunity to learn English by being in the UK or participating in community-based provision in the lead-up to receiving their status.



Client	Poor	Basic	Conversational	Fluent
Abdul	●			
Amal	●			
Beatriz			●	
Jane	●			
Marcus		●		
Michael	●			
Mo			●	
Pauline	●			
Richard	●			
Sarah	●			

To better understand participants' experience with English prior to arriving in the UK, they were asked whether they had studied it previously. All but three had studied it in a formal education environment. However, as English was not a primary language in any of the countries of origin represented, it was studied at a basic level and without reason to speak it outside of the classroom.

"I did study English in high school but it didn't give me very good knowledge." – Marcus

"I studied it. But I never concentrated on English – I just went to pass the exams. I never took it seriously. Now I feel really sorry that I have no good knowledge in English." – Amal

Exceptionally, two of the participants learned English outside of school. While Mo did not study English, he did learn it through informal means. On the other hand, Beatriz studied it in school and, because her family spoke limited English at home, her skills developed to a level where she can now hold a conversation as well as read and write.

"I taught myself from the internet and from YouTube." – Mo

In addition to English courses being integrated into school curricula, two participants mentioned learning English in refugee camps. These classes, however, were irregular and depended on the goodwill of volunteers to teach. As a result they offered little in terms of developing English language capability.

Ultimately, our sample, as well as external research, indicates that although initial capabilities may vary, there is nonetheless a genuine need for English language provision amongst refugees.

6.2 Education and professional background

To build a better sense of participants' educational and professional experience, they were asked to articulate the highest level of education they have achieved. Only two attended university prior to arriving, both from Syria. Most had completed secondary school and only one, from the Democratic Republic of Congo, had attended just primary school before being forced to drop out due to the conflict. Finally, one participant had trained as a nurse through a higher education institution in his country of origin.

Research published in 2013, which explores refugees' integration experiences by using data from the Survey of New Refugees collected between 2005 and 2009, provides a more comprehensive view of refugees' educational and professional experience before arrival. Their analysis shows that 45% of refugees during that period reported earning a qualification prior to arriving in the UK (Yi Cheung and Phillimore, 2013; 15).¹⁶ These figures do not radically depart from the distribution within our small sample.¹⁷

Given the education background of the sample participants and refugees more generally, there is reason to consider whether such backgrounds in education should be regarded as opportunities to be developed once in the UK. What this could mean is that ESOL should be regarded as a means of facilitating economic participation for refugees with qualifications and, for less educated refugees, ESOL could be a means by which they can attend school.

In addition to participants' educational backgrounds, their professional or work backgrounds help to provide an understanding of their potential capability to work and engage in economic life in the UK. The majority of participants explained that they had previously worked. Occupations varied, though there were more teachers than any other kind of occupation. Furthermore, and importantly, many demonstrated work experience in positions of varying skill levels, indicating their potential in a variety of occupations.

Michael, who trained as a nurse, worked in a number of medically oriented roles in DRC as well as in the refugee camp where he lived prior to resettlement in the UK. Richard worked as teacher and undertook administrative responsibilities while in DRC and, later, in a refugee camp. Others, like Beatriz, Mo, and

Sarah were students and their respective flights meant not being able to work in the fields in which they had trained.

In addition to those who had worked, two had not. Pauline and Jane both had families and took care of their respective children while their husbands worked. Their work histories, however, do not speak to their willingness, and eagerness to undertake work now that they're in the UK. They have aspirations to participate fully in British society, but first must overcome the language barrier.

"I would love to work in shops or restaurants. Though I don't understand the language – those are my desires to work with the people." – Jane

Ultimately, the need for ESOL is helpfully contextualised in an understanding that refugees have unfulfilled potential. This potential, together with their determination, stands to be a mechanism for contribution and participation to UK society. However, without adequate access to ESOL that potential is wasted and their potential contribution to UK society is stunted or lost.

6.3 Education, career, and social aspirations

In addition to reflecting on participants' education and work histories, they were also asked about their aspirations and objectives with respect to education, work, and social development. It was consistently found that participants wanted to develop in these areas and that English was regarded as the main barrier to achieving the aspirations they raised.

6.3.1 Education aspirations

Study was discussed most frequently in relation to ESOL provision. With the exception of four, all of the participants wished to pursue

¹⁶ Furthermore, 16% reported that they were students, 16% cared for the household, 6% were unemployed, and 5% were "involved in other activities or retired" (ibid., 15).

¹⁷ However, this should not be understood as legitimating the sample's representativeness of the population

further or higher education. However, three of the four who did not wish to pursue further study were already experienced professionals. Everyone within the group who wished to study further viewed English language as a barrier to moving forward with their educational aspirations.

“I want to learn English because it will help me to open different doors. For example, going to university.” – Richard

Mo presented a unique experience in relation to the role of ESOL and the pursuit of university education. Having been offered a position at a local university to study business on a scholarship, he was prevented from enrolling because his English language skills did not meet the necessary threshold. Keen to get started on improving his English – first assessed at Level 1 – he was unable to join a class despite approaching four different colleges. Mo is now on a waiting list for a class that only becomes available in September which would prevent him from enrolling in university a second time. The local college offered him a placement in Entry Level 3 and Mo attended hoping it would contribute to developing his English skills; however, he found it was too low of a level and dropped the course.

“I start at Entry Level 3 – two weeks nothing new to me. They did not teach me anything new. I dropped the class. Before I told them to transfer me but they said no. So I went to the Job Centre and told them and they called three different colleges to find out if I could enrol in Level 1 but all were full. The Job Centre advised me to learn online – like I already do. On the internet I can get a lot of websites that I can learn from. Speaking, listening, reading – but I can’t learn writing from the internet.” – Mo

Instead, spurred by his commitment to study at university, Mo decided to pursue self-study.

He studies for five hours a day in a local library and eagerly seeks out new means by which he can teach himself online. He explained that in order to improve his reading and writing, he reads and transcribes content from library books, but thinks that this is not the best way to learn. Rather than relying on the ESOL system, which he views as having failed him, he is instead taking the ILETS exam.¹⁸

Beatriz, who lives in London, presents a different experience from that of Mo. Beatriz was assessed at Entry Level 3 and has been able to access relevant ESOL classes and also undertakes a class every week at her local college in accounting. Unlike Mo, she has been able to pursue the field of study about which she is passionate and has not been restricted by English language requirements. Like Mo, however, she has received exceptional support from public institutions (the local council in her case and the specific university for Mo), which paid for ESOL courses on her arrival, and she was put forward to interview for a prestigious internship programme. Furthermore, Beatriz explained that her coursework in accounting helps her learn new vocabulary in English relevant to the field that she wishes to pursue.

Marcus presents another case in which English language is a significant barrier in the pursuit of further education. Marcus wants to train to become a mechanic. Placed in pre-entry English, the level below Entry Level 1 and meant to teach the very basics of language learning, Marcus feels it is too low of a level for his capabilities and potential. Pre-entry is not an accredited course and is offered at the discretion of providers. It is meant to prepare individuals for formal ESOL courses; however, according to caseworkers, a wide range of students attend. Some of them have skills that could facilitate Entry Level 1, and some with absolutely no reading and writing skills whatsoever. Marcus, who can read, write, speak and under-

stand some spoken English, feels it is not a good use of his time. He is eager to pursue training as a mechanic and has approached companies in the area in order to volunteer so that he may learn some skills. There are, however, no courses available and so he has committed himself to developing his English faster than the pre-entry course can. To this end, like Mo, he studies alone as he has become disenchanted with the class.

“I want to go to college. I just go to the library and study on my own. It’s better for me. I’m not involved in [the pre-entry] class anymore.” – Marcus

6.3.2 Career aspirations

All of the participants explicitly linked English language ability to the prospect of work. For most, English and further or higher education aspirations meant working for the first time or in an entirely different field. For others, however, there was a desire to work in a field in which they are experienced. This requires, in one instance, challenging exams that rely on both substantive knowledge but also high level English language skills.

All research participants expressed a desire to work in order to become self-sufficient and independent. The types of work they wished to undertake varied and five of participants wished to pursue work that they had undertaken before fleeing or that they previously studied. For participants like Sarah, Michael and Abdul – who have studied and worked as a primary school teacher, a nurse, and an IT technician, respectively – further study is required to do the same work but in a new language and in an environment with different and differently regulated protocols and practices. Michael and Amal, on the other hand, have experiences that they believe could facilitate getting similar positions in the UK. Beatriz, Marcus, Mo, Jane, and Pauline each wished to pursue work they hadn’t before undertaken.

“I want to learn English because I want to continue studying in the UK. I want to study education [so that I can become] a primary school teacher here.” – Sarah

“[I want to learn English] so I can speak to people. And when I get a job, I want to be able to speak to customers and colleagues.”



¹⁸ ILETS is the International English Language Testing System used for testing into England language higher education.

I am a nurse but they [the Job Centre] say to work as a nurse I must do a test in English. But I don't know English. – Michael

“Really, I'd like to learn English but because now I'm an old man, I don't have any particular job to work in. I want to work with people and on the internet[, with technology].” – Abdul

Amongst those who wished to transition their previous work experience to their life in the UK, Amal's story is especially significant. Amal was a semi-pro wrestler in Syria before fleeing. He explained that he was able to support his family financially through his sport. Before the war, he aspired to represent Syria in international competitions. Since fleeing, he has been unable to practice and, since being in England, has been unable to find a team to join due to the language barrier. Of all of the participants, Amal's experience is unique in that speaking English is irrelevant to the practice of wrestling – the rules are the same – but it is essential to seeking out opportunities and communicating with teammates.

“I've wrestled since childhood. I lived on the wrestling. My income was from wrestling and being on the team. I wish I could get some support to go further with wrestling. The charities have introduced me to some kids' places, which are not right for me. I haven't found the right place. I really want to represent the UK one day.” – Amal

Research conducted in 2010 on behalf of the Home Office notes that “refugees' English language skills were strongly associated with other integration outcomes, in particular employment” and that those with higher English language skills “at all time points after the asylum decision...were more likely to be employed than refugees with lower language skills” (Cebulla et al., 2010; 5). Significantly, English language was, for all individuals whose English language skills were self-rated as poor or basic within this research, identified as

prohibitive to finding work opportunities.

Furthermore, the aforementioned research clarifies that “refugees were also more likely to take up work if they had more advanced English skills” (Cebulla, 2010; 14). This finding is echoed in a 2013 analysis of the Survey of New Refugees, which identifies “a highly significant relationship between English fluency and literacy and employment and managerial and professional occupations” (Yi Cheung and Phillimore, 2013; vi, 19). In contrast to being employed in work for which they were over-qualified, there is an indication that English language skills may influence refugees' access to work for which they are qualified (ibid., vi). Finally, it has been found that employment can facilitate language learning and integration outcomes by enabling refugees to “mix with local people and to speak English” (Phillimore and Goodsen, 2006; 1728).

Paradoxically, then, English may be viewed as a mechanism for attaining employment; however, improved English may be a by-product of work. Therefore, exclusion from the job market because of poor English language ability may exclude refugees from opportunities to improve their English through work.



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6.3.3 Social aspirations and community integration

In addition to education and work, participants also articulated that they wanted to learn English for social reasons. These were consistent across interviews and focused on meeting neighbours, making friends, going shopping, engaging with public services, and volunteering.

Eight of the participants raised social integration issues when discussing their inability to communicate in English. The two who did not were more advanced English speakers – Mo and Beatriz – and explained that it was helpful to be able to communicate with people in a variety of environments.

Amongst those who felt their English language ability was poor, considerations around wellbeing were also consistently raised. Although this was not explicitly examined by the research, the desire, but impossibility, to speak with people was associated with feelings of isolation.

“I feel like an outsider. I want to speak to people. Everything is closed to me. I do not feel good about it.” – Amal

“One thing I've realised, when you can't talk to people, it's really very hard. They smile but you can't talk to them...I haven't made friends. I'm only in the house with my husband. I don't have friends yet. It's hard not having friends but we hope one day we will get them.” – Pauline

“[I want to learn English] So I can speak to people.” – Michael

“I want to talk to people so they can tell me how they live and I can tell them how I live.” – Jane

Research published in 2006 summarises the relationship between education, economic, and social elements of integration as well as the consequences of prohibiting their fulfilment:

“[I]f refugees living in dispersal areas are unable to be economically active, they will inevitably experience greater levels of social exclusion. Refugees who arrived in the UK skilled and motivated to work are likely to become increasingly disaffected and will have few positive opportunities to mix with the indigenous population” (Phillimore and Goodsen, 2006; 1732).

This concern has a long history and legacy. Organisations such as Learning for Work and NIACE have identified that an inability to access ESOL is “one of the greatest institutional barriers to migrants upgrading their skills and allowing businesses to use their talents to address growing skills gaps” (Learning and Work, 2015; 13; NIACE, 2006).

In the meantime, unable to work, nearly all of the participants have attempted to volunteer with only one succeeding. The majority explained that while they wished to volunteer, they could not due to language barriers – first, because identifying opportunities was difficult; and second, when finding a post and expressing interest, they were unable to communicate effectively.

6.4 ESOL and other community-based provision

Participants were asked about their experiences with accessing and, if in a class, their reflections on ESOL courses. A number of barriers to accessing ESOL were raised and there was some consistency across cases. Understanding these barriers, and why they exist in the first place, requires knowledge of policy and its development. Furthermore, the perspectives of caseworkers, ESOL providers, and government employees (working at the local and national levels) are used to substantiate and complicate the findings. Each of the barriers to accessing ESOL are discussed in turn.

6.4.1 Non-assessed or on waiting lists

Of the ten interviews, five participants were

not in a class at the time of the research. This finding is given relevant context by understanding dates of arrival.

Of those who were not in an ESOL class at the time of the research, Pauline and Jane have been in the UK the shortest time (three months) and both are based in the same area. Furthermore, neither had yet to be assessed for entering an ESOL course nor did they have any idea as to why this was the case or whether they were on a waiting list for an upcoming course. According to their Refugee Action caseworker, however, both are on waiting lists for classes that begin in September 2016. As discussed later in this section, Pauline and Jane, as well as Sarah, experienced further complications related to gender.

The other two participants not yet enrolled, Mo and Sarah, have been in the UK for five months and eight months, respectively. For both, classes at their respective levels, Level 1 and Entry Level 2, were unavailable. Mo was reassigned to Entry Level 3 where there was space; however, he dropped the course as he felt it did not facilitate his learning. Such reassignments, as one ESOL practitioner and advocate in the field explained,

“[Current provision] doesn’t meet all students’ needs. [...] They don’t necessarily put people into the right course.”

Waiting lists are recognised as frequent aspects of adult ESOL courses within England and are consistently causally linked to the disproportionate demand for courses and supply of funding. A participant who holds a management position in a college explained,

“Our waiting list is over two years long for adult learners. We have about 1,200 learners on the waiting list. The government funding from the Skills Funding Agency is being cut for adult learners year on year. And, as a result, the

college allocates less money each year to adult ESOL learners. So, the waiting list grows and has been growing for the last three or four years.”

While the aforementioned five cases are currently on waiting lists, only Beatriz and Amal did not wait a substantial amount of time (less than a month) to access an ESOL course. Beatriz and Amal both benefited from the Vulnerable Person Relocation Scheme and their local authority released funds to enable their participation in ESOL. This, from the perspective of a local official working in the area where Beatriz and Amal live, is not exceptional insofar as waiting times for classes are generally minimal and funding is easily accessible through various local sources. By contrast Michael waited two months to join a course, whereas Richard and Abdul waited many months. However, neither could recall the exact length of time. Given these observations, an important deduction is that minimal waiting times were in two cases linked to proactive and progressive local authority funding. This is in spite of, and not because of, current government policy.

6.4.2 Gender barriers

Two barriers to accessing classes related to gender were identified. These were not consistent across cases, but where they did occur, they occurred exclusively with women.

6.4.2.1 Overlooked by Job Centre

Jane was the sole participant whose husband was enrolled in ESOL through the Job Centre while she was overlooked and unaware as to whether or not she was on a waiting list. While this relates only to mandated ESOL, it can leave behind individuals within families. As there was only one participant who experienced this, with no others able to provide corroborative evidence, experts were asked about the issue and whether it was pervasive or problematic.

Caseworkers expressed that this issue does arise and that it is often the case that refugees whose spouses interact with the Job Centre are left to their own devices to seek out ESOL courses without much understanding of how to go about enrolling. Furthermore, from their perspective, it disproportionately affects women.

Worryingly, Jane did not understand why she had not received the same attention as her husband who had already been assessed and was enrolled into an ESOL course at the time of the research. Ultimately, prioritisation of a male adult family member is prohibitive to women’s development and integration.

6.4.2.2 Caring responsibilities

Barriers to accessing classes were also identified where women had caring responsibilities for young children. Both Jane and Pauline were identified by their caseworker as not being offered any access ESOL by the Job Centre because of their caring responsibilities. At the time of the research, their caseworker was seeking out ESOL provision with crèche facilities. In order to prevent them from feeling as though they are stagnating, their caseworker is seeking out English practice volunteers to begin their English language learning, albeit informally.

Sarah also has children and is concerned about being offered a course that would make it difficult to meet her caring responsibilities. Crèche facilities were mentioned in all three cases, but none felt empowered to obtain an ESOL placement that also provide childcare. Ultimately, all of the women with child care responsibilities who participated in the research articulated concerns about balancing attendance in ESOL and caring for their children.

“I wish the college [that I will go to eventually] was closer to my house. It’s not convenient for me. I’m married with children. Some colleges have nurseries.” – Sarah

6.4.3 Distance to course provider

Another barrier raised by some participants was the location of the college they had been assigned to attend which has financial implications.

All participants received benefits and so lived on very restricted resources. Bus fares therefore cut into their already limited incomes. This was consistently raised by individuals attending ESOL courses that required a bus ride to access.

6.4.4 Time in class

The final barrier is concerned with how long participants are in the classroom learning English. As this report primarily focuses on access rather than quality, time spent in the classroom is drawn from previous policy and the views of experts in the field who have been interviewed for this research.

There is variation around days and time spent in the classroom amongst those participants currently attending an ESOL course. Information on classroom time is available for four of the five participants who are currently enrolled: one takes a single class per week for two hours; another has two classes per week at two hours per class; the third takes a class for three days’ worth of classes per week totaling 10 hours; and the fourth takes four classes per week totaling eight hours.

Like waiting lists, limited time spent in the classroom is a direct consequence of funding cuts. Government policy decentralises decisions around provision to colleges and was in part meant to cope with this problem. By enabling colleges to decide on what courses to provide and how to provide them, this leeway was meant to facilitate adaptive strategies to meet demand. However, as one participant who is a manager in a college explained this is not always the case. Instead it can have adverse effects including not only waiting lists but also less classroom time, which is discussed in greater detail below.

“Each curriculum area in the college determines the hours per course and courses per week. Courses are funded...each qualification has a specific amount of money attached to it. So colleges plan curricula around qualifications delivered. You could have more classroom hours if you have more qualifications in the programme. You could have a relatively high volume of learners doing a small number of hours per week, which is our model, and helps to meet demand on the waiting list.”

Satisfaction with time spent in the classroom is necessarily subjective. Indeed, Abdul and Amal were dissatisfied with small amount of time they spent in the classroom. Abdul, who in pre-entry courses spent only one day in class per week, now attends four days. He is happy with the increase in classroom time but thinks it could even be extended further. Finally, Michael and Beatriz are satisfied with their classroom time.

6.4.5 Community-based provision

Community-based provision refers to English language support offered on a voluntary basis by individuals or organisations, college-provided outreach courses, local authority courses, or third sector classes with qualified teachers. Only three participants mentioned using community-based English language support – all of whom felt it did not function as a replacement

for formal ESOL provision and, in two cases, felt that they were too advanced for the courses they attended. However, caseworkers explained that they were seeking out such provision for participants not yet enrolled in ESOL so that they could get started learning English, even though formal ESOL was at the time out of reach.

In addition to community-based provision, three participants participated in classes on specific topics. Beatriz studied accounting, Abdul studied IT, and Richard participated in a variety of classes around living in the UK. All three also explained that through these courses they learned new words for familiar concepts, expanding upon what they learned through formal ESOL provision.

Ultimately, it is difficult to meet the varying needs of learners through a general course structure that is constrained by funding and the needs of providers to use their limited Adult Education Budget funds to offer a variety of courses. However, as the limited participants who utilised community-based provision expressed, such voluntary provision does not necessarily provide the kind of content that is required. Lastly, where courses on specific subjects are taken, benefits were demonstrated in expanding vocabularies while learning about areas of interest.



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7 Costings

Increased funding is absolutely essential to improve ESOL provision for refugees. This section describes current costs of ESOL provision, and proposes a funding package to ensure that refugees can access the ESOL provision they require. The analysis that informs this section was produced by consultants specialising in ESOL.¹⁹

7.1 Current funding

Costs of providing ESOL vary. However, for mainstream provision an accredited ESOL provider can expect to draw down funding through the Skills Funding Agency’s Adult Education Budget at an approved rate, so long as the qualification being taught and earned by learners is approved by the Agency.

Under current rules, a certificate at Entry Level 2 and 3, as well as Level 1 or Level 2 involves between 197 and 292 Guided Learning Hours (GLH).²⁰ From 2016, providers can draw down funding for additional hours if this proves necessary for the learner to progress. Research shows that it takes approximately 200 GLH for a language learner to progress from one level to another of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.²¹ Another awarding body, the Cambridge English Language Assessment, recommends 250 GLH per full certificate for Level 1 or Level 2. The costs for a qualification are the same as above, but since the provider cannot draw down more money within the one band, then they would receive no more than a provider achieving the same qualification level in less hours.²² As a result, and in an environment with consistently insufficient funds, there is a clear incentive structure for shortening GLH per course as this ensures more classes.

Assuming that 200 GLH are needed to achieve a full certificate and without considering any

weighting of costs by location, the hourly cost for such a course is £6.30 per learner. If the learning takes longer and is not covered by additional hours drawn down, it could be as low as £4.33 per learner. Therefore, the range of hourly costs extends from £4.33 for 292 hours and £6.42 for 197 hours per learner.

The Skills Funding Agency no longer focuses on hours, but rather on the achievement of qualifications. Many providers think that learners find it easier to achieve a full certificate by building it up through the achievement of Units. This also allows students to progress at different levels at different times. For instance, some learners may progress quickly through speaking and listening and could be at Level 1 more quickly than with their reading and writing which might be at a lower level.

Given this variation of needs, providers offering ESOL qualifications may need to deliver additional formal ESOL tuition to individual learners which would incur additional cost above the qualification rate. Additional hours are recorded and their funding rate calculated according to a prescribed costings developed by the Skills Funding Agency. Ultimately, the learning experience must be fit for purpose for individuals.

It is important to note that providers currently believe that the funding level for ESOL (and indeed other adult skills) is insufficient. Providers would at least like the pre-cuts level restored in real terms.

7.2 Learning hours needed to learn English

The number of hours necessary to learn English through ESOL has been the subject of much discussion amongst Awarding Bodies and funding organisations and agencies, as well as the ESOL community and others. These discussions

¹⁹ The full briefing paper, produced by Ljaja Sterland and Jane Watts, can be found on Refugee Action’s website.

²⁰ See Kings and Casey (2013; 31-32) for an analysis of the decreases in GLH across time in the UK.

²¹ The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is an international standard for describing language ability.

²² For providers hours relating to either a qualification outcome or to a period of study are used to determine funding that can draw down. These hours are grouped into bands.

generally result in either maximum or minimum or average hours which become the determinant of the funding allowed.

In practice of course, learners progress at very different rates partly depending on their prior experience of English and education (Kings and Casey, 2013). Literacy levels in a first language also have a bearing on attainment and progression. Other factors that have been associated with refugees’ integration include the individual’s study skills, health, and many others (Cebulla, et al., 2010; ii-iii).

Given such a large number of variables there are no fixed hours which can be stated for a learner to progress between each level. This is a source of difficulty when trying to determine both ESOL entitlement and eligibility. We have mainly been looking at between 200 and 400 Guided Learning Hours (contact teaching hours) to progress one level. ‘Guided Learning Hours’ do not include private study or time spent taking an assessment.

If we accept the figure of 400 hours being likely for those needing the most time to progress one level, the funding currently available is around £1265 for between 197 and 292 hours (the suggested hours for a full certificate –i.e. one level) and £784 for the remaining 108 hours to make 400. This gives £5.12 per hour. As one provider said, “no-one provides ESOL to make money.” These 400 hours may need to be delivered across two years if most learners can only attend 5 hours per week. This might also be the realistic amount that providers can provide.

Hours per level	Hours per week	Weeks per year	Hourly cost (average)	Annual cost	Two-year cost
200	5	40	£6.33	£1265	£2,530
400	10	40	£5.12	£2049	£4,098 ²³

²³ These sums do not take inflation into consideration.

7.3 Proposed funding arrangements for refugees

The costs of courses are identified on an annual basis by using the range of annual Guided Learning Hours referenced above, though it is important to stress that language learning needs vary depending on the individual. At 200 and 400 hours per person per year, costs for one year of ESOL provision are £1,265 and £2,049, respectively. An average of the two, which gives some consideration to refugees’ varying needs, is £1,657 per student per year at current levels.

In order to ensure that refugees can access ESOL without delay and at an appropriate level, Refugee Action believes that refugees should be entitled to free ESOL of two years regardless of employment status. This would not necessarily be required in every instance. In such cases, the money guaranteed to an individual’s ESOL access who does not need two full years of ESOL provision could be flexibly used for incoming refugees or for those who require additional study.

This proposal could diminish waiting periods not only for refugees but all individuals seeking language provision. It may relieve providers from the pressure to disaggregate their Adult Education Budget funds by creating a new income stream. In turn, it may permit, where there are sufficient numbers, an increase in available courses at different levels.

An average two-year course cost is £3,314, which represents 300 learning hours per

student per year. Of course some refugees may arrive with fluent English and not require any ESOL provision; some may not need this much; and others will need much more.

Total cost for the two-year funding is estimated using statistics provided by the Home Office and some key assumptions. These include: the number of UK protection status grants during 2015 provided to main applicants less the number of unaccompanied children²⁴; an increase in the expected number of resettled Syrians through the Vulnerable Person Relocation Scheme; and a decrease of UK-wide figures by 15% in order to account for dispersals to Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales which each have their own language strategies and funding streams. This calculation is provided with a detailed explanation in Appendix 1.

The total estimated number of refugees who would be eligible to participate in ESOL provision in England is therefore **14,274**. In order to ensure that the two-year fund reflects refugees’ needs (i.e. somewhere within the range of 200 and 400 hours) the average two-year cost representing 300 hours per student per year is used in our estimate.

Estimated annual number of refugees based on 2015	14,274
Average two-year cost	£3,314
Total estimated average cost for two years of ESOL	£47,304,036

Funding is at present mainly allocated through the Skills Funding Agency. The successful integration of refugees is clearly of interest to a number of Whitehall departments, including the Department for Work and Pensions,

the Department for Communities and Local Government, Department for International Development, and the Home Office.

7.4 The investment case for ESOL spending

With these costs identified, it is worth identifying the period of time it would require a refugee to effectively reimburse an equivalent amount back into the UK through taxation.

With an annual salary of £25,532²⁵, over the course of a year an employed refugee at the average wage would contribute £5,000.76 through income tax and national insurance alone.²⁶ Even at a lower wage of £18,000 per year, an individual would pay £1,398.20 towards income tax and £1,192.32 for national insurance, or £2,590.52 altogether. Taxes produced by a year’s worth of work would represent 253% and 205% of the cost of one year’s worth of 200 hours of ESOL provision; and 244% and 126% of 400 hours of ESOL provision for one year.

Where refugees are guaranteed two years’ worth of ESOL, and where such provision amounts to £3,314 per person, then at these salaries one year’s worth of work would represent 151% of the cost of two years’ worth of ESOL at the average salary and 78% of the cost at a salary of £18,000 per year.

Therefore, costs of two years’ worth of ESOL are effectively reimbursed following an individual’s first eight months of employment at the national average wage and about a year and three months at the lower wage of £18,000 per year. Given this, there is a strong case for seeing ESOL as an investment rather than an expense.

²⁴ This assumption is contingent on consistent incoming refugees. As historical statistics demonstrate, no two years of incoming asylum seekers or protection status grants are the same.

²⁵ To simplify the calculation, the average weekly salary of £491 as of February 2016 is used, provided by the Office of National Statistics (ONS, 2016). With this weekly rate, the average annual salary before taxation would be £25,532.

²⁶ Income tax and national insurance are calculated using the HMRC Tax Calculator. This discussion does not include VAT paid through day-to-day expenditure on goods.

Salary	Average ESOL cost per person for two years	Income Tax and National Insurance paid to UK per person per year	Time required to pay tax equivalent to cost of two years of ESOL
£25,532	£3,314	£5,215.52	8 months
£18,000		£2,805.28	14 months

Even where refugees who have learned English through ESOL do not work, for instance they may be home carer or at retirement age, their lives would be significantly improved. This could lead to savings for government due, for example, to the refugee being able to attend doctor’s appointments without the need for an interpreter.

8 Conclusions and recommendations

If you're not able to speak English, you're not able to integrate
 David Cameron, Prime Minister (BBC, 2016)

Refugee Action believes that if the UK recognises an individual’s status as a refugee and grants them protection, we should provide that person with the tools to fully integrate into our society and successfully build a new life for themselves. Access to high quality English provision is absolutely essential to this.

The research demonstrates the fundamental role of the English language – and therefore the fundamental role of ESOL – in refugees’ integration from the perspective of participants. This is supported by external research.

The interviews conducted consistently identified English language as the main barrier to integration outcomes. This finding reaffirms existing research on the subject. Interviews also raised the complex needs of refugees with respect to class time, or Guided Learning Hours. The variation of needs was further discussed in the costings analysis and the need for an alternative to existing funding, such as a cross-departmental approach, was identified as necessary to providing support.

Classes aside from ESOL, whether community-based provision or topical courses in areas of interest to individuals, were discussed as contributing to learning English in ways distinct from ESOL. The participants who attended community-based English provision felt it did not meet their needs in the way that ESOL does. Classes on specific subjects were, however, identified as helping them to learn

about the course material as well as a means of expanding vocabulary. Such courses, whether community-based provision or topical coursework, should therefore be considered as a useful supplement to ESOL provision, but in no way a replacement. Furthermore, as suggested by participants, community-based provision should not be relied upon.

Given the waiting lists caused by a dearth of ESOL provision, the aspirations of refugees to improve their lives, and the variety of learning needs, current policy and funding appear to be falling short. Exploring what could be done to ensure provision is made available at the point of need and without waiting lists or other barriers requires dedicated funding and not an adaptive strategy of using ever-dwindling resources via the Skills Funding Agency. In other words, providers cannot be expected to do more with less in order to ensure ESOL provision to refugees.

Refugee Action calls on the government to act on five essential recommendations:

1 Create a fund to specifically support refugees learning English.

This should enable all refugees that require English lessons to have free, accessible ESOL for their first two years in England. It would be beneficial to the refugees involved, to their new neighbours and communities, and to the UK as a whole. Our analysis shows this would cost around £1600 per refugee per year. This would require the Government to invest £47m a year to achieve this goal.

The cost of two years’ ESOL for each refugee is effectively fully reimbursed to the taxpayer following an individual’s first eight months of employment at the national average wage; and within 15 months at the lower wage of £18,000 per year.

2 Publish an ESOL strategy for England.

This should set clear national targets for ESOL provision and attainment; enshrine refugees' access to ESOL as an entitlement; and ensure that refugees do not wait to enrol in ESOL and to access the provision they require. The strategy can draw on the experience of those already in place in Scotland and Wales.

3 Ensure full and equal access to ESOL, particularly for women.

Female refugees' ability to attend English language classes can be improved ensuring they have access to childcare facilities that will make this possible. In addition, in all cases where ESOL providers are located far from the homes of refugees, and public transport is required to participate, funding should be made available for travel costs.

4 Provide asylum seekers with the right to access free English language learning.

This would support their integration from the point they initially make their asylum claim. Currently, people seeking asylum are not eligible for government-funded English

language teaching until they have waited six months for a decision on their asylum application, at which time they can receive partial funding to cover 50% of the course.

This learning can be delivered through a combination of formal and informal means; however, given the very low levels of income which asylum seekers are required to live on, it is essential that this teaching is available without charge. Free English teaching from the point of claiming asylum is currently available in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

5 Facilitate a national framework for community-based language support.

Community support for refugees wishing to learn English can be a vital compliment to (but not a replacement for) formal, accredited ESOL learning for refugees. Government should bring together civil society, the private sector, local government and other key stakeholders, to develop a framework which enables all interested parties to pool resources and good practice to increase the provision and quality of community-based language support.

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Appendix 1

The composition of our estimated population is comprised of the following. Assumptions about each component are elaborated in footnotes.

Add	Subtract
Main applicants 2015 (11,419) ²⁷	Unaccompanied children up to 17 (1,216) ²⁸
Resettled refugees (365) ²⁹	Unaccompanied children who have reached 18 (67) ³⁰
Mandate scheme refugees (18) ³¹	Dispersals outside of England (1,479) ³²
Vulnerable person relocation scheme (2,000) ³³	
Positive decisions on appeals (3,234) ³⁴	
17,036	2,762

²⁷ (Home Office, 2016)

²⁸ (Refugee Council, 2016)

²⁹ Using data from our Manchester Gateway team, there are 56% of clients were adults aged 16+ and so eligible for Gateway support. This proportion, if applied to all Gateway resettled refugees during 2015, will necessarily overestimate the size of the population eligible for adult ESOL as the lower age limit is 19 years old. 56% of the 652 refugees resettled through Gateway in 2015 will therefore be considered in our tally (Home Office, 2016a).

³⁰ (Refugee Council, 2016)

³¹ The composition of Mandate scheme refugees is unknown and so all are assumed to be eligible for adult ESOL (Home Office, 2016a).

³² Identifying the proportion of refugees who settle outside of England but within the UK is difficult to achieve. In the Scottish government's words, "it is very difficult to ascertain precisely how many refugees have been granted some form of refugee status and remain in Scotland" (Education Scotland, 2015). However, a now dated figure used by the Scottish Refugee Council places 10% of the total population of refugees reside in Scotland (Shisheva, et al, 2013). As no clarification as to what proportion of refugees settle in Wales or Northern Ireland, for the purposes of this estimation exercise, we assume that 5% of refugees live in these countries. Together, therefore, 15% of the total refugee population are assumed to live outside of England but within the UK.

³³ In 2015, 1,194 Syrians were resettled through the Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (Home Office, 2016). We assume that given commitments to bring in 20,000 Syrians, and given the amount to date who have arrived, that there will be approximately 4,000 Syrian refugees per year until 2020. We assume that half of these resettled Syrians are adults.

³⁴ (Refugee Council, 2016)

To protect the anonymity of our case studies, Refugee Action have used representative images of people in this report.

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