

Enterprise and Lifelong Learning

National “English for Speakers of Other Languages” (ESOL) Strategy: mapping exercise and scoping study

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The Scottish Executive commissioned the University of Abertay Dundee to undertake a national study of English for Speakers of Other Languages in Scotland, with the aim of providing quantitative data on the student and teaching populations. In addition the study explored the issues facing providers and learners and the concerns of organisations and agencies involved with learners and their families. The study took the form of a national quantitative survey of managers and surveys of learners and teachers in 4 key areas of Scotland. Interviews and group discussions were also held with learners, teachers and other stakeholders.

Main Findings

- Just over 9000 learners attended over 700 courses or learning with a home tutor in Scotland in 2003-04. 66% of the learners were female. 85% of students were enrolled on part-time courses. One quarter of all students attended classes for 5 hours per week or less, and most of those in this category who were surveyed wanted more hours of tuition.
- Most colleges and centres had waiting lists for classes, sometimes very long lists. Learners sometimes had to wait several months before being able to join a class. There were also waiting lists for crèche places.
- Nearly three-quarters of paid teachers worked part-time. Nearly half of all teachers were volunteers, and in some areas all teaching was carried out by volunteers. Only one third of all staff held internationally recognised initial ESOL teaching certificates and one-third of the institutions surveyed stated that they did not require TESOL qualifications for staff. The need for more access to qualifications and more qualified staff was identified by many practitioners as crucial.
- Around half of the learners had dependent children, and the main obstacle to regular attendance at class was childcare. The shortage of crèche places was perceived as a crucial issue by learners.
- Less than half of all students were entered for external awards in Scotland in 2003-04. The advent of the revised SQA ESOL NQ Units was welcomed by many students and teachers as a more relevant qualification for resident ESOL learners than traditional international examinations. However, many teachers voiced misgivings about aspects of the Units.
- The need to make use of the skills and qualifications of ESOL learners, especially those of refugees, has inspired a number of pioneering projects to help doctors, nurses, skilled tradesmen and others to learn English for work and reskill quickly for working conditions in Scotland. These projects are already bearing fruit albeit on a small scale.

Introduction

English for Speakers of Other Languages is taught to adults in FE Colleges, Community Education centres, schools and church halls throughout Scotland. Learners of all nationalities who have come here to study or work or as refugees attend full and part-time courses, motivated by the need not only to find work or college or university places but also to settle in Scotland and make friends here.

The ESOL population

The population of potential ESOL learners in Scotland is around 50,000. However, our data gives a total figure of just over 9000 learners attending over 700 courses or learning with a home tutor. 66% of these students are female.

Of the students enrolled in 2003-04, 10% were international fee-paying students, 29% were EU citizens, 22% were refugees or asylum-seekers and 26% were settled ethnic minority residents.

Edinburgh and Glasgow together account for 2/3 of all ESOL students, but ESOL classes are run in almost every council area.

The provision of classes

Tuition is delivered by FE Colleges, Council departments of Community Learning and Development and voluntary organisations. 80% of learners attended classes delivered by Further Education Colleges, either in colleges or in outreach classes sited in community centres. The great majority of students are part-time and 25% attend classes for 5 hours or less per week.

Most classes offer a General English syllabus although classes in English for work and English for study are available, usually in colleges. ESOL literacy classes are also offered, mostly by Community Education.

There was little evidence of regular liaison amongst providers. Quality of provision and of support for learners also varies widely between institutions.

Demand for classes

More than half of the 61 institutions surveyed stated that they had waiting lists for classes. Learners sometimes have to wait several months before being able to join a class. Up to 2,000 were recorded as waiting for class places in 2003-04. Some institutions assess applicants when they join the waiting list, others when they are able to offer a place. There were also waiting lists for crèche places.

From the survey of learners in cluster areas, it was found that learners generally find out about classes by word-of-mouth – from family members and friends as well as teachers, jobcentres and the Scottish Refugee Council.

Staff and their qualifications

326 paid teachers and 288 volunteers were involved in ESOL. 73% of paid teachers worked part-time, and in FE the percentage was 66%. For all subjects in FE, less than one-third of staff are part-time.

32% of all staff held internationally recognised initial ESOL teaching certificates while 14% held no teaching qualification. Only two-thirds of employers required ESOL teachers to hold any ESOL teaching qualification. Teachers commented that training needs to be more accessible, and that qualifications should be more rigorously insisted on. At the same time, there are new opportunities for training, notably in ESOL Literacy, and a trend to encourage teachers in FE to gain diploma-level qualifications.

Learners, managers, HMIE and stakeholders who were interviewed for the Survey praised the high quality of teaching, especially in FE.

Volunteers play an important role in ESOL and make up 47% of the teaching strength. In some areas and not only in remoter rural areas, volunteer tutors represent the only source of ESOL provision.

How ESOL is funded

ESOL is mainly funded through Adult Literacy and Numeracy (ALN) partnerships, the Scottish Further Education Funding Council and international student fees. There is some concern amongst ESOL practitioners that ALN Partnership funding cannot always provide appropriate tuition for ESOL students, with their wider range of educational qualifications and communicative needs, compared to native-speaker literacy students.

ESOL learner profile

Nearly all the learners surveyed by questionnaire were literate in their first language, and around 30% had attended university. The average length of residence in the UK was 3.5 years

Learners had been attending English classes in the UK for an average of 15.5 months. More learners gave as a reason for learning English “to be more independent” than any other (58%). 55% chose “to apply for a job or a better job” and “to make friends with English-speaking people”. Around half of the learners have dependent children, and the main obstacle to regular attendance at class was identified as childcare. Other obstacles included appointments, especially for asylum-seekers.

Perceptions of classes

Learners expressed satisfaction with their classes, although a significant number (30%) of low-level students would prefer a bilingual teacher.

56% of students who attended English classes for less than 5 hours per week wanted more hours. Students expressed a strong need for more opportunities to practise English outwith the class. They also highlighted a need for more crèche places.

Views of ESOL teachers

Teachers surveyed were more highly qualified than the data provided by the managers' survey suggested (58% had recognised ESOL teaching certificates). They had a wide range of teaching backgrounds, and had taught for an average of 11 years.

Their main concerns were the lack of guidance and support, the quality of the teaching environment and the lack of appropriate resources especially for beginners and for students who were resident in Scotland, in addition to the shortage of classes. Many teachers believed that ESOL is a poor relation in spite of its role as a major income-earner.

Assessment

Initial assessment or screening is variable across Scotland. Many institutions used only interviews, although most used written tests or published placement tests as well.

More than half of institutions used individual learning plans (ILPs). Some practitioners stated that ILPs are not always appropriate for ESOL learners, although there was agreement that learners' progress needs to be tracked and regularly reviewed.

Learners, teachers, managers and stakeholders felt ESOL classes helped learners to settle into life in Scotland and feel confident.

A minority of students were entered for external awards in Scotland in 2003-04. External awards have only recently been made available to many students for whom traditional international examinations are perceived as not appropriate or not relevant to those domiciled in Scotland.

The SQA ESOL NQ Units, recently revised, have been welcomed by learners where they have been introduced, although many teachers were critical of the specifications, exemplar levels and internal assessment arrangements.

Progression to work or study

2/3 of students surveyed who had been attending English classes for two or more years expected to return to the same class in 2004-05. There appeared to be a fairly widespread reluctance to move on from the ESOL classroom, which may be compounded by a lack of guidance and support.

A number of work-shadowing and tailored training + ESOL programmes as well as initiatives by Colleges using EU

funding, particularly in Glasgow, are beginning to yield successes is helping learners to find jobs suited to their skills.

Conclusions and recommendations

ESOL in Scotland faces a constantly shifting pattern of demand and inelastic supply. The arrival of students and workers from the EU accession states constitutes the next challenge. The existence of large waiting lists in many areas and the demand for more hours from existing students indicates the need for greater resourcing.

There is a need for more on-site childcare and after-school provision, lack of which was a significant deterrent to attending classes.

Learners need more guidance and tailored provision to help them move into mainstream education and training or the workplace.

The ESOL teaching profession is largely part-time. More full-time teachers would help to ensure stability and a consistently high quality of teaching and guidance.

Appropriate teaching qualifications and in-service training should be made available and accessible for both paid and volunteer staff.

Relevant and appropriate teaching and learning resources are needed, particularly for beginners.

About the National “English for Speakers of Other Languages” (ESOL) Strategy: mapping exercise and scoping study

The study aimed to investigate:

- The ESOL population and the provision of classes: numbers and types of students; types of classes; quality and funding issues
- The ESOL learners: their needs and expectations; their opinions of their classes; barriers to learning
- ESOL teachers: their qualifications, training and background; their views of different aspects of provision and resources
- Assessment and Progression: types of internal and external assessment; learners' attitudes to assessment and to progression from ESOL into mainstream education, training and work; special projects which assist progression

Data was collected in 2004 from quantitative surveys of managers of ESOL departments and units in Further and Community Education and the voluntary sector across Scotland and of learners and teachers in four cluster areas – Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen and Dumfriesshire. Discussions were held with 5 focus groups and in-depth interviews conducted with 13 teachers in these areas. Interviews were also held with ESOL managers and with stakeholders from organisations and agencies involved with ESOL learners.

The site carries up-to-date information about social and policy research commissioned and published on behalf of the Scottish Executive. Subjects covered include transport, housing, social inclusion, rural affairs, children and young people, education, social work, community care, local government, civil justice, crime and criminal justice, regeneration, planning and women's issues. The site also allows access to information about the Scottish Household Survey

If you have any enquiries about social research, please contact us at:

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The report, "National 'English for Speakers of Other Languages' (ESOL) Strategy: mapping exercise and scoping study", which is summarised in this research findings is available on the Social Research website at www.scotland.gov.uk/socialresearch

This document (and other Research Findings and Reports) and information about social research in the Scottish Executive may be viewed on the Internet at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/socialresearch>

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