

Increasing exclusion, raising barriers: the real costs of charging for ESOL



UCU

University and College Union

Foreword

by Sally Hunt, UCU general secretary

The government announced in October, 2006 that it was ending universal entitlement to free tuition in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses.

Since then, UCU has campaigned alongside NIACE, NATECLA, the Refugee Council, UNISON, USDAW, Unite TGWU, Crisis, the Children's Society, the WEA and others to highlight the impact of these changes upon students and staff.

We feared that the impact would be felt most by the low paid and vulnerable, particularly among settled communities and migrant workers and that this would only be exacerbated by linking entitlement to free ESOL to a complex benefits system.

However, UCU wanted to go beyond conjecture to find out what is really happening on the ground so we asked the people who know best – our members who teach ESOL.

The sad truth is that our warnings have now become a reality. This briefing is not a conventional survey. Rather it seeks to set out both the extraordinary impact that ESOL classes can have on individual life chances and also the human cost where the new charging regime means people no longer have access.

In this briefing our members tell us in their own words that:

- Overall enrolments have been affected across the board.
- Learners who need beginner and entry level courses have been turned away as course provision has moved to higher levels. It appears that this switch does not follow the pattern of demand.
- Those most affected by the new fees and by the cuts in beginner and entry level course provision are the most needy and most vulnerable people in the UK, often women on low incomes in settled communities or migrant workers.
- The funds to support low income learners are complex, inconsistent and patchy in impact and offer no long-term solution.

The government has made clear on several occasions that it wants to focus provision on those most in need. In a letter to *The Guardian* on 16 January 2007, Minister for Further and Higher Education and Lifelong Learning Bill Rammell, wrote,

‘...I want to ensure those in the greatest need continue to get full support... we must also address the needs of those settled in the UK who have been disadvantaged through poor skills for too long and who will remain a cost to the economy without the means to progress....’

Our members are committed professionals, serious about playing their part as educators in bringing hope and cohesion to our poorest and most socially excluded communities. Now that the impact of the changes in ESOL provision is becoming clear, they are calling on the government to play its part by thoroughly evaluating the funding regime to ensure that it supports rather than penalises those in greatest need.

Please listen.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sally Hunt', with a long, sweeping underline stroke extending to the right.

Sally Hunt

General secretary

University and College Union

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Section 1

Is the new fees structure affecting demand for ESOL?

'40 students have turned up to enrol and gone away when told they had to pay fees.'

We asked members to tell us how they thought the new fees were affecting demand and to tell us how colleges were responding to the LSC's emphasis on Level 2 programmes:

- The evidence from our members supports the preliminary findings of the NATECLA survey published in September 2007, which showed cuts in provision and learners deterred by fees.
- Overall, there seems to be a fall-off in enrolments which our members attribute to the new fees.
- This appears to be most acute among those wanting to enrol in entry level courses.

This is what they told us in their own words:

'There has been less demand for ESOL in general and enrolment targets have taken longer to meet ...The main reasons for these changes are the introduction of fees for all learners and the fact that the college has changed the balance and mix of provision in line with LSC targets, so has less provision for Beginner and ESOL literacy learners.'

Skills for Life tutor, College of North West London

'We have many fewer students enrolled - again this has reduced by more than a half (from approximately 300 to 120). In excess of 50 students who initially expressed an interest, passed our eligibility checks but never enrolled - we believe in the vast majority of cases this is because they could not afford the fees.'

Skills for Life tutor, Tyne Metropolitan College

'ESOL learners in 2006-7 = 310.

ESOL Learners projected for this year = 280.'

Leicestershire Adult Learning Service, Ofsted report

'We currently have a 30% drop in learner numbers in ESOL.'

Martin Tolhurst, Principal, Newham College

'Of 72 students enquiring about courses who were told they had to pay fees, only 13 have enrolled. 32 returning students who had fees remitted last year are now liable for fees: only four have re-enrolled. 40 students have turned up to enrol, and gone away when told they had to pay fees.'

Andrew Potts, Tyne Metropolitan College

‘At the beginning of October last year we had 876 part-time adult enrolments. At the same point this year we had 725; a reduction of over 17%.’

Hackney Community College

‘Some students have not returned because of the fees.’

Mary Osmaston, Bolton Community College

Case study 1 – the human cost of the new fees

‘She is struggling to manage paying bills and the rent and she is not eligible for any support funding so she will have to pay £510 for an ESOL course.’

‘In my class is a young Brazilian woman who has lived in UK for seven years. She is married to a British citizen who is a bus driver. She is still waiting for her Indefinite Leave to Remain. She stays at home to look after her fourteen month old child and previously worked as a cleaner. She is struggling to manage paying bills and the rent and she is not eligible for any support funding so she will have to pay £510 for an ESOL course.’

Helen Nicholas,

Greenwich Community College

‘125 students were interviewed this year, but only 44% enrolled. Last year, it was 100%.’

ESOL tutor, Colchester Adult Community College

‘ESOL learners in 2006-7 = 211.

ESOL Learners projected for this year = 150.’

Newcastle-under-Lyme College, Ofsted report

‘We’ve seen the ESOL learners fall from about 300 at any one time last year, to around 130 at the start of this term.’

Great Yarmouth College

‘Some students have expressed interest and then not returned to complete because they can’t pay.’

ESOL tutor, X College, Lancashire

‘At X College in 2005-2006 we had 1200 ESOL learners. This year, in spite of long waiting lists, we’ve only been allowed to enrol 700.’

ESOL tutor, X College

‘If we charged the full fees, the numbers would be down’

Peter Moore, City Lit Institute

Section 2

How has new LSC funding priority for higher level English courses affected provision and demand for entry level ESOL?

'We are facing chaos... Hundreds of students are on waiting lists and stand no chance of getting a place.'

The effect of the new fees is enhanced by the changes in LSC funding priorities. The emphasis on English for work has already had a substantial impact:

- it has prompted colleges to cut provision of beginner level courses, including literacy courses
- in many places this has led to higher level courses remaining undersubscribed while entry level courses have long waiting lists of learners
- learners are being turned away because there is no provision for them and in some cases this is leading to job losses, particularly among casual lecturers.

Here's what our members told us, in their own words:

'Lambeth College is cutting ten full-time and one part-time Entry 1 and Entry 2 ESOL classes. The cuts affect beginner level classes, which provide for the most crucial survival language needs for people who have come to live here...We have had an overall reduction of 10% in the number of ESOL courses we run, despite being hugely oversubscribed. There has been a 3% increase in ESOL embedded provision but this is at E3 and L1 level, while our waiting lists are at E1 and E2.'

Ann Cowie, Lambeth College

'We are facing chaos...Hundreds of students are on waiting lists and stand no chance of getting a place - this particularly affects Entry 1 and 2 ESOL students.'

Susan McDowell, Lambeth College

'Provision has been cut here by seven day classes and one evening class totalling 192 students. This has meant serious cuts in agency teachers plus directly employed teachers having to teach two evenings a week until 9pm.'

Fiona Bailey, West Kingsway College

'Basic literacy courses here at X college are slowly being eroded... employment related courses are growing, yet we are finding it hard to find students for some of these, while we have plenty of demand for E1.'

ESOL tutor, X College

‘Our provision has been cut by nearly half. Last year we had eleven groups of approximately ten students and now we’re running seven. Uptake is gradually improving but it is very slow. We have had to reduce fees to £210 per course.’

ESOL tutor, Totton College, Southampton

‘Provision is down by about 50% here at Victoria site resulting in the cancellation of thirteen courses.’

Chris Brain, Westminster Kingsway College

‘Our college had to reduce the size of its ESOL teaching team by more than a half at the end of last year.’

Skills for Life tutor, Tyne Metropolitan College

‘Interim figures show reduction of about 75% on daytime courses (90 hours).’

ESOL tutor, X College, Lancashire

‘There are now very few vacant ESOL places at any of the providers. This is because the number on offer in the first place was reduced.’

ESOL tutor, Coventry

‘195 learners turned away because the classes were full. 147 of these were at pre-Entry to E2 levels, provision of which has been reduced in line with LSC priorities.’

ESOL tutor, South Birmingham College

‘We still have 700 people on our waiting list and around 900 in classes.’

Mary Osmaston, Bolton Community College

‘Waiting list numbers remain high for Beginner, Entry 1 and some evening Entry 2 courses, but there are no waiting lists for Entry 3 and above where there are still places. The college still has many enquiries from potential Beginner learners but the college has stopped assessing these applicants as there are already over 130 names on Beginner waiting lists. The provision for Beginner learners is now insufficient to meet the demand.’

Skills for Life tutor, College of North West London

Section 3

Who has been hit hardest by the funding changes?

'This policy has had a hugely negative effect on the very people that need to integrate. It beggars belief.'

The most damaging aspect of the new funding regime is the growing evidence that it is hurting the poorest and most vulnerable people in the UK.

The government has made clear on several occasions that its intention is to focus provision on those most in need.

However, reports from our members across the country highlight that one of the many unintended consequences of the new funding arrangements is the further exclusion of people on the margins of society, in particular it is women in low income families, and particularly those from the African and Asian communities who are being disproportionately penalised by the fee regime.

These are also people who most need the beginner level courses which are being cut. The people being worst affected are precisely those the government wants to help.

This is what our members told us, in their own words:

'I have just lost all my Bangladeshi students because they can't pay £800 for the year. They are so willing to learn English so they can feel part of the community in North Yorkshire. I am outraged as it took me years to reach to them so they could come to college and learn English.'

ESOL tutor, X College, North Yorkshire

'Much of our traditional ESOL demand is from refugees and others of non EU background, including those who have been settled here for some time, and many have literacy needs as well as language needs so they are below government target groups. Most typically they are women and are of African origin.'

Vicki Fagg, Principal, College of North West London

'Some learners who had free classes last year who are not eligible for any fee reduction, have not returned – often wives who are just over the threshold for fee reduction who will not spend money on themselves as they cannot take that money out of the family.'

Leicestershire Adult Learning Service, Ofsted report

‘ESOL literacy courses, which are aimed at people with little or no education in their countries, have been particularly hard hit...The students requiring these courses tend to be mainly women from the Horn of Africa, and without access to learning tend to become very socially excluded. They are often single parents with children, and desperately need to be able to communicate with schools and support their children’s learning.’

Ann Cowie, Lambeth College

‘I recently interviewed 82 women from the Ghurkha community all desperate for ESOL classes but unable to pay the full fee, as their husbands earn just over the national minimum wage. I have written to Hazel Blears and Ruth Kelly, who have both recently suggested that we should no longer provide interpreting or translations services as migrants should learn English. How can they do this when such barriers are put up to those who wish to learn?’

Helen Nicholas, Greenwich Community College

‘I teach a number of community classes, to Asian ladies who are either married to British citizens, who are actually British citizens themselves, or who are married to ex-Ghurkas. They are all members of households with very low incomes... Following the introduction of course fees, the class sizes have halved. The cuts in ESOL entitlement have thus had the disastrous affect of discouraging Asian women from attending English classes. This policy has had a hugely negative affect on the very people who need to integrate. It beggars belief.’

Barbara Spence, X College

Case study 2 – the human cost of the new fees

‘She spends a lot of time sitting at home alone crying’

‘Gurmeet Bhakerd started our classes last year when they were free and was one of our most motivated students. She was extremely grateful for being given the chance to learn to read and write. It has been terribly hard for her to no longer be eligible and she has become quite depressed as a result. She has three children and is not able to afford to pay for her classes and her English is not a high enough level to join a literacy class. Gurmeet is illiterate in her first language and this was her first opportunity to access any kind of education. She was making excellent progress and was making the most of her opportunity to learn. She has since tried to get work but has been told that she is unemployable because of her disability. She spends a lot of time sitting at home alone crying.’ *Anna Halama, Bristol City College*

Section 4

What is the impact on community cohesion?

'As predicted, the more able and demanding learners are taking up places that the government was trying to allocate to the poorer communities.'

'Many of the people who are coming and paying to get on courses are not the widening participation settled communities. They are the very ones that [the government] said were driving needy ESOL students to the back of the queue in the past.'

Ceri Williams, Principal, Mary Ward Centre, London

'We have a shortfall of learner enrolments in the Pre-Entry and Entry 1 classes - where the most vulnerable learners would traditionally be placed after initial assessments. As predicted, the more able and demanding learners are taking up places that the government was trying to allocate to the poorer communities.' *Ruth Hill, Newcastle-under-Lyme College*

'The European migrants are generally more educated and therefore are more likely to secure a place on an ESOL course than the traditional ethnic minorities who feel threatened by the more dynamic and ambitious learners in the class.' *X College, Ofsted report*

'During enrolment I met many young migrant workers (Lithuanian, Polish etc) all on low income and very upset at the cost of ESOL classes. Many of these were packing salad etc for Tesco in Dartford (quite a distance from Greenwich) and all wanted to attend evening classes but were turned away because of the cost...which was excessive on the top of the fares to and from work.'

Helen Nicholas, Greenwich Community College

'We are turning away a lot of newly arrived spouses of residents who have to be in the UK for one year before they qualify for ESOL This is despite recent research that stresses that the longer people wait to begin, the worse their progress. It flies in the face of social cohesion.'

Denia Kincade, Liverpool College

'Newly arrived and married learners who would have to wait a year before being eligible for fee reduction are even less likely to join an ESOL class straightaway now the fees have risen though this is just the time they need them.'

Leicestershire Adult Learning Service, Ofsted report

'The category of students who are finding the new payment most difficult is the 'new spouses'. Many of these are in a marriage where the income is very low indeed and to pay £6.35 per hour for the first year is a financial burden they cannot carry. They are effectively excluded from studying and starting to integrate for their first and most difficult year here.' *Jan Collinge, Buckinghamshire Adult Learning Service*

Section 5

Have the government's hardship measures solved the problem?

'The ESOL transitional funding Learner Support Hardship Fund has been crucial to recruitment... Without this fund, recruitment would have been worse than it has been.'

UCU welcomed the government's announcement in April of an extra £4.6 million for 2007-8 Learner Support Hardship Funds and our members acknowledge that in some places this has been vital in shoring up provision. Similarly, the London funding package has been crucial for sustaining ESOL in the capital.

Yet these are, as yet, only one-year packages that offer no long-term solution. They have also had a patchy impact and some colleges have seen little benefit.

Here's what our members said:

'The situation regarding overall volume of ESOL has been stabilised but only as a result of the London 'rescue package'. However, this is currently for one year only Failure to embed this funding will result in major cuts in ESOL across London.'

Martin Tolhurst, Principal, Newham College

'The ESOL transitional funding Learner Support Hardship Fund has been crucial to recruitment... Without this fund, recruitment would have been worse than it has been. The information about this fund was too late for some learners, and we think a lot of learners didn't progress from last year because of the lateness in notification of the availability of this fund.'

Skills for Life tutor, College of North West London

'The Adult Education service is allowing learners whose household income is below the £20000 mark to apply to the Learner Support Fund for fees. As a result very few learners in the Adult Education Service are having to pay fees this year and demand has been overwhelming. But what about next year when the LSF input from central government is reduced? The colleges are not using their LSF in this way.'

ESOL Tutor, Coventry

'The transition funding we received from the LSC was very small and did not go anywhere near covering the subsidy we put up. I'm concerned about next year as other financial demands on the college may put pressure on us to reduce or even stop the subsidy.'

Peter Moore, City Lit Institute, London

Case study 3 – the human cost of the new fees

‘Next year he may not be so lucky’

‘Mr X was a football coach and a teacher in Brazil and aspires to become a teacher in London. He works part-time and studied ESOL last year at Hackney Community College. His course was free. This year he was asked to pay £900 in fees and cannot afford this. The Student Advisers in the college arranged for most of the fees to be paid from the hardship fund, but he still has to pay £100 from his own pocket and with a wife and family to support, Mr X finds this difficult. Next year he may not be so lucky as the money in the Hardship fund was increased for one year only. How can Mr X hope to become a teacher in this country when he cannot afford to continue improving his language skills?’

Hackney Community College

Section 6

Increased bureaucracy makes it harder to reach those who need us most

'The system is so complicated that I cannot understand it, so how can a learner who doesn't speak or understand English be expected to?'

Students' need to demonstrate receipt of benefits and to apply for Learner Support Funding has also generated more administration and more work for hard-pressed teaching staff. But the burden is felt most of all by the learners themselves who are often bewildered and confused by the system and in many cases effectively deterred from applying for the funding.

Once again, it is the most vulnerable and most needy who suffer:

'We've had to help about 15 learners to understand and apply for tax credits and other benefits. Some students have come to realise that they will actually be better off not working.'

Andrew Potts, Tyne Metropolitan College

'I have referred at least five students to the Job Centre (via student support) to try to get them on income support in order to get free ESOL lessons. These students were either not aware of income support or had been too proud to claim benefits previously, but will now try to get this benefit in order to get free ESOL, which is obviously not what the government intended!'

Chloe Jacobs, Hackney Community College

'We have found that many potential students won't ask for the hardship fund, they're just not turning up any more for classes'.

Ceri Williams, Principal, Mary Ward Centre

'Whilst we are using the additional hardship funds to support the worst hit cases, discussions with staff suggest that where we are unable to help people in these groups, about 75% who are asked to pay fees are not enrolling.'

Chloe Jacobs, Hackney Community College

'Our biggest problem is getting the relevant, and more complex, documentation for enrolment. Students often don't understand what to bring and why. Most enrolments here need seven different pieces of paper! Getting the necessary paperwork for enrolment from students has been a nightmare which has left teachers completely frazzled and demoralised.'

Denia Kincade, Liverpool College

‘The explanation and administration of implementing the new funding system, particularly in outreach, has had a huge effect and pressure on the tutors. This is in terms of the time involved in talking about funding with learners who mostly have a low level grasp of English...talking with them about what benefits they are on (they don’t always know or understand), working out what evidence needs to be brought and then chasing up learners to bring it in and the emotional burden of learners’ financial problems.’

Leicestershire Adult Learning Service, Ofsted Report

Case study 4 – the human cost of the new fees

‘One instinctively feels this is not the type of learner the government wanted to pay fees’

‘We have one woman whose disabled husband gets a carers allowance. Despite four trips to the local Onestop Shop with requests for confirmation that she is ‘the dependent of someone on a means tested benefit’, they just keep confirming that she receives a carers allowance and consequently, the College says she will have to pay fees. One instinctively feels this is not the type of learner the government wanted to pay fees but she just can’t produce the right paperwork!’

Denia Kincade, Liverpool College

‘All providers are fed up with the amount of teacher time they have spent checking paperwork’ *ESOL tutor, Coventry*

‘We have found the changes a nightmare to administer and have probably lost as much in term of admin capacity and costs of administering the changes as the government may have saved!’ *Colleen Molloy, Leicestershire Adult Learning Service*

‘It’s a nightmare just trying to get students enrolled. This seems to take up more time than preparing and teaching the lessons which is why they are here in the first place. The system is so complicated that I cannot understand it, so how can a learner who doesn’t speak or understand English be expected to?’ *ESOL tutor, Lewisham College*

Conclusion

The case for free ESOL provision

'If people are given the opportunity to learn English they can then participate in society and contribute to the economy. I believe we are storing up problems for the future if we do not provide good quality English courses for those in our community who need it.'

Ann Cowie, Lambeth College

The ability to communicate in English is a vital condition of community cohesion. The evidence from our members indicates that the change in funding regime may well undermine good intentions in promoting sustainable communities.

Unless the current funding arrangements are reviewed and changed, we are in danger of entrenching exclusion and marginality for key vulnerable communities and storing up major social problems for the future.

UCU is calling for the government to do the following:

- **Commission a full independent review to research the impact of fees and changing funding priorities on needy and vulnerable groups.**
- **Implement a long-term strategy for ESOL provision that:**
 - **ensures that low income learners receive access to free classes**
 - **sets the funding of ESOL provision on a steady base over the longer term**
 - **implements the recommendations of the Breaking the Language Barrier report by planning to expand ESOL provision, focussing on those areas with the greatest need.**

