

UCU submission to the Communities and Local Government Select Committee inquiry into community cohesion and migration

UCU

The University and College Union (UCU) represents nearly 120,000 further and higher education lecturers, managers, researchers and many academic-related staff such as librarians, administrators and computing professionals across the UK.

UCU represents over 40,000 academic staff in Further Education (FE) colleges and adult and offender education services. This includes staff delivering English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programmes.

Executive summary

UCU was extremely concerned when in October 2006 the then Department for Education and Skills (DfES) announced changes to funding policy in relation to programmes for ESOL. These restricted entitlement to free courses to those on benefit or income support and meant new fees for those not qualifying. They removed automatic eligibility for free tuition from asylum seekers. These changes alarmed and angered ESOL practitioners and students, as well as many other stakeholders. UCU has taken a leading role in the campaign to reverse these changes.

In November 2007 UCU asked members teaching ESOL about the effects.¹ They told us:

- 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.

¹ 'Increasing exclusion, raising barriers: the real cost of charging for ESOL', UCU, November 2007.

UCU recommends that:

- ESOL provision must be safeguarded and expanded.
- Free provision for ESOL should be restored up to at least Level 1.
- The resources for this should come from across all those government departments that have a strong interest in fostering and developing community cohesion.
- Action is taken to secure employer funding for ESOL workers through statutory means. Exhortation and relying on voluntarism is no longer enough. If legislation is introduced around agency working, then agencies that import migrant labour should be made responsible for the costs of any ESOL provision that may be required.
- Long term investment will be needed to allow individuals and communities time to build up skills and confidence to access fully not only ESOL provision, but more general learning and skills provision.
- Refugees be allowed to access ESOL provision again from the point they make the claim for asylum. It is then that they need the access to essential services that language gives. The lack of language skills of asylum seekers will only reinforce their isolation and can damage community relationships.
- Spouses and families of migrants be allowed to access ESOL provision without having to wait a year in the case of spouses, and three years in the case of families. There is sufficient evidence to show that such waiting periods are detrimental to language acquisition, and thence to settlement and community cohesion.
- When the responses to the current DIUS ESOL consultation have been received and analysed, UCU would recommend that particular attention is paid to the needs of women from settled communities, as they seem to have suffered disproportionately from the changes to ESOL funding regimes and programmes.

1. Introduction

UCU has made submissions to various inquiries and bodies looking at the various issues around migration, community cohesion and ESOL provision. UCU welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the CLG select committee.

A number of important reports over recent years have stressed the importance of English as a key element in terms of integration of migrants and some groups within already settled communities; and in demonstrating that English language programmes are a crucial element in equipping arrivals to this country for a full social, civic and economic life and diminishing deprivation which the Commission for Integration and Community Cohesion² identified as a key component in building community cohesion.

“English is both an important part of our shared heritage, and a key access factor for new communities to the labour market and wider society. It binds us together as a single group

² Commission on Integration and Cohesion - Our shared future July 2007 Department for Communities and Local Government

in a way that a multiplicity of community languages cannot ... we are therefore committed to the importance of English language training for all communities.³

The National Institute for Continuing and Adult Education (NIACE) in its report 'More than a language: the final report NIACE Committee of Inquiry on ESOL' ⁴

"English language learning has an impact on individuals, communities and the productivity and safety of workplaces in England. For individuals it makes a difference to the way we relate to each other and it impacts on our children. Without doubt there is for many a correlation between their self-esteem and the level of confidence they have in spoken English. For many, confidence in English language opens doors and helps people engage in and contribute to civil society. Lack of fluency in the language condemns many people to poverty."⁵

UCU believes that not only is the acquisition of English important for migrants in itself, but also the process of acquiring English by attending structured high quality ESOL learning programmes is a key element in integration and community cohesion.

UCU would argue that the recent changes to ESOL provision have damaged efforts to foster integration and community cohesion. A UCU member and ESOL teacher put it thus:

"their (ESOL students) attendance at ESOL classes is in itself a vital contributor to community cohesion. Their ESOL class is sometimes their only link with the English-speaking world which offers a supportive environment on which to learn about using English"

A TUC report on migrant workers in the labour market⁶ reported that ESOL programmes assisted migrants on social inclusion, improved health and safety in those work places where ESOL was provided because of improved communications and improved migrants' mobility and employability by increasing access to other provision to learning and skills development.

2. Changes in ESOL programmes

Two sets of changes have impacted on ESOL programmes over the last two years. Whilst the total amount of resources made available for ESOL programmes funded by the LSC has not been cut in overall terms, the change in priorities and introduction of fees have had substantial consequences. .

³ Commission on Integration and Cohesion - Our shared future July 2007 Department for Communities and Local Government Page 56

⁴ NIACE 'More than a language: the final report NIACE Committee of Inquiry on ESOL' Oct 2006

⁵ NIACE 'More than a language: the final report NIACE Committee of Inquiry on ESOL' Oct 2006 Preface Page 3

⁶ TUC Unionlearn Report 'Migrant workers in the labour market' December 2007

LSC priorities and targets

The first set of changes stem from the LSC moving its funding to support a different set of priorities; that is those programmes leading to qualifications that make up the national targets. This was first expressed in October 2005⁷. For ESOL it meant that some local LSCs moved funding away from low level ESOL programmes because the achievements gained in these courses did not count towards the national targets, despite such programmes often being necessary precursors for progression to the higher level programmes that did count towards the national targets.

Imposition of fees for ESOL

The second set of changes was announced in the autumn of 2006, and came into force in the new academic year starting September 2007. These instituted fees for ESOL programmes for the first time. Until then, ESOL along with the other skills for life programmes in literacy and numeracy had been free. Fees in LSC provision are set to return a percentage of the costs of delivery. In September 2007 the student contribution had been set at 37.5%. However other government policies had already set out that fees in LSC funded provision would rise each year until 2010 when they would amount to 50% of the costs of the programme. These fees would apply to ESOL students in work. Within the LSC funded provision there is a process that allow fees not to be charged for those students and their families that are on various types of benefit. The government also decided when it announced the imposition of fees for ESOL programmes, to remove the ability of asylum seekers to attend learning programmes.

Subsequent changes in proposals

In the face of overwhelming opposition to the changes that were being proposed for ESOL from students, community groups, ESOL teachers and whole range of others concerned about the impact, and the results of their own Race Impact Assessment exercise, the government did make some changes to their proposals before they were implemented.

Over £4 million was added to the existing student support funds for those ESOL learners who could not afford to pay the new fees. Asylum seekers who had not had their cases heard within six months (the time that that the government stated that all asylum claims would be heard) would be able to attend ESOL programmes again.

In London the Mayor's Office and the LSC were able to find an additional £15 million to support some of the lower level ESOL work that had lost its funding under the LSC re-prioritisation referred to above.

⁷ [LSC Priorities for Success - Funding for Learning and Skills October 2005](#)

In the autumn of 2007, new ESOL for work programmes were launched to meet the needs of migrants at work.

In January 2008 the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, the successor for FE of the DfES announced a consultation on ESOL provision. The main thrust of this was to propose that priorities for ESOL provision were to be set by local authorities within a national framework. This consultation ends in early April.

3. Impact of changes

In September 2007 with the introduction of the changes in fee policy for ESOL, a number of organisations attempted to survey their members engaged in ESOL work, and/or ESOL providers on the impact of the changes. These included UCU, NATECLA, the organisation for ESOL teachers and NIACE.

This task has not been easy. In September providers are fully occupied in reaching out to potential ESOL students, offering them advice and guidance so that they enter the right programme at the right level and then enrolling ESOL students. In addition ESOL programmes often take some time to enrol students as potential students are often very unconfident and may not be aware of the existence of ESOL courses.

Consequently much of the information on the impact of the ESOL changes has been anecdotal. It also tends to come from those organisations and areas whose provision has been hit hardest by the changes. Surveys attempting to assess the impact of the changes are still in train.

From the reports that have been assembled, it is clear that the changes have had variable impact: some provision and some areas have been hit hard whilst others seemed to have suffered far less.

In December the LSC published the First Statistical Return of students enrolled in its funded provision for the year 2007-2008. This is based on a student census carried out by providers in the autumn period. In its published form, this information is at a level which does not allow for detailed analysis of any particular set of programmes. However the census information should be capable of analysis to reveal changes in the numbers at least of those enrolled on different levels of ESOL provision. UCU has repeatedly called for a meeting between the government, the LSC and the ESOL stakeholders so that the census data can be examined together to ascertain the impact of the ESOL changes. This has not yet happened.

3.1. Impact of the LSC changes in priorities

There is evidence that in some parts of the country lower level programmes have been reduced. Sometimes this has led to higher level courses remaining undersubscribed while entry level courses have long waiting lists of learners. Some learners have been turned

away because there is no provision for them. One south London college cut ten full-time and one part-time Entry 1 and Entry 2 ESOL classes. These cuts affected beginner level classes. Overall there was a reduction of 10% in the number of ESOL courses run, despite being hugely oversubscribed. Staff at another London college reported that waiting list numbers had remained high for Beginner, Entry 1 and some evening Entry 2 courses, but there were no waiting lists for Entry 3 and above - where there were still places. In Birmingham an ESOL tutor told the UCU survey that '195 learners were 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'.

3.2. Impact of the changes to fee policies

The impact of the changes to the ESOL fee policies has been greatest on the most vulnerable groups and individuals in the communities that require ESOL provision. In particular women from low income families, especially those from African and Asian settled communities are hit hardest by the new fee regime. Without English and the support of ESOL courses they face increasing isolation. This can harm the impetus for both integration and community cohesion.

In the Midlands an OFSTED report on an adult and community learning service reported that 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.

ESOL teachers in a college in the North East reported more than 50 % reduction in ESOL enrolments in September 2007, with over 50 would-be students expressing an interest in joining an ESOL course, passing the college's eligibility checks but then not enrolling because they could not afford the fees.

As we have stated above, the government did try to alleviate some of the hardship from imposing fees for ESOL with over £4 million additional funding going into provider learner support funds. However guidelines for the use of this arrived very late and providers seem to have interpreted them in a variety of ways. From the reports reaching UCU, access to this support seems to have been a post code lottery and very dependent on the particular criteria that providers used in September.

The OFSTED report referred to above, stated that the explanation and administration of implementing the new funding system had a huge detrimental effect and led to extra pressure on the tutors. This was in terms of the time involved in talking about funding with learners who mostly have a low level grasp of English. The words of an ESOL teacher in Liverpool capture some of what happened:

'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.'⁸

The government in its various statements on ESOL since introducing the changes to fees policies, has frequently said that employers using labour whose first language is not English should pay for ESOL provision. A new suite of shorter more employment-orientated ESOL at work programmes and qualifications have been introduced and there are examples of excellent ESOL workplace programmes often introduced with the assistance of trade unions and union learning representatives.

However there still remain considerable problems around obtaining sufficient employer action in taking responsibility for the ESOL needs of their workforce. Despite programmes such as Train to Gain which carry large amounts of government funding, around two thirds of all employers provide no work place training whatsoever, so the likelihood of such employers providing ESOL courses or paying for their employees to attend such programmes is small. There are concerns as to whether Train to Gain in its present form is a suitable vehicle for ESOL in the workplace.

Many migrants are employed in low-wage low-skills work. Much of this may entail long hours, shift work, and temporary work which can change at short notice. Many may be housed in isolated accommodation with poor transport links. All these factors and others can militate against the kind of sustained learning that those without English need. Indeed as providers are judged on their success rates for learners which are calculated on the basis of attendance and achievement, some providers may be reluctant to organise ESOL programmes for potential students who through no fault of their own, have very disjointed patterns of learning.

4. The way forward

The Commission on Integration and Community Cohesion⁹ argued that given 'the key role immigration now plays in the success of the UK economy, and the importance of interaction in reducing concerns about immigrants, ESOL funding needed to be reconsidered; and that more innovative ways of providing ESOL need to be looked at'.

It recommended that the then DfES should continue to review its allocation of resource for ESOL, to ensure that there is adequate provision, and respond to increasing demand; that local areas should be encouraged to use their money for English language provision

⁸ UCU 'Increasing exclusion, raising barriers: the real costs of charging for ESOL November 2007

⁹ Commission on Integration and Cohesion - Our shared future July 2007 Department for Communities and Local Government Page 57-58

more flexibly and that new commissioning structures could enable close partnerships with voluntary sector organisations, and these should be explored further; that money saved on translating written materials should be added to the resources available for English lessons, and that there should be increasing recognition that learning English is not just about formal ESOL classes, it's about how community groups, places of worship, schools and family learning can be part of a set of pathways that lead to a standard exam. It also went on to argue that:

"it is only right that those who benefit most from migration, including businesses that employ migrant labour, should pay a contribution towards the cost of ESOL training".

These suggestions and the recommendations at the beginning of this document will form part of the UCU response to the current DIUS consultation on ESOL and community cohesion.

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.

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