



National Research and Development Centre  
for adult literacy and numeracy

# Evaluation of ESOL Skills for Life Qualifications

Research conducted for QCA  
by NRDC  
with EdComs and NIACE

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## 1. Summary and recommendations

### 1.1 Introduction

The introduction of the national Skills for Life strategy<sup>1</sup>, with demanding Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills, brought with it new standards, curricula and qualifications for adult basic skills. The core curricula, based on the national standards for adult literacy, describe what should be taught in literacy and English language programmes.

ESOL qualifications, aligned to the adult ESOL core curriculum and allowing for progression through the levels of the national qualifications framework at Entry Levels (1, 2 and 3), Level 1 and Level 2, have been offered by ESOL awarding bodies since September 2004. From January 2005 these have been the only ESOL qualifications to count towards the Skills for Life PSA target.

QCA commissioned NRDC with EdComs and NIACE to conduct secondary and primary research to evaluate whether the current qualifications are fit for purpose in the context of World Class Skills.

The study involved four key strands of work:

- a review of existing evidence;
- 10 case studies of ESOL providers;
- an employer survey;
- stakeholder interviews;
- two expert seminars.

The research took place between November 2008 and February 2009.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/readwriteplus/Skills\\_for\\_Life\\_policy\\_documents](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/readwriteplus/Skills_for_Life_policy_documents)

## 1.2 Summary

The qualifications were broadly seen as being fit for purpose. There were positive comments in general across the sample about the qualifications having provider recognition at a national level.

It was also felt that they provided a national set of standards and a shared language that had been missing prior to the introduction of the qualifications in 2004.

ESOL providers and practitioners have done an immense amount of work to develop fit-for-purpose delivery within the ESOL Skills for Life framework. Many appreciate the policy and infrastructure support that has been developed as part of the Skills for Life strategy.

Many described how the compressed timetable for the introduction of the ESOL Skills for Life qualifications had meant that in effect they had to be piloted while live. This has meant that test papers are only now settling down and teachers are still developing their understanding of how best to prepare learners for these exams. It was felt that a change now could be detrimental to exam quality and the quality of classroom practice. Most providers and tutors wanted priority to be given to changes to the existing system over changing the system altogether. It was felt that there is much to gain in allowing the qualifications to settle down and gain acceptance.

However, another consistent message was that ESOL should not be left behind literacy and numeracy in new developments, as it was previously in the development of the Skills for Life strategy and with the development of the ESOL Skills for Life qualifications.

## 1.3 Levels

### 1.3.1 Entry

Stakeholders felt that attention to Entry level provision should be a priority focus. There is a view that more Entry level 1 provision is needed, not only to ensure access for large numbers of ESOL learners unable to find places, but also to ensure that the learner journey starts where learner needs begin. The Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) could allow for smaller, unitised steps towards full achievement at Entry 1.

There was a request from a number of stakeholder interviewees, including the awarding bodies, for ways to acknowledge learning within Entry level 1. Such official recognition of first steps would include learners for whom progression from Entry level 1 to Entry level 2 in one go is too big a jump. It was felt that people with low educational backgrounds and low literacy levels were not well catered for by the size of the step change from one level to the next. To meet the needs of this group it would be necessary to create horizontal progression pathways within Entry level 1 and to recognise achievement of these for funding purposes.

#### 1.3.2 Level 3 progression

To achieve the World Class Skills targets and build higher level skills, basic or functional skills are seen as the foundation. To help learners develop their language skills to allow them to access higher education and skilled/professional occupations there is a gap above Level 2 for which A' level English is not the solution.

*“the standards for basic skills only cover Entry level, Level 1 and Level 2, whereas... some ESOL learners need to develop their competence in English language to Level 3 and beyond in order to gain access to Higher Education or to practise their profession in this country.”*

Breaking the Language Barriers (DfEE: 2000)

*“One class that I had were actually doing IELTS but we also put them through the Level 2 Literacy qualification, which they passed very easily despite the fact that their IELTS scores were not particularly*

*high. These students had passed the basic skills threshold but still needed more language development to get them ready for university.”*

Expert seminar

At the moment Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) require an International English Language Testing System (IELTS) band score of between 6 and 8 as a default qualification in English for second language speakers; it is seen as a good indicator of preparedness for study in HE but is not currently funded by LSC. The absence of an accessible English language qualification at Level 3 in the UK is blocking access to HE for ESOL learners by removing the Level 3 rung in the ladder.

#### 1.4 Assessment methods

Providers and practitioners felt the general range of assessment methods were appropriate. In particular, the development process, specialist input and the comprehensive ‘all modes’ approach to assessment (as opposed to the National Test) were seen as major advantages of the development of ESOL qualifications within the Skills for Life framework.

Within this general satisfaction, some areas for adjustments to the existing qualifications were suggested:

- considering further the relationship between internal and external verification;
- exploring the consistency between qualifications from different Awarding Bodies;
- considering the impact of success rate pressures on learner progression. That is, those more at risk of failing may be being denied the opportunity to take a chance at succeeding;
- exploring the contextual relevance of assessment tasks to take account of the wide diversity of learners post-2004;
- exploring the development of Level 3 and 4 ESOL qualifications;

- looking at the ways in which Entry level provision could be expanded to allow for more staged progression through the levels;
- enhancing teacher training for the ESOL sector to support changes to qualifications and related pedagogy.

#### 1.5 Impact on pedagogy

OFSTED reported that the backwash effect from focussed assessment of speaking and listening has been positive. Centres where speaking and listening were previously not taught extensively were being forced to take it into account because of the single mode focus on speaking and listening. Where previously such centres may have had a focus on grammar through worksheets they were being forced to include more speaking and listening activities in order to prepare learners for the exam.

On the other hand they have also seen evidence of long periods of writing or reading and less integration of skills where provision is split into exam preparation sessions focussing on the individual assessment modes. Thus, where a group is being prepared for the reading exam in term two they may only receive input and practice of reading in that term, in isolation from other skills.

This highlights a need for more training for practitioners to show that exam preparation can be done in the context of real life skills and that skills need to be integrated on courses even when learners are entering for only one mode of assessment at a time.

#### 1.6 Adult ESOL core curriculum

The link with the curriculum was seen as appropriate and effective in aligning the qualifications to national standards and reflecting good practice in the classroom. It was felt that the National Standards for adult literacy, interpreted through the ESOL core curriculum had led to fit-for-purpose ESOL qualifications.

The decision to put ESOL under the literacy standards was not done without debate at the time and there were arguments for the use of other standards such as the European Common Framework of Reference.

*“Having separate standards would allow more precise descriptions of language skills, allow more relevance to language learning and skills and more easily provide a base for a specialist ESOL curriculum.”*

Breaking the Language Barriers (DfEE:2000)

The qualifications are working well under the umbrella of the literacy standards but this is because of the way that the standards have been interpreted through the curriculum which aligns with the qualifications.

#### 1.7 Use of the National Test to assess reading at Levels 1 and 2

The National Test was seen as culturally inappropriate for ESOL learners; it was felt that it put them at a disadvantage. Interestingly, data from Cambridge ESOL shows a drop in achievement of 10% in Level 1 and Level 2 reading as compared to the other modes at the same level. It was also felt that the National Test does not test a wide enough range of reading skills.

Organisations work to maximise the ways in which funding and support for learners can be used, within the existing system. Consequently learners are only entered for exams where their potential for a pass is high due to the pressure on organisations to keep up their success rates. This has related effects on learner motivation and delays to progression given inflexibility of exam timetables.

At Level 1 and 2, ESOL learners have to take three separate assessments to gain a full qualification: speaking and listening, writing

and reading. For the latter, ESOL learners take the national test. This contrasts with the situation for literacy learners in which they only have to take the national test at Level 1 and 2 to gain a full qualification at that level. As the outcomes attract similar funding, there is a temptation for providers to put their ESOL learners in for literacy qualifications at Level 1 and Level 2 so that they only need to sit one exam rather than three.

There was also evidence that learners were being put in for literacy qualifications instead of ESOL due to the introduction of fees for ESOL learners. It wasn't clear from the evaluation if they are being put in just for the qualifications while being taught through ESOL provision or whether they are also being put into literacy rather than ESOL provision.

We know from previous research that there has been some blurring of the boundaries between ESOL and literacy learners as the linguistic diversity in the population continues to increase (Baynham et al:2007). However, the recent increase in numbers of migrant workers from Europe has increased the proportion of ESOL learners who have been highly successful academically in their countries of origin and whose needs are more akin to modern foreign language learners. These learners are not adequately catered for in adult literacy classes as their language development needs are different.

#### 1.8 Comparability of assessment outcomes awarding bodies

In the stakeholder interviews and in discussions with managers and providers there were some concerns about a lack of consistency in application of standards. It was felt that those that were internally assessed were less rigorous than those where the assessment was external. There was also evidence of a belief that learners had more chance of success with certain externally assessed awarding bodies than others.

NATECLA also reported concerns of some of their members that learners who arrive at their institution and hold a particular level qualification from one awarding body are not necessarily at the appropriate level to take a course for the next level if the awarding body is different.

Managers and providers were also concerned about a lack of agreement between Awarding Bodies in recognising each other's units as prior achievements and consistency to this approach in general. This sense of distrust among the awarding bodies was reflected in the stakeholder interviews and needs to be addressed if the qualifications are to work on the QCF.

Providers across the sample shared stories about their concerns over inconsistencies in language levels being marked and assessed. This calls into question the robustness of the system and adds to the pressures providers face regarding success rates and being able to predict pass rates.

#### 1.9 Currency of the qualifications

The ESOL Skills for Life qualifications have internal currency for providers and learners. This includes offering learners an opportunity, often for the first time, to gain a formal, nationally recognised qualification. However, this value has been shaped by the importance accredited provision has within the system and less by the wider, external currency of the qualifications, although this could be developed further. There was little evidence that the qualifications were recognised outside Skills for Life departments for internal progression. Learner progression routes are unclear and are therefore not necessarily promoted. Learners become de-motivated to progress beyond Entry 3 if they feel the qualifications will not have currency with universities or employers.

Employer awareness of the ESOL Skills for Life qualifications is low. This was felt to be unfortunate as the qualifications are suitable as a basis for work as they give a good basis of language on which to build up job specific language. They also prepare learners in transferable skills, useful for things such as team work and dealing with customers.

A number of stakeholder interviewees mentioned a lack of awareness of the qualifications among Train to Gain brokers as a barrier to greater visibility of the qualifications among employers.

There are clear recommendations on how external currency for the ESOL Skills for Life qualifications could be increased:

- evidence and communicate the realistic ways in which the qualification acts as proxy for other nationally recognised qualifications such as GCSE;
- provide development funds for providers to work internally and across educational institutions to promote the value of the qualifications as access routes to other formal programmes;
- facilitate cross-departmental work between ESOL and vocational teams to increase the internal currency of the ESOL qualifications;
- market information about the qualifications, with evidence on their use by employers and HEIs to providers, HEIs and employers;
- develop and continue to work with employers on their needs and adaptations of the qualifications.

#### 1.10 Accessibility

Organisations work to maximise the ways in which funding and support for learners can be used, within the existing system. There is evidence that learners are only entered for exams where their potential for a pass is high (this has related effects on learner motivation and delays to progression given inflexibility of exam timetables) due to the pressure on organisations to keep up their success rates. Providers

act as gatekeepers, often holding people back to maximise success rates. However, this restricts individual choice and is detrimental to individual progression towards higher levels.

We found no evidence that any differences in achievement levels amongst different groups were related to the qualifications.

#### 1.11 Functional Skills and the QCF

The current draft Functional Skills standards for English do not reflect a clearly graded framework for the development of language skills, the process of language learning or the needs of learners with ‘spiky profiles’ (e.g. strong speakers who are beginner readers and writers). OFSTED has noted that the English Functional Skills qualifications as currently specified are not appropriate for ESOL learners.

The current Functional Skills English qualification is based on a single unit (at each level) which means that it is technically not possible within the QCF to recognise the achievements of a learner at different levels in speaking, listening, reading and writing. This flexibility in the current ESOL qualifications, allowing for learners to be assessed at different levels for different skills, is a much valued feature, allowing assessment to fit learning well.

The approach to assessment methodology within Functional Skills qualifications is prescribed, setting out requirements for assessment based on the integration of different skills within ‘task-based’ assessment scenarios. Awarding bodies offering Functional Skills qualifications sign up to a standardised set of assessment principles, based on the above design features, which effectively precludes the development of learner-centred approaches to assessment that may vary between different groups of learners at different levels.

The Functional Skills qualifications, as they stand, do not allow the ‘spiky profiles’ of adult learners to be formally recognised within the

QCF, nor the even 'spikier' profiles of ESOL learners. They would also add significantly to the assessment workload of both learners and providers, particularly at Levels 1 and 2.

The adoption of the current Functional Skills qualifications for ESOL could easily mean that levels of achievement be depressed to the lowest common denominator, as learners will only be able to achieve at the level of their lowest language skill (e.g. Entry level 2 reading rather than Level 1 speaking). This will have the effect of making it harder for learners to reach the Level 1 functional threshold.

It could also result in fewer learners being registered for Functional Skills qualifications because providers fear that higher failure rates or lower success rates in comparison to previous years will have an adverse effect on their performance measures. More resources will be needed to support learners to achieve a Functional Skills qualification at a comparable level to a Skills for Life qualification.

A combination of these factors is likely to result in both increased failure rates, lower achievement rates at particular levels, and higher per capita investment in success than with the current Skills for Life qualifications.

If a transition is to be made to Functional Skills then it would be necessary to develop the current Functional Skills qualifications to make them accessible to adult ESOL learners, available as free-standing qualifications, able to deal with spiky profiles, and levelled appropriately to the development of bi-lingual learners.

Within this process there would be a need for development of the ESOL curriculum to bridge the gap between the Functional Skills standards and qualifications against these standards. As noted above, the ESOL qualifications were developed from the National Standards for adult Literacy but interpreted through the ESOL core curriculum.

Through a similar process the current ESOL qualifications could be developed to meet the Functional Skills standards.

However, the existing ESOL Skills for Life qualifications could be unitised and adapted to the QCF. This evaluation of the current ESOL Skills for Life qualifications provides strong evidence of on-going demand for ESOL-specific qualifications that are more flexible and unitised than is presently the case. The QCF provides all the technical features necessary to develop such qualifications and the current ESOL qualifications are highly suitable to be unitised for the QCF.

In either case this revision process should draw on the expertise in language assessment of the ESOL awarding bodies and the experience of ESOL providers in preparing learners for assessment.

## 2. Background and research objectives

The introduction of the national Skills for Life strategy<sup>2</sup>, with demanding targets for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills brought with it new standards, curricula and qualifications for adult basic skills. Each learner's achievement and level of skill can be measured against national standards set out in the core curricula. The core curricula, based on the national standards for adult literacy, describe what should be taught in literacy and English language programmes.

ESOL qualifications, fully aligned to both the adult literacy and the adult ESOL core curricula and allowing for progression across the levels of the national qualifications framework at Entry levels (1, 2 and 3), Level 1 and Level 2, have been offered by ESOL awarding bodies, from September 2004 and since January 2005 have been the only ESOL qualifications to count towards the Skills for Life target.

QCA now requires evaluation of whether the current qualifications are fit for purpose in the context of World Class Skills<sup>3</sup>(WCS). QCA commissioned NRDC with EdComs and NIACE to conduct secondary and primary research to inform the development of their strategic view on the future of the ESOL Skills for Life Qualifications. The study involved four key strands of work:

- review of existing evidence;
- 10 case studies of ESOL providers;
- employer survey;
- stakeholder interviews.

The report below outlines the messages from the four strands of research described above.

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/readwriteplus/Skills\\_for\\_Life\\_policy\\_documents](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/readwriteplus/Skills_for_Life_policy_documents)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/skillsstrategy/uploads/documents/World%20Class%20Skills%20FINAL.pdf>

### **3. Method**

This report draws together main messages from all four elements of the research carried out between November 2008 and February 2009. The following section outlines the method and scope of each of these.

#### **3.1 Evidence review**

An initial review of available evidence from NRDC and other research plus relevant policy documents was carried out at an early stage to ensure that all subsequent research was contextualised effectively.

Quotes from the review have been incorporated into this report and the full text can be found at appendix 4.

#### **3.2 Employer survey**

This report focuses solely on the messages from the employer survey which ran from January-February 2009. Three further reports on existing evidence, the case studies and the stakeholder interviews complete the study.

The following section outlines the method and scope of the employer survey.

##### **3.2.1 Approach**

Given the tight project timelines we used existing omnibus surveys as a way to generate fast, robust evidence from employers on the impact of the Skills for Life qualifications.

From the initial review of the desk analysis of existing evidence on the impact of the ESOL qualifications, a series of questions for the survey were drafted. These were shared with QCA and the ESOL expert group for feedback. Questions were then refined and the survey went live in January 2009.

The full set of survey questions can be found in Appendix 1.

##### **3.2.2 Sample**

This survey has been conducted using an online interview administered to members of the YouGov Plc GB panel of 185,000+ individuals who have

agreed to take part in surveys. An email was sent to panelists selected at random from the base sample according to the sample definition, inviting them to take part in the survey and providing a link to the survey. For this particular survey, we approached decision makers and individuals in HR in large and medium businesses to complete the survey. The overall non-representative sample for this particular group was projected at 350 individuals.

On closing the survey the total respondent sample size was 276 HR/ Recruitment/ Training managers (middle management or above) in private sector medium and large companies. This represents a 79% response rate.

Any percentages calculated on bases fewer than 50 respondents are not detailed within this report as they do not represent a wide enough cross-section of the target population to be considered statistically reliable.

### 3.2.3 Analysis

The main aim of the survey was to gain insight into the awareness and impact of the Skills for Life qualifications on the part of employers. Therefore, the analytic power of the survey is only descriptive, treating the cohort as unified.

Messages from the survey have been incorporated into this report.

## 3.3 Case studies

In December 2008, NRDC suggested a series of ESOL providers which could be approached as sites for case study research. Specific to selection were aspects including:

- location;
- size of provider;
- focus of provision (context, setting);
- ESOL concentration/regions.

Sites were sent an invitation to participate in the study. They were provided with an information sheet and were asked to confirm their interest. Where

additional providers were added to the invite list, QCA were informed and approved the final selection.

10 sites in the following locations took part in the case study research:

1. London, FE college
2. London, FE/ACL college
3. London, FE college
4. Bristol, FE college
5. Nottingham, FE college
6. Leeds, FE college
7. Newcastle, FE college
8. Bolton, FE college
9. Hertfordshire, FLLN programme
10. West Midlands, ACL provider

Organisations received a £100 incentive to participate in the study and learners received £20 each for participating in the study. Visits were completed over a day, in each institution.

### **3.3.1 Approach**

The case studies focused on the impact of the ESOL Skills for Life qualifications on organisations, on practitioners and on learners. Areas of focus included:

- development of qualifications since 2004;
- organisational implications of promoting qualifications;
- pedagogic implications of delivering qualifications;
- perception of internal and external value of qualifications;
- view of impact of QCF, Functional Skills and Skills for Life brand.

Full interview schedules can be found in Appendix 3.

In each case study site, we conducted:

- In-depth interview with ESOL senior manager(s)

- In-depth interview with ESOL tutors (1-2)
- 2 focus group discussions with ESOL learners (multi-level, 5 per group)

In total, we interviewed 158 respondents:

- 17 managers
- 24 practitioners
- 117 learners

All respondents signed consent forms. All in-depth interviews and focus groups were digitally recorded and summary transcripts produced shortly afterwards. In line with Market Research Society standards, all contacts were asked for permission to be re-contacted in relation to this project or projects in the future.

### **3.4 Stakeholder interviews**

We carried out semi-structured interviews with a range of key stakeholders engaged in Skills for Life policy and delivery. The interviews were organised around a series of questions designed to allow the data to be matched with that from the case studies. Quotes and comments from the interviews have been incorporated into this report.

The interviews were with:

LSC

OFSTED

NIACE

LLU+

NATECLA

City and Guilds

Edexcel

Trinity

The English Speaking Board

Cambridge ESOL

Full interview schedules can be found in Appendix 3.

## 4. Emerging findings

### 4.1 ESOL Skills for Life Qualifications, post 2004

*The new ESOL qualifications are based around 3 modes: (1) Speaking and Listening; (2) Reading, and (3) Writing. Qualifications are accredited as “single mode” or “all modes”. “All modes” qualifications structured on units of speaking and listening assess a learner’s ability to “listen and respond”, “speak to communicate”, and “engage in discussion”, and in reading and writing, engage at “text level”, “sentence level” and “word level”. At Levels 1 and 2 the ESOL “all modes” qualifications enable the learner to achieve across units of Speaking and Listening, Writing, and Reading. The Reading Unit is identical to the free-standing Certificate in Adult Literacy (“the national reading test”).*

*If a learner achieves, for example, Writing at Entry 1 and Reading at Entry 2 with Speaking and Listening at Entry 3, the learner is awarded a full “all modes” qualification at the lowest level. The learner can then upgrade the Reading and/or Writing units (within a 3 year period) to achieve a higher level overall qualification.*

*Awarding Bodies can credit units that a learner has achieved through a different Awarding Body<sup>4</sup>.*

Evidence review

The focus of this evaluation is the ESOL Skills for Life Qualifications, post 2004. It is important to note that the vast majority of practitioners involved in the study and in general were not active in the sector prior to 2004. Most

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<sup>4</sup> Frame, P. (unpublished a) “Report of Strand E ESOL Qualifications for the National ESOL Training and Development Project”

senior managers had more established ESOL careers and could speak about the changes with historical understanding of the development of the sector.

In general, the changes to the ESOL Skills for Life Qualifications post 2004 were positively received:

*“I think it (was) positive. There might still be some issues but you need to have a framework against which you are measuring a learner’s skills. Prior to the core curriculum and qualifications mapped to it, there wasn’t any. It’s invaluable.”*

Most organisations took a developmental approach to the changes, working across their teams to manage the changes. In particular, the ability to better reflect spiky profiles via separate modes counting towards the qualification was seen as a positive development.

This was supported by OFSTED’s 2008 review:

*Questionnaire evidence showed that a large majority of ESOL learners worked towards recognised ESOL Skills for Life qualifications in 2006–07. This represented a major shift from the national position three years earlier, when more than 60% of learners worked towards internally accredited outcomes.* (OFSTED: 2008)<sup>5</sup>

OFSTED also found that success rates with the new qualifications had not changed markedly through the transition.

*Those providers visited and that responded to the questionnaire had successfully managed the transition from offering non-accredited learning to externally accredited ESOL Skills for Life qualifications. The national Skills for Life qualification success rate was satisfactory for 2006–07, at 64%.* (OFSTED: 2008)

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<sup>5</sup> ESOL in the post-compulsory learning and skills sector: an evaluation (OFSTED: 2008)

Specific issues identified by respondents as the main negative effects from these changes were funding delays and a sense that the changes via awarding bodies had been rushed through.

*You got the impression that they were rushed out. I went to some seminars when they were preparing, but they seem rushed. Cambridge asked for feedback but never seemed to change them.*

Senior Manager

The effects of this are still being seen. Therefore, a key message from feedback on the post 2004 transition is with regard to any future changes - specifically, ensuring there is enough time for awarding bodies and organisations to forward plan so that provision and learners are not negatively affected. This point is particularly relevant in the context of the introduction of Functional Skills.

The awarding bodies made clear their understanding that ESOL is delivered in a wide range of contexts and settings and to a wide range of ESOL learners. They believe that with the variety of ESOL awarding bodies engaged in providing Skills for Life qualifications, the range of provision is well matched to the variety of requirements. They thought that the original design criteria, while being very prescriptive, had given stability and had led to consistency across the awarding bodies. The relationship to qualifications designed for native speaker attainment was also seen as a positive, giving the ESOL Skills for Life qualifications more status.

Across all the stakeholder interviewees there was general agreement that the skills covered by the qualifications were appropriate and that the link with the curriculum was useful in ensuring consistency across the awarding bodies.

#### 4.2 Delivery of the qualifications

Despite some concerns, there is overwhelming agreement that the ESOL Skills for Life qualifications and brand should continue post 2010 – specifically given the investment in the sector and the emerging external currency of the existing qualifications.

There are specific aspects of the qualifications, however, which could change to make the system more effective and efficient; many such recommendations are discussed in the sections below.

#### 4.3 Feeding the system

There is a general view from both managers and practitioners that delivery of provision is accommodated around “feeding the system”. Specifically, organisations work to maximise the ways in which funding and support for learners can be used, within the existing system. This has a number of knock-on effects.

Learners are only entered for exams where their potential for a pass is high (this has related effects on learner motivation and delays to progression given inflexibility of exam timetables) due to the pressure on organisations to keep up their success rates.

*“We have tended to get rid of the people who were just occasional visitors. The people that are still here are the people who have got the message that we are driven by exams and achievement and that that is what we are asking them to do. That is why they tend to sit exams and why the importance attached to the certificate has increased amongst the people that we see. However, that does not cover the people who are no longer here: those who were not prepared to take on the message about the exams. I think we have lost those people.”*

Senior Manager

*“That (prior to 2004) was a positive experience for most of the students because they could all have a go, and if they passed they achieved something and if they failed then maybe we were saying it doesn’t matter, but it helped students see where they are and who was strong and who was weak and what they needed to work on. Now there is so much pressure on us to not get any fails, we are putting people in for exams for completely different reasons. You think you can’t put people in for exams who might fail because it’s going to look bad on your numbers and number of fails. It’s all shifting because it’s coming down to money.”*

ESOL Practitioner

In larger institutions it is up to the organisation to develop a range of provisions to meet learner needs; this may be possible through drawing down funds from other sources to provide non-accredited routes into provision. However, in most cases these additional routes into formal provision have disappeared.

*“Until 2005, 2006, we were able to run additional support courses, for example conversation clubs, writing groups, an open access learning centre. We can’t run those now because there’s no qualification at the end of it. Everything that goes on now has to have a qualification at the end of it. That’s one thing we’ve seriously lost and it’s really sad. They were such popular and such useful sessions, particularly conversation clubs, all getting together and talking, which is what they want to do. No exam, just talk about what you want to talk about.”*

Senior Manager

Practitioners are under pressure to spend time preparing their learners for the specific tasks related to the assessment. This is an example of a backwash effect, the influence that a test has on the way students are taught (e.g. the teaching mirrors the test because teachers want their students to pass).

There are further pressures on practitioners and organisations with the administrative tasks associated with delivering the qualifications. At times using more than one awarding body may give providers useful flexibility, but this is often not possible due to the administration demands placed on providers by each awarding body.

The vast majority of the providers involved in the case study research accessed FE-based mainstream LSC funding only to support their provision. There is a general view that other funding mechanisms, specifically Train to Gain funding, do not have the flexibility (in hours) or in meeting learner needs (Entry Level).

*Research by the Campaign for Learning found confusion among the employers and ESOL tutors interviewed regarding eligibility for Train to Gain: “some tutors complained that a qualification could not be achieved in the amount of time Train to Gain funding allows for, and that Train to Gain effectively excludes the most vulnerable workers who are currently functioning at Entry Levels 1 and 2, even where these workers do have the potential to progress to Level 2 over time”<sup>6</sup>.*

Evidence review

#### 4.4 Fit for purpose

In most cases, the qualifications were seen as being fit for purpose. There were general positive comments across the sample on the qualifications being recognised at a national level (in terms of provider recognition), providing a national set of standards and shared language.

*I can see the advantage in Skills for Life being across the board. People who have moved around London can come to us and say ‘here’s my certificate for Skills for Life Entry Two’. That has made it*

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<sup>6</sup> Skaliotis, E. with Hartley, T. and Vernon, I. (2007). Tapping the Reservoir of Skills: Understanding the Impact of English Language Needs and Provision in the Workplace.

*easier. Because they have got that our placement will be better. It has a pan-London value.*

Senior Manager

The ESOL cohort has changed since 2004. There are larger numbers of 16-18 year old learners and migrant learners with professional and highly educated backgrounds. Anecdotal information from practitioners suggests that these migrant workers may settle within the community for long periods of time.

The earlier NRDC review also points to evidence on the changing diversity of the ESOL cohort:

*The recent OFSTED report highlighted not only the diversity of the ESOL learner body but also the shifting diversity of that body. Questionnaire data for 2006-7 showed that in FE colleges the largest group of learners (40% of enrolments) was recent migrant workers and the settled community made up around 30%. In adult and community learning the settled community was the largest group at around 50% and migrant workers represented 30%. The proportion of refugees and asylum seekers in both settings was just under 15%. This is dramatic shift from 2001 and even as recently as 2004-5, ILR data from the LSC suggested that migrant workers accounted for only around 4% of ESOL learners*

(OFSTED,  
2008)<sup>7</sup>.

*This “superdiversity” requires more than classroom solutions: classes, although effective in themselves, are at present unable to cater for all the complex needs of people wishing to compete for jobs and training in the UK<sup>8</sup>. Baynham et. al. (2007) argue in favour of specialised*

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<sup>7</sup> OFSTED (2008). *ESOL in the post-compulsory learning and skills sector: an evaluation*. London: OFSTED

<sup>8</sup> Baynham, M., Roberts, C., Cooke, M., Simpson, J., Ananiadou, K.,

*pathways for different learners, including more fast-tracking for those with skills, high quality careers advice and more specialist literacy provision. They should be flexible enough to respond to changing ESOL populations. If Skills for Life follows the broad principle of being focused on those most in need then, Duncan O' Leary argues, "the diversity of ESOL learners means that arrangements for English language learning cannot be exactly the same as other Skills for Life arrangements"<sup>9</sup>.*

Evidence review

*"Generally the students from European countries tend to find the exams less challenging and, I was going to say less relevant, but I am not so sure, because for people who are living here, the topics are as relevant to all learners. I think it is the degree of challenge that is different for different learners."*

ESOL Practitioner

Given the changes in ESOL funding, there are also specific needs of learners whose progression routes are not qualification driven that have to complete for reduced provision. As suggested in the NRDC evidence review, there is overwhelming demand for courses at Entry level.

*The OFSTED evaluation found that the most successful courses at meeting learners' needs were those operating at Entry levels 1 and 2. It recommended that the LSC "ensure that sufficient provision continues to be offered at levels closely matched to local need, particularly at entry levels" after finding that the provision most in demand was that at lower levels<sup>10</sup>.*

Evidence review

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Callaghan, J., McGoldrick, J. and Wallace, C. (2007) *Effective Teaching and Learning: ESOL*. London: NRDC.

<sup>9</sup> O'Leary, Duncan (2008). *A Common Language: making English work for London*. London: Demos

<sup>10</sup> OFSTED (2008). *ESOL in the post-compulsory learning and skills sector: an evaluation*. London: OFSTED

*There is a mismatch between needs and success on the one hand and exams and funding on the other.*

Expert seminar

Stakeholders felt that attention to Entry Level provision should be a priority focus, along with a needs analysis to see the degree to which specialised learner routes would allow for meeting the needs of this diverse cohort more effectively. There is a view that more Pre-Entry Level provision is needed, not only to ensure access for ESOL learners competing for high demand provision but also to ensure that the learner journey starts where needs begin. QCF could allow for smaller steps towards Entry level 1 achievement.

Additionally, the length of time it takes to progress was questioned by learners, practitioners and managers, as was the way in which this relates to guidance on planning the number of learning hours to progress from one level to the next. This is compounded by the issue of the diversity of learners (i.e. some will progress faster than others based in part on their earlier educational experiences), and that the number of actual learning hours allocated to programmes is seen as insufficient for progression between levels. This is a further concern when exploring part-time versus full-time provision, which has the same qualification demands despite the differences in guided learning hours (GLH) and learner cohorts.

In the stakeholder interviews this was a common theme. In general there was a feeling that shorter qualifications were needed. It was felt that the qualifications were too long for employers to release staff and so they often went for the literacy qualification instead. This is, of course compounded by the fact that the literacy qualifications are free.

Concerns were expressed over providers entering ESOL learners for the literacy qualifications to avoid the need to pay fees.

*“As Literacy and numeracy are free and ESOL paid for there is evidence that providers opt for literacy even when it isn't the most appropriate. OFSTED inspectors have been given guidance to look at whether there are patterns in changes in exam entry.”*

OFSTED

There has also been an LSC circular to warn providers off doing this:

*“It is important that the ability to pay does not influence which learning aim a learner is enrolled on to. Learners should be enrolled on to the most appropriate learning provision that supports their level of skills, needs and aspirations. Initial assessment should identify this prior to discussion of the learner’s financial situation and any ability to pay fees. The Learning and Skills Council does not expect the number of Skills for Life ESOL enrolments within individual providers to decrease due to this policy change; neither do we expect to see any notable increase in Skills for Life literacy enrolments. In addition to this we do not expect to see ESOL learners being enrolled on to literacy provision but being taught ESOL<sup>11</sup>.”*

The issue of the size of the qualifications was felt to be particularly acute at Entry level 1 where the GLH were seen as not enough. At this level, particularly in less intensive provision, people may need much longer to move up a level.

There was a request from a number of stakeholder interviewees, including the awarding bodies, for the development of a ‘Bottomless Entry level 1’ – a way to acknowledge learning below Entry level 1. Such official recognition of first steps would include learners for whom progression to Entry level 2 in one go is too big a jump. It was felt that people’s pre-entry demands were not met and consequently people with low educational background and low literacy levels were not well catered for by the qualifications. This point was made

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<sup>11</sup> FACT SHEET 11 –Ensuring learners with literacy and language learning needs are placed on the most appropriate provision – LSC October 2007

continually to colleagues at LLU+ during the recent review of the ESOL curriculum.

Similarly the LSC spoke about the tension between a government focus on ESOL for community cohesion and short-term targets for Skills for Life. They noted that Entry Level still takes up most LSC funding, despite the perception of Level 1 and Level 2 taking priority and expressed concerns that the 'bottom end' is neglected. They talked of having the philosophy of building on Entry Level over a 4 or 5 year period because the supply of 'low hanging fruit' will soon dry up.

There were also serious concerns about the jumps between levels, specifically the jump between Entry level 3 and Level 1, and less so between Level 1 and Level 2.

NATECLA supported the need to make changes to the size of the qualifications at Entry level 1 and also to look at the possibility of creating horizontal progression pathways within Entry level 1; an idea that was also mentioned by a number of the awarding bodies. NATECLA did feel that there were problems at both ends with the need for a qualification route at Level 3 for University entrance. They had originally lobbied for IELTS to remain available for providers as a funded option.

Listening/Speaking tasks were often criticised as being inauthentic and not providing enough chances for learners to attempt a response. In the stakeholder interviews questions were asked about whether speaking and listening abilities should be tested solely through a joint assessment. The skills of listening and speaking, while linked, are still separate skills. Learners may well have very different levels of ability, and indeed of need, in speaking as compared to listening. One awarding body in particular felt that a full range of listening skills may not be tested within the current speaking and listening qualification.

The writing tests were criticised by a number of awarding bodies:

*As the tests are designed to examine language attainment only, the writing tests are limited by the information that can be provided on the paper, otherwise the assessment rests on the students' creative ability to write in English. The writing papers are not intended to be a test of the students' reading capacity or their creative ability. The student is limited also by the need for 'correctness' rather than their ability to express their meaning. This means that the marker and the verifiers may often be presented with marking problems that cannot always be covered by a mark scheme – unless it is 26 pages long.*

Awarding body two

Writing tasks were also criticised for being inauthentic. This is exacerbated further by the diversity of the ESOL cohort whereby younger learners, adult learners and learners with professional experience are likely to differ in the contextual demands placed on them, which are not always reflected in the exam options.

*The order of the exams is fine; I teach the four skills every day. It's a tricky thing to do as a practitioner to match your classroom teaching with the topic of the exam. It's hard for young people, for me as a young person as a practitioner because i.e. I want to go into the classroom and teach them something interesting, relevant and lively. What I need to get them to do for the content of the exam is not any of those things. It's a challenge. Especially with classroom management.*

ESOL practitioner

Learners generally feel nervous in exam situations. Although this is hardly surprising it puts into question the relationship between internal and external validation and how different models of assessment can be used to develop evidence towards the qualification. There is a choice of awarding bodies to address some of these concerns

*OFSTED judged that the “test-based qualifications represented a greater challenge to learners [than internally-accredited tests], requiring them to demonstrate their skills to a consistent national standard against objective criteria under examination conditions”<sup>12</sup>.*

Evidence review

In the stakeholder interviews and in discussions with managers and providers there were also some concerns about a lack of consistency in application of standards. It was felt that those that were internally assessed were less rigorous than those where the assessment was external. There was also evidence of a belief that learners had more chance of success with certain of the externally assessed awarding bodies than others.

A number of the awarding bodies spoke about the advantages to new providers in the externally assessed qualifications as they don't have the expertise or enough people to do the assessing internally.

Exam timetables were seen as inflexible. For example, only allowing candidates to be entered every eight weeks or timetabling exams once per year.

*“But sometimes they only get one chance once a year to have a go at that level. With young people time can be crucial. There are places we can get them into before seventeen, which depends on a successful Level 1 learner, like the sixth form college. An ESOL learner can go to the sixth form college to do a GC package if they are a successful Level 1 learner. If they're coming to us at sixteen, they've got a short period of time to do that. There could be more flexibility about when you take them.”*

ESOL practitioner

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<sup>12</sup> OFSTED (2008). *ESOL in the post-compulsory learning and skills sector: an evaluation*. London: OFSTED

*“They’re supposed to be on demand, but they’re not. Because we take learners every week, the teachers don’t know well enough whether to put them in, and if they arrive after the entry date, you have to get them through something else. So the teacher ends up teaching two exams. There’s been a lot of pressure on teachers during the last two or three years.”*

ESOL Manager

It is clear that there are different options for providers to choose from and it may be that the frustrations expressed above are as much about how the providers manage the assessments, as the qualifications themselves. However, it is also true that there was a consistent plea for flexible timetabling and frequent assessment points.

Managers and providers were also concerned with a lack of Awarding Body agreement in recognising each other’s units as prior achievements and consistency to this approach in general. This sense of distrust among the awarding bodies was reflected in the stakeholder interviews and needs to be addressed if the qualifications are to work on the QCF.

*“In our view, it is true to say that differing standards of rigour, authenticity and administrative security across awarding bodies do mean that some unit assessments are more accurate, reliable and trustworthy than others, which is a risk-laden scenario for such high-stakes assessments. The mutual recognition of units is, thus, a cause for concern.”*

Awarding body five

NATECLA also reported concerns of some of their members that learners who arrive at their institution and hold a particular level qualification from one awarding body are not necessarily at the appropriate level to take a course for the next level if the awarding body is different.

Lack of consistency between internal and external assessments procedures, specifically confusion over how these can equate, pressures on providers to increase internal assessment and verification for financial reasons, and consistency between verification procedures across awarding bodies are further issues facing managers and practitioners.

Providers across the sample shared stories about their concerns over inconsistency in marking. This calls into question the robustness of the system and adds to the pressures providers face regarding success rates and being able to project pass rates.

*“We’ve had some shocks. In my main full-time courses, we’ve had two (groups) at each level and we’d have a weaker group with some level of literacy and a stronger group. Then we found the stronger group who got 90% in their mocks and failed their reading last year. We were gobsmacked and didn’t understand why they did well with practice papers and failed. There was quite a few of them and you wonder why.”*

ESOL Manager

One stakeholder interviewee also spoke about a complaint from a curriculum manager that as their awarding body do not record their spoken exam when there is a dispute over results there is no evidence for providers to use to appeal.

Learners are also aware of the lack of consistency, which can have an impact on their motivation:

*“...some students who haven’t got good English still pass. Some students speak fluently and fail. So I don’t know if you can check. I thought when I started Level 1, all of them were perfect but I see some people who still fail.”*

## ESOL Level 2 Learner

Delays in results were seen as not only problematic in terms of learner motivation but also have serious knock-on effects to internal progression and reducing waiting lists. This is made worst still by the inflexibility of timetabling whereby students may wait a year to re-sit an exam.

Learners shared concerns about not being able to attempt the exams, even if they were not likely to pass. They felt waiting for a whole year to make a second attempt was unfair.

*“You know after one year you have to do the exam again. Why do they do it like that? I was very sick, so I couldn’t. But why do I have to come here to repeat again? Because I am on benefits the government now has to pay for me for a whole year again. I lose a year as well.”*

## ESOL Level 1 Learner

They also felt that they needed more time during the Listening/Speaking, reading and writing exams. Their concerns were echoed by practitioners.

Providers and practitioners were also concerned about the lack of relevance of the content of tasks and the awards for 16-18 year old (or younger-use in some schools) learners in terms of their HEI progression aims.

*“The topics are very adult related, for example phoning and visiting a doctor. Medicine instructions, applying for a job, going to the Post Office, writing a letter of complaint to a catalogue company. Young people aren’t interested in those topics. They’re interested in the latest mobile phone, music, how to keep up studying their Level 1. Socialising. food, clothes, driving, further education and other things.*

*Those materials are more relevant to this type of ESOL learner than the exams are. There’s two things about the exams other practitioners*

*feel quite strongly about. When an ESOL learner comes into education in this country, they may or may not have had educational experience. There's a lot of academic concepts and skills that they lack. So when they come into British society, in the British education system, that's problematic."*

ESOL Teacher

Among the awarding bodies there was also agreement that there was demand for a wider range of contexts as students don't want to use the available contexts where they aren't relevant to their vocational area. Other stakeholder interviewees also felt that the contexts of the exams didn't fit around the lives and experiences that ESOL learners have – with particular anecdotal evidence that the contexts were not right for citizenship courses.

For other adult learners, practitioners were concerned about the need to support learners to develop exam taking skills, in a new language.

*"A lot of the time they're trying to learn the language and a lot of other peripheral skills within an academic environment. That goes alongside the language learning. Therefore it takes an ESOL learner time. If they lack academic framework, background, experience, knowledge etc, they struggle to even get in shape to do an academic Cambridge language exam. I find that exam structure not very flexible."*

ESOL practitioner

The existence of the single mode speaking and listening qualification was also highlighted as important by the stakeholder interviewees as it met what was often deemed to be ESOL learners' main need. It was seen as a good example of,

*"...designing qualifications for people's needs. S&L is important for people so should be seen as a full qualification."*

Stakeholder interview

Practitioners and managers felt modular specific qualifications allow for recognition of spiky profiles. Distinguishing listening and speaking as separate modes was also a topic often raised by respondents.

Indeed, OFSTED reported that the backwash effect in terms of speaking and listening has been positive, with centres where speaking and listening were previously not taught extensively, due to inexperienced teachers with less expertise, being forced to take it into account because of the single mode focus on speaking and listening. On the other hand they have also seen evidence of long periods of writing or reading and less integration of skills because provision is split into exam preparation sessions focusing on the individual modes.

In the stakeholder interviews there was general agreement that the national test at level one was not appropriate for ESOL learners.

*“A nonsense. Huge cultural issues. Doesn't test all reading skills and also tests knowledge of syntax and grammar and lexis. This means that some learners are at a disadvantage.”*

Stakeholder interview

There was also mention of the pernicious effect of learners being put in for the literacy Level 1 rather than the ESOL Level 1 as they have to do the same reading test. This leads to learners having no accreditation of writing.

There was also general support for more flexible ways of assessing such as building up of portfolios – rather than multiple choice/tick boxes. It was felt that such summative assessment methods don't allow practitioners to give people feedback on what they need to do to improve. However, it may be that this betrays a lack of understanding of the different purposes and values of formative and summative assessments. At the very least there is a difficult

balance to be struck between the need to assess learners' language level and to help them to progress.

There is some evidence from the recent review of the ESOL curriculum and OFSTED inspections that teachers feel restricted in being able to teach their learners what they need to learn because they have to teach to the curriculum to be able to prepare them for the exams. Also that many students are not used to the exam format (cloze tests, generalising from rules etc.) so teachers need to spend a disproportionate amount of time on it in class. This may highlight a need for more training for practitioners who lack professional knowledge or confidence and focus too heavily on exam preparation at the expense of language development.

In their stakeholder interview NATECLA agreed that there was a need for more training but argued that most of the current training being delivered by providers was focused on the process and logistics of delivering the exams rather than on developing pedagogy.

Waiting lists at most institutions are extreme, in some cases up to 70+% of the existing active student load. With access and progression being central aspects of the strategy, these issues need to be addressed.

There are practical and meaningful changes which could be made to the exam process and specific awarding body offers that could make the experience more learner and practitioner friendly:

- exploring how the curriculum and qualifications support diversity. For example, could there be variation in the offer, for example more structured, grammar based programmes in addition to more contextualised daily life programmes;
- exploring which students are left out of the focus on a qualification-led system;

- exploring the ways in which long waiting lists are impacting learners' lives;
- exploring the ways in which increased exam date flexibility would affect achievement.

This too is supported by the earlier NRDC review:

*There is a mismatch between this guidance and the part-time delivery of provision across an academic year of 30 weeks<sup>13</sup>. Learners need more hours to achieve, but there are already more potential learners than either provision or funding can support.*

Evidence review

Alongside these developments, the impact of success rates and funding flexibility also need to be explored.

#### 4.5 Value of the qualifications

*“The first reason I study English is because it is the first language in this country so you can’t communicate with people if you can’t speak English. Everything in this country is just in English. The second reason is if I want to get a job it is better to speak English to get a qualification when you finish your course. It will help you to get a good job and a good salary. I need to change my life. In my country I studied sewing. I was a dressmaker, but now I want to study better things. This Saturday I start my business course.”*

ESOL Level 1 Learner

##### 4.5.1 Intrinsic value

Across all stakeholder groups, there was a clear value for the qualification, from the learner perspective. This is shaped somewhat by the drive to motivate learners to achieve and also the rhetoric about the external value of

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<sup>13</sup> Frame, P (unpublished b) “Paper on ESOL Skills for Life Qualifications for the NIACE enquiry”.

the Level 2 qualification with regard to work but in most cases learners want to gain the qualification for a variety of reasons:

- gain a formal qualification for the first time;
- use the qualification to gain access to other vocational or HE courses;
- use the qualification to gain access to the job market;
- gain the qualification as a sense of achievement;
- gaining the qualification for UK citizenship.

*“Of course it is important because if we haven’t got any qualifications we would get a job as a cleaner or something and so it is very important that we have a qualification.”*

ESOL Entry level 3 Learner

*“I think it is very important for teachers when they want to upgrade to next level. It is very important to have tests in the school if you want to continue...”*

ESOL Level 2 Learner

ESOL learners’ motivations of course go beyond those which focus on the qualifications and include:

- integrating;
- contributing to UK society;
- developing language skills to support, and relate better to, children and even grandchildren;
- accessing services;
- developing independence.

It was recognised that these other motivations are often seen and treated as secondary factors and the desire to participate is often driven by the need to gain the qualification rather than develop their language. This can be seen by the large numbers of learners that do not return to provision after completing their Entry level 3 qualification.

There was also a sense from learners that once they progress and gain more experience with the labour market, they lose faith that their ESOL qualifications will mean anything externally.

*“I think it is not helping because last year I applied to be a teaching assistant and I told them I had finished Entry Three but they said we had to do a test. I did the test and passed. That’s why they don’t care if you’re Level One or Level Three because I have seen some people with Level One and some with Entry who have passed. What is important is that you have learning.”*

ESOL Level 2 Learner

*“I think the exams means very little if anything. One of our troubles is getting students to turn up for exams. Often we have meetings with sixth form and they’re saying ‘well if they don’t attend tell them they don’t get the qualifications’. Well they don’t want the qualifications anyway so it’s not really a character we can use. Things they know have a value, university entrance and so on, Skills for Life Entry level 3 qualification. The other thing is citizenship. That’s recognized and has value. Other than that they’re really not valued by anyone.”*

ESOL Manager

This questions the fit for purpose nature of the qualifications at Levels 1 and 2 and the role of the qualifications in supporting the development of language and learning more widely. As mentioned earlier, the initial value learners place on gaining the qualification is often largely based on the rhetoric from providers and less on their lived experience.

Younger learners were very focused on gaining GCSEs and professional migrant workers were concerned about qualifications they would gain at HE level. These cohorts were generally more critical about the value of the

qualifications. The degree to which Level 2 qualifications can be reliable proxies for GCSEs requires further exploration specifically on:

- awareness of equivalency (by learners, practitioners, and externally with HEIs and employers);
- accuracy of equivalency (both in terms of competencies and access to further education and employment).

This should be followed up with wide scale efforts to increase clarity in this area.

Further exploration of the use of Level 2 qualifications may also be useful, in addition to demographic analysis of drop out at Entry Level 3, to see if the qualification driven system is serving specific types of learners at specific levels and what this may mean for access, progression and achievement.

This kind of drop out at Entry level 3 could be related to ESOL learners being put on to literacy courses, although practitioner respondents in the case studies suggested that drop out at this level was often due to employment demands or inability to pay fees.

#### 4.5.2 External currency

*“I think completing the qualification is low on learners’ priorities. In many instances they’re doing it as a favour to us because we say how significant it is for funding, and how without funding there’s no classes. Many learners are proud and pleased to get a certificate, but other than that, I can’t say.”*

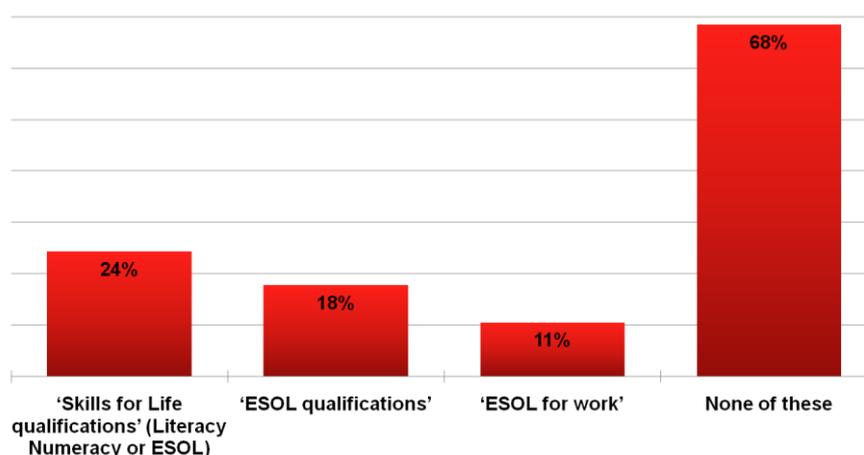
ESOL Manager

On the whole, managers, practitioners and younger (16-18 year old) learners and learners at Levels 1 and 2 felt that there was little or no external value for the qualifications. There were two main reasons for this:

- Lack of awareness of the national standing of the qualifications (both by learners and also by external stakeholders like employers) and further lack of awareness of the ways in which the qualifications map to other key known qualifications like GCSEs, EFL qualifications and IELTS.
- There was a feeling that ESOL qualifications are not what employers care about – that instead they want to know about contextualised language skills. Therefore, engaging employers, especially with the introduction of ESOL fees has been extremely difficult. Where employers are still engaged, they prioritise short courses with specific foci like developing knowledge of technical language or health and safety terms.

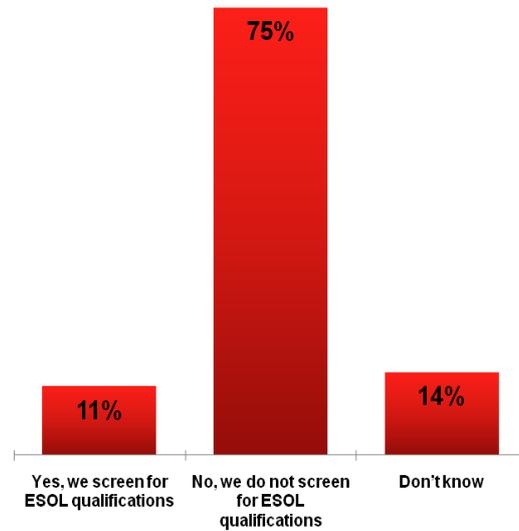
Respondents to the survey of businesses were asked about their awareness of the ESOL qualifications. The majority (68%) were unaware of them and only 18% had heard of the ESOL Skills for Life qualifications as opposed to 24% who had heard of the literacy and numeracy versions.

Table 1: Awareness of Skills for Life qualifications in business.



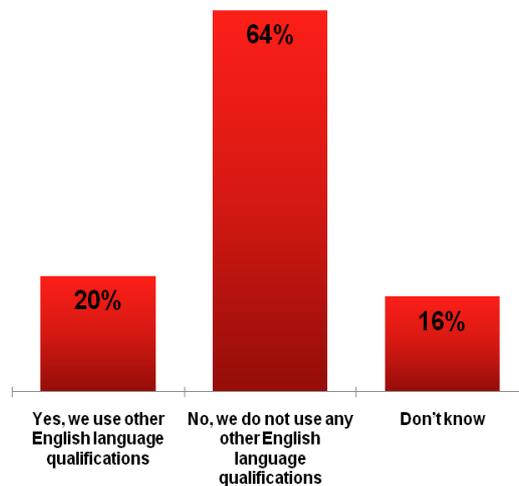
87 respondents answered questions relating to their use of qualifications at the point of recruitment for screening purposes. The vast majority did not use the qualifications for this purpose or were not aware of their use for this purpose.

Table 2: Businesses screening for ESOL qualifications.



Responses for use of English language qualifications rose only slightly.

Table 3: Businesses screening for English language qualifications.



Examples of “other” English Language qualifications being used were not all language specific or recognised national proxies:

- NVQs;
- aptitude testing including verbal reasoning;
- case studies, presentation skills;
- educational qualifications from mainstream schools/colleges;
- English qualifications native to their countries;

- GCSE English;
- GCSE or equivalent;
- IBO;
- IELTS;
- online testing ;
- spoken English;
- valid national qualifications in English from home countries;
- UK Degrees;
- UK Recognized educational qualifications;
- In-house English testing for reading, writing and numeracy and successful candidates are given mandatory ESOL Entry level 2 training where English is not their first language and they are below this level;
- McQuaig (a combination of Maths/English/Logic test plus a personality profiling tool).

This supports claims from both the desk analysis and the case studies, suggesting that not enough has been done to market the qualifications to employers.

*Research by the Campaign for Learning found that the majority of employers and managers had little understanding of numeracy provision and entitlement<sup>14</sup>. There are suggestions in the research that this situation is even more profound for ESOL, and that this is compounded by a lack of understanding from employer show better English skills for employees will benefit their business.*

Evidence review

A number of stakeholder interviewees mentioned a lack of awareness of the qualifications among Train to Gain brokers as a barrier to greater visibility of the qualifications among employers.

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<sup>14</sup> Skaliotis, E. with Hartley, T. and Vernon, I. (2007). *Tapping the Reservoir of Skills: Understanding the Impact of English Language Needs and Provision in the Workplace.*

*“Our perception is that Train to Gain brokerages have not fully engaged with the ESOL for Work qualifications.”*

Awarding body five

*“Train to Gain brokers currently are either totally explicit about Skills for Life or they don’t mention it at all and ‘embed’ it into NVQs. ESOL at a disadvantage because of the cost.”*

Stakeholder interview

This also supports the question of external validity of the qualifications, if employers are not aware of them and if learners are working to gain the qualifications with aims of using them to access the labour market.

The 2008 OFSTED review notes that there are now less vocational ESOL courses available for learners.

*... discrete part-time general English courses were the most common type of provision ... At Entry level 3 and above, around four out of 10 providers offered ‘embedded’ courses that integrated ESOL and vocational learning aims into a single learning programme. Although these were effective in enabling learners to develop their ESOL skills, much of this provision was recent, and the range of vocational subjects was often narrow.*

OFSTED (2008:6)

This reduction and loss of contextualised ESOL/vocational programmes (e.g. ESOL for Childcare) has happened as a result of funding focusing increasingly on discrete provision and targets.

This type of contextualised provision offered a mechanism whereby ESOL qualifications (and Skills for Life qualifications more widely) could be explicitly tied into vocational aims. This highlighted the ways in which the ESOL qualification would be useful to learners and to potential employers. It also supported better internal progression for ESOL learners into mainstream

courses. The loss of vocationally focused pre-entry or access courses has led to a decrease in contact between ESOL and vocational teaching teams and has meant that ESOL providers have lost a vehicle to promote cross departmental work. This in turn has minimised the internal currency of the ESOL Skills for Life qualifications.

*“... we go from pre-entry up to Level 2. The gap I feel, it is a shame, but it is because of funding, is that we used to run vocational courses as well and we lost money and were told to cut and that is where we cut and I feel it is a sad lack. I am also responsible for ALS which is Additional Learning Support for our ESOL learners on our mainstream courses and I feel that some of them, if they had been able to go there via our vocational courses would be getting on a lot better now.”*

ESOL Practitioner

These external validity issues also have a number of wider knock-on effects:

- learner progression routes are unclear both to learners and practitioners and to other educational leads (even within institutions) and are therefore not necessarily promoted;
- learners become de-motivated to progress beyond E3 if they feel the qualifications will not have currency with HEIs or employers.

There is a general view that employers are not aware of the qualifications (or their equivalences).

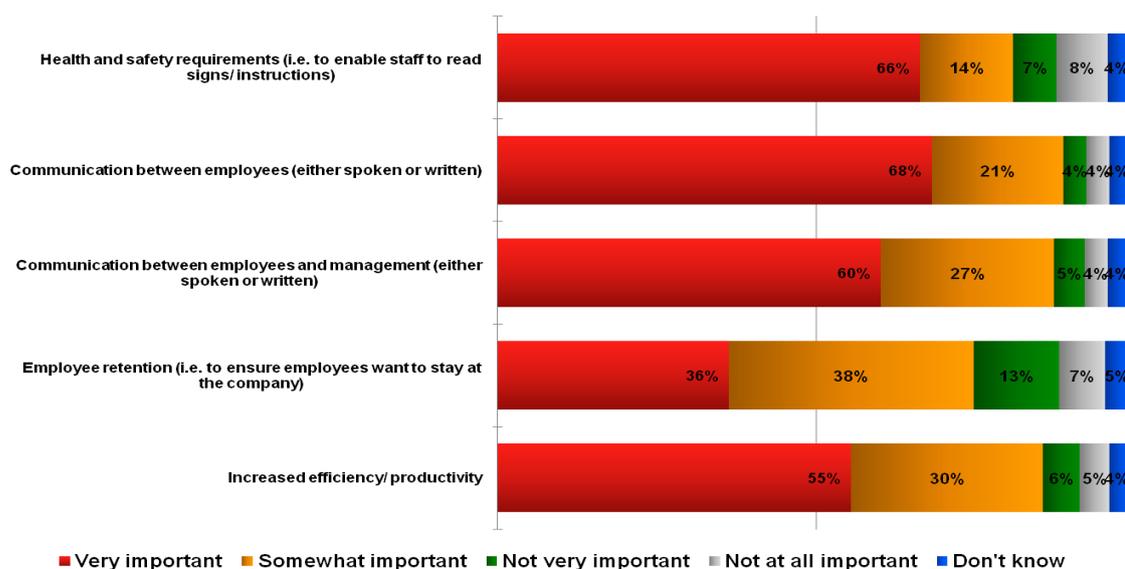
*“I don’t think employers have a clue about them. I used to do cross college work with construction, and it took employers twenty years to get used to NVQs as opposed to City and Guilds. I don’t think these qualifications are on the horizon at all. ...The research on what employers want show that they want the soft skills, people who can problem solve, present, work with others, and I don’t think any of the qualifications, be they ESOL*

*qualifications or GCSEs or functional skills or key skills have much fitted in of those qualities employers want.”*

### ESOL Manager

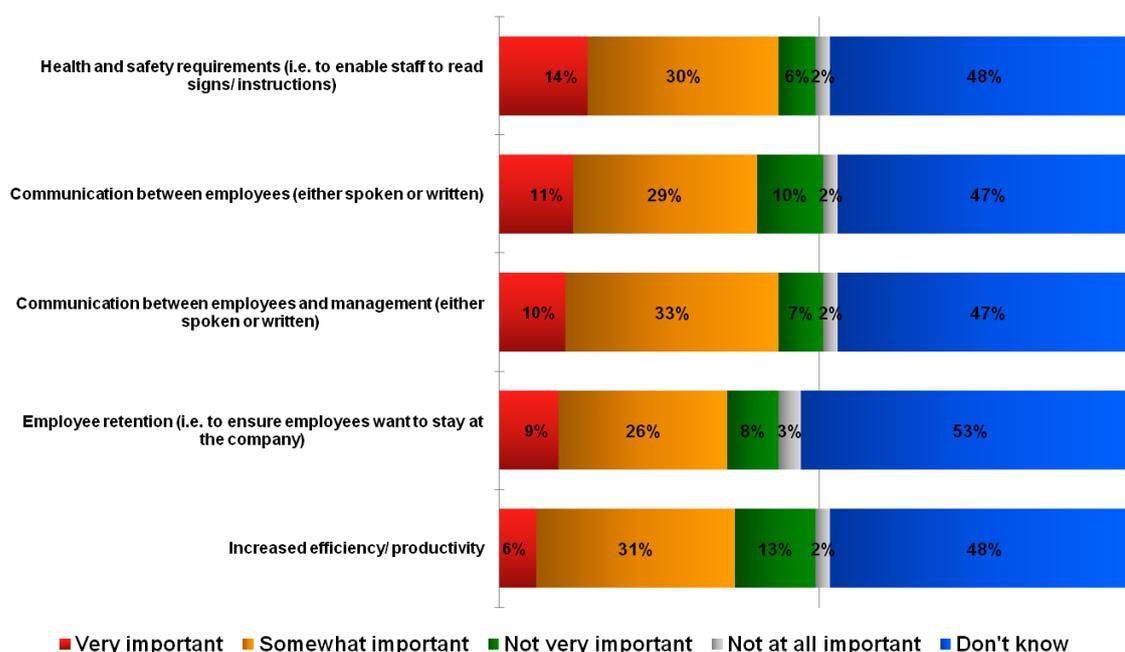
87 respondents who had employees with ESOL needs answered questions on the employer survey on the ways in which ESOL development was important to key aspects of working life, for example, health and safety and retention:

Table 4: ESOL and working life.



The chart above would suggest that ESOL does have an important role to play within the workplace. The same respondent group was then asked to reflect on how well the current qualifications addressed these factors:

Table 5: ESOL qualifications and working life.



These responses, along with those from the secondary analysis and case studies suggest that employers are also unaware and uncertain as to how the existing qualifications address factors such as health and safety, communication between employees, employee retention and increased efficiency.

Research suggests that in addition to the lack of employer awareness of the ESOL qualifications, there is also... *a lack of understanding from employees how better English skills for employees will benefit their business. The JH Consulting report on ESOL in London argued that the “business case for ESOL over and above [learning English for health and safety requirements] is not clear for many employers, and larger companies expect regional solutions that cannot be delivered effectively through the current infrastructure and processes*<sup>15</sup>.

*Furthermore, (in the same report) the ESOL qualifications were judged to be “not workplace friendly”, taking into account neither “the application in the workplace or what employers want and/or need. Recently OFSTED listed “the*

<sup>15</sup> JH Consulting (2005). *Developing a Three Year Strategic Action Plan for Skills for Life in London: Summary of evidence and recommendations for ESOL.*

*relevance of Skills for Life qualifications to the workplace” as one barrier to extending workplace provision. Providers told inspectors that they found it difficult to persuade employers in small- and medium-sized enterprises of the value of offering ESOL learning to their employees<sup>16</sup>.and exacerbated by reuirement to tie in with a mandatory qualification outcome.*

Evidence review

Although a number of the providers were working with employers directly, this relationship has been made more difficult due to the pressures of fees. It was felt that employers are not likely to pay the fees or sign up to providing the full qualification. This relates to feedback provided on the ESOL for Work qualifications whereby the content was well regarded but the required hours were not workable for employers.

*There is a real need for systematic embedding of ESOL skills in vocational qualifications and the ability to assess in a relevant context.*

Expert seminar

This supports earlier analysis conducted by NRDC regarding the existing evidence:

*With reference to the ESOL qualifications, O’Leary argues that there is a mismatch between long ESOL courses that culminate in full, traditional qualifications and what individual learners or employers are looking for. As a result “the learning and employment systems struggle to work together as effectively as they need to” as the former is focused on qualifications and the latter on what it takes to help someone into work<sup>17</sup>.*

Evidence review

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<sup>16</sup> OFSTED (2008). *ESOL in the post-compulsory learning and skills sector: an evaluation*. London: OFSTED

<sup>17</sup> O’Leary, Duncan (2008). *A Common Language: making English work for London*. London: Demos

Although there seems to be little external value for the qualifications, it is important to note this may be a result of the qualifications not being marketed rather than the qualifications themselves being deficient.

In conclusion, there are three main messages in terms of the value of the qualifications:

1. There are differences between internal, intrinsic value and external value for the qualification.
2. Practitioner and learner value for the qualification has been shaped by the requirement to achieve.
3. There is little awareness on the “real” authentic value of the qualification, within organisations, across educational institutions and with employers except within citizenship where there is real perceived value.

The perceived value of the qualification was often undermined by lack of information or clarity of information, specifically related to how these qualifications translate to nationally recognised equivalents, like GCSEs both in terms of the theoretical equivalency and the “real” proxy value.

Regardless, the clear message from all three stakeholder groups was that the qualifications are important (even though the external value was questioned) and they should be better marketed to increase external currency. The value in learner choice to complete the qualification is also important and senior managers in particular were concerned about the loss of this aspect of adult ESOL provision.

#### 4.6 Forward planning

The vast majority of senior managers and ESOL practitioners were only moderately aware of the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) and Functional Skills debates. For those who were aware, there was serious

concern over the lack of information available on the ways in which the QCF and Functional Skills will impact ESOL in the future. Where people are aware the avenue for information often comes from other departments within colleges and there are misunderstandings and gaps of information which are causing concern for providers.

*“What worries me now is that we are talking about foundation (functional) skills and already they are talking about literacy and numeracy but have no idea about whether ESOL will be in or out or where it fits. It feels like the afterthought.”*

Senior Manager

Furthermore, concerns over Leitch targets and potential changes or disposal of the *Skills for Life* brand were also of great concern for managers and practitioners.

#### 4.7 The Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF)

An important element of the current context is the introduction of the new Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) which will replace the National Qualifications Framework (NQF).

The QCF will permit the development of qualifications in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) that reflect the varied abilities and demands of learners whose community language is not English. In particular, ESOL qualifications in the QCF will allow learners to accumulate credits from individual units towards a qualification. This process of credit accumulation would allow qualifications to be offered to ESOL learners with some or all of the following features:

Individual units at different levels could be combined in a single qualification. Providing a majority of credits are gained at the level of the qualification, other credits could be achieved at the level below.

Learners would therefore be able to demonstrate achievement at different levels in different areas of skill and knowledge. For example, a learner might achieve credits at Level 2 in speaking and listening Skills, but at Level 1 in writing Skills. This would increase the existing flexibility already pioneered through the ESOL Skills for Life qualifications.

In theory, individual units could be offered on a 'stand alone' basis (though there may be difficulties in securing LSC funding for such provision). So learners could 'dip their toes' in a short course based on a unit in reading skills before deciding whether or not to build up further credits in other units towards a qualification.

Units within the QCF are designed to be free-standing. This means that units can be used in more than one qualification. So, for example, units that assess speaking and listening Skills could be embedded within qualifications in vocational areas or in wider Citizenship or Employability programmes.

Credits can be transferred between awarding bodies in the QCF. An ESOL learner that began their study at one centre could transfer credits to another centre who offered ESOL qualifications, even if the second centre was registered with another awarding body.

The QCF regulations permit more flexibility in assessment methods than the current NQF. This means that, with the support of an awarding body, centres could devise assessment activities and assessment tools appropriate to individual ESOL learners (or to particular groups of learners) based on the same unit, and all approved assessments would lead to the award of credits. All credits awarded by all awarding bodies for all units in the QCF are entered into a standard 'Learner Record'. The format of credit awards is therefore identical across all qualifications in the QCF, creating an important symbol of equal esteem within the Framework.

In summary, the QCF offers a range of design features and approaches to regulation that will permit the development of very flexible qualifications that can offer a wide range of routes to achievement that are responsive to the needs of individual learners. It remains to be seen whether other factors (for example the setting of government targets or the funding methods of LSC and especially whether the central computer database will be ready in time or fit for purpose) inhibit or facilitate the potential of the QCF to support ESOL qualifications appropriate to the needs of learners.

In interviews as part of the case studies there was a striking lack of awareness of the QCF:

*“I don’t know much about it. Just one of those things you hear bandied about together with ‘foundation learning tier is coming in next year’ and no, we don’t really see much beyond that.”*

ESOL Manager

*“The only thing is that it’s (QCF) so unclear and no one’s making a decision. My tendency is to join rather than not, the same way ESOL could become part of the framework of basic standards or not. I think it’s the same discussion. I’d rather be fighting within... Partly, yes. Also being part of a framework with everyone else, facilitating progression and employers, whenever they get their heads round foundation tier. I’d rather be in it rather than separate.”*

ESOL Manager

There are also questions on how the QCF will deal with learners needing access provision or non-qualification bearing courses. There is some concern that discrete; non-qualification bearing provision could disappear completely.

*“I think there are certain learners for whom language is separate from the rest of their education, and they’re not interested in the vocational element or the other elements in the framework or the pathways. We*

*have a number of learners who are retired and for whom looking at progression is maybe not the route that they want to be going along, but they want to improve their English for social reasons; taking control of their lives within society, rather than through employment. For that sort of group and those with caring responsibilities, while there may be a desire to go into employment, it's still a way off, so for them the most pressing need is language tuition. There is a case for some discrete provision remaining."*

ESOL Manager

When the QCF was explained to respondents, most were positive about it conceptually, for the following reasons:

- it could offer flexibility to develop separate Listening and Speaking qualifications;
- it could better acknowledge the spiky profiles of ESOL learners if qualifications were unitised;
- it could better acknowledge the potential horizontal progression into vocational domains and perhaps better facilitate this through necessary cross departmental collaboration;
- it could require awarding bodies to be more consistent in their validation processes and also in the value of awards;
- it could increase the value for the qualifications externally

Concerns included:

- funding units instead of qualifications could become a logistical and administrative nightmare;
- how the QCF may impact targets and related funding (in terms of "rules of combination");
- lead in time is crucial to any changes; in large providers, timetabling into 2010 has already started.

These views support those from earlier studies:

*...the Demos report on ESOL in London argues that “national policy should experiment with different forms of assessment – such as practitioner assessment for a certain number of credits of learning within each qualification – and ensure that embedded ESOL courses are eligible for fee remission”<sup>18</sup>. This idea of a credit framework is essential to the Demos vision of effective ESOL provision. Under this framework, different courses would have different forms of assessment. Learners could gain a certain number of credits without the need for a standardised external assessment and some courses – although not the full qualification – might dispense with the standardised assessment altogether.*

*O’Leary argues that this would allow for the introduction of “a greater breadth of courses without the huge expense of having to externally accredit all learning, even when qualifications seem inappropriate [...] This being the case what is needed is a system of measuring progress that is appropriate for progression within the education system and, just as importantly, provides satisfaction for the learner. This is most likely to come, in many cases, from a clear initial diagnosis and identification of goals at the outset, followed by provision and testing that reflects that. Changing the system would therefore not mean the end of qualifications, but it would lead to a wider range of options to meet a wider range of needs.*

Evidence review

The most central and overwhelming concern was that there was little inclusion of the ESOL sector in the debate.

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<sup>18</sup> O’Leary, Duncan (2008). *A Common Language: making English work for London*. London: Demos

#### 4.8 Functional Skills

There seemed to be equal confusion and lack of clarity about the role the development of Functional Skills would play in the future of ESOL provision.

*“If literacy goes to be replaced by functional skills what will happen to the literacy standards? If they go what will replace them? What is the relationship between the literacy standards and functional skills? If standards were common to ESOL qualifications and functional skills, could ESOL quals be used as a proxy for functional skills qualifications in the FLT diplomas?”*

Awarding Body one

*“A series of unclear messages has emanated from the QCA and DIUS on the forthcoming relationship between ESOL Skills for Life and Functional Skills English, with the likelihood of the former being subsumed into the latter alternately growing and waning. It is essential that ESOL awarding bodies should receive firm guidance sooner rather than later.”*

Awarding Body five

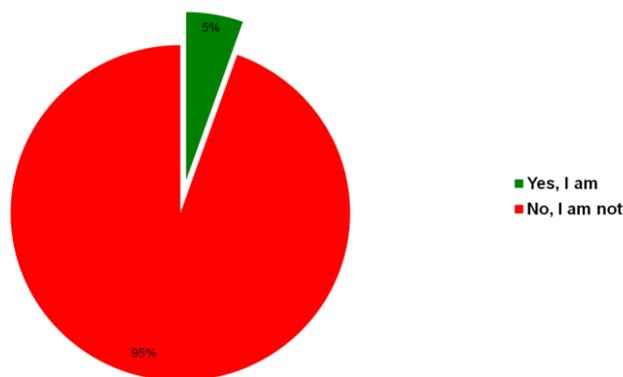
Timing was also seen as a key issue for LSC

*“ESOL is always considered later – it would be good if all decisions could be made at the same time.”*

In large institutions, where Functional Skills were being piloted and where senior managers were part of cross departmental groups, more awareness was noted.

Supporting earlier analysis of ESOL Managers and Practitioners, employers also have limited awareness of Functional Skills.

Table 6: Awareness of Functional Skills among employers.



N 276

Of those that were aware, the vast majority were not sure how Functional Skills would impact ESOL provision:

- *As the Functional skills qualification covers not only English, but Maths and ICT I think employers might prefer to go along this route rather than ESOL*
- *I don't know. I am aware of them but do not have direct involvement with them*
- *Likely to make other ESOL less attractive*
- *None*
- *Should enhance employees communication and productivity*
- *Somewhat limited in practical terms, although nice in theory.*
- *These are practical skills in English, mathematics and information and communication technology (ICT which will help employees gain the most out of work, education and everyday life)*
- *Very little. Functional skills, whilst interesting, are still not very well thought out and needs totally separating from the GCSE qualifications.*

Employer Survey

As with the QCF discussion, managers and tutors were mainly concerned about ESOL being a consideration for the Functional Skills debate:

*“I think with all accreditation you want something that maps to what you’re doing. What you’re doing is good practice, and you want accreditation to be as capacious as possible to cover that. Within functional skills it reminds me when I worked at OCR English, and it looks like that sort of model, which we can work to. We can have our educational rigour and then depending on which awarding body you go for, to accredit it quite simply, so you’re not teaching to a particular qualification. The only downside is that I don’t know how it links to the European language qualification levels. If that is made clear, then the purists in the department would agree it was accrediting language as opposed to communication.”*

ESOL Manager

Concerns were also raised on the development of further new terminology, which could add to the low external awareness of the ESOL qualifications. Regardless, managers and providers felt the need for large scale consultation on the developments and potential impacts for ESOL provision. This was felt to be necessary not only to gain insight and provide feedback on proposed changes but also to forward plan for any large scale systemic changes.

#### 4.9 The future of Skills for Life

In addition to the rumours and lack of clarity over the QCF and Functional Skills, there was also concern over the Skills for Life brand disappearing. There was a consistent view that the Skills for Life brand needed to be sustained and developed further.

There was a strong acknowledgement that ESOL is different to literacy and numeracy, which echo messages from the 2007 Williams and Williams<sup>19</sup> study: and the NIACE report 'More than a language':

*“having separate standards would allow more precise descriptions of language skills, allow more relevance to language learning and more easily provide a base for a specialist ESOL curriculum’. Others, on the other hand, clearly considered ESOL should continue to be subsumed under literacy, arguing that ESOL provision had always been ‘equated with low status and value’ and ‘that separate standards might perpetuate this marginalisation’”*

Evidence review

The distinctive aspects of ESOL would still benefit from further review to ensure that the evidence on multi-lingual and bi-lingual learners, EFL and other key disciplines (like ESOL learner identities) can more directly influence future provision. A particular example of this is the flexibility shown when EFL and ESOL provision is housed together, where practitioners teach across programmes and are able to meet the needs of their learners through both these streams, in addition to Skills for Life literacy and numeracy.

There are serious infrastructure and development issues to consider should changes to the Skills for Life brand be changed post 2010. In most instances, managers and practitioners felt resources and time should be put into improving quality within the existing framework and that in many cases, it was still bedding in. This is particularly true in terms of the messages from the case studies on the external validity of the ESOL Skills for Life qualifications, where the view was that they would, with time, gain in currency, if they were marketed to employers and HEIs. This assumption was also based on further developmental changes to the framework to allow the curriculum and ESOL offer to be more fit for purpose for the changing, diverse ESOL learner base.

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<sup>19</sup> Williams E. & Williams A. (2007) *ESOL and EFL: An unhelpful distinction?* CfBT

## **5. Conclusions**

### **5.1 Summary**

The qualifications were broadly seen as being fit for purpose. There were positive comments in general across the sample about the qualifications having provider recognition at a national level.

It was also felt that they provided a national set of standards and a shared language that had been missing prior to the introduction of the qualifications in 2004.

ESOL providers and practitioners have done an immense amount of work to develop fit-for-purpose delivery within the ESOL Skills for Life framework. Many appreciate the policy and infrastructure support that has been developed as part of the Skills for Life strategy.

Many described how the compressed timetable for the introduction of the ESOL Skills for Life qualifications had meant that in effect they had to be piloted while live. This has meant that test papers are only now settling down and teachers are still developing their understanding of how best to prepare learners for these exams. It was felt that a change now could be detrimental to exam quality and the quality of classroom practice. Most providers and tutors wanted priority to be given to changes to the existing system over changing the system altogether. It was felt that there is much to gain in allowing the qualifications to settle down and gain acceptance.

However, another consistent message was that ESOL should not be left behind literacy and numeracy in new developments, as it was previously in the development of the Skills for Life strategy and with the development of the ESOL Skills for Life qualifications.

### **5.2 Levels**

Stakeholders felt that attention to Entry level provision should be a priority focus. There is a view that more Entry level 1 provision is needed, not only to ensure access for large numbers of ESOL learners unable to find places, but also to ensure that the learner journey starts where learner needs begin. The Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) could allow for smaller, unitised steps towards full achievement at Entry 1.

There was a request from a number of stakeholder interviewees, including the awarding bodies, for ways to acknowledge learning within Entry level 1. Such official recognition of first steps would include learners for whom progression from Entry level 1 to Entry level 2 in one go is too big a jump. It was felt that people with low educational backgrounds and low literacy levels were not well catered for by the size of the step change from one level to the next. To meet the needs of this group it would be necessary to create horizontal progression pathways within Entry level 1 and to recognise achievement of these for funding purposes.

To achieve the World Class Skills targets and build higher level skills, basic or functional skills are seen as the foundation. To help learners develop their language skills to allow them to access higher education and skilled/professional occupations there is a gap above Level 2 for which A' level English is not the solution.

*“the standards for basic skills only cover Entry level, Level 1 and Level 2, whereas... some ESOL learners need to develop their competence in English language to Level 3 and beyond in order to gain access to Higher Education or to practise their profession in this country.”*

Breaking the Language Barriers (DfEE: 2000)

*“One class that I had were actually doing IELTS but we also put them through the Level 2 Literacy qualification, which they passed very easily despite the fact that their IELTS scores were not particularly high. These students had*

*passed the basic skills threshold but still needed more language development to get them ready for university.”*

Expert seminar

At the moment Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) require an International English Language Testing System (IELTS) band score of between 6 and 8 as a default qualification in English for second language speakers; it is seen as a good indicator of preparedness for study in HE but is not currently funded by LSC. The absence of an accessible English language qualification at Level 3 in the UK is blocking access to HE for ESOL learners by removing the Level 3 rung in the ladder.

### **5.3 Assessment methods**

Providers and practitioners felt the general range of assessment methods were appropriate. In particular, the development process, specialist input and the comprehensive ‘all modes’ approach to assessment (as opposed to the National Test) were seen as major advantages of the development of ESOL qualifications within the Skills for Life framework.

Within this general satisfaction, some areas for adjustments to the existing qualifications were suggested:

- considering further the relationship between internal and external verification;
- exploring the consistency between qualifications from different Awarding Bodies;
- considering the impact of success rate pressures on learner progression. That is, those more at risk of failing may be being denied the opportunity to take a chance at succeeding;
- exploring the contextual relevance of assessment tasks to take account of the wide diversity of learners post-2004;
- exploring the development of Level 3 and 4 ESOL qualifications;
- looking at the ways in which Entry level provision could be expanded to allow for more staged progression through the levels;

- enhancing teacher training for the ESOL sector to support changes to qualifications and related pedagogy.

#### **5.4 Impact on pedagogy**

OFSTED reported that the backwash effect from focussed assessment of speaking and listening has been positive. Centres where speaking and listening were previously not taught extensively were being forced to take it into account because of the single mode focus on speaking and listening. Where previously such centres may have had a focus on grammar through worksheets they were being forced to include more speaking and listening activities in order to prepare learners for the exam.

On the other hand they have also seen evidence of long periods of writing or reading and less integration of skills where provision is split into exam preparation sessions focussing on the individual assessment modes. Thus, where a group is being prepared for the reading exam in term two they may only receive input and practice of reading in that term, in isolation from other skills.

This highlights a need for more training for practitioners to show that exam preparation can be done in the context of real life skills and that skills need to be integrated on courses even when learners are entering for only one mode of assessment at a time.

#### **5.5 Adult ESOL core curriculum**

The link with the curriculum was seen as appropriate and effective in aligning the qualifications to national standards and reflecting good practice in the classroom. It was felt that the National Standards for adult literacy, interpreted through the ESOL core curriculum had led to fit-for-purpose ESOL qualifications.

The decision to put ESOL under the literacy standards was not done without debate at the time and there were arguments for the use of other standards such as the European Common Framework of Reference.

*“Having separate standards would allow more precise descriptions of language skills, allow more relevance to language learning and skills and more easily provide a base for a specialist ESOL curriculum.”*

Breaking the Language Barriers (DfEE:2000)

The qualifications are working well under the umbrella of the literacy standards but this is because of the way that the standards have been interpreted through the curriculum which aligns with the qualifications.

### **5.6 Use of the National Test to assess reading at Levels 1 and 2**

The National Test was seen as culturally inappropriate for ESOL learners; it was felt that it put them at a disadvantage. Interestingly, data from Cambridge ESOL shows a drop in achievement of 10% in Level 1 and Level 2 reading as compared to the other modes at the same level. It was also felt that the National Test does not test a wide enough range of reading skills.

Organisations work to maximise the ways in which funding and support for learners can be used, within the existing system. Consequently learners are only entered for exams where their potential for a pass is high due to the pressure on organisations to keep up their success rates. This has related effects on learner motivation and delays to progression given inflexibility of exam timetables.

At Level 1 and 2, ESOL learners have to take three separate assessments to gain a full qualification: speaking and listening, writing and reading. For the latter, ESOL learners take the national test. This contrasts with the situation for literacy learners in which they only have to take the national test at Level 1 and 2 to gain a full qualification at that level. As the outcomes attract similar funding, there is a temptation for providers to put their ESOL learners in for literacy qualifications at Level 1 and Level 2 so that they only need to sit one exam rather than three.

There was also evidence that learners were being put in for literacy qualifications instead of ESOL due to the introduction of fees for ESOL learners. It wasn't clear from the evaluation if they are being put in just for the qualifications while being taught through ESOL provision or whether they are also being put into literacy rather than ESOL provision.

We know from previous research that there has been some blurring of the boundaries between ESOL and literacy learners as the linguistic diversity in the population continues to increase (Baynham et al:2007). However, the recent increase in numbers of migrant workers from Europe has increased the proportion of ESOL learners who have been highly successful academically in their countries of origin and whose needs are more akin to modern foreign language learners. These learners are not adequately catered for in adult literacy classes as their language development needs are different.

### **5.7 Comparability of assessment outcomes awarding bodies**

In the stakeholder interviews and in discussions with managers and providers there were some concerns about a lack of consistency in application of standards. It was felt that those that were internally assessed were less rigorous than those where the assessment was external. There was also evidence of a belief that learners had more chance of success with certain externally assessed awarding bodies than others.

NATECLA also reported concerns of some of their members that learners who arrive at their institution and hold a particular level qualification from one awarding body are not necessarily at the appropriate level to take a course for the next level if the awarding body is different.

Managers and providers were also concerned about a lack of agreement between Awarding Bodies in recognising each other's units as prior achievements and consistency to this approach in general. This sense of distrust among the awarding bodies was reflected in the stakeholder

interviews and needs to be addressed if the qualifications are to work on the QCF.

Providers across the sample shared stories about their concerns over inconsistencies in language levels being marked and assessed. This calls into question the robustness of the system and adds to the pressures providers face regarding success rates and being able to predict pass rates.

### **5.8 Currency of the qualifications**

The ESOL Skills for Life qualifications have internal currency for providers and learners. This includes offering learners an opportunity, often for the first time, to gain a formal, nationally recognised qualification. However, this value has been shaped by the importance accredited provision has within the system and less by the wider, external currency of the qualifications, although this could be developed further. There was little evidence that the qualifications were recognised outside Skills for Life departments for internal progression. Learner progression routes are unclear and are therefore not necessarily promoted. Learners become de-motivated to progress beyond Entry 3 if they feel the qualifications will not have currency with universities or employers.

Employer awareness of the ESOL Skills for Life qualifications is low. This was felt to be unfortunate as the qualifications are suitable as a basis for work as they give a good basis of language on which to build up job specific language. They also prepare learners in transferable skills, useful for things such as team work and dealing with customers.

A number of stakeholder interviewees mentioned a lack of awareness of the qualifications among Train to Gain brokers as a barrier to greater visibility of the qualifications among employers.

There are clear recommendations on how external currency for the ESOL Skills for Life qualifications could be increased:

- evidence and communicate the realistic ways in which the qualification acts as proxy for other nationally recognised qualifications such as GCSE;
- provide development funds for providers to work internally and across educational institutions to promote the value of the qualifications as access routes to other formal programmes;
- facilitate cross-departmental work between ESOL and vocational teams to increase the internal currency of the ESOL qualifications;
- market information about the qualifications, with evidence on their use by employers and HEIs to providers, HEIs and employers;
- develop and continue to work with employers on their needs and adaptations of the qualifications.

### **5.9 Accessibility**

Organisations work to maximise the ways in which funding and support for learners can be used, within the existing system. There is evidence that learners are only entered for exams where their potential for a pass is high (this has related effects on learner motivation and delays to progression given inflexibility of exam timetables) due to the pressure on organisations to keep up their success rates. Providers act as gatekeepers, often holding people back to maximise success rates. However, this restricts individual choice and is detrimental to individual progression towards higher levels.

We found no evidence that any differences in achievement levels amongst different groups were related to the qualifications.

### **5.10 Functional Skills and the QCF**

The current draft Functional Skills standards for English do not reflect a clearly graded framework for the development of language skills, the process of language learning or the needs of learners with 'spiky profiles' (e.g. strong speakers who are beginner readers and writers). OFSTED has noted that the English Functional Skills qualifications as currently specified are not appropriate for ESOL learners.

The current Functional Skills English qualification is based on a single unit (at each level) which means that it is technically not possible within the QCF to recognise the achievements of a learner at different levels in speaking, listening, reading and writing. This flexibility in the current ESOL qualifications, allowing for learners to be assessed at different levels for different skills, is a much valued feature, allowing assessment to fit learning well.

The approach to assessment methodology within Functional Skills qualifications is prescribed, setting out requirements for assessment based on the integration of different skills within 'task-based' assessment scenarios. Awarding bodies offering Functional Skills qualifications sign up to a standardised set of assessment principles, based on the above design features, which effectively precludes the development of learner-centred approaches to assessment that may vary between different groups of learners at different levels.

The Functional Skills qualifications, as they stand, do not allow the 'spiky profiles' of adult learners to be formally recognised within the QCF, nor the even 'spikier' profiles of ESOL learners. They would also add significantly to the assessment workload of both learners and providers, particularly at Levels 1 and 2.

The adoption of the current Functional Skills qualifications for ESOL could easily mean that levels of achievement be depressed to the lowest common denominator, as learners will only be able to achieve at the level of their lowest language skill (e.g. Entry level 2 reading rather than Level 1 speaking). This will have the effect of making it harder for learners to reach the Level 1 functional threshold.

It could also result in fewer learners being registered for Functional Skills qualifications because providers fear that higher failure rates or lower success rates in comparison to previous years will have an adverse effect on their

performance measures. More resources will be needed to support learners to achieve a Functional Skills qualification at a comparable level to a Skills for Life qualification.

A combination of these factors is likely to result in both increased failure rates, lower achievement rates at particular levels, and higher per capita investment in success than with the current Skills for Life qualifications.

If a transition is to be made to Functional Skills then it would be necessary to develop the current Functional Skills qualifications to make them accessible to adult ESOL learners, available as free-standing qualifications, able to deal with spiky profiles, and levelled appropriately to the development of bi-lingual learners.

Within this process there would be a need for development of the ESOL curriculum to bridge the gap between the Functional Skills standards and qualifications against these standards. As noted above, the ESOL qualifications were developed from the National Standards for adult Literacy but interpreted through the ESOL core curriculum. Through a similar process the current ESOL qualifications could be developed to meet the Functional Skills standards.

However, the existing ESOL Skills for Life qualifications could be unitised and adapted to the QCF. This evaluation of the current ESOL Skills for Life qualifications provides strong evidence of on-going demand for ESOL-specific qualifications that are more flexible and unitised than is presently the case. The QCF provides all the technical features necessary to develop such qualifications and the current ESOL qualifications are highly suitable to be unitised for the QCF.

In either case this revision process should draw on the expertise in language assessment of the ESOL awarding bodies and the experience of ESOL providers in preparing learners for assessment.

## 6. Appendices

### 6.1 Employer Survey Questions

1. How many of your employees are speakers of languages other than English and have English language learning needs?
2. How many of these have English language needs which affect their ability to do their job? because of spoken? Or written? Language?
3. Are you aware of the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) qualifications?
  - *Skills for Life* qualifications (Literacy, ESOL, Numeracy?)
  - ESOL qualifications
  - ESOL for work

Are they suitable for your workplace needs?

4. Do your current hiring practices include screening for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) qualifications?
  - We do not test for English language qualifications / we use in-house testing / we screen for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) qualifications / we do not look for ESOL qualifications at recruitment
  - Have you used any other English language qualifications to recruit e.g. literacy, EFL?
5. Have any of your speakers of other language employees studied to improve their English? And worked towards English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) qualifications during their employment with you?
  - [Sub-question] If yes, where did this learning take place?
  - At a local provider / in-house training
  - Via local union learning rep

- Other (open box)

What English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) qualifications were offered?

Are there any barriers to providing support?

- Time off from work
- Costs for in-house training
- Employee interest
- Numbers of employees needing support
- Lack of relevance to workplace context

6. What would be the priorities for a language learning qualification be:

- health and safety requirements
- With communication (spoken/written) between employees
- With communication (spoken/written) between employees and management
- With employee retention
- Efficiency/productivity

7. Do the current English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) qualifications in your experience address these priorities adequately:

- With health and safety requirements
- With communication (spoken/written) between employees
- With communication (spoken/written) between employees and management
- With employee retention
- Efficiency/productivity

8. Are you aware of the new Functional Skills qualifications?

- If yes, what impact do you think these will have

## 6.2 Stakeholder interview questions

### Range of ESOL qualifications

- Do you think that the range of ESOL Skills for Life qualifications is sufficient to meet the needs of ESOL learners studying in a wide range of contexts? (N.B. 'Qualifications' = either Speaking and Listening only, or all modes Sp/L + R+W)

### Levels and skills covered by the qualifications

- Do you think that the levels and skills covered by the qualifications are adequate?
- How closely aligned do you think the qualifications are with the core curriculum?
- To what degree do the ESOL Skills for Life qualifications allow for supporting best practice in ESOL pedagogy? In what ways?

### Assessment methods-

- To what degree do current assessment requirements meet the needs of learners? Are there any gaps in the current assessment requirements?
- Could you comment on:
  - the validity and impact of the exam requirements and format use of the national test for reading
  - differences between awarding bodies

### Exam Administration

- Can you describe the transition between the-use of qualifications with ESOL learners up until August 2004 and the new ESOL Skills for Life qualifications (post August 2004)?
- Do you feel that there are any issues with current arrangements for administration of the exams?
- To what degree have the new qualifications increased external validation?

### Funding and fees policy

- Do you feel the recommendation on guided learning hours (the notional guided learning hours for an average learner following an ESOL Skills

for Life qualification are estimated to be a minimum of 100 hours per mode per level. QCA) is achievable? I.e. that a learner could achieve a qualification having progressed by a full level from attainment at initial assessment?

- (*For examining bodies*) What hours do you currently expect providers to allocate on their learning programmes?

### **QCF**

- How do you think the QCF will impact on the uptake and impact of ESOL qualifications?
- Are there any specific issues you see related to the credit based model suggested by the QCF?
  - Unitization / Spiky profile
- Do you feel that the ESOL qualifications are gaining in currency in education/ employment / citizenship?

### **Policy**

- How do you see the relationship between the ESOL (Skills for Life ) qualifications and:
  - Skills for work
  - World Class Skills
  - Train to Gain
  - Citizenship/social cohesion

### **Functional Skills**

To what degree do you feel Functional Skills will impact on ESOL provision - in what ways?

### 6.3 Interview schedules

#### Discussion guide for QCA ESOL depth interviews with senior managers

Focus/timing	Discussion
<b>Introduction</b>  <b>5 min</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aims of discussion               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ To explore the impact of the ESOL qualifications on providers, learners and employers.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• MRS Confidentiality agreement</li> <li>• Recording</li> <li>• Use of transcripts/quotes</li> <li>• Provider details (name, type, size and location)</li> <li>• Respondent background               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Role</li> <li>○ Length of time in the institution/organisation</li> <li>○ Length of involvement in ESOL</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>The current ESOL offer</b>	
<b>20 mins</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What ESOL qualifications are offered at your institution? <i>Probe: numbers of learners, teachers, on-line and satellite provision, embedded provision</i></li> <li>• Is the ESOL dept part of the SFL dept?</li> <li>• What proportion of your ESOL learners are studying toward the new ESOL qualifications?</li> <li>• What funding streams do you draw down to support your ESOL provision? <i>Probe: Train to Gain funding</i></li> <li>• To what degree do targets impact on courses offered</li> <li>• How strong is ESOL learner retention, completion and achievement at this organisation?</li> <li>• Can you describe the kinds of ESOL learners you serve at your institution? <i>Probe: mix between migrant workers, settled community members, refugees; changes in learner body since 2004; impact of changes in funding eligibility</i></li> <li>• To what degree do their learning goals differ? <i>Probe: employment goals, family support goals, general communication goals</i></li> <li>• Do you run any employer led ESOL qualifications? Any citizenship specific programmes?</li> <li>• To what degree does your current offer meet the needs of learners? Are there any gaps in the current offer? <i>Probe: entry levels, short courses, unaccredited courses, flexibility in scheduling, flexibility in delivery style, levels, curriculum content, courses long enough to learn a language</i></li> <li>• To what degree do current assessment requirements meet the needs of learners? Are there any gaps in the current assessment requirements? <i>Probe: wash-back, spiky profiles, exam dates, practitioner assessment</i></li> <li>• Can you describe the transition between the old ESOL qualifications (post August 2004) and the new ESOL qualifications? <i>Probe: issues with funding and assessment alignment, alignment with the Skills for Life qualifications in Literacy and Numeracy</i></li> </ul>
<b>Impact of ESOL qualifications</b>	
<b>20 mins</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To what degree do you think ESOL learners benefit from being classed as <i>Skills for Life</i> learners? What are the drawbacks?</li> <li>• <i>Probe: policy attention, skill/financial position, similarity to Literacy and</i></li> </ul>

	<p><i>Numeracy development/learners – or language teaching, separate standards, relationship to EFL, notion of bilingual/multilingual development</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can you describe the impact of the new ESOL qualifications on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Your organisation</li> <li>○ Your teachers/delivery</li> <li>○ Your learners</li> </ul> </li> <li>• To what degree have the new qualifications increased external validation? What impacts has this move had on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Your organisation</li> <li>○ Your teachers/delivery</li> <li>○ Your learners</li> </ul> </li> <li>• To what degree do the new qualifications allow for supporting best practice in ESOL pedagogy? In what ways?  <i>Probe: learning in chunks vs repetition, learning in groups, ESOL literacy in addition to English as a additional language, balancing specialist language needs of vocational programmes</i> </li> <li>• To what degree do you feel the current ESOL qualifications are valued: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ By learners, and in what ways?</li> <li>○ By employers, and in what ways?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• What current awarding bodies do you work with? What has been the rationale for this use? What works well about this system? What doesn't? (e.g. enrolment procedures etc)  <i>Probe: historical choices, employer currency, industry recognition, rationalisation across the institution, language levels of tasks set by ABs</i> </li> </ul>
<b>The Qualification Credit Framework</b>	
<p><b>10 mins</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are you aware of the QCF? (<i>If not, researcher to explain</i>)</li> <li>• Do you feel the recommendation on guided learning hours (300 for level progression) is achievable? Are there any specific issues in supporting this?</li> <li>• To what degree is horizontal progression important for ESOL learners? To what degree with the QCF address this?  <i>Probe: short courses, learner progression and persistence, employment demands, technical language demands</i> </li> <li>• How do you think the QCF will impact on the uptake and impact of ESOL qualifications? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ From the perspectives of providers</li> <li>○ From the perspectives of learners</li> <li>○ From the perspectives of employers</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Are there any specific issues you see related to the credit based model suggested by the QCF?  <i>Probe: funding and assessment alignment, issues with Awarding Bodies</i> </li> <li>• To what degree do you feel Functional Skills will impact on ESOL provision – in what ways?</li> </ul>
<b>Sum Up</b>	
<p><b>5 min</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Summarise</li> <li>• Gain permission to re-contact (either in relation to this research or future research)</li> <li>• Thank &amp; close</li> </ul>

## Discussion guide for QCA ESOL depth interviews with ESOL tutors

Focus/timing	Discussion
<b>Introduction</b>  <b>5 min</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aims of discussion               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ To explore the impact of the ESOL qualifications on providers, learners and employers.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• MRS Confidentiality agreement</li> <li>• Recording</li> <li>• Use of transcripts/quotes</li> <li>• Provider details (name, type, size and location)</li> <li>• Respondent background               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Role</li> <li>○ Length of time in the institution/organisation</li> <li>○ Length of time teaching ESOL</li> <li>○ Contract type</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><i>Probe: full-time / part-time (fractional or hourly paid)</i></p>
<b>The current ESOL offer</b>	
<b>20 mins</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What ESOL qualifications are offered at your institution? <i>Probe: numbers of learners, teachers, on-line and satellite provision, embedded provision</i></li> <li>• Is the ESOL dept part of the SFL dept?</li> <li>• Can you describe the kinds of ESOL learners you teach? <i>Probe: mix between migrant workers, settled community members, refugees</i></li> <li>• To what degree do their learning goals differ? <i>Probe: employment goals, family support goals, general communication goals</i></li> <li>• Does your organisation run any employer led ESOL qualifications? What roles do employers play in this provision? Do you teach on any of these courses?</li> <li>• Does your organisation run any citizenship specific programmes? Can you describe this provision? Do you teach on any of these courses?</li> <li>• To what degree do the ESOL courses you teach on meet the needs of learners? Are there any gaps? <i>Probe: entry levels, short courses, unaccredited courses, flexibility in scheduling, flexibility in delivery style, levels, curriculum content, courses long enough to learn a language</i></li> <li>• To what degree do current assessment requirements meet the needs of learners? Are there any gaps in the current assessment requirements? <i>Probe: wash-back, spiky profiles, exam dates, practitioner assessment</i></li> <li>• [for those in post at this org in 2004] Can you describe the transition between the old ESOL qualifications (post August 2004) and the new ESOL qualifications? <i>Probe: issues with funding and assessment alignment, alignment with the Skills for Life qualifications in Literacy and Numeracy</i></li> </ul>
<b>Impact of ESOL qualifications</b>	
<b>20 mins</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To what degree do you think ESOL learners benefit from being classed as <i>Skills for Life</i> learners? What are the drawbacks?</li> <li>• <i>Probe: policy attention, skill/financial position, similarity to Literacy and Numeracy development/learners – or language teaching, separate standards, relationship to EFL, notion of bilingual/multilingual development</i></li> <li>• Can you describe the impact of the new ESOL qualifications on:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Your organisation</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Your teaching</li> <li>○ Your learners</li> <li>● To what degree have the new qualifications increased external validation?</li> <li>● What impacts has this move had on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Your organisation</li> <li>○ Your teaching and assessment</li> <li>○ Your learners</li> </ul> </li> <li>● To what degree do the new qualifications allow for supporting best practice in ESOL pedagogy? In what ways? <i>Probe: learning in chunks vs repetition, learning in groups, ESOL literacy in addition to English as a additional language, balancing specialist language needs of vocational programmes</i></li> <li>● To what degree do the new qualifications allow for attention to Listening and Speaking, to Reading and to Writing?</li> <li>● To what degree do you find the new qualifications relate to the curriculum? Does the current ESOL curriculum meet the needs of your learners?</li> <li>● Can you describe your current assessment methods? <i>Probe: formative and summative assessment and ILPs</i></li> <li>● Can you describe the progression routes within your organisation and the degree to which these are suitable for your learners?</li> <li>● To what degree do you feel the current ESOL qualifications are valued: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ By learners, and in what ways?</li> <li>○ By employers, and in what ways?</li> </ul> </li> <li>● What current awarding bodies do you work with? How effective are your current external verification processes?</li> </ul>
<b>The Qualification Credit Framework</b>	
<b>10 mins</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Are you aware of the QCF? <i>(if not, researcher to explain)</i></li> <li>● What is your view on the impact of unitisation on ESOL pedagogy and delivery?</li> <li>● Do you feel the recommendation on guided learning hours (300 for level progression) is achievable? Are there any specific issues in supporting this?</li> <li>● To what degree is horizontal progression important for ESOL learners? To what degree with the QCF address this? <i>Probe: short courses, learner progression and persistence, employment demands, technical language demands</i></li> <li>● How do you think the QCF will impact the uptake and impact of ESOL qualifications? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ From the perspectives of providers</li> <li>○ From the perspectives of learners</li> <li>○ From the perspectives of employers</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Are there any specific issues you see related to the credit based model suggested by the QCF? <i>Probe: funding and assessment alignment, issues with Awarding Bodies</i></li> <li>● To what degree do you feel Functional Skills will impact on ESOL provision – in what ways?</li> </ul>
<b>Sum Up</b>	
<b>5 min</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Summarise</li> <li>● Gain permission to re-contact (either in relation to this research or future research)</li> <li>● Thank &amp; close</li> </ul>

## Discussion guide for QCA ESOL focus group with ESOL learners

Focus/timing	Discussion
<b>Introduction</b>  <b>10 min</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aims of discussion               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ To explore the impact of the ESOL qualifications on providers, learners and employers.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• MRS Confidentiality agreement</li> <li>• Recording</li> <li>• Use of transcripts/quotes</li> <li>• Introductions</li> <li>• Respondent background               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Country of origin</li> <li>○ Length of time in the UK</li> <li>○ Reason for move to the UK</li> <li>○ Length of time in the institution/organisation</li> <li>○ Level of course currently enrolled on</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>The current reasons for study</b>	
<b>15 mins</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What were your reasons to study? Why is studying ESOL important to you? <i>Probe: improving language skills, getting a job, helping family, other</i></li> <li>• Do you study full-time or part-time?</li> <li>• Why did you choose this institution?</li> <li>• Are you studying for a qualification? <i>Probe: levels</i></li> <li>• Have you completed any other qualifications – ESOL or otherwise?</li> <li>• How long have you been studying?</li> <li>• How many of you are working? What kinds of jobs are you doing? Part-time or full-time?</li> <li>• How many of you were working in your home countries? What kinds of jobs were you doing?</li> <li>• What are your long term job aspirations in the UK? What are your other goals related to developing your English language skills?</li> </ul>
<b>Perceived impact of ESOL qualifications</b>	
<b>20 mins</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why is studying ESOL important to you? <i>Probe: personal satisfaction, finding a job, developing language skills, helping children, other</i></li> <li>• Do you think your ESOL qualification is important? In what ways/to whom? <i>Probe: personal satisfaction, finding a job, others</i></li> <li>• Do you think ESOL qualifications are important to employers? To get a job or to get promoted?</li> <li>• Do you feel the topics you study are important / relevant to your life? To getting a job? To becoming a citizen? Would other topics be more relevant?</li> <li>• Do you think what you have learned on your ESOL course will be important/relevant in the workplace?</li> <li>• Do you feel it is important to be tested? Are there other ways in which you would like to be assessed?</li> <li>• Do you feel it is important to complete the course and get the qualification?</li> <li>• Do you feel you have add an opportunity to provide feedback on the changes to ESOL qualifications? In the future would you like to be able to provide feedback?</li> </ul>
<b>Future progression and persistence</b>	

<b>10 mins</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Will you continue to study after you complete this qualification? What kind of course? Why?</li> <li>• Would anything hold you back from continuing to study? Do you feel you are supported to continue studying? If yes, by whom?</li> </ul> <p><i>Probe: family, institution, teacher, employer</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Will you look for a (new) job when you are done studying?</li> </ul>
<b>Sum Up</b>	
<b>5 min</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Summarise</li> <li>• Gain permission to re-contact (either in relation to this research or future research)</li> <li>• Thank &amp; close</li> </ul>

## 6.4 Evidence review

December 2008

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 Context

- i. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and the Skills for Life Strategy Unit required Awarding Bodies to develop new qualifications appropriate to the needs of adults living and working in the UK, and fully aligned to the standards set out in the Adult English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) Core Curriculum, and within the National Qualifications Framework (NQF).
- ii. The qualifications were designed to reflect the skills, knowledge and understanding in English needed by people wishing to live, work and study in Britain (LSC Fact Sheet 4, 2004).
- iii. These new Certificates in ESOL Skills for Life were introduced in August 2004, although not all qualifications or awarding bodies (ABs) had been accredited by that date.
- iv. The qualifications replaced both the “legacy” ESOL qualifications, which became ineligible for LSC funding for new learners on 1 August 2004, and the “proxy” ESOL qualifications, which were no longer eligible for LSC funding from 1 January 2005 (LSC Fact Sheet 6, 2005).
- v. Full ESOL qualifications at Entry 3, Level 1 or Level 2 contribute towards the government’s basic skills targets. There is an expectation that the majority (80% and over) of LSC-funded ESOL learners will be working towards these new nationally-recognised qualifications.
- vi. In September 2007, new ESOL for Work qualifications were launched. These offer shorter, more work-related English programmes and are currently available at

Entry Level 3 and Level 1. These qualifications are separate to the ESOL delivered under the Skills for Life family of qualifications and are not considered in the following report.

- vii. + citizenship context?

## 1.2 QCF

- i. An important element of the current context is the introduction of the new Qualifications and Curriculum Framework (QCF) which will replace the National Qualifications Framework (NQF).
- ii. The QCF will permit the development of qualifications in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) that reflect the varied abilities and demands of learners whose community language is not English. In particular, ESOL qualifications in the QCF will allow learners to accumulate credits from individual units towards a qualification. This process of credit accumulation would allow qualifications to be offered to ESOL learners with some or all of the following features:
- iii. Individual units at different levels could be combined in a single qualification. Providing a majority of credits are gained at the level of the qualification, other credits could be achieved at the level below.
- iv. Learners would therefore be able to demonstrate achievement at different levels in different areas of skill and knowledge. For example, a learner might achieve credits at Level Two in Speaking and Listening Skills, but at Level One in Writing Skills.
- v. In theory, individual units could be offered on a 'stand alone' basis (though there may be difficulties in securing LSC funding for such provision). So learners could 'dip their toes' in a short course based on a unit in (eg) Reading Skills before deciding whether or not to build up further credits in other units towards a qualification.
- vi. Units within the QCF are designed to be free-standing. This means that units can be used in more than one qualification. So, for example, units that assess

Speaking and Listening Skills could be embedded within qualifications in vocational areas or in wider Citizenship or Employability programmes.

- vii. Credits can be transferred between awarding bodies in the QCF. An ESOL learner that began their study at one centre could transfer credits to another centre that offered ESOL qualifications, even if the second centre was registered with another awarding body.
- viii. The QCF regulations permit more flexibility in assessment methods than the current NQF. This means that, with the support of an awarding body, centres could devise assessment activities and assessment tools appropriate to individual ESOL learners (or to particular groups of learners) based on the same unit, and all approved assessments would lead to the award of credits.
- ix. All credits awarded by all awarding bodies for all units in the QCF are entered into a standard 'Learner Record'. The format of credit awards is therefore identical across all qualifications in the QCF, creating an important symbol of equal esteem within the Framework.
- x. In summary, the QCF offers a range of design features and approaches to regulation that will permit the development of very flexible qualifications that can offer a wide range of routes to achievement that are responsive to the needs of individual learners. It remains to be seen whether other factors (for example the setting of government targets or the funding methods of LSC) inhibit or facilitate the potential of the QCF to support ESOL qualifications appropriate to the needs of learners.

### 1.3 Aims

This report has three functions within the wider NRDC evaluation of the ESOL Skills for Life qualifications:

- i. to summarise relevant research from the field
- ii. to aid the development of the interview schedules that will be used in fieldwork
- iii. to rationalise the analytic framework for the project's case studies

### 1.3 Limitations of desk research

As the Certificates in ESOL Skills for Life were not introduced until 2004, the published research on ESOL generally makes only limited and incidental references to these qualifications. There are no substantive studies of the new qualifications and even recently published ESOL research is often based on fieldwork carried out in the period prior to August 2004.

Although such sources do not offer an evaluation of the new qualifications, they do offer guidance on the criteria that are integral to any evaluation, including, of course, the considerations that were brought to bear during the design phase of the new qualifications themselves.

### 1.4 A note on sources

From the period post-August 2004, four larger reports on ESOL provision have commented on the new ESOL qualifications.

- i. *The KPMG Review of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)*, KPMG 2005.

The KPMG review was commissioned by the Skills for Life Strategy Unit and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) in order to determine current practices and issues in ESOL and make recommendations on how the planning and funding of ESOL provision might be more effectively managed in the future. The review was conducted by desk research, fieldwork interviews with further education colleges and local LSCs, and focus groups with ESOL learners.

This review does not evaluate the new ESOL qualifications but does refer to changes to funding associated with the new qualifications and the likely effects of these changes on

ESOL provision. On the introduction of the new qualifications, the review notes that many providers were insufficiently prepared to introduce the certificates in September 2004, and that this lack of readiness had reduced the impact of the new qualifications in the 2004-2005 academic year. (This interpretation is disputed by Frame [unpublished b].)

The review noted that the scale of change in moving from a picture where 60% of provision was not externally validated (“other provision”) to one where, eventually, some 80% of ESOL provision would be externally validated, presented a significant challenge.

- ii. *‘More than a language’ NIACE Committee of Inquiry on English for Speakers of Other Languages, chaired by Derek Grover CB. NIACE, 2006.*

“More than a language” was intended as a fresh look at the issues in ESOL provision. Its recommendations were based on evidence submitted to the committee, on written documents, and on committee meeting discussions. These recommendations were designed to address a situation the committee viewed as giving “serious cause for concern”. Despite substantial investment in ESOL, the committee concluded that provision was too patchy or too poor in quality to meet the needs of the growing number of people demanding ESOL and that funding was not always well-targeted.

The NIACE report voiced concerns from the sector about the new ESOL qualifications. Although it was too early to undertake an assessment of the qualifications and the framework itself had been widely welcomed, the report noted that some worries were already being expressed about their suitability.

In particular, the report drew attention to both the promotion of the qualifications (to learners and employers, and in education) and discrepancies in funding structures as areas in need of further attention. The report also flagged up discrepancies between the assessment requirements of literacy and ESOL qualifications and asked for more guidance on how best to implement the Individual Learning Plan (ILP) approach in the ESOL context, taking account of ESOL pedagogy and the needs and capabilities of English language learners.

- iii. *A Common Language: making English work for London*. Demos, 2008.

Duncan O' Leary's recent report for the think tank Demos explores policies that can encourage and support people to learn English in London. The findings also have implications for national policy. This research was based on interviews with over 40 ESOL learners, a discussion group with people not accessing ESOL, three expert seminars, and a desk-based review.

With reference to the ESOL qualifications, O'Leary argues that there is a mismatch between long ESOL courses that culminate in full, traditional qualifications and what individual learners or employers are looking for. As a result "the learning and employment systems struggle to work together as effectively as they need to" as the former is focused on qualifications and the latter on what it takes to help someone into work.

This leads O'Leary to argue in favour of a credit-based framework for ESOL whereby "learners could access public funding for part of an overall qualification, rather than having to sign up for a whole course which they believe will not suit their needs". More flexibility would help create more demand and facilitate progression.

This report also recommends that learners are asked for feedback about courses, teaching, achievement and whether their needs are being met.

- iv. *ESOL in the post-compulsory learning and skills sector: an evaluation*, OFSTED 2008

Published in October 2008, this evaluation of the quality of ESOL provision is based on visits by OFSTED inspectors to 14 further education colleges, 8 adult and community learning providers, 5 independent work-based learning providers, and 1 learndirect provider between September 2007 and March 2008. In addition, the report analyses responses to a survey questionnaire received from 114 colleges and 30 adult and community learning providers.

The OFSTED evaluation notes that in 2006-7 the large majority of ESOL learners (some 70% in colleges and nearly all learners with private training providers) worked toward ESOL qualifications and the national success rate in this period was 64%. It judges that providers “successfully and rapidly” (p. 5) managed the introduction of the new Certificates in ESOL Skills for Life and singles out for particular praise the greater emphasis now placed on developing learners’ speaking skills in response to the listening and speaking qualifications.

## 2. The policy context

Key question 1: how true is the fit between the new ESOL qualifications and the suite of Skills for Life qualifications?

Key question 2: are ESOL learners best-served by being classed as Skills for Life learners?

The inclusion of the subject of ESOL in the Skills for Life strategy along with literacy and numeracy is easy to understand. Competency in the English language is a basic skill for living and working in the United Kingdom. As the NIACE report, “*More than a language...*”, summarises, English language skills are essential for work, vital in avoiding poverty, a recognised route to citizenship, and a way of “contribute to and at the same time shape the communities in which we live and work” (2006, p. 3).

Undoubtedly, the Skills for Life strategy has brought new status and increased resources to ESOL provision in England. Latest figures from the National Audit Office show that Department spending on ESOL tripled between 2001 and 2004 and in 2006-7 it was just under £300 million (almost a third of the Skills for Life budget).

Pam Frame argues the new qualifications have brought considerable benefits:

For the first time there are qualifications designed with UK-based adult learners as their target candidates. ESOL providers are not having to beg, borrow and compromise with qualifications designed primarily for international EFL or native speaker/ literacy learners. The unitisation allows for the ‘spiky’ profile of so many

learners which presented a real problem when using many earlier qualifications.  
(Frame unpublished b)

Such success is a partial explanation for the fact that demand for ESOL courses continues to outstrip supply, particularly in London (NAO, 2008). As a consequence, universal entitlement to free ESOL classes has been stopped.

Yet this change in itself indicates that, in policy terms, ESOL is not always the “same” as the other Skills for Life subjects of adult literacy and numeracy. For example, as Duncan O’Leary points out, the new funding arrangements mean that ESOL entitlements are constructed according to financial position, whereas other Skills for Life entitlements are based on levels of prior achievement. The correlation between low skills and low earnings is not as clear for ESOL as it is for literacy and numeracy. Qualified people with higher-paying jobs can still be in need of ESOL learning and some ESOL learners enjoy a higher spending power in the way that literacy and numeracy learners do only very rarely (O’Leary, 2008).

This possible dissonance between the principles of Skills for Life and the ESOL context has an impact in several areas: “Pedagogy, funding regimes, targets, and standards and qualifications which are, quite properly, designed mainly for literacy and numeracy learners are being applied in an ESOL context to which they are not entirely appropriate” (NIACE, 2006). Indeed, the NIACE report concludes that this issue underpins a number of the difficulties with ESOL provision and that adjustments need to be made to the infrastructure and delivery to meet the needs of English language learners. In a similar vein, Duncan O’Leary argues that ESOL funding should follow the same set of principles as literacy and numeracy provision, without necessarily having the same set of specific arrangements (O’Leary, 2008).

Turning specifically to the new ESOL qualifications, this argument has implications in the areas of infrastructure and delivery. How are learners served by mapping the ESOL standards to the Skills for Life standards? Does including ESOL in Skills for Life compromise the teaching of English as a *language*? In other words, if ESOL is “more than a language; it is both a language and a skill for life” (NIACE, 2006), is it better to

teach ESOL as a language or a skill for life and which qualifications framework better supports this?

These questions are not new and stretch back to the design of the strategy itself. At that time, some maintained that “having separate standards would allow more precise descriptions of language skills, allow more relevance to language learning and more easily provide a base for a specialist ESOL curriculum’. Others, on the other hand, clearly considered ESOL should continue to be subsumed under literacy, arguing that ESOL provision had always been ‘equated with low status and value’ and ‘that separate standards might perpetuate this marginalisation’”(Williams & Williams, 2007).

*Breaking the Language Barriers* (DfEE 2000), the 2005 KPMG review and a report by CfBT (Williams & Williams, 2007) all recommend that ESOL should be seen as a language teaching operation, and distinct from adult literacy and numeracy provision. For Williams and Williams the separation made between ESOL and EFL (that is, English as a Foreign Language, typically taught in the UK to students from abroad) has been an “unhelpful distinction” which has ceased to be relevant, particularly given the changing composition of immigrant population after the accession countries joined the EU in 2004.

The Skills for Life strategy has had implications for EFL teaching in England. The KPMG review concluded that in choosing courses learners were largely guided by providers, and that because of funding for the new ESOL qualifications, learners who might be better suited to EFL courses were being placed on ESOL courses (KPMG, 2005). A report on ESOL in London from 2005 concluded that there is “more that unites than divides these two branches of learning” and that there should be scope for “a pick and mix’ modular approach that meets the spectrum of learner needs and aspirations” (JH Consulting, 2005). Baynham et. al. (2007) contend that the “pedagogic distinction between English as a Foreign Language and ESOL has increasingly less credibility.” (Prior to the introduction of the new qualifications and the ending of LSC funding for EU EFL learners, some colleges transformed EFL teachers into ESOL teachers at short notice, with implications for teacher-training in Skills for Life [Frame, unpublished b].)

In essence, evaluating the suitability of ESOL qualifications as Skills for Life qualifications turns on the extent to which these qualifications are focused on and tailored to individual

ESOL learners. As the report for Demos argues, “the diversity of English language learners means that arrangements for English language learning may not be exactly the same as other areas of learning that fall under the Skills for Life banner” (O’Leary, 2008).

Earlier reports by KPMG and NIACE suggested potential problems where ESOL was regarded by local LSCs as a “sub-area” of Skills for Life (KPMG, 2005) instead of a “distinct element of the wider policy” (NIACE, 2006) and that, where necessary, adjustments should be made to infrastructure and delivery to meet the needs of English language learners (NIACE, 2006).

Finally, in a paper written for the NIACE ESOL enquiry, Pam Frame argues that the strategy for ESOL provision may have been undermined by a lack of a coherent and consistent message and communication problems between the host of interested agencies.

### **3. Range**

The ESOL qualifications are based around 3 modes: (1) Speaking and Listening; (2) Reading, and (3) Writing. Qualifications are accredited as “single mode” or “all modes”. “All modes” qualifications structured on units of speaking and listening assess a learner’s ability to “listen and respond”, “speak to communicate”, and “engage in discussion”, and in reading and writing, engage at “text level”, “sentence level” and “word level”. At Levels 1 and 2 the ESOL “all modes” qualifications enable the learner to achieve across units of Speaking and Listening, Writing, and Reading. The Reading Unit is identical to the free-standing Certificate in Adult Literacy (“the national reading test”) but is not an ESOL qualification. The single mode qualification is solely in Sp/L.

If a learner achieves, for example, Writing at Entry level 1 and Reading at Entry level 2 with Speaking and Listening at Entry level 3, the learner is awarded a full “all modes” qualification at the lowest level. The learner can then upgrade the Reading and/or Writing units (within a 3 year period) to achieve a higher level overall qualification.

Awarding Bodies can credit units that a learner has achieved through a different Awarding Body. There have been issues here between ABs over formal agreements to recognise each other's units as prior achievements (Frame unpublished b).

According to the most recent OFSTED report on ESOL, a large majority of ESOL learners worked towards recognised ESOL Skills for Life qualifications in 2006–7. This represented a major shift from the national position three years earlier, when more than 60% of learners worked towards internally accredited outcomes (OFSTED, 2008). OFSTED found that providers had a clear framework of qualifications to offer with outcomes explicitly cross-referenced to national standards on which to base their programme and course planning (OFSTED, 2008).

This evaluation also judged that where ESOL provision was effective, learners made substantial gains in their fluency and confidence in speaking English, and in their ability to understand the spoken language. Many learners attending general ESOL classes had significantly improved their job or promotion prospects.

It is important to point out that the infrastructure of coding and MIS has not facilitated the easy implementation of these qualifications or the monitoring of achievement (Frame unpublished b). OFSTED inspectors found that there were still many problems with the reporting and analysis of achievement, which impeded clear judgements on success rates (2008, p. 27)

Key question 1: do standardised courses reflect and support the huge breadth and diversity of learner starting points and goals?

Key question 2: do the requirements acknowledge adequately that it takes time to master a language?

Key question 3: are the qualifications flexible enough to deliver learning in 'chunks' that are manageable for some of the most 'mobile' of learner populations (JH Consulting, 2005)?

### 3.1 Courses

The qualifications are based on the National Standards for Adult Literacy as set out in the Adult ESOL Core Curriculum. The levels offer parity with the achievement of English native speakers in, for example, adult literacy qualifications, or in key skills/GCSE English at Levels 1 and 2.

The OFSTED evaluation found that the most successful courses at meeting learners' needs were those operating at Entry levels 1 and 2. It recommended that the LSC "ensure that sufficient provision continues to be offered at levels closely matched to local need, particularly at entry levels" after finding that the provision most in demand was that at lower levels.

This is in tune with much of the literature on ESOL provision, where the main concern is the need to protect entry level courses. For example, the NIACE enquiry recommended a review of the effects of targets to protect entry-level courses, courses it identified as "important stepping stones to progression".

The Campaign for Learning report on ESOL argues that although it is hard to find funding for courses that are short non-accredited, these courses may be more appropriate for learners new to learning or with very chaotic home lives (Skaliotis, 2007, p. 20) Duncan O'Leary went further by arguing that "the government should introduce a measure for entry-level courses if they are going to prove hard to fund otherwise (O'Leary, 2008).

Research by the Campaign for Learning expressed concern that ESOL learners on vocational courses often did not have the language skills required to complete the course successfully and that Entry Level 3 and below many employers might consider the level of skills too low for employment (Skaliotis, 2007: p. 51).

O'Leary's report for Demos advocates a more holistic needs assessment of each individual than is currently available. This process would assess (a) people's level of English, (b) their literacy in their native language – a proxy for this would be to determine the number of years of education an individual has undertaken, (c) their eligibility for fee remission, and (d) their motives for learning and the mode of provision they would prefer (O'Leary, 2008).

The KPMG review noted that, prior to the introduction of the new qualifications, the largest percentage of ESOL enrolments was for short courses, and that this indicated there might be a problem with ESOL learner retention (KPMG, 2005). This is expanded upon in both *“More than a language ...”* and a report by the Campaign for Learning on English Language needs in the workplace. Both these suggest that the high drop out rate for ESOL learners may be due to learners who would be better suited to EFL courses choosing to do ESOL courses because these are free (Skaliotis, 2007, p. 13). This is now out of date as ESOL means-tested

### 3.2 Language Learning

Some research on ESOL provision draws attention to differences between learning another language and other subjects, and how the provision on offer can work against both ESOL learning and ESOL pedagogy. Baynham et. al (2007) argue that as language development comes through the “constant restructuring” of language and as teachers support this through repetition and recycling over a considerable period, “cutting up learning into short, bite-size modules, as required on some ESOL courses, shows no understanding of these second language-learning processes” (Baynham et. al., 2007). For Duncan O’Leary, pace of learning is vital for those lacking literacy skills – “learning to read and write through the English language is likely to take considerably longer than simply learning a foreign language as a well-educated individual” (O’Leary, 2008).

Case studies conducted for the LLU+ ESOL Accreditation Handbook show that one issue is that of specialist language, which learners need for their courses and their vocational exams, but which do not feature in the new qualifications. Teachers, therefore, have to balance this need against the more general language used in the “general” English topics in the Skills for Life qualification projects and exams (Frame et al, 2008).

### 3.3 Flexibility

Unitised programmes are designed for adults not intending to achieve, or not able to commit to, the whole qualification at the point of signing their learning agreement (LSC Fact Sheet 6, 2005)

Each unit at each ESOL level is based on a minimum of 100 guided learning hours. Therefore this equates to a minimum of 300 guided learning hours for an average learner to progress a whole level across all modes (Frame, 2008). There is a mismatch between this guidance and the part-time delivery of provision across an academic year of 30 weeks (Frame, unpublished b). Learners need more hours to achieve, but there are already more potential learners that either provision or funding can support.

Duncan O’Leary’s report for Demos advocates a credit framework for ESOL courses, to provide both the option of shorter courses and a platform for progression (O’Leary, 2008). This flexibility, he argues, would help personalise courses and contribute to bridging the gap between the education and employment systems. Courses and qualifications need to provide progression, but they also need to be fitted around learners, rather than vice versa (O’Leary, 2008)

The danger with targets based on outputs is that they become conflated with outcomes when the two are not the same thing. For example, policies focus solely on full qualifications to achieve central targets, when what some people really need are short courses of learning – perhaps credits, which do not add up to full qualifications. The danger is that too narrow a focus on outputs gets in the way of outcomes (O’Leary, 2008)

## **4. Delivery**

### **4.1 Providers**

A report on ESOL in London from 2005 suggested that providers might require further support to understand how best to implement the new qualifications so that they meet the needs of learners. The report identified a trend for providers to have learners take whole qualification “‘in one go’, in order to reach targets and for providers to draw down funding and/or achieve required success rates” (JH Consulting, 2005).

The recent OFSTED evaluation concluded that, overall, “providers maintained satisfactory outcome rates during the significant shift from mainly internally accredited achievement to Skills for Life qualifications”. (2008, p. 11) Inspectors found that managers were “acutely aware” of the need to raise levels of achievement in Skills for Life ESOL qualifications, and prioritised this in the guidance they gave to ESOL curriculum managers and staff (p. 26).

#### 4.2 Teachers

Research by the Department of Education and Skills investigated the attitudes of tutors towards the new Skills for Life tests. Only half of ESOL tutors thought the tests were “positive” and they also felt that the tests might alienate learners (Williams & Williams, 2007).

Research with teachers has also uncovered concerns about “washback”, that is, about the effect on classroom practice of exam requirements, including the teaching of exam technique and study skills. Some teachers expressed fear that their teaching would need to be exam-orientated rather than meeting student needs, and focus on exam skills rather than language skills (Frame et al, 2008).

#### 4.3 Learners

The recent OFSTED evaluation of ESOL provision concluded that the new ESOL qualifications had “motivated many learners to succeed” (2008, p. 10). This supports earlier research by the Department of Education and Skills which found that 75 per cent of students said they enjoyed the new Skills for Life tests, found them easy to read and understand, and gained a sense of achievement from their qualification (Williams & Williams, 2007). OFSTED judged that the “test-based qualifications represented a greater challenge to learners [than internally-accredited tests], requiring them to demonstrate their skills to a consistent national standard against objective criteria under examination conditions” (OFSTED, 2008).

Research by NRDC suggests that for some learners, the introduction of the new qualifications has not removed ESOL’s marginal status, in that to them the subject does

not hold an equal footing with literacy. Simpson et al., argue that in some providers, literacy is regarded as the feeder for GCSE English, meaning that learners “progress” from ESOL to literacy. Learners can therefore think that if they are placed in a literacy class they have solved their English *speaking* problems. For many learners, ESOL has a marginal status in comparison to literacy – some negative associations are attached to it that are not so associated with Basic Skills classes. Learners want to identify with the mainstream and this means that bilingual learners are drawn to literacy provision over ESOL (Simpson et al, 2008).

## 5. Diversity of learner body

A diversity of learners means a diversity of drivers, a variety of starting points, needs, motivations, aspirations and end goals.

The recent OFSTED report highlighted not only the diversity of the ESOL learner body but also the shifting diversity of that body. Questionnaire data for 2006-7 showed that in FE colleges the largest group of learners (40% of enrolments) was recent migrant workers and the settled community made up around 30%. In adult and community learning the settled community was the largest group at around 50% and migrant workers represented 30%. The proportion of refugees and asylum seekers in both settings was just under 15%. This is dramatic shift from 2001 and even as recently as 2004-5, ILR data from the LSC suggested that migrant workers accounted for only around 4% of ESOL learners (OFSTED, 2008).

This “superdiversity” (Vertovec, cited in Baynham et. al, 2007) requires more than classroom solutions: classes, although effective in themselves, are at present unable to cater for all the complex needs of people wishing to compete for jobs and training in the UK (Baynham et. al., 2007). Baynham et. al. (2007) argue in favour of specialised pathways for different learners, including more fast-tracking for those with skills, high quality careers advice and more specialist literacy provision. They should be flexible enough to respond to changing ESOL populations. If Skills for Life follows the broad principle of being focused on those most in need then, Duncan O’ Leary argues, “the diversity of ESOL learners means that arrangements for English language learning cannot be *exactly the same* as other Skills for Life arrangements” (2008).

Key question 1: Does existing provision meet existing need?

Key question 2: Is existing provision flexible enough to adapt to the demands of a diversifying learner body?

Many new migrant workers come to the UK with high levels of education and high aspirations, and want ESOL to enable them to get good jobs. Some research suggests that ESOL courses can be too basic both for these and those seeking to employ them. This, again, raises the issue of EFL learning: the new wave of ESOL students have more in common with what are considered to be traditional EFL learners, rather than with adult literacy students and a move towards the more targeted programmes such as those offered in EFL would be more suited to their needs. Barton and Pitt (2003: 21) suggest:

We need to rethink the way learners are categorised. Policy decisions can become a barrier in terms of learners' needs and accreditation. Recent policy changes which have brought ESOL provision together with literacy and numeracy are raising questions about the differences between ESOL and the other areas impacting on pedagogic practice.

So although the aims of ESOL have remained fairly similar (i.e. to permit learners to settle into British society), there have been subtle changes in the expectations of the learners. Many students now require English courses to enable them to function at a high level of competence.

The presence of this new migrant group has implications for other groups of potential ESOL learners. There are indications that people from the settled communities are losing out to new skilled migrants, especially in the provision offered by Jobcentre Plus (Skaliotis, 2007, p. 13).

Enrolment procedures and exam content may not be flexible enough for ESOL learners in prison, especially those who will be deported and for whom the "Living in Britain" content of the Skills for Life syllabus is irrelevant. Learners who have progressed from pre-Entry to Entry level 1 exams have not followed this syllabus find the exam difficult. Cambridge

exams in Speaking and Listening involve enrolment procedures that mean they can't be offered to prisoners (Fisher et. al., 2008).

## 6. Citizenship

Requirements changed in July 2004, so that those wanting to be naturalised as British citizens had to have ESOL Entry level 3 standard of English language ability, but these new requirements became redundant after 1 November 2005. From this date, applicants for naturalisation have to meet the criteria of both language proficiency and knowledge of life in the UK (LSC Fact sheet 7, 2005). This was further extended to include all seeking ILR in.....??

Would-be citizenship applicants with English language ability below Entry level 3, are required to successfully achieve an ESOL Skills for Life qualification in speaking and listening, or the speaking and listening component of an all modes qualification, at Entry levels 1, 2 or 3 according to the learner's needs. In addition, to meet the citizenship element of the requirements, the course will need to use materials derived from the *Citizenship materials for ESOL learners* pack developed by NIACE and LLU+. As they study for this qualification on an ESOL course delivered in a citizenship context, they will not be required to sit the test of knowledge of life in the UK.

Those whose English is considered to be *at or above* Entry level 3 need the test of knowledge of life in the UK (citizenship test). Passing the test will the candidate is deemed to have also met the language requirements for naturalisation and no other proof of language proficiency will be required (LSC Fact Sheet 7, 2005).

In 2005 the KMPG review anticipated that learners wishing to gain citizenship would have to undertake a number of programmes of learning to reach Entry level 3 and that this demand was likely to lead to a high level of enrolments.

OFSTED inspectors found that ESOL providers routinely integrated aspects of citizenship into their general ESOL classes making extensive use of the ESOL citizenship materials developed by NIACE and LLU+. OFSTED judged however, that specific citizenship

projects were more effective than general ESOL classes in making the course relevant to the particular community and needs of the learners (OFSTED, 2008: p. 23).

## **7. Accreditation and assessment**

The new ESOL qualifications are either externally assessed or offer a mix of internal and external assessment. Awarding Bodies offer a range of approaches to assessment including tests, assignments, portfolios, interviews, and presentations or role plays. Assessments require learners to engage in purposeful tasks where the context and the content of material is rooted in everyday life in the UK (“Living in Britain”).

According to an LSC Fact Sheet, assessment at each level aims to test that candidates have the necessary communicative skills and the language to function at that level in their day-to-day lives, not that they have been drilled to perform a particular task (LSC Factsheet 4, 2004).

In a paper submitted to the NIACE ESOL enquiry, Pam Frame argued that:

The process of accreditation has been rigorous. There is a great deal of confidence in the assessments, particularly of ABs long-term experienced in assessing language. There is a choice of approaches to accreditation whilst units across ABs remain comparable. This is much better than the one-size-all approach required by the national reading test. Learners are responding well and as a sector we are perhaps overcoming an undeserved reputation for not wanting to use accreditation (Frame unpublished b).

Key question 1: are existing assessments sufficiently culturally aware?

Key question 2: how do providers select the awarding bodies they use?

For example, how strategic is their approach? To what extent is the selection of awarding bodies determined by historic usage? By match between learners’ needs and offered outcomes? To what extent is the choice of awarding body determined by the currency that body carries in education / with employers?

## 7.1 Appropriateness of Methods

Several pieces of ESOL research have recommended changes to the methods of assessment. Examination dates can conflict with when a learner plans to leave the course. The NIACE enquiry pointed out the disparity between the assessment requirements of literacy and ESOL qualifications in relation to the national Skills for Life targets and recommended that this should be corrected (NIACE, 2006). A number of studies have questioned the appropriateness of the Individual Learning Plan (ILP) for ESOL learners working at lower levels such as Entry 1 and 2 (NIACE 2006; Baynham et. al., 2007).

Case studies that form part of the LLU+ ESOL Accreditation Handbook suggest that assessment by exam can be problematic for learners with negative prior educational experiences, low levels of confidence and complicated lives – many have never sat exams before. Learners may lack the study skills and exam techniques to do the test in the required time.

With this in mind, the Demos report on ESOL in London argues that “national policy should experiment with different forms of assessment – such as practitioner assessment for a certain number of credits of learning within each qualification – and ensure that embedded ESOL courses are eligible for fee remission” (O’Leary, 2008). This idea of a credit framework is essential to the Demos vision of effective ESOL provision. Under this framework, different courses would have different forms of assessment. Learners could gain a certain number of credits without the need for a standardised external assessment and some courses – although not the full qualification – might dispense with the standardised assessment altogether.

O’Leary argues that this would allow for the introduction of “a greater breadth of courses without the huge expense of having to externally accredit all learning, even when qualifications seem inappropriate [...] This being the case what is needed is a system of measuring progress that is appropriate for progression within the education system and, just as importantly, provides satisfaction for the learner. This is most likely to come, in many cases, from a clear initial diagnosis and identification of goals at the outset,

followed by provision and testing that reflects that. Changing the system would therefore not mean the end of qualifications, but it would lead to a wider range of options to meet a wider range of needs” (O’Leary, 2008).

## 7.2 Awarding Bodies (ABs)

In a paper written for the NIACE enquiry, Pam Frame noted that some providers were concerned about the standardisation of levels between ABs and between the different types of accreditation now available. Providers reported examples where the language levels of tasks externally set by ABs have diverged from the agreed standards. Frame cautions that, “there is no information (mainly because it is commercially sensitive) about numbers of learners entering/achieving with each AB and it will take some years before useful ‘benchmarks’ emerge, if ever, from nationally collated LSC statistics” (Frame unpublished b).

## 7.3 Achievement

The 2008 OFSTED evaluation of ESOL provision judged that outcome rates for the new qualifications were satisfactory – but a key challenge is to raise these levels to good. It pointed out that the test-based qualifications were a greater challenge to learners, requiring them to demonstrate their skills to a consistent national standard against objective criteria under examination conditions. In the three year period from 2004 to 2007, completion rates in Skills for Life qualifications rose from 49% to 64%. Rates in colleges were slightly higher (OFSTED, 2008).

## 7.4 Progression

The 2008 OFSTED evaluation of ESOL provision judges that progression to further ESOL or vocational study was good: over half of ESOL learners followed these routes, most often for college learners to further courses offered by the same provider. About a quarter of those studying with the work-based learning providers visited gained jobs. The report notes, however, that education providers did not have progression information for a substantial proportion (between one-third and one-half) of their learners.

A report on ESOL in London undertaken for Demos recommended that to create options for learning that meet people's specific needs, the government should establish a credit framework for ESOL courses, to provide both the option of shorter courses and a platform for progression (O'Leary, 2008).

## **8. Currency**

In a paper written for the NIACE enquiry, Pam Frame argues that there has been no real promotion of the new ESOL qualifications, which are recognised by government and funding mechanisms but not by employers and those working in higher education (Frame, unpublished b). This situation is complicated further by the fact that so many ESOL learners are highly mobile, working across the whole of Europe and the qualifications do not travel.

There may be a danger, as Simpson et al argue, that qualifications whose currency lies only in their worth in attracting funding, have a questionable validity and are essentially valueless (2008).

### 8.1 Education

The recent OFSTED evaluation asserts that the ESOL qualifications had currency within the learning and skills sector and beyond (OFSTED, 2008, p.10). Other research from the field suggests that certain awarding bodies (for example, Cambridge ESOL) have a historic currency within the higher education as did IELTS, but there is little evidence of the currency of these new certificates themselves. Providers should be encouraged to collect progression data that can support the OFSTED assertion.

### 8.2 Employment

Convincing employers of the currency of the ESOL qualifications still appears to require work. Although the recent OFSTED evaluation noted that ESOL provision in the workplace was growing, especially where links with employers and trade unions were

well established, the volume was small. Providers faced difficulties in persuading employers, especially in small- and medium-sized enterprises, of the value of offering ESOL learning. A recent report for the think tank Demos recommends that a system of accreditation for prior education/skills gained in the workplace would have currency with employers (O'Leary, 2008).

## **9. Skills for work**

The Leitch Report has focused attention on world class skills and skills for work. In these areas there appears to be work to do in matching provision to the needs of those looking for workplace skills and those looking for skilled workers.

Referring to the importance of employability-related ESOL provision for the unemployed, the NIACE enquiry argued that it was essential that such provision should have both employability and learning outcomes, and that it should be available for lower-level learners, not just those learners who count towards the LSC's current Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets (NIACE, 2006). The KPMG review found that there was a need for specific vocational provision to meet the demands of learners seeking employment (KPMG, 2005: p. 4). A report on ESOL in London argued that qualifications and jobs targets, combined with lack of flexibility in funding streams and qualification structures had created provision focused on funders and providers rather than learners and employers (JH Consulting, 2005).

### **9.1 Train to Gain**

Research by the Campaign for Learning found confusion among the employers and ESOL tutors interviewed regarding eligibility for Train to Gain: "some tutors complained that a qualification could not be achieved in the amount of time Train to Gain funding allows for, and that Train to Gain effectively excludes the most vulnerable workers who are currently functioning at Entry levels 1 and 2, even where these workers do have the potential to progress to Level 2 over time (Skaliotis, 2007, p. 44).

From February 2008 an expansion of the Train to Gain service has offered discrete Skills for Life training at Levels 1 and 2. In London the offer includes ESOL and ESOL for Work qualifications from Entry level 3.

## 9.2 Employer attitudes

Research by the Campaign for Learning on found that the majority of employers and managers had little understanding of *numeracy* provision and entitlement (Skaliotis, 2007: p. 20). There are suggestions in the research that this situation is even more profound for ESOL, and that this is compounded by a lack of understanding from employees how better English skills for employees will benefit their business. The JH Consulting report on ESOL in London argued that the “business case for ESOL over and above [learning English for health and safety requirements] is not clear for many employers, and larger companies expect regional solutions that cannot be delivered effectively through the current infrastructure and processes (JHC, 2005). Furthermore, the ESOL qualifications were judged to be “not workplace friendly”, taking into account neither “the application in the workplace or what employers want and/or need. (JHC, 2005) Recently OFSTED (2008) listed “the relevance of Skills for Life qualifications to the workplace” as one barrier to extending workplace provision. Providers told inspectors that they found it difficult to persuade employers in small- and medium-sized enterprises of the value of offering ESOL learning to their employees.

The ESOL for work qualifications, launched in October 2007, seem designed to tackle some of these problems. The qualifications cover 50% of the Skills for Life literacy standards but in differing combinations. Employers can therefore choose the content and approach to assessment most appropriate to their needs. The qualifications can be taught in the workplace (so can S4L) making courses easier to schedule, especially for employees who work shifts. It is hoped that such tailored provision will prove more cost effective than a one size fits all approach. Concerns have been raised, however, that these qualifications have less emphasis on writing and more emphasis on oral, reading and listening skills (Skaliotis, 2007: p. 7) and are not available for mixed cohorts below Entry level 3.

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