



1.0 English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) Policy

English for Speakers of Other Languages Policy

This policy sets out the responsibilities of the Department for the Economy for the provision of English for Speakers of Other Languages in Further Education colleges.

Other policies and strategies relevant to this policy include:

- [The Racial Equality Strategy 2015-2025](#);
- [The Executive's Programme for Government 'Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most'](#);
- [The Refugee Integration Strategy](#);
- [The Department for the Economy's Economic Mission](#).

Version No	Date	Comments	CM Ref:	Author	Branch/Directorate
0.2	10/10/25	Draft to include stakeholders' comments		Mark McGrath	Further Education Division
1.0	11/11/2025	Finalised version		Ryan Harper	Further Education Division
Review Period		June 2027			

1. Introduction

- 1.1. Northern Ireland (NI) is becoming a more ethnically diverse society. Over the years we have welcomed economic migrants, asylum seekers, refugees and other newcomers from around the world, who have made NI their home. For a significant number of these new arrivals, they will need to acquire the necessary English Language skills to succeed in their new country.
- 1.2. Being able to communicate in all areas of the English Language is key to successful integration, enabling new arrivals to live independently, enter or continue their education, or to gain employment. The Department for the Economy (DfE) has a key role to play in supporting integration through the delivery of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) in its network of Further Education (FE) colleges. FE colleges are Non-departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs) of the DfE and have a dual purpose to support both social inclusion and economic growth.
- 1.3. The demands for ESOL in NI will continue to change. There is a need to continue to be innovative in our approach to ESOL, ensuring ESOL learners remain at the heart of our provision. We aim to work collaboratively across all sectors to share best practices and enable learners to access ESOL sooner, become fluent faster and ultimately achieve a level of independence which will allow them to successfully integrate into their new community.
- 1.4. The purpose of this policy is to:
 - provide a definition of ESOL;
 - define the eligibility criteria for availing of free ESOL provision;
 - set out the FE colleges' obligations for ESOL provision; and,
 - promote a supportive and inclusive environment where all cultural backgrounds are respected.

2. Scope of policy

- 2.1. The DfE operates under the vires of [The Further Education \(Northern Ireland\) Order 1997](#), which sets out the duties and powers of the Department in relation to FE.
- 2.2. The main focus of this policy is the provision of ESOL in FE colleges to support individuals over 16 years of age to acquire ESOL qualifications to assist them to integrate into society.
- 2.3. We recognise that the voluntary and community sector has a significant role to play in the delivery of ESOL and, while this sits outside the scope of the Department, we will continue to engage with this sector regarding the provision of ESOL as appropriate.

3. Definition of ESOL

- 3.1. The definition of ESOL¹:
 - refers to the teaching of English to students whose first language is not English, but who are living in an English-speaking country; and,
 - covers the four key skills of: reading; writing; listening; and speaking English.

4. Demand for ESOL in NI

- 4.1. There are a number of groups of people who choose to study ESOL:
 - individuals who come to NI to learn English for academic or professional reasons;
 - economic migrants who come to NI for employment and can use ESOL to achieve their goals, avoid exploitation, and work better and more safely;
 - refugees, asylum seekers and displaced people who come to NI fleeing hardship, conflict and persecution for whom ESOL allows access to a new community and future life prospects; and

¹ Cambridge Dictionary: [ESOL | English meaning - Cambridge Dictionary](#).

- family members of refugees, migrants and British nationals who come to NI with the intention of joining relatives under a family visa.
- 4.2. It is estimated to take approximately 200 guided learning hours for an English language learner to progress from one level to the next. [source: [Cambridge English Support](#)].
- 4.3. The provision of ESOL in NI is largely delivered by three broad types of providers:
- Public Sector (e.g. FE colleges);
 - Voluntary and Community Sector (V&C), often referred to as the third sector; and,
 - the private sector.

5. Delivery of ESOL in FE colleges

- 5.1. In NI, DfE has responsibility for the provision of ESOL through its network of six regional FE colleges;
- Belfast Metropolitan College
 - North West Regional College
 - Northern Regional College
 - South Eastern Regional College
 - South West Regional College
 - Southern Regional College

Levels of ESOL

- 5.2. FE colleges offer ESOL at a number of levels including pre-entry/informal ESOL and formal/accredited provision. Recognised ESOL qualifications are available at five levels (Entry 1, Entry 2, Entry 3, Level 1 and Level 2).
- 5.3. ESOL provision in FE colleges is delivered through UK-based awarding organisations, which are regulated by Ofqual in England, and their qualifications

are recognised for use in NI through the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA).

Components of ESOL qualifications

- 5.4. Accredited ESOL courses must include the following components:
- an initial assessment to determine what level of ESOL the individual should undertake;
 - a set syllabus;
 - delivery over a set number of guided learning hours broadly aligned with indicative hours set by awarding organisations; and
 - an examination and quality assurance process.

Teaching ESOL

- 5.5. To teach ESOL full-time in a FE college in NI, tutors must meet the minimum requirements as stated in [FE Circular 1/12 - Qualifications required to teach in an Institution of Further Education](#). The FE colleges, as employers, may also specify additional criteria when advertising posts.

Supporting learners who have experienced trauma

- 5.6. ESOL learners come from a variety of backgrounds. For those who have arrived as Asylum Seekers, Refugees or through a UK Resettlement scheme, escaping war torn countries or risk of violence, it is recognised that they may have additional needs due to trauma. FE colleges should have the appropriate resources in place to support both learners and tutors of ESOL.

Who is eligible for ESOL within FE colleges

- 5.7. ESOL within FE colleges is for learners who have completed compulsory education (i.e. they are over the age of 16 on or before 1 July of the academic year they are enrolling).
- 5.8. A list of available classes and information on how to enrol is available on each FE college's website.

Funding of ESOL

- 5.9. DfE currently provides funding for FE colleges to deliver ESOL as part of their baseline funding. This does not preclude FE colleges from utilising other funding streams for the provision of ESOL.
- 5.10. As NDPBs, the FE colleges are entitled to determine the fees for their provision. The cost of an ESOL course can vary across FE colleges and can depend on the number of weeks, hours or level of course that is offered.

Accessing free ESOL provision

- 5.11. DfE, through the FE colleges, offers free ESOL provision to the following groups of people:
- asylum seekers;
 - refugees;
 - those granted Humanitarian Protection;
 - individuals arriving under Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP), Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) and Afghan Resettlement Programme (ARP); and
 - individuals arriving under Homes for Ukraine, the Ukrainian Family Resettlement Scheme and the Ukraine Permission Extension Scheme.
- 5.12. More details regarding eligibility can be found at FE Circular 10/22 - Access to ESOL classes in FE colleges. The Circular will be kept under review and may be updated to include new groups eligible for access to free ESOL provision in the future, subject to ministerial approval.

Delivering ESOL provision

- 5.13. When determining the delivery model of ESOL classes, FE colleges should consider the barriers to ESOL and make efforts to maximise accessibility for the full range of learners. This should include consideration of the following (as a minimum):

- Offer ESOL classes at different times of the week and day to meet the needs of their learners, where demand determines there is a need.
- Offer a range of delivery models, such as face to face, online or a blended approach to delivery.

Operational guidance for ESOL provision

- 5.14. This Policy sets-out the rationale, responsibilities and criteria for the provision of ESOL within the FE colleges. Circular xx/25 **[DN: to be inserted once Circular is developed and agreed]** provides the operational guidance for the delivery of ESOL provision.
- 5.15. This Policy and Circular xx/25 **[DN: to be inserted once Circular is developed and agreed]** will be reviewed on an annual basis from June 2027, notwithstanding any ad-hoc amendments that might be required, to ensure both the Policy and Circular xx/25 **[DN: to be inserted once Circular is developed and agreed]** respond to the evolving needs of the DfE, the FE sector and ESOL learners.