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LANGUAGE LEARNING AND MIGRANT 'INTEGRATION' IN SCOTLAND: EXPLORING INFRASTRUCTURE, PROVISION AND EXPERIENCES

Executive summary: Key findings and recommendations

FRANCESCA STELLA AND REBECCA KAY, UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW



Executive Summary with key findings and recommendations

LLAMI ('Language learning and migrant 'integration' in Scotland: exploring infrastructure, provision and experiences', 2019-23) is a research project funded by the British Academy. This policy brief outlines the key findings and recommendations from the research project, and is supported by our full research report, available at <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7885964>. The research project focuses on ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages), defined as English language education for adult learners aged 16+, although we also explore initiatives not branded as ESOL but related to language learning and/or migrants' socio-cultural integration. In this qualitative study, we explored the complex landscape of ESOL provision in Scotland through a comparison between Glasgow, Aberdeen city and Aberdeenshire, and considered the perspectives of diverse ESOL providers, decision-makers, practitioners and learners. The research took place in 2020-21; a time when ESOL provision in Scotland was undergoing significant changes in terms of governance, funding and organisation of provision.

KEY FINDINGS

1. There was evidence of significant unmet ESOL needs and demand across Glasgow, Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire

Unmet demand was a particularly prominent issue in Glasgow city, where demand for both College and community classes far outstripped supply (see section 3.1). This is clearly documented in the centralised waiting list operated by the Glasgow ESOL register. We found evidence in both Glasgow and Aberdeen city that third sector providers were stepping in to fill gaps in existing provision. In Aberdeenshire, providing for smaller numbers of potential learners, especially in rural areas, was a challenge made more difficult by recent changes in the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council (SFC) funding model (See section 3.3).

2. Collaboration among different providers is key to successful partnership work and the effective planning and delivery of local provision.

The landscape of ESOL provision in Scotland is very complex, and traditionally based around a division of labour between college and community providers. Further Education (FE) Colleges generally offer Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) accredited classes and more intensive tuition based on a national curriculum, while community providers (Local Authority Community Learning and Development (CLD) partnerships and third sector organisations) generally offer non-accredited, less intensive classes based on a social practice model, rather than a set curriculum. The division between formal/accredited and informal/non-accredited provision is not absolute however, and there are overlaps between college and community provision (see sections 1.2.1 and 1.2.2).

Changes in the SFC funding model seemed to reinforce a hierarchy between accredited and non-accredited classes and incentivise some community providers to move to a credit model and accredited classes, particularly in Aberdeenshire. Community practitioners raised questions about whether a credit model borrowed from the FE sector can be reconciled to the social practice model that has traditionally

underpinned community provision, and whether all ESOL learners necessarily seek or would benefit from accreditation (see sections 3.2 and 3.5).

Collaboration among providers was central to: a) coordinating ESOL provision locally; b) communicating, marketing and signposting of ESOL provision to other providers, services and potential learners; c) testing and cross-referrals of learners to various providers; d) gathering and sharing information to identify and address unmet demand or the needs of specific cohorts of learners. The report highlights examples of effective cooperation and innovative joint work and a general openness and goodwill among providers to make partnerships work, but it also explores the challenges involved in collaboration (see section 3.4). Lack of clear guidelines and insufficient funding can have a detrimental impact on collaboration: evidence shows that in some local authority areas changes in SFC funding mechanisms had the unintended effect of stifling cooperation and innovation by creating competition for scarce resources and reinforcing hierarchies among providers (see sections 3.3 and 2.4.1).

3. Uncertainties about funding, and the introduction of more stringent SFC reporting requirements, had a significant impact on provision.

The report documents funding challenges for community and college ESOL providers within a broader context of cuts in adult education and rising levels of unmet demand (see sections 3.3 and 2.4.1). Across all our fieldwork locations third sector providers frequently stepped in to fill gaps in provision, but this relied on ad-hoc, short-term funding that was not conducive to a sustainable growth of ESOL provision. Our findings also show that funders' reporting requirements and expected outcomes are not always aligned with providers' aims and learners' needs. This raises questions about what kind of outcomes can be meaningfully measured and how: numbers of learners, attendance and progression into education or employment may be easier to measure than other, no less important, things that learners look for and get out of ESOL classes, such as improved confidence, wellbeing and social connections (see section 3.3 and 4.2.2).

4. Learners' needs and aspirations in the context of their broader lives should inform ESOL-related policy and ESOL provision.

ESOL practitioners saw ESOL as more than just a subject, and language learning as part of a broader process of settlement or 'integration' for their learners, which included economic, social, cultural, civic and political dimensions. The importance of centring learners' diverse needs and aspirations in ESOL policy and provision also chimes with the strategic objectives of the most recent Scotland ESOL strategy (2015-2020). Our findings also point to the importance of a joined-up approach to ESOL provision, connecting the ESOL sector and wider services supporting asylum seekers, refugees and migrants (see section 3.5). This approach would be consistent with the one followed in the New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy 2018-22 (Scottish Government 2017), which is currently being renewed. The Refugee Integration Strategy includes language alongside other aspects of settlement¹, but only applies to forcibly displaced migrants and not to those who have chosen to come to Scotland for work, study or family reasons (see section 2.2). The failed renewal of the Scotland ESOL strategy in 2020 and the lack of strategic vision for the sector are putting pressure on ESOL providers and have resulted in under-resourced, piecemeal and disjointed provision (see sections 2.4.2, 2.5 and chapter 3). They have also resulted in a lack of clarity about who, and what, publicly funded ESOL is for (see section 3.2 and Conclusions).

5. Experiences of access to ESOL classes are inflected by learners' migration status, location and gender. (see Section 4.1)

In Glasgow, all our interviewees were refugees or asylum seekers who had moved to Scotland independently, rather than through resettlement schemes. Finding and enrolling in ESOL classes had been an early priority for most, but the high level of unmet demand made it hard to access the kind of ESOL provision they preferred, especially for college courses. Several participants had accessed community ESOL through third sector organisations offering wraparound support to asylum seekers and refugees, while access to

¹ These are: employability and welfare, housing, education, health and wellbeing and communities, culture and social connections.

college classes had been facilitated through word of mouth and social work referrals. In Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire, all our participants were voluntary migrants, most of them economic migrants in low-paid, precarious employment. The majority had been living in Scotland for many years, managing with varying degrees of confidence and competence in English. For many, ESOL learning had not been an immediate priority and some had only started ESOL classes after living in the UK for several years. ESOL classes had to be fitted around shift work and family responsibilities. Most had found out about ESOL classes through word of mouth, and the most significant barrier to accessing ESOL was around distance to available classes. Financial considerations linked to the cost of travel as well as fees for college courses (up to £6,000 per year for a full-time course) also created barriers for some learners. Across Glasgow, Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire, family responsibilities, especially for women with young children, could further delay or interrupt access to ESOL learning.

6. Diversity of ESOL learners shapes motivations and aspirations linked to language learning

Work and improving employment prospects was a strong motivation for both voluntary migrants and asylum seeker/refugee learners in our study (see Section 4.2.1). However, migrant status nuanced experiences given that it determined opportunities for employment: asylum seekers in the UK are granted permission to work only in very specific circumstances, and English language learning is often seen as a prerequisite for employability. And yet, many voluntary migrants, especially EU nationals who had moved to Scotland under free movement, had been able to enter the workforce, irrespective of their level of English, but usually in precarious, low paid jobs (see Section 4.2.1).

Learners' educational backgrounds and social capital informed their aspirations for the future. Those with professional backgrounds in their country of origin often hoped that ESOL learning would lead to getting a 'good' job, well- matched to previous experience. Those with limited formal education in their country of origin had more vague aspirations in relation to future employment or education. Many voluntary migrants, especially those with experience of precarious and/or low paid work, regarded ESOL learning as a key component in improving their employment prospects, asserting their employment rights, or developing a career. Some had progressed careers as a result of improving their English language skills, however others had found that better English was not all they needed, and that other structural inequalities linked to age, gender, education and ethnicity came into play (see Section 4.2.1).

Social connections, increased self-confidence, and independence were also important motivations for language learners (see Section 4.2.2). ESOL classes and activities provided opportunities to meet other people and impacted on learners' social connectedness and mental well-being. These connections also had practical implications, improving access to information about institutions and day-to-day life in Scotland. The importance of language classes as a site for sociability and support for general well-being was especially marked amongst forcibly displaced migrants, who experienced isolation and high levels of stress from dealing with the asylum system. Increasing self-confidence was linked to independent access to services and rights. Being able to deal with formalities linked to their migration status but also with healthcare professionals, utility companies, schools, and other institutions without relying on others for help was important to almost all our learners, regardless of migrant status, gender, length of stay or language ability. Several learners who had arrived in Scotland with already strong English still sought out ESOL classes as a way to increase social connections and gain confidence. They also described ESOL classes and activities as a source of solidarity and support networks with both other learners and teachers or volunteers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Undertake a comprehensive mapping exercise to scope need and demand for, and provision of ESOL in Scotland

There is ample evidence of unmet demand in all three council areas covered in this report. Yet we know little about the geography of ESOL need and demand across Scotland, and how it has changed as a result of shifting migration patterns and policy over the past twenty years. The landscape of ESOL provision in Scotland presents significant regional variation, which has and will continue to change over time: while Rice et al. (2004) estimated that 80% of ESOL learners in Scotland attended FE College classes, existing research, including our own, suggests that this figure does not apply to all local authorities, and that the balance between College and community ESOL may have shifted. A comprehensive scoping review would be timely: the last Scotland-wide mapping exercise was commissioned in 2004, to inform the first Scotland ESOL strategy (Rice et al. 2004). The scoping review would require the collection of new quantitative and qualitative data, but can also draw on existing datasets (i.e. demographic data from the latest Scottish census, records from FE and community providers). Given the dynamic landscape, it would also be helpful for such a review to consider potential new learner groups who are arriving, or are likely to arrive, as a result of current policy developments at UK and Scotland level. These include ongoing changes in the UK asylum and resettlement routes, changes in the UK points-based visa routes for voluntary migrants, and the role of migration in Scotland's population strategy.

2. Make sure that ESOL governance and provision are underpinned by a long-term strategic vision for the sector and by adequate funding

Until 2020, ESOL governance and provision in Scotland was underpinned by two successive ESOL strategies. Scotland no longer has a standalone ESOL strategy: instead, ESOL was incorporated into the broader national Adult Learning Strategy 2022-2027, alongside other areas of community adult learning. The Adult Learning Strategy commits to undertake a review of the impact of the Scotland ESOL strategy 2015-2020, and to produce recommendations for this specialism within the context of the Adult Learning Strategy, rather than to produce a new standalone ESOL strategy. The current position leaves the ESOL sector without a clear strategy, raising justified concerns that the distinctiveness of ESOL learners and specialism may be lost within the broader Adult Learning Strategy. The policy vacuum around ESOL is already having detrimental effects on the sector, particularly around funding and related capacity, and effective coordination of resources and provision nationally and locally. While it is hoped that the review of the previous Scotland ESOL strategy and ensuing recommendations will provide a sense of direction, it is essential that ESOL maintains a distinct profile within the broader Adult Learning Strategy. ESOL-related policy needs to centre learners' diverse needs and aspirations and be informed by a consultation with learners and practitioners. Rather than referring to a generic 'ESOL learner', ESOL-related policy also needs to have a clear vision about who and what publicly-funded ESOL is for: while it is right that the emphasis should remain on the poorest and more marginalised migrants, consideration needs to be given to the fact that ESOL needs are not limited to these groups (see Chapter 4 and Conclusions). Adequate funding is essential to enable the sector to cope with continuing change, and avoid an overreliance on unpaid volunteers: thus, a funding strategy should be a key part of a long-term vision for the ESOL sector. Consideration also needs to be given to the fact that, unlike other areas of community adult learning included in the Adult Learning Strategy, ESOL is delivered across Community and Further Education.

3. Promote a joined-up approach to ESOL provision which reflects the diverse needs of learners and facilitates coordination and cooperation across ESOL providers and with other services supporting migrants

This report outlines the diversity of the ESOL landscape in Scotland in terms of learners, providers and regional contexts. Developing a more joined-up approach to this diversity would enhance coordination and cooperation across the sector but would also require thinking across ESOL and other relevant policy areas such as migration policy; policies around integration and community development; and educational policies. This more joined-up approach underpins the New Scots Integration Strategy for asylum seekers and refugees, but is much less clearly articulated, for example, in the Scottish Government's thinking about how to attract and retain migrant workers, or how to support family members accompanying them. Our study points to the key role that ESOL activities play in a broader process of settlement for learners, one which includes economic, social, cultural, civic and political dimensions. Our findings show the importance of centring learners' diverse needs and aspirations in ESOL provision and understanding their language needs in the context of their wider lives. Devising a framework that starts from the needs of learners rather than drawing boundaries around what is/is not ESOL, or setting hierarchies around accredited and non-accredited learning, would lead to a more joined up approach to ESOL provision. This joined-up approach would facilitate the coordination of diverse provision and encourage cooperation and innovation across Scotland's many geographical contexts and between different ESOL providers. It would also incentivise cooperation across ESOL providers and other services supporting ESOL learners and facilitate outreach to hard-to-reach groups.