

Addressing Language as a Barrier to Work and Progression

**The Impact of Edinburgh College's
English for Work programmes**



Supporting people to enter and then progress in the workplace is a key part of Edinburgh College’s mission. This mission has both a social and economic dimension to it. From a social perspective, we are a community anchor institution, helping people to

integrate and connect with one another and building community cohesion. From an economic perspective, our college plays a key role in tackling unemployment and economic inactivity and ensuring that skills supply and demand are aligned in the local labour market. The research we are presenting here shows the important role our English for Work Programmes play on both those fronts, and highlights how our college is, simultaneously, a place of social sanctuary, cultural diversity and economic dynamism for our region.

The research also highlights that increasingly those who attend our English for Work programmes are refugees or asylum seekers. In 2022 the College, in partnership with the Scottish Government, City of Edinburgh Council and local charity Dnipro Kids, supported a group of 60 Ukrainian refugees, including children, by providing living accommodation at our halls of residence at Milton Road campus. The College is now working to enhance our approach to supporting sanctuary-seeking students even further and, reflecting this, was recently recognised as a ‘College of Sanctuary’, one of the first colleges in Scotland to receive this award.

The statistics also show that a large majority of those who undertake our English for Work programmes are women, many of them looking to return to the labour market after a period of time, others looking to progress to higher-paid employment or to change careers. Moreover, many of those who study English for Work programmes live in the most deprived parts of our city.

Taken together, these demographic trends show the importance of these courses in providing opportunities for a number of underrepresented, disadvantaged groups and often for those furthest from the labour market.

Our English for Work courses are, however, just one part of a much broader ESOL and languages provision. In fact, Edinburgh College is home to one of the largest and most diverse language offers of any centre in the UK. We provide ESOL classes and Modern Language courses for students across the length and breadth of Scotland, and specialist English language and teacher training programmes for partners across the globe.

Moreover, ESOL is consistently (and increasingly) one of the most over-subscribed curriculum areas of the College. Our findings give an indication of the potential our ESOL offer has to grow and evolve in the years ahead and suggest there is need for all of us in the city to explore how we could work together to ensure provision in this area is expanded, not just as a means of meeting demand from individuals, but also to ensure we unlock their true potential for the benefit of our communities and the economy of our city region as a whole.

I’d like to thank all our staff who work tirelessly to support our students in this area. I’d also like to thank all partners who gave their time to participate in this research. I look forward to engaging with you all around the results and working together towards our shared goals in supporting everyone in our communities to play a full part in the social and economic life of our city region.

A Cumberford

Audrey Cumberford MBE FRSE
Principal and CEO
Edinburgh College

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Our research suggests:

- Lack of English language skills may be an under-appreciated factor in our understanding of economic inactivity in the Edinburgh city-region. In the 2022 census, around 6% of those aged over 3 reported a lack of confidence in at least one aspect (speaking, reading, writing) of their English.
- Edinburgh College's English for Work programmes serve an incredibly diverse demographic, with individuals from 53 different countries accessing these courses in the past five years alone.
- Edinburgh College's English for Work programmes support three key objectives: helping people into work, helping people progress in work and supporting people to change careers.
- 70% of those surveyed are undertaking an English for Work programme to help them find work in their chosen industry for the first time, with 30% already working in their chosen industry but looking to progress their careers.
- Edinburgh College's English for Work programmes are important for those seeking sanctuary in the UK, with the proportion of refugees undertaking these programmes growing steadily over the last five years.
- Edinburgh College's English for work programmes are an especially important route into the labour market for women, for those returning to work after a period off, and for those living in deprived areas: 83% of English for Work students in the last 5 years were women, 73% were aged 30 or older, and 51% were living in the most deprived 40% of households in Scotland by SIMD decile.
- Student satisfaction with Edinburgh College's English for work programmes is high with 90% saying their course is/was "good" or "excellent" and 88% reporting that the course is improving their confidence in using English in a workplace setting.
- Students value the employability dimension of the programme, and evidence suggests they are especially positive about aspects of the course that develop practical skills that will help them find a job in their chosen industry, such as CV preparation and interview skills.
- Employers who support English for work programmes (by providing work placements) value the programmes for a number of reasons, most notably they see it as a potential future recruitment pipeline, especially in industries with skills shortages.
- A key challenge faced in terms of curriculum provision in this area concerns the split of general and more specialised/ industry focussed English language programmes, with the need to balance the clear employability benefits of tailoring courses to specific industries against the need for individuals to improve their general English.
- With the right funding, employer engagement and partnership working, there is the potential to expand provision in this area either introducing vocational and employability aspects at lower levels of ESOL or by expanding the range of specific industry focussed courses to meet other regional skills shortages.

Our findings show that English for Work programmes can:



Tackle economic inactivity



Disproportionately enrol women and those returning to work



Support individuals from over 50 different countries



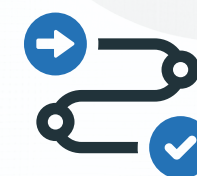
Deliver high student satisfaction



Help people into work, progress in work, and change careers



Develop highly valued employability skills



Provide a route to employment for sanctuary seekers



Create a potential recruitment pipeline for employers

English Language and Economic Inactivity in Edinburgh, East and Midlothian

English Language: the national context and our regional outlook

Between 2001 and 2022 Scotland's non-UK born population grew from 3.8% to 10.2%, with 554,900 non-UK-born people now living in Scotland¹. In that (2022) census, 94.18% of people reported being able to speak, read and write English well. While, this percentage is high, the obvious counter-factual is that close to 6% of the population (some 308,337 people nationally) reported an issue with at least one aspect of their English².

A similar picture emerges at a regional level throughout Scotland, including in our region (incorporating the City of Edinburgh, East Lothian and Midlothian). Here the census suggests that the vast majority of people speak English to a level that allows them to fully partake in the economic life of our capital city region, with 93.84% of people in the region aged 3 able to speak, read and write English well. That said, some 6.16% of the population reported an issue with at least one aspect of their English. Breaking this down, 34,049 people in the region (4.84% of the population) either did not read English well, write English well, speak English well, or some combination of these three. In addition, 8,034 people (1.14% of the population aged 3 or older) were recorded as having "limited" English skills, and 1,304 people (0.19%) were recorded as having no skills in English at all³.

It is also worth pointing out that discrepancies exist within the region. Whereas only one in 24 people over the age of 3 in Morningside have an issue with an aspect of their English, this rises to 1 in every 11 in the Forth Council Ward in North Edinburgh, where the College's Granton Campus is located⁴. In

this respect, there is an overlap between some of the region's highest areas of deprivation and some of the highest rates of English as a second language.

A final contextual point worth considering, where English language in the region is concerned, is the shift in migration patterns Scotland has experienced in recent years (especially post-Brexit). In this respect, two broad trends merit comment.

The first is an increase in the number of asylum seekers and refugees seeking sanctuary in Edinburgh and the wider region. The City of Edinburgh Council first became involved with UK Government resettlement schemes in 2015, with an annual commitment to resettle 150 people per year⁵. Since then, City of Edinburgh Council has resettled people under UK resettlement schemes, including the UK Government's Afghan relocation scheme. It also supports a number of asylum seekers, as well as adults and dependents with insecure immigration status and no recourse to public funds. Moreover, more than 11,000 Ukrainian refugees have arrived in Edinburgh since 2022.⁶

At the same time, over the last decade, economic migration to Scotland from the EU has slowed. The Polish-born population of Scotland, for example, was *lower* in the 2022 census (75,351) than was estimated by the ONS in 2016 (81,000)⁷. Indeed, much of Scotland's European-born population have been in the country for more than a decade, and *new* inward migration is underpinned by people moving to Scotland from elsewhere in the world, driven as much by the emergence of new geo-political conflict as by established patterns of economic migration. In short, "Scotland's migrant population includes people from a wider range of linguistic and cultural

backgrounds than ten years ago, coming to an increasing number of destinations within Scotland, with differentiated rights to work and entitlements to welfare support and with different associated needs"⁸.

While the implications of these concurrent trends in terms of service delivery are manifold, for the purposes of this research, suffice to say that shifting migration patterns have the potential to impact the aggregate English language ability of the region's population, the level of demand for ESOL broadly, and the type of English language (and related employability) support required for people to enter and progress in the labour market.

English Language, Economic Inactivity and the Future Workforce

With a few exceptions, in our region, some English language ability is a requirement to join the labour market and advanced English Language skills are often required for career progression. It is therefore axiomatic that a lack of English Language *ability* is a potential driver of unemployment or economic inequality, and a lack of English Language *proficiency* has the potential to hamper in-work progression, leading some to be stuck in low-paid jobs, and, by extension, driving in-work poverty. Lack of English language proficiency is therefore not only a social issue, as it is often framed, but an economic one. This economic imperative – to address English as a barrier to work – becomes more pressing when we consider both broad national demographic trends and the specific regional labour market context.

On the former, Scotland's population is ageing and, without migration, would be declining rather than growing. Indeed, deaths have outnumbered births in Scotland each year since 2014-15⁹. Population growth in recent years has therefore been sustained

by net inward migration. The importance of sustaining this dynamic (a net inflow of people) is reflected in recent Scottish Government policy papers, such as the (2021) Population Strategy, *A Scotland for the Future*¹⁰, and, more recently, the policy paper entitled *Migration - Meeting Scotland's Needs* (January 2025)¹¹, both of which emphasise the importance of inward migration in terms of ensuring Scotland has strong demographic foundations (i.e. a large enough working age population) to support sustainable economic growth.

Simultaneously, in our region of Edinburgh, East Lothian and Midlothian, demand for a skilled workforce continues to grow, and it is clear that the abstract need to sustain a large enough working age population nationally can be evidenced more concretely by the skills gaps and recruitment challenges already existing at a regional level in a number of key industries. In research carried out by Edinburgh College last year, only 35% of employers reported being confident that their organisation would be able to recruit the right people for the vacancies they need to fill in the upcoming year¹². In their most recent skills assessment for the Edinburgh, East and Midlothian region, SDS forecast that the region's workforce demand will grow by more than 8% over the next decade, requiring 34,600 additional workers to fill new jobs (expansion demand), on top of the 154,900 additional workers required to replace those retiring within the current workforce (replacement demand)¹³.

It follows that how effectively the city-region integrates recent migrants into the local labour market will be critical to its ability to meet these expanding workforce demands and thus its ability to drive inclusive economic growth in the future, especially in a number of key sectors, where recruitment challenges and skills gaps already present an ongoing challenge.

Edinburgh College's English for Work offer

It is against this backdrop that Edinburgh College's English for Work programmes operate. Over the years, the College's provision in this area, as well as its broader ESOL provision, has evolved and expanded in response to the growing demand and diverse needs of the student population. Initially, the College offered a single general ESOL for Work course. However, today the College has a comprehensive range of courses in this area, that aim to integrate English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) with vocational training.

This expanded course portfolio includes three general English for Work courses across three campuses, alongside industry-specific programmes, catering to the diverse needs of both students and the demands of local industry. This industry-specific curriculum has continually adapted to reflect changes in the job market and student interests. A summary of Edinburgh College's current English for Work course portfolio is outlined below:

- **Access to Care and Health Professions with ESOL:** This course is designed for students hoping to enter the healthcare sector, offering both ESOL instruction and key knowledge and skills for health and care professions.
- **Computing with ESOL:** This course caters for students interested in the rapidly evolving field of computing. Students on this course develop essential computing skills alongside an ESOL component. On completion, students should have developed the language proficiency and technical expertise which will enable them to embark on a career or further training in IT and related fields.
- **Childhood Practice with ESOL:** By integrating ESOL with training in childhood practice, this course is aimed specifically at those who aspire to work with children. Key aspects of child development and education are explored, providing students with the essential skills and language proficiency required to work effectively in early years settings or progress to further training.
- **ESOL for Work:** Whilst not industry specific, this course focusses on developing language proficiency alongside work-based skills, such as, workplace IT, workplace cultures and norms, and customer service.



Social and Economic Impact of ESOL and English for Work Programmes

A number of academic studies and policy-focussed reports have looked into the social and economic benefits of ESOL broadly, or the efficacy of English for Work programmes more specifically. That said, there remains something of a fragmentation to academic study and policy development in this area.

One strand of this diverse literature focusses on quantifying the direct economic returns of ESOL broadly or English for Work programmes specifically. Examples of such an approach include:

- A 2019 study conducted in Greater Boston, which found that “these types of programs appear to break even from a societal standpoint within 5 years. Adding in the cost savings associated with the gain in employer-sponsored health insurance produces a break-even time of just 1.5 years”¹⁴.
- A 2023 study (based on a randomised control trial) that estimated the causal effects of English language training for adult immigrants in the US, which found that programme participation increased the annual earnings of participants by \$2,400 and that the associated rise in tax receipts covered programme costs over time, generating a 6% return for taxpayers¹⁵.
- A 2021 paper (using a Regression Discontinuity Design) that evaluated the impact of a reform programme in Denmark which focused on improving Danish language training for those granted refugee status. This found that, eighteen years after the programme, those refugees who undertook training were four percentage points more likely to be employed and earned \$2,500 per year more than those who did not. They also found evidence of more formal skill upgrading for those who undertook the programme (i.e. additional years of education and progression to jobs with a stronger communication requirement)¹⁶.

- A 2003 study, which utilised survey data to investigate the impact of language proficiency on earnings and employment probabilities of non-white immigrants to the UK. The study found that “language proficiency has a positive effect on employment probabilities, and lack of English fluency leads to earning losses”. The authors argue that one of the key mechanisms through which earnings and employment benefits are realised is through greater proficiency leading individuals to better understanding optimal job search strategies, finding it easier to convince prospective employers of their qualifications and being able to access jobs requiring communication skills¹⁷.

These, and other studies like them, support the case for public funding for these programmes, based on strong earnings returns for individuals and a positive ROI for the exchequer.

Beyond this, in a UK context, several studies and policy papers have approached this question from a more macro perspective, by examining the benefit of ESOL to the UK economy as a whole. A 2021 report from ResPublica, for example, argued “that, in the face of an acute skills crisis in Britain, better provision of English for Speakers of Other Languages – ESOL – should now be a key strategy for tackling skills gaps and skills shortages”¹⁸. Similarly, a 2021 report from the Learning and Work Institute concluded that “the potential benefit of ESOL to the UK economy is often ignored” and advised that “ESOL strategy needs to align with economic goals and in particular the UK’s agenda for skills” with providers working “with local stakeholders to plan provision which combines ESOL with vocational skills, at intermediate and advanced levels.”¹⁹

A final strand of the literature worth exploring, is that which looks at the value of ESOL from the perspective of migrants themselves. There is considerable evidence generated by academics in a Scottish context that suggests “migrants living in the UK generally recognise

the importance of English in their daily lives and their English language needs, while continuing to value their linguistic and cultural heritages and switching between different languages in different contexts”²⁰

Along similar lines, one study on migrant’s perceptions of the link between English language acquisition and employment prospects, outlined how “both economic and displaced migrants frequently mentioned work as the main reason they needed to improve their English. However, their migrant status, different rights to employment and experience of work in Scotland, as well as their previous education and work experience in their countries of origin, family roles and childcare responsibilities, all came together to produce a complex and nuanced set of practical experiences and understandings of the relationship between ESOL and employability.”²¹

Another thematic analysis of this issue put it as follows: “successfully gaining employment is of huge importance to New Scots as working increases people’s sense of belonging and safety in an area, encourages encounters and connections with the local community, enables New Scots to more easily meet friends and family (through increased availability of resources), produces more opportunities to learn and use other languages and generates both financial independence and improves mental wellbeing through such independence.”²²

The Scottish and UK Policy Context

Neither Scotland nor the UK have a standalone ESOL strategy. In Scotland’s case, the previous ESOL strategy (2015-2020) was discontinued and ESOL was incorporated into the broader (2022-2027) Adult Learning Strategy. The UK, meanwhile, has never had an ESOL strategy. Some have argued that – in the Scottish context – this has “signalled a lack of strategic vision for the sector and a failure to address issues linked to under-resourced, piecemeal, and disjointed provision”²³. While UK commentators point out that “the benefits of a national strategy have been reiterated time and time again over the past twenty years”²⁴

In short, while the literature in this area is diverse, both methodologically and in focus, the outline picture that emerges is that the return on investment from ESOL provision is good, that the benefit to the UK economy is under-appreciated and that there is a growing need to align ESOL provision, both in terms of quantity and content, with local economic needs and national skills priorities. Where migrant perceptions of ESOL and employability are concerned, research has tended to find that English language acquisition is a key priority for new migrants, and, in turn, that securing paid work is a key motivating factor in this prioritisation.

Based on these broad conclusions, most studies, both academic and grey literature (including a number of those mentioned above), have tended to generate recommendations that involve greater recognition of the importance of ESOL, a clearer strategic vision from government in this area and further efforts – on the part of providers – to align ESOL provision even more closely with the skills agenda. Our research aimed to generate new evidence that supports the College to better understand its particular context while, at the same time, adding to our collective understanding of these broader issues and themes.

On the other hand, ESOL does feature prominently in the New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy²⁵ and the associated delivery plan²⁶ and it is often through a social integration rather than economic development lens that ESOL provision is framed where policy is concerned. It should also be noted, that as the Scottish Government waives ESOL fees for asylum seekers, ESOL provision is not as restricted according to immigration status in Scotland. Despite this, the ESOL funding landscape can, in practice, be complex and, reflecting this, provision fragmented²⁷.



The results and analysis presented in this report are based on primary research conducted by Edinburgh College researchers between November 2024 and February 2025.

The primary data collection tool was a survey, conducted with current students on English for Work Programmes, and an adapted version of the survey conducted with former students on English for Work programmes. Both surveys contained a mix of questions that asked students to reflect on their experience on English for Work Programmes, including their motivations for studying the programme, how effective they found the programme itself and how useful they believe it will be (or was) in terms of supporting their career progression, as well as examining any social benefits students believe they gained from the course. The survey was distributed directly to current students by class teachers.

Meanwhile, former students were identified and, where permission to do so had been granted, contacted by email to invite their participation in the study.

To supplement survey data, a small number of semi-structured interviews were conducted with lecturers who have worked on these programmes for a number of years to explore some of the themes identified in the survey in greater depth. To provide an additional perspective, data gleaned from the above methods was supplemented by a small number of semi-structured interviews conducted with selected employers who the College works with as part of its English for Work programmes. Primarily these employers provide work placements for students on English for Work programmes. Employers were selected to represent a range of industries and company sizes (see Table 1 below).

Limitations

There were a number of limitations of the research. Firstly, as survey participation was optional, the sample was not necessarily representative. That said, among current students the response rate was very high (with around 85% of current students completing the survey). The response rate was far lower, and thus student perspective more limited, among former students. Cognisance must therefore be paid to this limited sample size when drawing conclusions about the longer-term impact of the programme for individuals based on this data.

In terms of the employer perspective, interview data was qualitative, and employers were not selected at random. As such, data in this area was not representative. We acknowledge this limitation.

Similarly, the researchers' positions within the organisation represent a potential limitation of the research and the presentation of the findings. We acknowledge this and offer this research as an insight gleaned from our perspective; in a sense, self-reflective on the part of our institution and underpinned by an action research ethos on the part of the researchers. The research aims to support Edinburgh College develop our offer in this area and is published and shared with partners and stakeholders as a means of adding to our collective understanding of this topic.

Table 1: Overview of Employers Selected for Interview

Company	Company size (employees)	Public/ Private/ Third	Industry
Employer A	0-250 employees	Private	Retail and Leisure
Employer B	0-250 employees	Public	Retail and Leisure
Employer C	0-250 employees	Private	Health and Social Care

All interviews lasted around 20 minutes and were recorded, transcribed and then analysed using Qualitative Content Analysis.

Our Findings: Demographics of Edinburgh College's English for Work Programmes

Between 2019-2020 and 2024-2025, over 500 individuals undertook English for Work courses at Edinburgh College. Individuals on English for Work courses over this period came from 52 different countries and were aged from 18 to 59. Within this incredibly diverse student cohort, a number of notable demographic trends emerge that were discussed in interview with lecturing staff, and which are explored in depth in the sections below.

Refugees

The College has a large, and increasing number of sanctuary-seeking students (refugees and asylum seekers) enrolled on its programmes, around 75% of whom study ESOL programmes. Within that, the College's English for Work programmes are a popular option for this cohort, with students from a sanctuary-seeking background making up an increase proportion of this cohort since 2019/2020. Part of the growth in refugees enrolling on these programmes reflects the city's aforementioned response to the Ukraine war. The Scottish Government's super-sponsor scheme resulted in Scotland receiving (per head population) a much higher number of displaced people from Ukraine than elsewhere in the UK. Edinburgh was a key entry point for Ukrainian arrivals in the months following the outbreak of war, and many of the Ukrainians who arrived via Edinburgh airport, have chosen to stay within the city region. However, the war in Ukraine is not the only reason for an increase in sanctuary seeking students within the College's student population, with conflict elsewhere in the world leading to an increase in students from an ever-more diverse range of countries. As noted above, this process has happened alongside a decline in economic migration from the EU post-Brexit.

Anecdotally, this shift is something that lecturers interviewed had noticed in their classes. When asked about the demographics of their student cohort, lecturer A responded:

“*That's a really interesting question because I think we've seen a change in the demographic of our students, largely due to conflict in certain areas. So most of our students now in the department are refugees, asylum seekers as opposed to economic migrants from Eastern Europe from a few years ago.*

Lecturer A

When asked if they had also seen a change in the demographic of their learner, Lecturer B responded:

“*Oh yes, oh yes, yes. I mean I've been in the college since 2011 and initially we had European students basically: lots of Spanish students who needed to get their qualification to get somewhere”, whereas now: “Most of them are sort of some kind of refugee, they find themselves here, they're desperate to work.*

Lecturer B

Women entering the labour market or returning to work

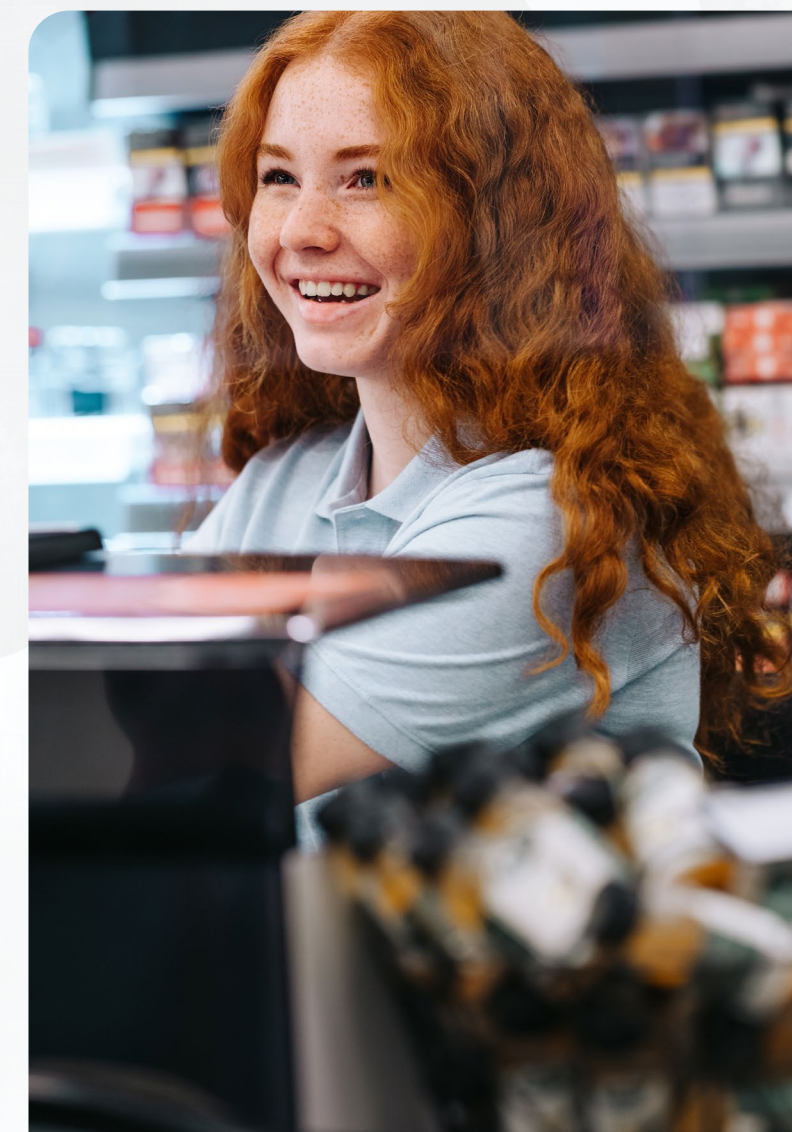
Another notable trend in the enrolment data for the College's English for Work programmes is a substantial over-representation of females on these courses. Between 2020/21 and 2024/25, 83% of those who enrolled on English for Work Programmes at Edinburgh College were women. While the subject areas offered may hold some weight in explaining why this is so, it does not, intuitively, appear to be a sufficient explanation in itself given that, within our English for Work course portfolio, traditionally female-dominated courses (such as English for Health and Care Professions) are balanced by courses in curriculum areas that have historically had an over-representation of males (such as English for Computing).

Asked about this dynamic, lecturer A agreed that the over-representation of females was a consistent trend and suggested, an alternative explanation for this, based on their knowledge of the student cohort:

“*We've always had probably a bigger sway towards more female than male on these courses...I don't know. We've got a lot of parents on these courses. And we often have mothers who've taken time out of their careers to have children and they're returning adults but they need to increase their level of English and get back into that – you know, get back into work, so this is almost a step into it. So, we do have that demographic a lot, a lot of mothers returning after a maternity gap or a longer gap in their careers, or maybe they've never really worked in a career but they're looking to get a career because their kids have grown. So perhaps that could be one of the reasons.*

Lecturer A

The fact that English for Work programmes appear to be viewed by many women, with English as a second language, as a potentially supportive route into (or back into) employment after a maternity gap or career break, suggests these programmes may play an important part in tackling economic inactivity in the region. In working, disproportionately, with this demographic, and by directly tackling a number of the barriers often identified for this group, Edinburgh College's English for Work programmes could have an important role in tackling this specific economic challenge within the city-region.



Deprivation

51% of students enrolled on Edinburgh College's English for Work programmes live in the 40% most deprived areas in Scotland, compared to just 29.98% of the Edinburgh and Southeast Scotland region's residents. This significant over-representation of student living within the city region's most deprived postcode should perhaps not be surprising. Many of those who attend Edinburgh College's English for Work programmes are new arrivals to the city and, as explained above, many have arrived as refugees or asylum seekers whose initial housing options are weighted towards more deprived parts of the city region.

More broadly, the overlap between migration and deprivation is a long-standing trend in Scotland and the UK and is a multi-faceted issue that has been explored in several studies. The Josphe Rowntree Foundation, for example, found that minority ethnic communities in Scotland (of which migrants make up a substantial part) experience poverty rates that are "double the national average, and rising"²⁸. Research by Migration Policy Scotland's highlighted some of the key factors that potentially underpin this dynamic. They found that "migrants face specific barriers in the labour market, including non-recognition of overseas qualifications; undervaluing of work experience and skills development gained outside of the UK; costs of addressing language barriers; discrimination on grounds of race or religion"²⁹

Our findings speak to these points, particularly around the barriers to work faced by migrants based on the lack of opportunity to convert past qualifications from their home country. As Lecturer A explains:

“ *It's anecdotal but we have so many students who come here and say "I know I can get an opportunity in this country. I just don't know exactly how to do it, and I also know I need to improve my English and my skills to do it. I was an accountant, for example, in my country, I came over here, I work as a cleaner, I had my kids, and I just need that step up back into that career or another career". And we hear that all the time, all the time. So maybe women who haven't been active economically for a long time, as you say, but wanting to get back into it.*

Lecturer A

Discussion

Taken together, the demographics of Edinburgh College's English for Work programmes point to the importance of these courses for some of the most economically disadvantaged groups within the city-region. It suggests that these courses have a potentially important role to play in tackling several pervasive economic challenges in the city, such as unemployment, economic inactivity and in-work-poverty.

Moreover, the notable growth in refugees and asylum seekers on these programmes, mean they have an increasingly important part to play in the integration of sanctuary-seeking students in the region. In this respect, these courses support a number of Scottish Government priorities laid out in the New Scots Integration Strategy (and associated delivery plan) and place the College at the heart of refugee integration efforts within the city region.

Reflecting this shift, Edinburgh College has, throughout this academic year, been working towards becoming a "College of Sanctuary". This award (developed and overseen by the wider City of Sanctuary network) recognises – and seeks to enhance – the work colleges do in providing support and opportunity for refugees, asylum seekers and those seeking sanctuary in the UK. Work towards this end has been led by an internal working group, comprised of staff from across the College, that has engaged with sanctuary seeking students, identified opportunities to enhance our support and sought to raise awareness among the wider student and staff cohort of the challenges faced by those seeking sanctuary.

Our Findings: Impact for Individuals

Our research also looked to generate some insight on the impact these programmes are having for the individuals studying on them, and the views of these students about the design and efficacy of the programmes in supporting them to achieve their goals.

The primary data collection tool for this part of the research was a survey, completed by a high proportion (more than 85%) of those currently studying on English for Work programmes (as well as a small number who had completed their course). A limitation of the research in this respect, was that most survey respondents were part-way through (rather than finished) their course. As a result, the potential impacts of the course on their career were only just beginning to come into focus and, the more quantitative longer-term impacts, in terms of, say, career progression and increased earnings were yet to be fully realised. Nonetheless, the data gathered did allow us to glean some important insights on students' motivations for studying the course, some of the early impacts it was having for them, and some reflections on what they foresaw the longer-term impacts being in terms of employment prospects and career trajectory. Some of the key themes that emerged from this part of the research are discussed below.

Increased confidence

One of the key findings that emerged from this part of the research was an increase in participants' confidence in using English in a workplace environment. When asked "Is the course helping you improve your confidence in using English in a workplace setting?", 88% answered "yes" and 12% answered "maybe", with no respondents saying that the course was not helping them in this respect. A range of comments provided greater insight on the development participants had seen in this respect:

This course has improved my confidence to communicate with others in English

Student A

I became more confident in my English skills therefore I have a wider choice of work.

Student B

It has impacted of using English more fluently [sic]. I will use my language more efficiently during work which can change the type of work that I'm thinking of doing.

Student C

While this finding is perhaps to be expected, it is nonetheless reassuring to have this impact confirmed and, indeed, the extent of this sentiment among participants was encouraging. Moreover, comments from participants highlighted the fact that, for many, the course was developing their confidence in a broader sense (beyond confidence in terms of language use), as comments below demonstrate:

I feel I am more confident now. I feel as if I am really improving my skills and developing myself. I really enjoy the process.

Student D

The course improved my English, gave me new knowledge, skills and confidence in looking for a future job.

Student E

A sense of Motivation and Purpose

Alongside an increase in confidence, survey responses suggested that, for many students, their English for Work course was serving to improve their motivation, instil a greater sense of purpose and heighten their ambition. Some of the survey responses below capture these sentiments:

The course has greatly enhanced my skills and confidence, aligning perfectly with my career goals and inspiring me to pursue new opportunities.

Student F

Some projects, assignments enhance my confidence in my own career.

Student G

It helps me with written CV [sic] and with presentation for interviews with potential employers.

Student H

Lecturer B summed up the way they saw this increased sense of motivation and purpose materialise, in practice, in their classroom:

I think a lot of our ESOL courses do that, that's the idea. You know "I could be a waitress all my life, but I don't want to be...". We also work an awful lot on their skillset, what they've got. Because they don't realise how much they have got, transferable skills, and making them confident to think "actually, I could do far more with my life, I could feel satisfied and give back to the place where I'm staying". And I think a lot of them think that as well.

Lecturer B

Lecturer A meanwhile, highlighted how the course itself was structured to support self-reflection and how an approach to building confidence in students was deliberately embedded in the programme:

So, I think within this unit, there's a huge amount of self-reflection for the students. They reflect on where they are in their careers, what skills they have developed up to now, their natural qualities, their futures and where they see themselves going, and the from that we take quite an individualised approach.

Lecturer A

While it is impossible to quantify (based on the survey results alone) the extent to which these two phenomena (increased confidence and a greater sense of motivation and purpose) will affect future labour market outcomes for these individuals, there is reason to suggest that they could have a significant positive impact. Indeed, there is considerable academic evidence that links associated concepts like self-esteem with observed employment outcomes, especially for women. A (2015) quantitative study from researchers at the University of Maastricht, for example, found that "low self-esteem is highly significant in predicting the probability of becoming unemployed for women but not for men"³⁰.

This point is significant in the context of our research findings, especially when we consider the aforementioned demographics of the English for Work cohort. If we assume that low-self-esteem and lack of confidence are predictors of unemployment, especially among women, it is encouraging that in our research (conducted with a cohort that is 83% female) one of the key themes emerging from responses was an increased confidence, motivation and sense of purpose. While the methodology employed in our research does not, in isolation, allow for definitive conclusions to be reached in this respect, when considered alongside existing academic evidence, our findings give reason to suggest that these courses could be an important catalyst for improved labour market outcomes for this group.

Awareness of career opportunities and pathways to further study

Another impact that came through strongly in survey responses was that the programme improved participants' awareness both of career opportunities that may be open to them currently, and of study pathways that may open up enhanced career opportunities to them in the future. Comments to this effect included:

I understood in what directions you can build a career and how you can develop a business

Student I

Thanks to the course, I decided to study the area that interests me in more depth and try to find a job in this area.

Student J

It helped me to find my current job and encourage to study on next course at Edinburgh College.

Student K

It's let me start to think about the future, because if I pass this course, I might have a chance to further study.

Student L

Again, there is reason to suggest this finding is significant. Recent research on migrant experiences in Scotland have highlighted how "migrants experience underemployment, precarity and vulnerability to exploitation when they are unable to access jobs that match their skills, qualifications and experience or when their visa conditions restrict the hours and/or sectors in which they can work."³¹

The existence of this dynamic within the English for Work cohort was confirmed by Lecturer B:

We've got dentists, who're fully qualified, we've got dental nurses, dental technicians, we have doctors, we have nurses – a big group of nurses this year – who've not only qualified but they've also been working in their country, which they've had to flee for various reasons, most of them, most of them are sort of some kind of refugees, they find themselves here, they're desperate to work, we need the nurses, and they can't work. Because they then have to manage to get into the official world of whatever it is, be it nursing or dentists. I know a dentist who's been particularly detailed in what he needs, he needs about an IELTS 8 to be able to get onto the album, to get onto the album to then practice. So basically, they end up taking courses in the college. Again, they're repeating their education in order to be able to work here.

Lecturer B

While the course was not able to address the underlying structural factors that often impinge on migrants' ability to gain employment matching their existing qualifications, such as non-recognition of qualifications and restrictive visa conditions, in improving awareness of the local labour market, career opportunities and education pathways, there is reason to suggest that the course may go some way to supporting migrants avoid the precarity and vulnerability to exploitation described above.

Similarly, in acting as a pipeline for students to go on and study higher level programmes at the College (alluded to in the quotes above) these programmes have the potential to be an important first step on a pathway to career advancement and increased earnings potential.

Understanding of the workplace

Along similar lines, survey evidence suggested that the programme served to increase awareness and understanding of processes and procedures associated with job-hunting and applications in the UK and important cultural workplace norms that are context-specific. Comments to this effect included:

It allows me to have a deep look into the job market and the procedure of how to apply the job.

Student M

Makes me feel more confident about writing CV, cover letter. Lecturer C and Lecturer D are absolutely fantastic, passionate tutors.

Student N

I think it will help me understand what is the education system in Scotland.

Student O

The course is great, we have visited another departments for health and care and teachers explained for us everything so it's great.

Student P

Once again, Lecturer A explained how the teaching approach to this aspect of the programme is deliberately designed to support students in this regard, by providing real-life examples that allow leaning to be applied directly in their current situation:

We ask them to write their individual CVs, cover letters, make it realistic and meaningful. We ask them to find a job that they want to do apply for, and then we go through the motions without actually doing it. So, its meaningful, which is always good for the students. You know, it's not just a sort of... hypothetical situation. So that's a positive aspect.

Lecturer A

Our Findings: Impact for Employers

Interviews carried out with three employers who support the College's English for Work programmes explored the impact hosting student placements had for these employer partners themselves and aimed to highlight any issues that arose throughout the process. Despite the small sample size, several common themes emerged across interviews. These themes are discussed in more depth below. More broadly, evidence gleaned from employer interviews suggests that, through work placements, students on English for Work programmes had an overwhelmingly positive impact in a diverse range of workplace settings.

A more diverse workforce bringing new skills

All employers interviewed expressed positive views about the impact hosting English for Work students had had on their organisation. In particular, it was highlighted by employers that English for Work students, irrespective of their current English Language ability, brought with them a range of valuable skills and experience to the workplace. Many of these skills and, much of this experience, was a direct result of them having a different background to existing staff, whether that be linguistic or cultural background (as expressed by Employer A below) or background in terms of broader life experience (as expressed by Employer C below).

“ We've got a bit of everything here to try because, as I say, they will get the residents that stay in the hotel as well as the members. So, you know there's a lot of Spanish who visit for festival seasons and stuff like that. So actually, having someone who's got a different background is beneficial in this place.

Employer A

“ Certainty in the case of the student we had, she was just absolutely great. She was really keen, willing to learn, aware that she had some previous life experience she could bring. And again, that's part of you know...we did a mini induction for her. So, she wasn't just abandoned but talking about the fact that she already knew things. She had a young family. So, it meant that she realised, you know, time management and you know, all the different pressures and things that you normally have. And she was able to sort of recognise that she could bring those skills.

Employer C



Questioned on the potential challenge of hosting students whose first language was not English and, in some cases, whose English language level may still be quite low, employers were also, in general, positive: acknowledging the potential challenge (especially if it was combined with the shyness or nerves typical of anyone starting a new job) but suggesting this challenge was surmountable in most circumstances, providing the student had at least a baseline level of English.

“ I think any lower would have been a bit of a struggle. She's quite shy as well and I think that was probably because of the language barrier... maybe holding herself back a little bit from chatting as much and being maybe a bit less confident with customers to have that chat because with staff she would become quite chatty. But then when you're speaking to someone it's a bit daunting I think, if you're not entirely sure of your English skills. So, I think her level was fine, but anything below that probably would have been difficult to manage.

Employer B

“ And I just remember Student A, he struggled a wee bit. But then again, after a few days he started to get a bit better. You know what I mean? And he was just nervous as well because he was 20 or whatever he was, he was just, he was just nervous.

Employer A

Moreover, even where English language skills could potentially have presented an issue in the workplace setting, the employers interviewed emphasised that this was often compensated for by a good attitude and strong non-verbal communication skills:

“ One of the things I've noticed in people whose [English] language skills aren't great: their body language and facial expression skills are fantastic, we can learn so much from them, because that's what they're used to using.

Employer C

Taken together, the evidence gleaned from employer interviews suggests that hosting student placements had a net positive effect in terms of workforce skills, with the additional skills students brought to the workplace outweighing any challenges associated with English being a second language.

“ I think it's definitely good for the work placement providers, they enjoy it because it is a different cultural approach even – they see that, for example, these people they've got all these qualifications, they might not be nurses in our country, but they've had different experiences and they share that, so it's enriching the work placement providers, and it's giving our lot a kick into the employability market.

Lecturer B

A potential recruitment pipeline

Another key benefit of hosting a student placement identified by the employers interviewed related to the potential for the placement student, if they were a good fit for the organisation, to gain longer term employment with the organisation after their course. In this sense, working with the College on these programmes could serve as a potential recruitment pipeline for the employer, with the added benefit that the placement duration (two weeks) gave the opportunity for the employer to get-to-know the student over an extended period of time and see their skills and competencies in the workplace setting, in a way that would not be possible in an interview:

“ So that’s been absolutely ideal for me because I was looking for a part timer and her name is Student A. I think she’s doing a fitness course now at the college, but she now works for me 20 hours a week and it just made sense because she was here for two weeks, she got to know the members, she learned how to look after the pool. It was an easy fix, an easy fit...With Student A working here now, it’s proved to me that it’s been worth the risk I did say to her, I said “look, you know, once you’ve finished your course, if you’re in a position and you are looking for a job in this area, then please come back and mention that you came on this course”. So essentially, it’s a kind of two-week long interview, you know? Yes, they have to finish the course but. But actually, yeah, we would welcome her with open arms. She was really great, but we wouldn’t have known that had we not have had that opportunity.

Employer C

While the above provides a good example of how courses are delivering against a key objective (supporting students into employment), it also highlights the potential value of the programme for employers, especially in industries and sectors where recruitment and retention present ongoing challenges.

Supporting students and developing existing staff

Another key theme that emerged from all three interviews was a belief that the two-week work placement could be beneficial for students in terms of exposure to real-life, workplace situations that would require them to use – and by extension practice – their English language skills in a specific workplace contexts:

“ Because it is such a...talking job, you’re always talking to customers and answering the phone and there’s very little scope for doing things outside of that in [details of organisation].

Employer B

“ And particularly for our setting, learning about dementia and you know that that in itself is just very different in communication, you know, exercise, answering the same question 20 times in exactly the same way. And it’s a real skill. She it felt like she was able to do that, and she also recognised that not everyone was the same, you know? So that person-centred element was very key, which was great.

Employer C

As well as developing the skills of students, there was also a suggestion in interviews that hosting student placements could be of some benefit to existing staff. One employer, in particular, highlighted the positive impact that hosting students could have on the morale of existing staff, explaining that it gave these staff an opportunity to share their experience and take pride in their own professional expertise, while inspiring others into the industry:

“ In a lot of ways, the carers that work with us already love to be able to.... I don’t really want to use the word show off, but that’s kind of what I mean. Like, “look what I know!” Especially if they come from the same background or the same country and it’s like “look, you know, look what I can do”. And I think that there is something really good in that sort of peer support but also peer encouragement and it’s great for the staff to realiseand I don’t think they know how good they are.

Employer C

Community Engagement and Service

In the course of discussions about why the employers interviewed supported the programme (and whether they’d be willing to continue to do so in the future) it emerged that, in terms of motivation, employers also had altruistic reasons for their involvement in the programme. Chief among these was a desire to build strong community links, to give people a chance and to support them to integrate into their community or progress in their careers. Employer A said:

“ It’s just good to build community relations as well because, as I say, if I’m struggling one day I could quite easily go to Edinburgh College and look for someone who’s you know, looking to start out...So certainly, I’m happy to keep helping out in the community and help people progress in their lives.

Employer A

Employer B expressed a similar sentiment, noting that providing opportunity to people was central to their organisational ethos, and that this programme clearly aligned with that ethos:

“ Oh yeah, pretty straightforward. We’re quite happy to support people because we’re a [details of organisation], so you know, it’s kind of our...our thing. We like supporting members of the community to grow and get more development opportunities. So certainly, I’m very happy to have students here in the future.

Employer B

Our Findings: Features of successful English for Work programmes

In the course of our research, a number of features of successful English for Work programmes emerged that are discussed in detail below.

Industry Specific

Results suggest best practice is to tailor courses to specific industries, with a bespoke curriculum focussing on language and skills applicable to the area. In order to achieve this, current employment trends need to be well understood and ongoing feedback from professionals on the skills gap should be sought. Additionally, job shadowing, mainstream course observation and research to identify industry specific vocabulary and genre should be undertaken.

Prioritising Language use

Findings suggest English for Work courses should prioritise language use over theoretical demonstration of knowledge and that traditional assessment techniques may not be the most effective way for ESOL learners to demonstrate knowledge and skills. Alternative assessments such as presentations, project work, and practical demonstrations would provide a more realistic assessment scenario. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to work collaboratively with departments delivering mainstream courses to review and revise current assessment where applicable.

Employability Focus

Findings also highlighted the importance of including soft skills development and input on the culture of the work place environment in the UK as a key part of English for Work courses. Lecturer B explained how their students identified this point to them:



I said “what’s the most useful thing you’ve done this year?” And they said, well, apart from actually pushing our English up, employability. Because we’ve now got a CV that’s up to date and British style, UK standard, we know how to do an interview, we know where to look for jobs, and we feel we’ve actually got the confidence to go out there and do so by ourselves.

Lecturer B

As well as practical skills, such as CV writing, it is proposed that teamwork, problem solving and adaptability should be integrated into course work and industry visits and outside speakers should be encouraged to focus on explaining work place norms and culture to English for Work students.

Meaningful employer connections

Findings suggests the work placement element of our English for Work programme is especially valued by students. By extension, our research found that maintaining strong employer partnerships is foundational to a successful English for Work programme. While identifying sufficient suitable placements was identified as a challenge, the rewards of doing so for students came through clearly in our results.



The demographics of enrolment, and evidence of the outcomes produced, suggest English for Work programmes fulfil a potential dual purpose in both supporting the social integration of migrants, including refugees, while, at the same time, helping tackle key economic issues, including skills shortages in key growth industries. It follows that the outcomes of English for Work programmes align closely with several key Scottish Government objectives around tackling poverty, supporting economic growth and integrating New Scots.

For the same reason, English for Work programmes form an important part of the city region's skills landscape, representing a unique skills intervention tailored to the local labour market. The findings of our research suggest there may be scope to consider providing further support for such programmes – potentially through the city region's economic, as well as social, funding – as means of improving labour market outcomes for a number of disadvantaged groups. Such an approach would require

something of a reframing of our thinking about the role of English language development (from a pre-cursor to skills development to an integrated part of it).

Our research suggests that student satisfaction with Edinburgh College's English for Work programmes is high and that these programmes generate a range of positive outcomes for the individuals who study on them, for local employers and for the wider economy.

At the same time, there were limitations to our research, discussed above, and there is considerable need for further research to be conducted in this area. Particularly, there is a need for more longitudinal research that looks at the longer-term labour market impacts of these programmes for students. Similarly, studies adopting a more econometric approach to quantifying the returns for individuals or the exchequer from investing in such programmes in a Scottish or UK context would be welcome.



Next steps for Edinburgh College

In response to rising demand, Edinburgh College intends to expand its ESOL provision in the years ahead. The findings of this research will help inform that development and ensure growth in this area aligns with the needs of individuals and the regional labour market it supports. In particular, the following priority actions have been identified to ensure the College's English for Work course portfolio continues to evolve in line with demand from individuals and the needs of the local labour market.

Introduction of wider range of industries

Our research highlighted that industry specific courses are of high value to students. As such, part of the College's planned expansion of ESOL provision involves introducing new industry specialisms to our English for Work portfolio. Efforts in this regard are already underway, with the introduction of English for Construction course, which launched in August 2025. Thereafter, the College is exploring opportunities to develop English for Work programmes in other in-demand industry areas, such as Professional Cookery, Automotive Maintenance and Hair and Beauty.

Expansion of work placement programme

Our research underscored the importance of the work placement element of English for Work courses for many students, as well as the value this brought to employers. As such, the College aims not only to retain but to expand its work placement offer in this area.

Closer integration with other departments

Our research found evidence that where collaborative working between ESOL and other College departments was strong, this benefitted students on English for Work programmes. Continuing to develop this collaborative approach to English for Work programmes will therefore be a key part of our approach going forward.

Development of progression pathway to mainstream college courses

Related, the ESOL team will also explore ways of ensuring students are able to progress out of ESOL into vocational courses at a lower level, with the aim of promoting faster progression to employment and economic activity. Efforts in this regard will be underpinned by a review of the current English language support for students on mainstream College programmes, with a view to identifying areas where there is a need to expand support provision, including exploring the possibility to provide support sessions for specific subject areas with higher numbers of ESOL learners. At the same time, consideration will be given to what further training and support is needed for lecturers on vocational courses in terms of developing effective communication with non-native speakers of English.

Support for efforts to map ESOL demand at a regional level

There are efforts ongoing to develop a more robust, evidence-based understanding of the level of unmet ESOL demand within the Edinburgh city-region. Edinburgh College will continue to engage with partners to this end and aims to play a proactive role in developing a collaborative solution to address this issue.

Further engagement with research in this area

Edinburgh College will continue to engage with partners locally, nationally and internationally around the results of this research. In April 2025, the authors presented preliminary findings at the IATEFL conference, giving the opportunity to engage with practitioners operating similar programmes in other countries. Through these activities, Edinburgh College aims to ensure its provision in this area aligns with international best practice.

Key Asks

Our research suggests that further collaboration between key stakeholders is needed to maximise the potential impact of ESOL for Work programmes for the region. In particular, our research highlights the need to:



Expedite efforts to quantify unmet ESOL demand regionally



Conduct a study into the economic impact of ESOL for work programmes



Increase targeted funding for ESOL and employability programmes



Increase employer engagement with ESOL programmes



Further the integration of ESOL into regional skills and workforce development plans





Edinburgh College’s English for Work Approach

In recent years there has been a notable drive towards ESOL courses having greater emphasis on employability skills. Reflecting this, the programmes above have evolved to have a clear focus on teaching language skills directly relevant to the workplace, thus enhancing learners’ employability and confidence in the workplace. Particular features of this over-arching approach are discussed in more detail below.

Vocationally Specific Language Training

Vocationally specific language courses (ESOL for Access to Childcare, Health and Care Professions and Computing) provide tailored language input addressing the needs of specific job roles or industries. For instance, learners might practice the language used in a childcare, healthcare, or programming setting. This targeted approach ensures that learners acquire the vocabulary and communication skills necessary for their chosen field, making them more competitive in the job market.

Integrated Skills

A holistic approach to the integration of essential skills such as digital literacy, teamwork, and problem-solving into language learning ensures that learners are workplace ready. For example, a language lesson could include activities requiring collaboration and the use of digital tools, thereby preparing learners for the multifaceted demands of modern employment.

Use of Authentic Materials

The incorporation of authentic materials, such as job advertisements, company websites, and workplace documents, into lessons exposes learners to the typical text-types encountered in employment. Using authentic materials ensures that language instruction and input is both practical and directly applicable to the workplace.

Workplace Simulations and Role-Playing

Activities of this nature are key components of vocational and employment-specific language courses. These activities provide learners with the opportunity to practice real-life work scenarios in a safe and controlled environment. Role-playing

activities such as interviews, meetings, and customer interactions can have a huge impact on confidence building and enhancement of practical language skills. In addition, learners can develop the ability to navigate professional settings effectively through experiencing these simulated workplace situations.

Work Placements

Edinburgh College has a long-standing history of working in partnership with local businesses to provide work placements, internships, or job shadowing opportunities. Our ESOL department has a dedicated ESOL work placement officer who works with employers across all sectors to find short term placements for students on English for Work programmes. These work placements offer learners practical experience and assist in the building of professional networks. By working directly with employers, usually in their chosen industry, learners can apply their language skills in real-world contexts, gaining valuable insights. This aspect of the programme will be discussed in more depth in the *Findings* sections above.

Alignment with the region’s ESOL employability Landscape

It is also worth noting that Edinburgh College’s programmes are just one part of the city’s ESOL employability landscape. The New Scots Employability Fund running from April 2025 to March 2028, for example, supports a number of organisations across Edinburgh, such as the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA), Linknet and The Welcoming, that provide holistic support for New Scots, including employability training, mentoring and ESOL classes. Where Edinburgh College’s offer is unique is that, whereas the majority of ESOL classes offered through the voluntary sector are limited to a few hours per week, Edinburgh College has the capacity to offer full-time courses. This additional time resources offers the potential to provide more comprehensive language development and employability skills for students, positioning them effectively for the job market.





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