

Reflections on the Role of Edinburgh College's English for Work Programmes

Author: Neale Gardiner, Policy, Research and Business Intelligence Lead, and Sarah Donno, Head of School, College-based ESOL, Edinburgh College

Background and Motivation

Throughout the 2024/2025 academic year, we (the authors of this article) have conducted a piece of research focussed on assessing the impact of Edinburgh College's English for Work programmes. This small suite of specialised courses aims to support local people (whose first language is not English) to improve their English skills to prepare them for – or support them to progress in – employment. In some cases, these courses have a broad scope ("English for Work"), while in others they have an industry or sector focus (Computing with ESOL, Access to Care and Health Professions with ESOL, Childhood Practice with ESOL).

Some key contextual factors drove our desire to explore this area. One of these was recent shifts in migration patterns to Scotland, that have changed the demographics of our region. The 2022 census showed that close to 1 in 5 (19.9%) people in our region (which incorporates the City of Edinburgh, East Lothian and Midlothian) were born outside the UK, rising to almost 1 in 4 (23.51%) in the City of Edinburgh itself. Overall, there are 52,373 more people in the region who were born outside the UK than there were in 2011, when the last census was conducted¹. The College has seen this shift reflected in a rising demand for ESOL courses. The census showed that 93.84% of people in the region aged 3 and over can speak, read and write English well, suggesting 6.16% (some 43,387 people) had some issue with at least one aspect of English (Scottish Government, 2024).

Alongside this, there is emerging evidence that a lack of English language ability is a key driver of economic inactivity in our region, raising the question of how ESOL programmes can help tackle this, and other acute economic challenges, such as skills shortages in key industries.

Our English for Work programmes operate at the intersection point of these complex, multi-faceted issues but often receive considerably less attention in our discussion of them than other employability-focussed programmes or activities in the region. Our research aimed to address this and support the College get a clearer understanding of who is undertaking these programmes, what impact they have for those individuals, what impact they have for our local labour market and, from there, consider how the College might want to develop these programmes going forward.

Our Approach

Our research employed a mixed-methods approach, with demographic data on enrolments supplemented by a survey conducted with current and past students, and a small number of semi-structured interviews carried out both with employers who support, and lecturers who deliver, these programmes.

This approach gleaned a lot of rich data and insight, and while we believe it was methodologically rigorous, we appreciate that our position within the organisation represents a limitation of the research. In this sense, we make no claims of academic objectivity. Our research was undertaken as a self-reflective exercise on

the part of our institution and underpinned by an action research ethos on our part as researchers. We intend to share our findings with partners as a means of adding to our collective understanding of this topic and to raise awareness of this important area of college work.

Our Findings

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, several notable demographic trends emerged.

Firstly, over the last five years there has been a significant increase in the number of sanctuary-seeking students (refugees and asylum seekers) undertaking these programmes (from just 2% of the cohort in 2019/2020 to over half of the cohort in 2024/2025). While much of this growth reflects the city's response to the war in Ukraine, this is not the only factor: conflict elsewhere in the world has resulted in the college welcoming sanctuary-seeking students from an ever-more diverse range of countries.

Our stats also show that a large majority (83%) 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, as lecturer A explained:

“We’ve always had probably a bigger sway towards more female than male on these courses. 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.”

Taken together, the demographics of Edinburgh College's English for Work programmes point to the importance of these courses in supporting groups who are often furthest from the labour market and suffer most acutely from structural barriers to employment and in-work progression. It suggests that these courses have a potentially important role to play in tackling a number of pervasive economic challenges such as unemployment, economic inactivity and in-work-poverty.

A survey of students and past students (which gathered around 100 responses) shed more light on the impact for individuals undertaking these programmes. Some key themes that emerged in responses suggest programmes served to increase students' confidence in using English in a workplace environment, gave them a greater awareness of career opportunities and how best to pursue these, developed a range of employability skills and sparked a desire to undertake further study to enhance career prospects.

Interviews with employers, meanwhile, highlighted how employer partners (who provide work placements as part of the course) value these programmes as a potential recruitment pipeline, bringing new skills to their workplaces and supporting them to develop a more diverse workforce. They spoke of how recruitment challenges in their industries were requiring them to look at innovative ways of developing their workforce and how hosting student placements was also a way of supporting the professional development of existing staff.

Implications

Taken together, our findings emphasise that the College's English for Work programmes occupy an important space in the city's economic ecosystem. Crucially, these programmes are not just about social integration of new migrants – though that is an important aspect - but also have a clear economic imperative to support the better alignment of skills supply and demand in the local labour market. Our findings also underlined how English for Work programmes embody the College's ethos; they are a unique skills intervention that provide opportunity for those who face the greatest structural barriers to labour market entry and progression.

Next Steps

In April 2025, we presented our preliminary findings at [IATEFL](#), the world's largest English Language teaching conference, which this year was held in Edinburgh. This gave us the opportunity to engage with a specialist audience, including others from around the world operating similar programmes, facilitating the sharing of ideas and best practice. We aim to publish a report discussing our full findings this summer.

In the meantime, our research will help to inform the development of this area of the Edinburgh College curriculum, including the priority of expanding our ESOL provision to meet growing demand, and aligning our offer in this area even more closely with the needs both of the individuals and the local economy that our college supports.

The College Action Inquiry Research Network (CAIRN) Journal aims to be an important voice in the scholarship of the Scottish college sector.

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