



Innovative practice case studies

ESOL – AKG's internal provision

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AKG – developing bespoke internal provision

This case study explores Angus Knight Group (AKG)'s experience in delivering a bespoke ESOL course for Restart participants internally.

Key findings from this case study include:

- Development of internal provision was a response to the scale of need plus a recognition that to be effective it needed to be more intensive and more targeted.
- In person initial assessments help allocate participants to the appropriate level of course.
- Consideration needs to be given to the timings and days appropriate to the cohort to maximise attendance rates.
- Tutor recruitment and retention is a significant factor in a successful model.
- Internal delivery of ESOL enables key alignment with the Restart employment process and allows for internal monitoring.
- Internal delivery of ESOL allows for a content focus on employability language and skills topics.
- Participants may need multiple courses to progress sufficiently to be ready for work.
- Virtual delivery as part of all of provision has a range of benefits for participants as well as providers but providers need to ensure that participants are able to access the necessary technology to engage.
- Engagement rates and feedback shows the effectiveness of the course in improving English for employability but it has also revealed a number of wider benefits for participants, including increased confidence, independence, social cohesion, life skills, digital literacy and increased engagement with the Restart programme. Job outcome comparison data is being prepared.

Introduction

In 2022 AKG¹ identified a need for ESOL provision for Restart participants beyond courses in local further education colleges and other providers because these courses typically consisted of one weekly session,

¹ Restart delivery was under the Jobs-22 brand name at that time

leading to slow progress and a lack of reinforcement of learning between sessions. In addition, the content was not focused on the language requirements needed to support engagement with employment services.

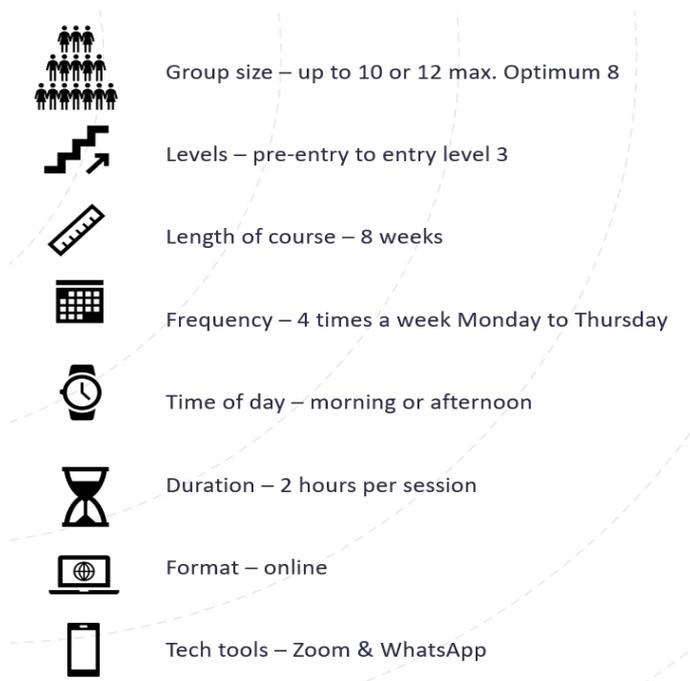
In response AKG recruited an experienced ESOL tutor to develop and pilot a targeted curriculum and deliver ESOL provision to Restart participant online. This case study sets out how the provision was designed, what's involved for participants, how it interacts with Restart, and the outcomes it is delivering for the participants and the provider.

After a successful pilot the provision was commissioned and developed more comprehensively, covering pre-Entry level through to Entry level 3. The programme has grown to include a team of 10-11 tutors and two senior leads, serving up to 200 people at any one time. An additional level has been devised for participants with very low levels of literacy in any language, referred to as 'New to ESOL'. This programme delivered onsite, in person and in small groups over a short timeframe.

Overview of course design and set up

ESOL provision was piloted to create a range of courses, covering pre-entry level to Entry Level 3. All courses, regardless of level, have the same structure. Each course provides 64 hours of guided learning, in the form of two hours each day, four days a week over eight weeks. Homework is set every day. AKG report that eight is the optimum group size, but these can go up to 10 or 12 in practice.

When designing the course, because there was a significantly higher proportion of females, the course timings were designed to ensure alignment with school hours enabling primary carers to attend. To aid course accessibility, AKG decided to deliver the provision largely online (except the initial assessment). This format also helped increase the availability of tutors. Core lessons are not held on Fridays because many participants attend Friday prayers. Instead, Fridays are used for catch-up sessions. The image below shows the key design elements of the course.



AKG recruited tutors on permanent contracts, either full-time or part-time, rather than as freelancers, and preferred recruiting tutors with lived experience where possible, as they could relate to participants.

Over time, AKG has adapted course delivery to reflect emerging lessons and participant needs, including:

- **Making ESOL courses available to those in work** if their level of English is putting their employment at risk. This support is shorter, more targeted and is currently accessed by low numbers.
- **Balancing class sizes.** Initially tutors worked in pairs covering all ESOL levels. However, class sizes varied, based on demand for different levels. All courses now start simultaneously, and this allows for people to be moved between groups as appropriate to maintain optimum class sizes. Whilst tutors will try to keep participants from the same site in the same group, online delivery allows the flexibility for participants to join groups from other sites if necessary.
- **An additional in-person Pre-Entry level** course was added in response to support participants identified through the initial assessments with extremely low levels of English, and sometimes of overall literacy. This has to date been in person and with smaller groups.

Curriculum development

There was a clear rationale for incorporating topics beyond employability in the curriculum to provide the foundations of the English language and support the journey into work. For example, topics such as travel and shopping can enable participants to engage in everyday situational and social English that increases familiarity with English overall.

Once these skills are embedded, the course focuses on topics designed to support job search, such as specific language around filling application forms, CVs, job descriptions, and interviews. The course also

covers expectations from employers, expected behaviour at interviews, and other related topics to support job search. The research team were able to see a lesson being delivered to participants at Entry Level 3. Activities for this lesson included watching actors take part in job interviews and identifying good practice in areas such as dress code, behaviour and interview preparations. Course tutors can also offer participants 1:1 sessions for specific incidences, such as interview practice as required.

Delivery model

The programme is delivered in 'groups'; AKG deliberately use that term rather than 'class' or other language which may remind people of school.

Initial assessment

The first step is an initial assessment to help tutors assign participants to the most appropriate ESOL level, an initial in-person assessment was developed, covering Entry levels 1, 2 and 3. This takes place in person at the Restart delivery site. Participants are given a short, written assessment (approximately 30 questions) which allows the tutors to assign them to the correct group based on their level of English. The in-person delivery allows them to assess language levels through oral communication alongside the written task, and participants to meet each other.

Online delivery

Courses are delivered online, and this has been seen as central to the success of the course and delivering high attendance rates and other user benefits. Using an online delivery method however requires attention to the set-up phase to ensure accessibility.

The technical set up

As digital skills and access can be an issue, the technical set-up process is vital. At initial assessment, tutors ensure participants are set up to access the course through phone, laptop or another device, and check their internet access. Site staff can provide equipment if needed, and each office has laptops available so that participants can join lessons there if they cannot do so from home.

Tutors outlined that participants can be nervous about using Zoom, but during the induction tutors ensure they can access the course and practice using the software, such as controlling audio, the mute button and so on. It is common for participants to bring someone with them to the initial assessment to support with language and digital literacy, but tutors seek to ensure participants can manage independently over time to meet the learning outcomes.

It's really, really fantastic to see how they just light up when they manage to do something on their own because this is like simple digital literacy. And I always tell them it is just another thing that you can add to your CV.

ESOL tutor

The benefits of the online delivery model

The online delivery model was cited by several interviewees as a key enabler to the success of the programme, developing participants' digital skills alongside ESOL. Various benefits to the online model were identified, including:

- Being able to distribute participants across multiple sites to maintain optimum numbers within individual courses is efficient and cost effective.
- Enabling participants who are primary carers to attend these time intensive courses whilst remaining at home, saving them travel time and increasing engagement levels.
- Zoom is accessible and easy to use on phones, tablets and laptops. It is simple for people to navigate and allows for easy breakout sessions.
- Helping participants become familiar with online communication and build digital literacy, particularly where they have not used similar software before. This can help when participants later need to undertake online interviews or assessments.
- The use of the WhatsApp group to deliver learning adds an additional digital literacy element, which is sometimes taken further by participants who later form groups after the course has ended, extending their personal connections and continuing mutual support and learning.
- The model is cost effective for the prime, particularly where Restart delivery sites may have limited space for in person delivery.
- The online model is scalable to adjust to fluctuations in demand.

Delivering the course

Tutors use tools within Zoom such as annotation and breakout rooms, which provide opportunities to practice conversational English. Tutors commented that students enjoy breakout discussions as they are an opportunity to extend the learning environment.

Tutors also use WhatsApp, with participants signing a consent form for sharing their data within the group. Materials are shared by one person in the group in each session, with the group chat being used in the lessons and for the homework. The group is discouraged from using this in other ways. They also use WhatsApp to send in their work privately during the lesson so that activities can be completed and marked in real time by the tutors. Feedback on work is sometimes given using the audio function in WhatsApp, which helps develop listening skills. Tutors can use this to add a range of teaching elements, such as setting listening exercises alongside written work. The WhatsApp group is also used to get feedback at the end of sessions from participants.

Tutors seek to use real life scenarios and materials in their teaching and make it as learner centred as possible. For example, tutors appoint leaders for different functions within the lessons, establish attendance certificates and often develop other ways to engage and involve participants as ways of developing other interpersonal skills. This may also involve buddying participants up with others from their country if they are struggling, which can help with confidence as well as progress, demonstrating the power of the peer group.

Presentation event

At the end of each course, participants are invited to a presentation event at which they receive a certificate and celebrate with other participants. Participants are encouraged to bring food to share, and some are awarded badges for fulfilling specific roles during the course. Participants sometimes bring family members along to these events.

These events were referred to in interviews as being 'joyful' and celebratory, demonstrating the pride experienced by some participants due to course completion.

I've seen people hugging each other at these certificate events that we do. And people from different backgrounds.

AKG

Staff on site spoke of the whole team looking forward to presentation events because of the atmosphere it brings to the Restart centre of celebration and positivity. Conversations with learners at a celebration event revealed one learner who said having this certificate meant that she felt she could start looking for work. Another participant commented that her employment adviser had confirmed that she can add participation in the course and the certificate to her CV.

Interaction with and contribution to Restart delivery

There is a high level of interaction between the Restart provision and the ESOL providers. Employment advisers receive an attendance note if participants do not attend an ESOL session, which allows them to explore reasons for non-attendance. If a participant regularly fails to attend, they can be mandated; this has happened but is not common. Overall, attendance rates for the ESOL courses have been high, which was noted by employment advisers as well as tutors.

The employment advisers communicate with the course tutors and will often ask participants how they are progressing, if they have any challenges, and whether there are any additional support needs.

Delivery staff felt engagement with the ESOL course led to increased engagement with other elements of Restart, in part due to increased understanding as well as pride in participation in learning, increased confidence, and wider outcomes. In particular, the ESOL curriculum contributes to increased engagement

with the job search requirement under Restart and job readiness increases in part due to improved language skills.

After each cohort the tutor will inform employment advisers who has passed the ESOL level and who is suitable for progression to the next level. By the time a participant is at Entry Level 3, tutors and staff may discuss other things to increase their work-readiness.

Participant experience and outcomes

Overall, the courses achieve attendance rates of around 90%. Operational staff commented on how high this is compared to some other provision on offer to participants. Feedback is gathered in a variety of ways, and evidence suggests that the provision is contributing to varied outcomes for participants.

Data collection and feedback mechanisms

The impact of the ESOL provision is monitored by:

- Tutors gathering ongoing feedback from participants.
- Participants completing an end of course survey which looks to establish changes in confidence as well as skills and job outcomes measures.
- Regular 1:1 meetings between participants and Employment Advisors, who share feedback on an ongoing basis.
- Business managers reviewing quarterly figures on job readiness.
- Business managers reviewing the impact on the use of translators at Restart appointments. Staff interviews revealed that they sometimes ask translators to continue to attend or to provide points of clarification but to step back and let participants interact as much as possible. This can be done until the participant is ready to attend appointments without the translator being present.

Overall, the senior stakeholders are committed and enthusiastic about this ESOL provision and its value, and will be preparing an impact report about the provision when data sharing allows. Despite the ESOL provision being active for several years, it was delivered by a sister company previously which meant that there was little data sharing until early 2025, meaning that it has not been possible to look at the effect of provision on outcomes. AKG are now making efforts to review historic outcomes data for participants involved.

We are starting to do a bit of analysis of those people and to track and see how quickly they may move into work and look at people that have previous to this who have been on programme with these needs, what their average time would be to work to give us some kind of comparison.

AGK

Outcomes

Delivery staff across AKG described participant engagement with the ESOL provision as a process through which participants are brought closer to employment through improved language skills, as illustrated in the example below.

One participant wanted to work in the building trade, but the site they wanted to work on would not allow this because of the risk of the participant not understanding the health and safety information sufficiently. As well as supporting the participant to gain CSCS cards, Restart provided ESOL courses plus additional one to one support to focus on building the specific language that he needed in order to work on a construction site.

Whilst language acquisition is the primary objective for Restart providers, it is often paired with other changes, such as increases in confidence and empowerment. This section will look at the range of outcomes being observed through the delivery of the ESOL provision.

Language skills

AGK staff are positive about the intensity of the provision, which creates a learning environment that supports language acquisition. This is particularly important given many participants experience little or no English in the home. The intense delivery ensures participants progress through the levels in a timely manner; they can pass through three levels in six months; 40% of participants progress to another level at the end of their course. Participants have continuity of experience and build relationships with tutors and fellow participants that supports the learning experience. Participants must meet attendance requirements to continue to the next level. If participants wish to progress further than Entry Level 3, they are referred to local provision to progress into functional skills qualifications. Whilst formal data is not yet available, there is clear anecdotal evidence and examples of participants being able to enter employment through their enhanced English skills.

Digital literacy

The online nature of the ESOL provision can help participants improve their digital literacy. The use of Zoom, WhatsApp and sometimes ChatGPT contributes to overcome digital barriers for those who have low digital skills and experience. At Entry Level 3 the course can include employability-related role plays, such as interview practice and giving presentations, further enhancing the digital learning experience. This increased digital literacy also means individuals can use technology to improve their lives and complete day-to-day tasks, such as doing videoconferences with friends and relatives abroad.

Confidence

Staff members reported participants were often being nervous but willing at the assessment days, and that they had noticed gradual improvements to their confidence as they progressed through the course.

One Restart participant came into the programme having never worked. Although she had been in the UK for a decade, she had not learned English. Having engaged with the ESOL provision this participant found the confidence to obtain a cleaning job on her own, which the delivery staff attributed to increased confidence with language.

Course tutors are aware of the importance of confidence and develop teaching methods to support this. For example, a participant's family expressed concern that the participant would be too timid to participate actively in the provision. The tutor gave the participant an individual role as wellbeing leader for the group and their task was to check that no one has any issues at the start of each session. They also took photographs for the group's WhatsApp channel. Through this leadership the participant has learned IT skills and responsibility, leading to increased confidence.

Independence

Restart staff often found that participants gained increased independence through developing their language skills. For example, participants may not previously have had the English skills to navigate local transport but can travel independently as they build the language ability to understand and plan routes. One participant was previously reliant on her husband travelling with her to Restart appointments but was very proud she could now use the bus independently. Some tutors also found some participants with little experience of formal education had increased willingness to engage with similar programmes going forward.

Building communities and combating social isolation

The groups consist of participants from diverse backgrounds and cultures. For some this is the first time they may have encountered people from those backgrounds and over time they may develop relationships. Tutors and staff noted participants gained knowledge and understanding of other cultures.

The intensity of the programme contributes to the development of relationships between participants. During the programme the tutors reported a high degree of support offered by participants to each other and the importance of the development of a community of learning.

Those that are progressing, those that are getting it quicker than those that aren't, are they not, it's not a competitive environment. They are helping their peers.

Stakeholder interview

Despite online delivery, tutors reported a strong sense of bonding between participants who may not have many other opportunities to engage with others outside of their home. These groups often stay in touch and maintain those relationships and connections beyond the timeframe of the course.

The celebration events also demonstrate the relationships formed through the course and the support participants have provided to their peers. The digital skills developed through the programme also enabled individuals to use Zoom (and similar technologies) to do video calls with friends and family in other countries.

One woman started to attend ESOL classes in her early 60s. Until then, she had never been involved in formal education. Since doing the course, she now attends the local library and can engage with her grandchildren's education and with her wider community. She was featured as a 'local hero' in the local newspaper.

Personal development and wellbeing

Some tutors had observed changes in personal development and wellbeing during the provision. This may be influenced by factors unrelated to the courses, but the tutors' daily interactions with participants mean that they were able to observe changes over time. One tutor saw a participant through three consecutive courses and observed changes in their personal grooming and body language that signified improved wellbeing and a more positive outlook; the individual secured a job.

Skills for life

Interviews with key stakeholders, delivery staff and participants all referred to the contribution of the ESOL course to equipping participants with skills for life. These include being able to make doctor, dentist and other health related appointments, as well as being able to attend these appointments. Being able to attend school appointments and events such as parents' evenings and meetings with teachers were also mentioned, as well as managing other everyday processes and administrative tasks.

We've had participants saying how nice it is that they can go to a parent's evening and understand what the teachers are saying to them about the child and their progress. And so again, it's not only sort of the employability side, but also the life skills of sides that I think this improves and supports for the participant as well.

Stakeholder interview

One participant witnessed a car reversing into their vehicle, and due to their increased English skills developed on the course, they were able to deal with the insurance company herself. This participant has now moved into work.

New developments

Currently, the ESOL courses are not accredited, which is seen as adequate for the cohort. However, it can deter external commissioners and AKG may seek formal accreditation and the attendant governance procedures going forward if that will help participants evidence success.

The model attracted interest from another Prime provider which had identified similar challenges around a high demand for ESOL and a shortage of provision. Given the online model, they were able to purchase these courses to be delivered for their participants. Following a successful pilot, further sessions have been agreed. The prime has been very positive about the provision, describing this as supportive, flexible, engaging and seamless. This Prime has also brought in other ESOL provision that is being delivered face-to-face from within their supply chain, as well as using college provision. This mix was described as allowing flexibility as participant needs can vary. However, they will be looking at the outcomes of all provision and will continue to monitor success.

The provision AKG have developed has also been successfully rolled out beyond Restart, including in apprenticeship programmes. In addition, they are providing this to a commercial waste management company who found their new employees did not always have the English skills to understand their induction process and particularly health and safety information.