



# Lowering the Bar



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## Core objectives

We assist migrants to North Somerset to improve their English language skills and confidence to such an extent that they can access higher education, job-related training or skilled employment. For a year, volunteer teachers have been delivering high-quality courses, without charge, to all learners equally. It is a core value that all people deserve the opportunity to achieve their potential and we work to raise aspirations among diverse language communities and in a spirit of promoting equality.

We work closely with Race Equality North Somerset (RENS) and Refugees Welcome North Somerset (RWNS). Many of our learners initially came to us through contact with RWNS and we commenced operations in RENS premises in Meadow Street, which we still use for three sessions per week. We have also collaborated with the volunteer provision at St Paul's Church and have been exploring partnership opportunities with Weston College: students have been referred to us for IELTS testing and we support learners who wish to work or study at the college.

## History

The initial idea for the classes came in September 2021, when three or four refugee learners asked for informal ESOL sessions to supplement the Functional Skills provision at Weston College. We convened more formally from April 2022 after direct requests from newly arrived Afghan women who were given no access to ESOL provision at that point.

The courses have grown in popularity and new referrals are being received every month. Learners also bring along their friends and people that they meet in other settings. This promotes community cohesion and mixing of learners from a variety of L1 language communities.

## Delivery and teaching methods

To date, our courses have been delivered on three mornings per week, at times that avoid a clash with the classes at St Paul's and most of the Weston College provision accessed by our learners. Each session has three groups of different levels of skill (roughly speaking, beginner, IELTS band 2–3+ and IELTS band 4+), primarily based on ability to deal with spoken English.

Each class includes learners from each of our L1 communities and is taught by a small team of teachers who coordinate their work. The teachers constantly review what happens in the classroom and the progress of learners.

Our ESOL philosophy is heavily influenced by the Dogme approach. We concentrate on communication and using English in realistic scenarios, with examples of written material drawn from everyday life. This fits very well with the IELTS testing method, which measures candidates' ability to communicate. We use publicly available IELTS tests to measure learners' progress.

## Students

Our existing learners are residents of North Somerset, mainly drawn from refugee and asylum-seeking communities from a variety of countries of origin (see Figure 1). A few of them are under 18 but the majority are of working age (see Figure 2); almost 20% are aged 19–25. They are almost all in receipt of means-tested benefits or Section 95 support. Our asylum-seeking learners are all men; they are, or would like to become, volunteers in the community while awaiting a final asylum decision.

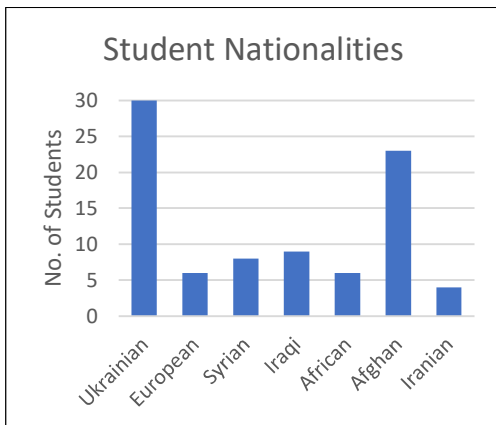


Figure 1 Student ethnicities (May 2023)

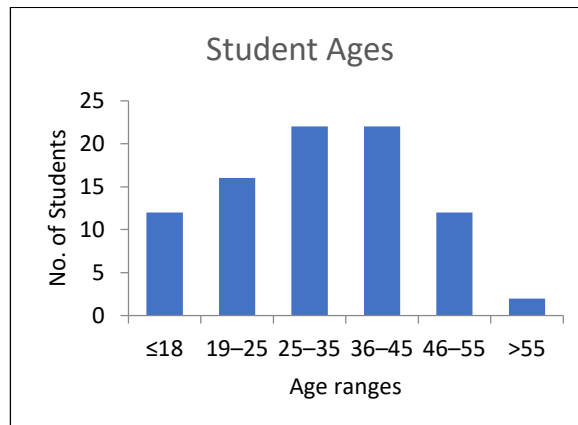


Figure 2 Range of student ages (May 2023)

The vast majority of our learners are women. The men in their families may not be in work but a significant proportion of them are reluctant to engage with most of the available educational provision. Some received little education as children and fear being infantilised in a classroom; others have indicated that traditional ESOL provision does not provide a sufficiently clear pathway to employment. Some of those men have spent time in zero-hours jobs (e.g., in delivery or security work) and they are now looking to improve their prospects.

Some of our learners have attended accredited employment pathway courses run by Community Learning but have found that their language skills are not sufficient to keeping up with the course. Similarly, some men have enrolled on Weston College courses related to the jobs they did in their home country but have dropped out (or been rejected) because of language barriers.

None of the learners holds a Level 2 qualification, although some have post-16 qualifications from their country of origin. Most reside in deprived areas of Weston-super-Mare (Central and South Wards) and are on means-tested benefits. They experience significant barriers to study and work because of their low level of English language skills. Our organisation provides a safe environment, with equality at the forefront; with the aim of removing these barriers.

## Enrolment and retention

We keep records of all enrolments and the outcomes for our learners. Since April 2022, we have enrolled 86 learners (see Figure 3) and have a retention rate of about 86%. We believe this speaks volumes about our learners' satisfaction and the standards we set.

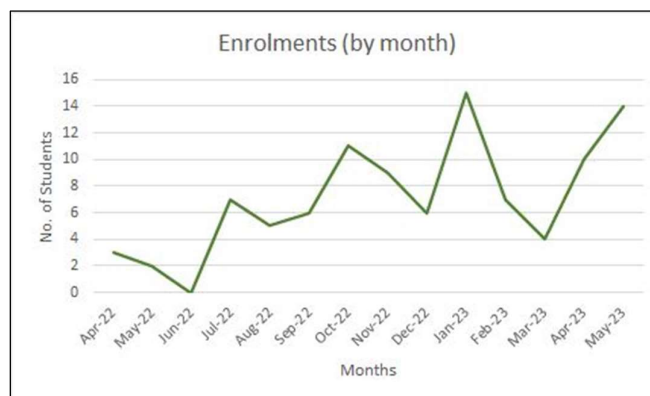
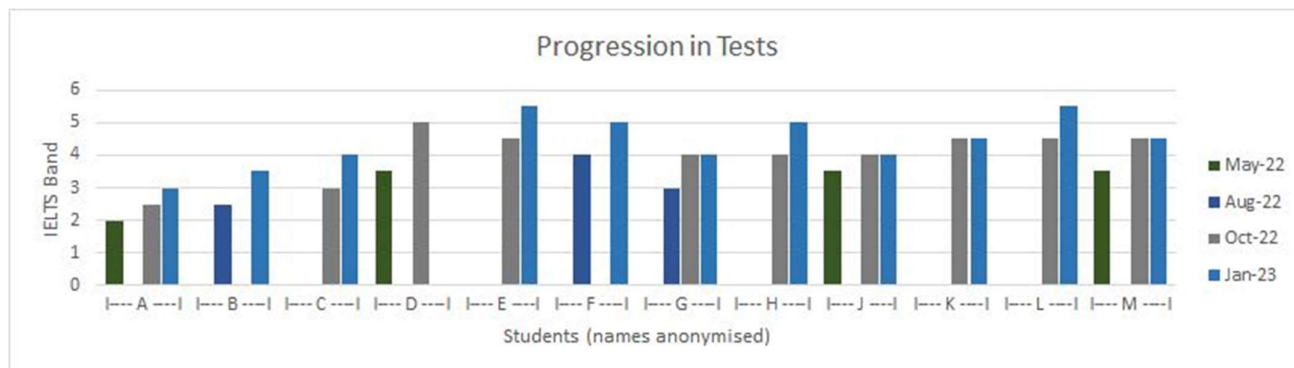


Figure 3 Learner enrolments per month (to May 23)

## Progression

Although we have only been in operation for just over a year, we have already demonstrated an ability to raise learners' English language skills and confidence (see Figure 4). Some learners are already progressing on to work, volunteering roles or full-time study.



**Figure 4** Progression of twelve learners, in informally administered IELTS tests

We have assisted nine people into employment and five into full-time education. In addition, about 15% of learners have moved from one class to another and we have approximately 65 learners with access to up to six hours' provision per week.

One of our learners (assessed as IELTS Band 4 on enrolment in August 2022) sat a formal IELTS exam in May 2023. He achieved Band 7 and has been given an unconditional offer of a place at a red-brick university for October 2023.

Individual learner plans are discussed at regular teachers' meetings and schemes of work are developed. Learners are differentiated to ensure that none are left behind and any necessary intervention is put in place. Assessments are monitored to determine when learners are at a stage to progress to the next group. The quality of the courses we deliver is assessed monthly to ensure our learners are progressing to meet set learning outcomes. Learners are invited to discuss issues with the teachers and to give feedback on lessons and the areas in which they would like more practice. The Dogme approach to ESOL is very responsive to learner input.

## Other aspects of the teacher–learner relationship

Aside from academic progress and achievement, we also provide guidance to learners necessary for them to reach their short-term and long-term goals. Individual discussion with learners is underpinned by our mission to promote diversity and equality, raise aspirations and build confidence.

We are committed to nurturing good relationships and collaborating with other organisations. Some of our teachers attend the Thursday Welcome Café run by RWNS. This gives our learners and other people an opportunity to share food from their own countries, to socialise and to use their English for informal communication. We also hold regular conversation clubs, providing a space for learners to apply their language in a functional communicative way. This builds confidence and has seen learners form strong friendship bonds that is conducive to building a life here in the UK.

In spring, we worked with Natural England to run kite-making workshops that culminated in a trip to the beach flying the home-made kites. We will run kite-making sessions as part of the Festival of Culture at Broadoak School.

## Plans for the future

There is now demand for an extension of our services to provide an evening class for people who wish to concentrate on preparing for IELTS. We have also been asked to provide a class specifically for women, to cater for Muslim women who are not comfortable learning alongside men.

We are also looking to create a class specifically for men wanting either to access skills training or to move into more secure work. The new class will focus on ESOL for employment: reading job descriptions, writing CVs and role-playing interviews. There will be a clear intention to support the learners as they move into training or work – the class would be a place where they could bring training materials or issues with work. To facilitate this, we would seek to form a supportive relationship with the training course provider or employer and scaffold the learners as they increase their confidence and ability to communicate.