

ENGLISH SKILLS FOR EMPLOYABILITY (ESfE) THINK TANK

A BRITISH COUNCIL AND
NATIONAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT
AGENCY INITIATIVE





INTRODUCTION

To address the growing need for English Skills for Employability in India, the British Council and the National Skills Development Agency (NSDA) invited key UK and Indian stakeholders to join an English Skills for Employability (ESfE) Think Tank.

The objective of the ESfE Think Tank is to provide a platform for stakeholders to discuss needs, share experiences and identify ways of working together to address the key priorities emerging from the discussions.

This document outlines the context in which the Think Tank functioned and gives an overview of the meetings and discussions that have taken place so far.

BACKGROUND

In 2008-09, the Government of India launched the National Skills Development Corporation (NSDC¹), set up as part of the National Skill Development Policy (2009) to fulfil the growing need in India for skilled manpower across sectors, and to narrow the existing gap between the demand and supply of skills. Research conducted by the NSDC indicates skills gaps both in functional, vocational and workplace skills as well as soft skills, with English featuring as an essential skill to complement core domain skills in over half of the 21 focus sectors such as IT and ITES, media, hospitality, beauty and wellness, retail, financial services and healthcare. In September 2013 the National Skills Development Agency (NSDA) was constituted to provide the over-arching framework for different skills missions across India.

The Government of India study, National Employability Report-Graduates 2013, conducted by Aspiring Minds, a company involved in assessing various aspects of education, training and employment, reveals that nearly half of Indian graduates are not fit to be hired. "The employability of graduates varies from 2.59 per cent in functional roles such as accounting, to 15.88

per cent in sales related roles and 21.37 per cent for roles in the business process outsourcing (BPO/ITeS) sector. A significant proportion of graduates, nearly 47 per cent, were found not employable in any sector, given their English language and cognitive skills," the survey findings show.

With 55 per cent of India's population below 30 years in age, as per the National Vocational Education Qualification Framework vision document (AICTE-NVEQF Vision Document, 2011)², many policy-making bodies view English as a key skill that can transform the employability of India's youth. India's Planning Commission's Approach Paper to 12th Plan also states that, "Special emphasis on verbal and written communication skills, especially in English would go a long way in improving the employability of the large and growing mass of disempowered youth."²

With a view to addressing the growing need for English Skills for Employability in India, the British Council and Mr S Ramadorai, Chairman of the NSDA, invited key UK and Indian stakeholders to join an English Skills for Employability Think Tank.

What is the objective of the ESfE Think Tank?

The objective of the ESfE Think Tank is to provide a platform for UK and Indian stakeholders to discuss needs, share experiences and identify ways of working together to address the key priorities emerging from the discussions.

How will this objective be achieved?

The British Council and the National Skills Development Agency will jointly convene a series of Think Tank meetings during which UK and Indian stakeholders will discuss and identify key priorities. These will then be followed up through projects and / or further discussed during smaller specialist and focussed roundtable meetings.

Who are the ESfE Think Tank participants?

The Think Tank has been attended by representatives of government bodies, Sector Skills Councils, private and public organisations and academic institutions with a role to play in the development of the English Skills for Employability sector.

What has happened since the initiative started?

The first Think Tank meeting was held in Mumbai on the 20 September 2013 and is summarised in **Appendix 1**. At that meeting, it was agreed that the discussions should focus on the five key priority areas of:

- Standards and assessment
- Curricula and content
- Delivery mechanisms
- Faculty and assessor development
- Business and funding models.

A meeting was held on 17 December 2013 to discuss issues and challenges around the first theme of standards and assessment. This meeting is summarised in **Appendix 2**.

The second ESfE Think Tank meeting was held at the British Council in Delhi on 16 January 2014. The lunch was attended by the UK Minister for Skills, Matthew Hancock. The report of this meeting is summarised in **Appendix 3**.

A research committee, comprising representatives from the NSDA, the British Council, Trinity College London and Manipal City and Guilds, was established in June 2013 to take forward the recommendations from the third Think Tank meeting. This research committee has committed funding to support two research phases:

Phase one will be to identify six to eight dominant entry-level job roles in collaboration with the Sector Skills Councils for health, construction, and tourism and hospitality. Interviews will be conducted with employers, employees and training providers to ascertain:

- whether there is a perception that English is a barrier to entry and to promotion for individuals in these roles
- what languages (English and vernacular) they currently use in the workplace and for what tasks
- what level of literacies are required (oral, visual, written)
- what language level (English and vernacular) is currently required by individuals in those roles (formal and non-formal sectors)
- how and where those individuals acquired those skills
- if possible/ appropriate, how those skills were taught and by whom.

The research output for phase one: case studies of individuals, employers and training providers as well as a set of guidelines indicating how English language and vocational skills can be developed in different phases of an individual's learning and development pathway.

Phase two will be to first agree, on the basis of the findings from phase one, whether a pre-A1 level of English is required for those roles, and if so, whether it would be desirable and feasible to align a pre-A1 level to the National Skills Qualification Framework (NSQF).

This research is due to be completed in late March 2015 and will be shared at the final meeting of the ESfE Think Tank in early April 2015.





APPENDIX 1

Summary of ESfE Think Tank meeting held in Mumbai on 20 September 2013

The following is the summary of discussions at the meeting, hosted by the Country Director, British Council India and the Chairman of the National Skills Development Agency.

It was agreed that there are three main audiences in India for English and Skills development:

- students in schools, Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs), polytechnics or colleges pre-employment
- individuals out of the system and
- employees already in the workplace.

All three need to be addressed but in each case a different set of solutions is required.

Five main priority areas emerged from the discussions and are briefly summarised below.

- Quality standards and assessment
- Curriculum and content
- Delivery mechanisms
- Faculty and assessor development
- Business and funding models

Quality standards and assessment

Mr Ramadorai suggested that a common definition of soft skills needs to be understood. Currently, English is categorised as a soft skill akin to problem solving and critical thinking skills, but it is also a key skill for many for the roles identified within 23 sectors identified in the National Skills Qualification Framework.

The current lack of common benchmarks and standards is one of the biggest challenges. Currently, Sectors Skills Councils are writing national occupational standards and are identifying the English skills required for job roles. UK providers present described the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)³, a framework of functional linguistic competence against which industry needs and requirements can be mapped and existing proficiency levels can be assessed. Once the English language skills gap has been identified, appropriate curricula and approaches can be designed and implemented to close the gap, and assessments can measure outcomes.

Core vocational skills and soft skills such as English can be taught together, but they can be assessed separately. For example, the National Skills Development Corporation (NSDC) has worked with Liquid to identify the English required for 130 job roles; the vocational skills will be assessed against the appropriate mapped levels of the NSQF, and English will be assessed against the mapped levels on the CEFR. The alignment of UK and Indian standards can

be achieved through mapping exercises such as this one, and the CEFR has been designed to be used and adapted flexibly in this way.

Curriculum and content

Once competencies and standards have been developed, the focus needs to be on what needs to be delivered. Decisions need to be taken around the route into the curricula; is it from the level of the state, the institution, the teacher or the learner? Consensus was that it should be at the level of the learner. One curriculum is unlikely to be sufficient in a country with the size and diversity of India. Core to this is the need for local contextualisation that is age and culture appropriate, develops functional competence and literacy skills and above all, meets industry expectations and requirements. However, curricula and syllabi can be designed to the same set of standards. The NSDC is looking for partners who can work with them to design and or accredit curricula and content.

Delivery mechanisms

The need for innovative mechanisms to improve access for the millions who need training in both vocational and soft skills, including English, over the next decade was considered crucial, although it was agreed that the immediate need was to focus on what to deliver and the pedagogy required to support delivery. How to deliver, i.e. through face-to-face, online, blended solutions for example, would be to some extent determined by market forces, but equity of access to quality provision for marginalised groups is important.

English is a determinant of socio-economic status, and learning English can make some learners feel stigmatised. Exposure to English is also limited in rural India so learners lack an environment in which to practice and learn from their mistakes. M-learning solutions can address both needs at a much larger scale than face-to-face learning, and as the level of mobile penetration in India is currently 900m, with the numbers of people accessing the internet through their mobiles likely to be over 200m by 2015, the challenge remains to find appropriate curricula, content and pedagogy that is not cost-prohibitive.

Research into the impact of delivery through m-learning and other digital channels is essential. Centurion University highlighted the success of the Gram Tarang employability initiative which develops students' skills to work for Café Coffee Day through a bespoke three month training course. Other innovative practices such as English-only hostels are

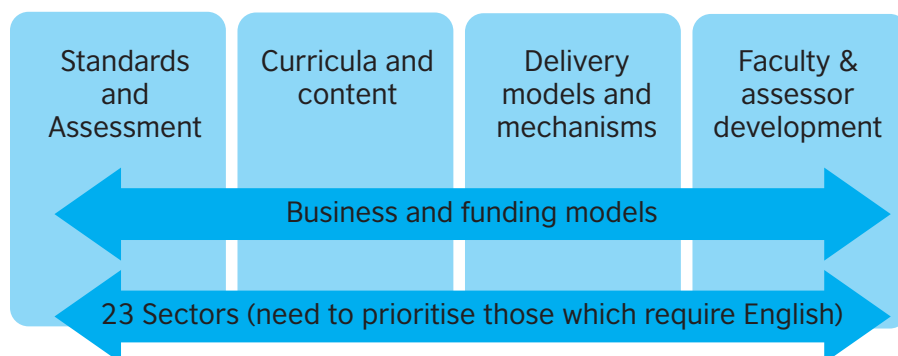
being piloted and they are interested in being a laboratory for such experiments.

Faculty and assessor development

Faculty development is critical, not only for those faculty teaching English, but also those responsible for teaching vocational skills. Ideally, faculty members would work together collaboratively to plan their syllabi to ensure that vocational and soft skills are integrated and reinforced. The faculty needs to fully understand industry needs and ensure that their students are aware of the skills and competencies they need to be successful in their job search. Developing their skills in formative and summative assessment, using the national standards identified for the target trades is another area of priority.

Business and funding models

Funding of research, innovative delivery models, curricula and content is essential to help India identify what works and to bring about sustainable change. Ms Patricia Hewitt, Chairperson of the UK India Business Council (UKIBC), suggested that the UK-India Research Initiative (UKIERI) could consider supporting comprehensive pilots that are scalable and sustainable. The introduction of voucher schemes can also provide learners with the power to choose a course that meets their own learning needs at their own convenience. It must be noted that the NSDC STAR Scheme aims to do just that and encourage skill development for youth by providing monetary rewards for successful completion of approved training programs and could be extended to cover English language skills.



The UK has established a system of Corporate Social Responsibility bonds which may provide an interesting model for India. The introduction of the new 2 per cent allocation to CSR mandated by the new companies act provides an opportunity for companies to pool resources to contribute towards key skills development areas.

Next steps

Mr Ramadorai suggested that this initiative should be housed within the National Skills Development Authority (NSDA) and Mr Rob Lynes emphasised the need for group to meet again quickly to find solutions to the challenges summarised above.

It is recommended that four groups are formed to take forward discussions on the following verticals and corresponding cross-cutting horizontal issues.

Participants should volunteer for one or more groups, and commit to attending a follow-up meeting by the middle of December. The whole group should then meet again in Delhi on 16 January 2014 to share their deliberations and progress and agree next steps.

APPENDIX 2

Summary of ESfE Think Tank meeting held in Delhi on 17 December, 2013

The roundtable started with Mr J.P. Rai, Director-General of the National Skills Development Agency, setting out the context for the discussion. Mr Rai highlighted that during the on-going development of the National Skills Qualifications Framework (NSQF), one issue that was highlighted repeatedly during the inter-ministerial consultations was the need to include certain soft skills, such as computer-literacy, English language skills, etc. as part of the competencies.

In order to support young people's aspirations to avail of global job opportunities, it was felt that some link to international equivalences of the NSQF levels would be beneficial, such as linking to qualifications being

developed in key destinations for migrant labour, such as the work being undertaken by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Though English requirements for sectors will be different, it was suggested that a basic generic English requirement would be possible to identify, but the group was asked at what level the specific requirement would need to start.

TK Arunachalam presented a short film of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), a framework of linguistic competence available in 42 languages, including English that has been used globally to describe and assess language performance since 2001. The group was keen to

understand exactly how the CEFR has been used in conjunction with the European Qualification Framework (EQF) in the UK, and other vocational frameworks in other countries globally and whether this would provide any learning for India. For example, the construction sector in the UK was compelled to identify minimum language standards for immigrant construction workers in the UK to ensure workers could understand basic health and safety instructions and guidelines.

It was noted that European frameworks are determined by outcomes and level of demand, rather than age and length of service or level of training / educational attainment. In India, the number of training hours required is often prescribed, but the concept of a 'notional' learning hour may be adopted which would enable those who do not have paper based evidence of training to still be able to prove their prior learning in some way. This is part of the draft NSQF which is under consideration of the Government.

The group discussed whether a set of standards specific to India was required and how best to link them with international standards. The British Council also shared the fact that the National Literacy Mission Authority of India, in collaboration with the English and Foreign Languages University, has already been working on a linguistic framework for India which could be shared with the group for information. The possibility of developing a framework using all major Indian languages was also discussed: this would facilitate migration cross states and in all languages and not just English, as the CEFR has done for Europe. It was proposed to include the Central Institute of Indian Languages in related follow-up activities.

There was a discussion on the need to map linguistic competence in all four skills; listening, reading, writing and speaking, onto the NSQF for key sectors. Participants felt that if the CEFR has already been mapped onto a European EQF, then the mapping may need only to be between the NSQF and that

employment framework. It was also suggested that rather than mapping the NSQF, it would be more helpful to identify key roles and map those, assuming that those at the level levels need generic language skills and those at a higher level need specialist skills. However, ultimately there was agreement that what is needed is a strategic approach paper that can help inform what type of mapping needs to be done.

The recently launched STAR assessments could provide an excellent research bed for further investigation of what type of language skills are required for different sectors and roles. Data is emerging now which could be reviewed and findings could feed into any mapping project to ensure it is based on ground realities.

Based on discussion by the group three key actions were agreed:

- Share experience relating the CEFR to the Qualification Frameworks in the UK and Europe.
- Pursue further discussion with the three Sector Skills Councils present (NASSCOM, Healthcare SSC and Construction SSC) to develop case studies on how a framework may help to define language requirements in their sector.
- Develop a document that outlines an approach to developing a framework for English Language Standards (which could in theory accommodate other languages in India as well) that takes into account the range of language requirements in India (from understanding key words in English, through to high level skills required for the BPO sector) and how best to map them to the emerging NSQF.

The modalities for pursuing these actions were agreed to be discussed outside the meeting and approved at the next meeting of the English Skills for Employability Think Tank in Delhi, January 2014.

1. <http://nsdcindia.org/knowledge-bank/index.aspx> for example, English identified as an essential skill for retail sales

2. Twelfth Five Year Plan (2012–2017) Social Sectors, Volume III - http://planningcommission.nic.in/plans/planrel/12thplan/pdf/12fyp_vol3.pdf

3. Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) describes linguistic competence in English at 6 levels from A1 (lowest) to C2 (highest) across the four skills of listening, reading, writing and speaking and within different domains – social, work and tourism. More details can be found here: <http://www.cambridgeenglish.org/about-us/what-we-do/international-language-standards/>



APPENDIX 3

Summary of ESfE Think Tank meeting held in Delhi on 16 January 2014

The meeting was chaired by Mr JP Rai, Director General, National Skill Development Agency (NSDA) and Mr Chris Brandwood, Director English for the British Council in South Asia.

Mr Rai opened the meeting by announcing that the National Skill Qualification Framework (NSQF) had been formally approved by the Cabinet Committee on Skill Development in its meeting held on 19 December 2013. He also announced that the NSQF would underpin the certifications issued under the Ministry of Finance's landmark initiative on Skill Development, the National Skill Certification and Monetary Reward Scheme (Standard Training & Assessment Reward - STAR). He emphasised that the framework's primary purpose is not to support only the small numbers of young people interested in the international job market, but the large numbers who are seeking employment within the domestic market. English requirements domestically will vary by sector and so we need to define the English language requirements by priority sectors for both the international and domestic sectors.

Chris Brandwood stressed the importance of quality standards: the English language sector is large and disorganised and by benchmarking standards to a linguistic framework such as the CEFR, and to the National Skills Qualifications Framework, the potential positive impact on the industry cannot be ignored. Students will demand teaching and assessment that enables them to reach the standards set, and this in turn could have a positive impact on quality standards across the sector.

Anita Rajan, Vice Chairman Office at Tata Consultancy Services, provided an overview of the Think Tank to date and the core objectives of the initiative. Sandhya Chintala, Vice President of NASSCOM and Executive Director of the IT-ITeS Sector Skills Council (SSC) provided feedback to the group on the conclusions of the working group on Standards and Assessment held on 17 December 2013. Leighton Ernsberger, Assistant Director Skills, British Council presented an overview of the UK's experience in mapping the CEFR to the National Qualification Frameworks (NQF) in the UK.

John Yates, CEO from Manipal City & Guilds presented a short case study of a UK provider's experience of working in the vocational skills sector in India. He suggested that it is vital to separate the assessment of skills and language, otherwise poor English language skills can become a barrier to entry. In his experience, he felt that a skill can be demonstrated even with no literacy in the vernacular. If an entry level role is mapped to the A1 level on the CEFR, it is possible that many young people will not reach the language level required. John Yates endorsed the development of an A0 level to ensure that a language pathway can be identified for many vocational industries where A1 is simply too high.

Manipal City & Guilds provide a pre-A1 foundation English level course which comprises 40 hours of speaking and 20 hours of listening, reading and writing skills to ensure they can be eligible to apply for roles as security guards, doormen or work in retail. Interestingly, Aditya Birla Group pays INR1,000 a month more for those who have some English on joining. An attempt to codify a pre-A1 level would therefore be very welcome.

During the discussion that followed, these were some of the key points raised and debated:

- The CEFR is language agnostic, but there was agreement that English is largely the link language not only for migrant workers, but also for those sectors who are required to work across domestic geographies. Communication skills in both the vernacular and English are essential. Developing skills in the mother tongue is as essential as developing them in English. There was agreement that generic communication skills are to a certain extent transferable across languages.
- The importance of assessment cannot be underestimated. There was discussion around whether assessment should be domain specific or generic, and how far language standards can and are agnostic of trades and skills. It was felt that further research is required to answer this question. Entry and exit levels may also need to be set.
- The group unanimously agreed that if a decision is made to assess language and vocational or sector specific skills separately, this does not mean that they should be taught separately: An integrated pedagogy was considered to be preferable.
- We were reminded that a large part of the social demand for English is aspirational in nature, and so providers need to be wary of simply 'equipping' young people with the functional level of language skills they need to obtain or retain a job, but consider how they can be 'enabled' to reach their potential. Dr NS Prabhu, world renowned English professor from Bangalore first coined the challenge of equipping rather than enabling in 1987, and the challenge is present still today. We need to match young people's needs and expectations.
- English and IT skills are the two key enabling skills, which with harder to define soft skills would enable the delivery to a higher level of quality at scale in order to support India in achieving its ambitions.
- It was felt that it would be of benefit to develop a strategy using the CEFR (with the inclusion of an A0 Level) for separately identifying language requirements, including English, and standards in the development of Qualification Packs (QP) by SSCs.
- Trinity College London also suggested they could

support the formation of an Sector Skills Council (SSC) in India for languages.

- The group warned of the danger of a mapping exercise over-simplifying a framework, but also cautioned that the mapping must not become so complex that the employers, training providers and young people cannot understand it.

The final recommendations for action were as follows:

- The group agreed that research on two specific points would be the most productive next step:
 - a. to develop a new entry level within the context of the Common European Reference Framework, that recognises achievement pre level A1. The group felt that this was necessary for a number of

sectors, such as healthcare and construction, and would act as an important motivator for students to acquire language skills in the vocational context in India.

- b. to conduct action research with three Sector Skills Councils (for example Construction, Healthcare and IT/ITES) to develop a white paper on how the linguistic levels of the CEFR (including the new pre-A1 level) could be best integrated into vocational qualifications developed under the National Skills Qualification Framework (NSQF).
- There was also interest in holding joint awareness-raising events around the NSQF and the CEFR.

For more information contact:

British Council
17 Kasturba Gandhi Marg
New Delhi 110 001

Telephone (toll-free): 1800 102 4353

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