



National Research and Development Centre
for adult literacy and numeracy

Research briefing

Progression

This is one of a series of publications produced to provide up-to-date summaries of recent research findings from the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC) and associated organisations. The series features summaries in each of the following areas:

- Family literacy, language and numeracy (FLLN)
- Formative assessment
- Numeracy
- Persistence
- Priority groups
- Progression

Progression

Introduction

Progression is central to Skills for Life, and if the challenging targets set out in *World Class Skills* (DIUS 2007) are to be achieved, progression rates will need to increase. However, there is currently a lack of robust research evidence regarding who progresses and why. The policy-making, research and practitioner communities are also under-informed about the barriers to progression: what keeps individuals from moving onwards and upwards to a higher level, or from progressing in the many other ways that best suit their needs?

In order to help address these questions, this paper summarises recent research projects where the NRDC and associated research centres have investigated these issues. The findings summarised in this paper lay the groundwork for continued research and development work aimed at increasing progression in adult learning.



What the research shows

How much progression is there?

In 1991, 28% of the UK's adult population lacked any qualifications, and 17% had some form of Level 1 qualification (Sabates et al. 2007). Twelve years later, in 2003, 11% of the first group – those lacking any qualifications – had achieved some form of Level 2 qualification or higher. Of the second group – those with Level 1 qualifications in 1991 – 22% had achieved Level 2 or higher by 2003.

These figures are drawn from analysis of the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS), which surveys a representative sample of the entire adult population. Because older adults are less likely to seek to progress in education, a clear picture of the rate of progression also requires analysis of younger adults. For this we can turn to the National Child Development Study (NCDS), which is following the lives of a cohort of individuals born in 1958. At age 23, nearly half of this cohort (47%) lacked any Level 2 qualifications. But by age 42, more than half of this group had attained some form of Level 2 qualification (Sabates et al. 2007).

The fact that the progression rate is higher for this cohort than for the adult population as a whole should not be surprising. Theories of human capital suggest that the older an individual grows, the less likely he or she is to invest time and energy in achieving higher qualifications, largely because older individuals have less time to reap the rewards of having those qualifications (De Coulon and Vignoles 2007).

Does Skills for Life increase progression?

Recent NRDC research (De Coulon and Vignoles 2007) analysed the progression rates of a cohort of adults born in 1970 (the British Cohort Study 1970, or BCS70). The study initially looked at the number of qualifications attained by this cohort between 1996 and 2000 – that is, before the launch of Skills for Life. The researchers then compared progression (in terms of qualifications obtained) from this four-year period to

progression rates for the same group between 2000 and 2004, during most of which time Skills for Life was in existence.

Looking at the first four-year period (1996–2000), the study found what could be called a 'rule of 10%' among adults with no qualifications, or qualifications at Levels 1, 2 or 3: approximately 10% of each group attained a higher qualification of some sort between 1996 and 2000.

Looking at the next four years of this same cohort's lives, the study found that, for adults with qualifications at Level 1 or below, progression to a higher qualification went up to 13%. This 3 percentage point gain, when compared with the rate for this group between 1996 and 2000, represents an increase of approximately 30% in the likelihood of attaining a higher qualification.

For adults with qualifications at Level 1 or below, the progression rate under Skills for Life increased by approximately 30%.

Thus far we have only considered progression to a higher level. When expanding the analysis to include individuals in the BCS70 who took any new qualification, including those at a level equal to or lower than the highest qualification they possessed in 1996, researchers found that among the 6457 individuals in the sample, far more new qualifications were achieved in the second four-year period: 1036 in 2000–2004 compared to 790 between 1996 and 2000, an increase of 27%. These very significant increases may be even more impressive than they first appear. Remember, as this cohort aged, their likelihood of progressing to higher qualifications should theoretically have

fallen, not risen. For adults at higher qualification levels, this proved to be true over this time period. For example, the rate of progression for those at Level 4 or above fell by 28% from the first four-year period to the second.

Does this mean that Skills for Life has increased progression? At this stage, it is too early to say. The introduction of Skills for Life does coincide with an increase in progression for adults with low qualification levels. However, other factors may have played a role in explaining the apparent rise – e.g. an increased tendency to certify learning – and more research is required to give a clearer picture of when, why, and how progression occurs.

Barriers to progression

One thing that research has told us is that a key barrier to progression is time. American evidence (Porter et al. 2005) suggests that, in the English context, learners are likely to need on average 150–200 hours of time on task to improve their literacy by one level in Skills for Life. ('Time on task' refers to the combination of formal and self-directed learning.)

Other recent findings suggest that attitudinal barriers may play a bigger role in non-progression than socio-economic constraints (Sabates et al. 2007) and that socio-economic constraints in adulthood may not be as educationally significant as they are in childhood. For children, recent research using the Millennium Cohort Study has found that in vocabulary tests of three-year-olds, the sons and daughters of graduates were 12 months ahead of children of the least-educated parents (George et al. 2007). Comparing the achievements of low and high socio-economic status (SES) groups at age 7, research has found a very large difference, with better-off children scoring 31 percentage points higher on tests than those from low SES groups (Duckworth 2007).

In adulthood, while gaps remain, they are much smaller than in childhood. In terms of progression to Level 2

qualifications in general, those from a high SES group were still more likely to do better than those from low SES groups, but the high SES groups outperformed the low SES groups by only 9 percentage points (Sabates et al. 2007). While this is still a significant gap, it is far smaller than the gaps in childhood, suggesting that socio-economic factors are less significant for adult learners than previously believed and that attitudinal barriers may be particularly important.

We have also found age-related differences in adulthood. Among individuals born in 1958, factors from childhood played a key role in predicting progression to some form of Level 2 or above between ages 23–33, but less of a role between ages 33–42. For example, whereas parental expectation regarding schooling during childhood was a key factor in predicting attainment of Level 2 or above between ages 23–33, it was not a significant factor in predicting attainment between ages 33–42. And, whereas school achievements at age 7 and academic attainment between ages 7–16 were both key factors in predicting progression as an adult, these two factors were much more significant for younger adults (aged 23–33) than for older ones (aged 33–42). This suggests that as adults get older, their past – and its influence – recedes in importance. For those aged 33–42, the key predictors of achievement were not just factors experienced as a child, but also activities engaged in as an adult, including enrolment on adult education courses not leading to qualifications between the ages of 23 and 32. This suggests that while positive learning experiences and childhood attainment are key elements in predicting successful progression as an adult, positive attitudes towards learning also play a key role.

Pathways of progression

While there may be typical barriers to progression, investigation of the BHPS found no typical route of progression to Level 2, an issue that the Foundation Learning Tier will seek to address by offering learners clear progression

As adults get older, their past – and its influence – recedes in importance.

opportunities towards Level 2 and beyond, or to other meaningful destinations. In the BHPS, analysis of the routes that adults took highlights some complexities. Unsurprisingly, a large number of adults went straight from no qualifications to some form of Level 2 qualification: among working-age adults who had no qualifications in 1991 and who attained Level 2 or higher by 2003, 58% achieved Level 2 or higher without taking a Level 1 qualification along the way (Sabates et al. 2007).

More surprisingly, the same research found that those achieving Level 2 or higher from a base of no qualifications in 1991 were less likely to take sub-Level 2 qualifications than those who started from a base of Level 1. That is, learners who already had Level 1 were more likely to take (additional) Level 1 qualifications on their way to Level 2 than were learners who started with no qualifications and attained Level 2.

Progression from non-counting to counting provision

Because progression is so central to Skills for Life targets and *World Class Skills* (DIUS 2007), policy-makers are paying greater attention to progression from courses which do not count towards Skills for Life targets to those which do. NRDC has recently engaged in qualitative and quantitative analysis of this issue. The results are intriguing, and highlight some of the tremendous challenges faced by Skills for Life.

Between August 2000 and June 2005, more than 3 million individuals enrolled on adult literacy, language or numeracy courses. Of this number, 44% (more than 1.3 million) initially enrolled with ‘non-counting’ aims only – i.e. enrolled on courses that did not count towards Skills

for Life targets. This group was the focus of our study.

Of the 1.3 million individuals who enrolled with non-counting aims between August 2000 and June 2005, 37% were enrolled on literacy courses, 42% on ESOL, 9% on numeracy, and 11% on literacy and numeracy. A significant majority (61%) enrolled at Level 1, with 24% enrolling at Entry Level and 2% at Level 2. The most popular subject and level combinations were literacy Level 1 (27% of all non-counting aims) and ESOL Level 1 (29%).

Of the 1.3 million, roughly 176,000 – i.e. 13% – went on to enrol on a course that would count towards the target, indicating that progression from non-counting to counting provision is low. This is a worrying statistic. But we should not forget how far the distance is from many non-counting learning aims – including those at pre-Entry Level – to Levels 1 and 2; nor that we have learned a lot in the recent past about how better to support progression, and that the results of these improvements will not be evident in our research. Perhaps most importantly, the figure of 13% is an average; we also have evidence from some providers who are ahead of the field and whose progression rates are much higher. There are plenty of examples of good practice we can turn to in an effort to increase rates across the board.

We were also able to analyse how long it tended to take individuals to progress from non-counting to counting provision. Here too we found surprising evidence. While the mean length of time taken to progress from non-counting to counting provision was 7.5 months, by far the most common length of time was one month. This may represent strategic initial enrolment and re-enrolment of learners by providers.

Less surprisingly, the second most common length of time was one year. Beyond 24 months, there was very little progression. We urgently need to find out why this is so. How far does this reflect inadequacies in provision, progression pathways, and support for learners?

Scope of this paper

This paper summarises recent research on progression in adult learning, particularly up to Level 2. The paper draws on research by the NRDC and associated research centres and partner organisations.

Skills for Life: An Analysis of Adult Skill Levels in the UK

This report (De Coulon and Vignoles 2007) provides descriptive evidence of changes in the supply of skills and qualifications in the labour market during the period in which Skills for Life has been in existence.

Determinants and Pathways of Progression to Level 2 Qualifications: Evidence from the NCDS and BHPS

This report (Sabates et al. 2007) uses longitudinal data from the National Child Development Study and the British Cohort Study 1970 to describe the characteristics, both socio-economic and otherwise, of adults in these studies who progressed by at least one level.

Progression from non-counting provision to counting provision

This NRDC research project (Brooks et al., forthcoming 2008) uses quantitative analysis of Learning and Skills Council (LSC) data in order to begin developing a picture of the actions of individuals enrolled on LSC-funded courses between 2000 and 2005 – courses which did not count towards Skills for Life targets.

References and further reading

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Progression

Key Points

- In 1991, 28% of the UK's adult population lacked any qualifications, and 17% were qualified only up to Level 1. Of the former group, 11% had achieved some form of Level 2 or higher by 2003. Of the latter group, 22% had done so.
- Nearly half of all individuals born in 1958 lacked any Level 2 qualifications by age 23. But by age 42, 53% of this group achieved some form of Level 2 qualification.
- Recent research on individuals born in 1970 finds evidence of increased progression up to Level 2 in the years following the launch of Skills for Life.
- Socio-economic status may play less of a role in progression and achievement for adults than for children. For adults, attitudes towards learning may be more important than socio-economic status.
- Between 2000 and 2005 more than 3 million individuals enrolled on LSC-funded adult literacy, language or numeracy courses. Of this number, 44% initially enrolled only on courses that did not count towards Skills for Life targets. Of this group, only 13% went on to enrol on a course that did count towards the targets.

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