for adult literacy and numeracy

SUMMARY REPORT

The Learner Study

The impact of the Skills for Life strategy on adult literacy, language and numeracy learners

Compiled and edited by: Jenny Rhys Warner and John Vorhaus
Based on research reports by: Yvon Appleby, Ann-Marie Bathmaker,
Greg Brooks, Pam Cole, Mark Pilling and Linda Pearce

IOE LONDON
Leading education and social research
Institute of Education
University of London

The Learner Study
The impact of the Skills for Life strategy on adult literacy,
language and numeracy learners

Contents

Executive summary

The Learner Study

The NRDC Learner Study took place between 2003 and 2006 with an overall aim of providing evidence for government to refresh and take forward the Skills for Life strategy. It provides robust evidence in the form of statistical data and qualitative insight into how the Skills for Life strategy has impacted on learners. It also sheds light on the impact of the strategy in relation to each of the principal stakeholders and contexts of Skills for Life.

Together with the NRDC Teacher Study (Cara et al. 2008) it represents a comprehensive evaluation of the impact of the strategy on learners.

The study was designed to:

- Identify participation, retention and achievement rates amongst literacy, ESOL and numeracy learners.
- Identify how far literacy, ESOL and numeracy learners had progressed on their Skills for Life courses.
- Provide detailed qualitative insight into how the Skills for Life strategy impacted on learners in particular, and also curriculum managers, Skills for Life co-ordinators and others.

One study, three projects

The Learner Study included three related parallel projects across the fields of literacy, language (ESOL) and numeracy:

- In the first project we identified participation, retention and achievement rates amongst literacy, ESOL and numeracy learners in the years 2000 to 2005. We analysed data from the Individualised Learner Records (ILRs) gathered by the national Learning and Skills Council (LSC) in England.
- In the second project we identified how far literacy, ESOL and numeracy learners progressed on their Skills for Life courses. Data were gathered from two samples of learners in 2004/05 and 2005/06, using literacy and numeracy tests, attitude questionnaires and learner profiles.
- In the third project we obtained detailed qualitative insights into how the Skills for Life strategy impacted on a wide range of stakeholders, learners in particular, but also curriculum managers, Skills for Life co-ordinators and others. In-depth interviews, observations and focus groups were conducted in six areas of England selected to provide a range of learning contexts and learner experiences.

The three separate projects were designed to complement one another and give the fullest picture possible of the impact of the Skills for Life strategy. The first project made use of the best available dataset on Skills for Life, administered at the time of our study by the LSC; the second gathered data in order to

answer questions that this same LSC dataset was not equipped to answer; the third, being a qualitative study, provided the material for gaining detailed insight into and stories about the data gathered in the two quantitative studies.

Findings

Participation and achievement

Between 2000/01 and 2004/05 there was a large increase in total numbers for participation and achievement in Skills for Life provision. Enrolments more than doubled from 1,043,087 to 2,180,253; achievements almost tripled from 441,364 to 1,284,531.

Literacy
Literacy had the highest number of enrolments and qualifications achieved between 2000/01 and 2004/05, compared with numeracy and ESOL. In 2005 43% of enrolments and 42% of all achievements were in literacy.

Participation and achievement rates in literacy rose throughout the period: by 2004/5 enrolments had more than doubled (from 411,187 to 934,796) and achievements had more than tripled (from 171,961 to 539,115). Most of the qualifications achieved in literacy throughout the five years were at Level 1, and between 2000/01 and 2004/05 achievements at Level 1 tripled.

Numeracy
The numbers engaged in numeracy provision were lower than for literacy throughout the five-year period from 2000/01 to 2004/05. Nevertheless, total numbers for participation and achievement in numeracy rose considerably. In 2004/05 enrolments showed an increase of 89%, or almost double, from 362,340 to 686,223. Achievements nearly tripled (a rise of 188%) in this period, increasing from 119,666 to 345,161.

Level 1 achievement dominated the overall numbers, rising from 46,239 in 2000/01 to 201,276 in 2004/05, a more than fourfold increase in achievement. There was also a large increase in the number of achievements at Level 2, from 58,967 at the beginning of the five-year period to 89,215 at the end – an increase of over 50%.

ESOL
The numbers for participation in ESOL provision were generally smaller than for literacy or numeracy. Over the five years from 2000 to 2005, enrolments in ESOL represented just over a quarter (26%) of enrolments across all three skills.

Overall figures for participation and achievement in ESOL rose throughout the period. By 2004/05 enrolments had more than doubled (from 269,560 to 559,234) and achievements had risen by a greater amount, from 149,737 to 400,255.

Levels of attrition between enrolment and achievement were lower for ESOL than for literacy or numeracy. In 2000/01 over half (56%) of enrolments led to successful achievement, and this rose to nearly three-quarters (72%) in 2004/05.

Qualifications and targets
What level and type of qualifications do learners achieve?
Achievements were highest for Level 1 qualifications between 2000/01 and 2004/05. They were lowest for Entry level at the start of the five-year period in 2000/01, but Entry level figures increased substantially in 2002/03, overtaking the number of achievements at Level 2. From this year on, Level 2 achievements represented the lowest number for all three levels.

Relative to key skills and GCSEs, basic skills made up the highest number of all enrolments,

with 504,050 enrolments in 2000/01 rising to 1,413,086 in 2004/05. The proportion represented by basic skills rose from just over 48% in 2000/01 to just under 65% in 2004/05.

Figures for achievement in basic skills rose from 296,743 in 2000/01 to 1,062,409 in 2004/05. Relative to key skills and GCSEs, basic skills qualifications made up an even greater proportion of all achievements, rising from 67% of overall achievements in 2000/01 to 84% in 2002/03, and then remaining almost steady for the following two years.

Attitudes towards the national tests
Positive comments amongst managers and tutors about the national tests focused on how they motivated learners and enabled them to gain a qualification and move learners on.

For learners hoping to gain employment or progress within education, qualifications were often important to achieving their goals.

Most older learners who described learning for enjoyment and fulfilment did not want to take tests, but a few valued them because they had never previously gained qualifications.

Attitudes towards the targets
Most managers and co-ordinators were largely happy to have targets as they thought that they helped to improve the quality as well as the quantity of provision. Others, however, suggested that Skills for Life targets could act as a blunt instrument that could hamper rather than enable progress.

Many tutors were less happy with the targets. Whereas managers and co-ordinators felt they had some flexibility in adapting the targets and working with them, tutors described themselves as having to organise their work to meet the targets.

Progress and progression

Learners' progress
We recruited a sample of 1649 learners on adult literacy, language and numeracy (ALLN) courses, and each learner was tested before and after their courses.

The skill levels of all groups of learners attending Skills for Life provision in 2004–06 improved on average, with the exception of the writing levels of literacy learners.

There were very few differences between the different groups we looked at, suggesting that provision was working equally well for many different groups of learners, and hardly any were being left behind.

Progression
We identified three types of progression:

- **Moving on**: moving on to other forms of learning such as a higher-level Access course, a vocational course or a higher-level literacy, ESOL or numeracy course. 'Moving on' might also take the form of promotion in the workplace or getting a job as a result of study.
- **Moving around**: carrying on with the same course, or an equivalent level of learning, with or without taking qualifications. This might apply to people who are unable to attend regularly because of physical or mental health issues, people who come mainly for the social aspect of learning, or those who want or need to learn at a slower pace than many of their peers.
- **Moving out**: leaving learning altogether. This might arise for a variety of reasons, from being disappointed with the experience of learning, to a change in life circumstances. Moving out of provision may be a positive development, indicating that learners have achieved what they wanted.

Learning in context

Work-based learning
Where workplace learning was most successful the company involved was committed to Skills for Life at the highest level of management, and managers at all levels were involved.

Union learning representatives were an important factor in enrolling and being supported on work-based courses.

People had many reasons for learning at work. Reasons directly associated with work included promotion, taking on voluntary roles such as union learning representative and other union activities, and keeping up with new levels of work skills, such as ICT.

Learners also cited reasons not connected with work: helping children, overcoming embarrassment, and regaining confidence lost at school.

Prison and probation
Skills for Life offered the opportunity for prisoners to achieve qualification outcomes quickly and easily, and encouraged them to progress.

However, Skills for Life increasingly came to be seen as dominating prison education provision to the exclusion of other learning, with the National Qualification Framework (NQF) Level 2 representing the end point of learning offered to prisoners.

Whilst offenders often moved from one prison to another, or from the secure estate back into the community, records of achievement frequently failed to follow them.

Probation Service learners chose to attend class as part of their sentence. They felt that the opportunity to gain a qualification was more productive than serving a sentence where they wouldn't achieve anything.

College-based provision
College staff spoke of how Skills for Life had dramatically raised the profile of literacy, language and numeracy. Interviewees spoke of Skills for Life as including far more than just basic skills and felt that it had acquired a much higher national profile than previously.

College managers reported that staff in schools were better rewarded financially than teachers in further education (FE). Many tutors complained that the pay and career progression routes within basic skills were not as attractive as those in mainstream teaching.

Over half of the learners on college campus and satellite sites attended ESOL provision to either learn or improve their English language skills. The remaining college learners we interviewed were evenly spread across literacy, numeracy and mixed provision linked to vocational training.

A sense of achievement was a common theme running through interviews with numeracy students. For many, particularly older learners, gaining a numeracy qualification was akin to climbing Everest; something people had been frightened of and never thought they could do. It was almost the 'ultimate learning challenge'.

Community-based provision
For people learning in a community setting, it was important that provision was located within their communities and near to their homes. This was cited repeatedly as a significant reason for attendance across all subjects.

Older learners and learners with lower levels of confidence, learning difficulties, disabilities or health issues were able to access this provision with relative ease. The importance of ease of

access was a commonly repeated message: it was clear that community-based learning was reaching people who would otherwise be left out.

Why learners attend classes

Literacy
People attended literacy classes for a variety of reasons:

- to learn spelling, reading and writing not acquired at school;
- to gain skills and certificates for employment;
- to help (grand)children with schoolwork and homework and to meet other people;
- to improve confidence;
- to be able to undertake more various and demanding challenges in everyday life.

Numeracy
People described attending numeracy classes to improve their maths skills for work related reasons, to help their (grand)children and simply to prove to themselves that they could do it.

Interviewees recounted their own difficulties of learning maths whilst at school, and wanted to support their children to prevent them experiencing the same difficulties.

Many interviewees needed a maths qualification for promotion or as an entrance requirement for a higher-level course.

ESOL
People attending ESOL classes came from many language communities and backgrounds; some had been born in England, others were refugees or asylum seekers, whilst others were recent economic migrants from Europe.

The vast majority of interviewees said they wanted to learn English to be able to find work. Some spoke of how they wanted to help their children, whilst others said that their ESOL learning would help them integrate into their local community and to communicate on behalf of that community.

For many, particularly women, the primary concern was to improve their access to public services in the UK such as transport and health care.

Managers, co-ordinators, tutors: views on Skills for Life
Nearly all managers and co-ordinators brought extensive prior knowledge and experience to their work on Skills for Life, and expressed a critical but positive view of the strategy.

Interviewees described how Skills for Life had allowed for the development of new projects, how literacy, language and numeracy had become 'destigmatised', and how the profile of basic skills had been significantly raised in the national policy agenda.

Most managers, co-ordinators and tutors commented on the scale and scope of the strategy and its infrastructure; some found the target numbers almost overwhelming and often confusing; others found that the very size of Skills for Life was a positive advantage.
A large number of interviewees were positive about the content of the new qualifications; however, a significant number expressed reservations.

1

Introduction

The Learner Study was designed to assess the impact of the new learning infrastructure on the experiences and achievements of adult literacy, ESOL and numeracy learners. It also examined the views of managers, tutors and co-ordinators. The project set out to:

- provide robust evidence in the form of statistical data and qualitative insight into how the Skills for Life strategy has impacted on learners
- understand the impact of the strategy in relation to each of the principal stakeholders and contexts of Skills for Life
- provide evidence for the government on how to refresh and take forward the Skills for Life strategy.

Context

The Skills for Life strategy was introduced in March 2001. It was formulated in response to *A Fresh Start* (1999), the report of the working group chaired by Sir Claus Moser. The report concluded that up to seven million adults (one in five of the adult population) in England had difficulties with literacy and numeracy – a higher proportion than in any other European country apart from Poland and Ireland. The strategy initially set out to improve the literacy, language and numeracy skills of 2.25 million adult learners by 2010, with interim targets of 750,000 by 2004 and 1.5 million by 2007; these have since been met. Its aim is to ʻmake sure that England has one of the best adult literacy and numeracy rates in the world', and its long-term vision is ʻultimately to eliminate the problem' of poor levels of adult literacy and numeracy (National

Audit Office, 2004, p.20). Skills for Life emphasises the needs of priority groups at risk of exclusion, including unemployed people and benefit claimants; prisoners and those supervised in the community; public sector employees; low-skilled people in employment; and younger adult learners aged 16 to 19.

A new set of standards was created, comprising five levels of achievement or learning outcomes: Entry levels 1, 2 and 3 and Levels 1 and 2, with Level 2 broadly equivalent to the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) grades A*–C. National core curricula were introduced for literacy, ESOL and numeracy. Nationally recognised multiple-choice tests were introduced to replace and simplify a plethora of existing qualifications and other ways of recognising achievement. There was a range of materials to support teaching and learning, including new initial assessment guidance and tools and individual learning plans. Together, these became known as the Skills for Life learning infrastructure.

Undoubtedly, Skills for Life has raised the profile of adult literacy, language and numeracy learning among the general population. Many reports and press articles have been devoted to the UK's skills deficit. There has been a widespread advertising campaign designed to attract adults with poor literacy and numeracy skills into provision, and more recently debates over eligibility, funding and access for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses, and *The Leitch Review of Skills* (2006), with its emphasis on employability and improving the skills of the workforce, have ensured that the

issue of adult basic skills retains its recently acquired high profile.

NRDC launched a longitudinal study in 2002 to measure the impact of Skills for Life on teachers and trainers (Cara et al. 2008). This was followed in 2003 by a linked study of the impact of the Skills for Life learning infrastructure on learners. This publication presents a summary of the findings of that longer study.

One study, three projects

The Learner Study included three related projects across the fields of literacy, language (ESOL) and numeracy. Why did we undertake three separate projects? The first made use of the best available dataset on Skills for Life, administered at the time of our study by the LSC; the second gathered data in order to answer questions that this same LSC dataset was not equipped to answer; the third, being a qualitative study, provided the material for gaining detailed insight into and stories about the data gathered in the two quantitative studies.

Project 1: Participation and achievement
In this project we identified trends and patterns in participation and achievement in ALLN from 2000/01 to 2004/05 – the first five years of the Skills for Life strategy. We did this by analysing data from the LSC's Individualised Learner Record (ILR).

The LSC gathers data on all learners participating in LSC-funded provision using its ILR. ALLN courses form a small part of the overall datasets gathered by the LSC. This dataset was the most comprehensive available for our purposes, providing information on learners' demographic profiles, including their age, gender and ethnicity.[1]

The ILR records data on individuals' learning aims: that is, the goal, or goals, they aim to achieve at the beginning of a learning programme. All figures in this report based on ILR data represent 'learning aims' as distinct from individual learners. We identified trends in enrolment, completion and achievement, and we also identified completions as a proportion of enrolments, achievements as a proportion of enrolments, and achievements as a proportion of completions.

We identified patterns in participation and achievement over time, in relation to provision overall and in relation to literacy, ESOL and numeracy considered separately. In our analysis of trends we looked at the subject area, level and type of qualification, differences between FE and work-based learning, and differences based on learners' age, gender and ethnicity.[2]

Project 2: Learners' progress
In this second project we gathered data on learners to assess their progress in literacy and numeracy, and attitudes towards their learning.

During the academic years 2004/05 and 2005/06 we gathered data from 1649 adult literacy, ESOL and numeracy learners. At their first interview, all learners completed a background characteristics profile, an attitudes questionnaire and an assessment during a first interview. Those we re-contacted completed an attitudes questionnaire and an assessment during a second interview some months later.

---

1 The same LSC dataset was used in reports on Skills for Life by the National Audit Office (2004) and by the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts (2006).
2 The LSC data we used include all data on ALLN provision, and not only data relating to provision that counted towards the Public Sector Agreement targets.

The learners were contacted via teachers who were taking part in the parallel Teacher Study. Each of the 1027 teachers was asked to nominate learners to take part in this study, and a total of 321 (31%) did so, providing an average of just over five learners each.

We constructed a detailed profile of the learners we assessed: the contexts in which they engaged in Skills for Life provision, the numbers pursuing literacy, ESOL and numeracy courses, and an analysis of learners by age, gender, ethnicity and previous educational experience.

We also assessed the progress of learners, identifying how far they improved between their first assessment, given at the start of their course, and their second, administered once the course had finished.

Project 3: Exploring the impact of Skills for Life
In the third project we sought to gain detailed insight into how Skills for Life had affected learners and other groups involved in the strategy. We spoke at length to those on whom the strategy has its most direct impact. Between 2004 and 2006 we conducted 416 first interviews and 135 second interviews with adult literacy, ESOL and numeracy learners across six geographical sites: West Yorkshire, Birmingham and Solihull, Cheshire and Warrington, Wiltshire and Swindon, West London, and Cumbria and Northumberland. Most learners fell into one or more of the Skills for Life priority group categories: unemployed people and benefit claimants; prisoners and those supervised in the community; employees in low paid jobs in both public and private sectors; and other groups at risk of exclusion, including those with ESOL

needs. We also spoke with people living in disadvantaged communities – some homeless, some elderly, and others with mental health issues or disabilities. Others we interviewed were employed, retired, or seeking to improve their skills to support wider family and friends.

We also interviewed other stakeholders engaged in Skills for Life, both in order to acquire evidence of the impact the strategy was having on them and also to see how far their evidence supported or differed from the messages we were receiving from learners. We therefore sought out the views of managers, co-ordinators and tutors,[3] with whom we conducted 146 first interviews and 46 follow-up interviews.

How this report is organised
Evidence from the three projects has been organised under the following headings:

- participation and achievement
- qualifications and targets
- progress and progression
- learning in context
- the learners' voices
- the views of managers, co-ordinators and tutors.

---

3 We use the term manager, co-ordinator and tutor as generic terms for those involved in the implementation and delivery of the strategy across a wide range of settings.

2

Participation and achievement

In this chapter we look at participation and achievement rates for the academic years 2000/01–2004/05. We look at the overall figures for all learners before turning to look in more detail at the evidence for literacy, language and numeracy.

We explore further evidence on the levels at which learners achieved and the type of qualifications they were pursuing, and we compare trends in participation and achievement between qualifications that count towards the Public Sector Agreement (PSA) targets and qualifications that don't. All figures in this chapter are based on our analysis of the LSC ILR.

The evidence reveals a large increase in total numbers for participation and achievement in Skills for Life provision. Enrolments more than doubled from 1,043,087 to 2,180,253, whilst achievements rose by an even greater amount and almost tripled from 441,364 to 1,284,531.

The figures are displayed in Figure 2.1. This, like several others included in this report, includes both bar graphs and line graphs. The bar graphs are used to show total figures for each year, whilst the line graphs show how these total figures translate into proportions of the whole.

The line graphs show that the number of completions as a proportion of enrolments stayed almost the same throughout the period, rising from 71% in 2000/01 to 73% in 2004/05. At the same time, the proportion of enrolments that resulted in achievement was much lower, and whilst this figure rose from 42% of enrolments leading to achievement in 2000/01, to 59% in 2004/05, a 17 percentage point increase in total, this trend was flattening out in the last two years, rather than continuing to rise.

There were much higher rates of achievement where programmes of learning were completed.

The number of achievements as a proportion of completions rose steadily over the five-year period, by a total of just under 21 percentage points, and in 2004/05 the number of completions that resulted in achievement was 81%. In completion rates, however, there was little improvement. At just over 70% throughout the period the retention rate was high for adult learners participating in adult basic and key skills provision. At the same time, since completion rates would appear to have a direct impact on overall achievement rates, this is an important area for further consideration.

Total participation and achievement in Skills for Life (SfL) provision between 2000 and 2005

- ■ Enrolled (E)
- ■ Completed (C)
- ■ Achieved (A)
- ● % Completed (C/E)
- ● % Achieved (A/E)
- ● % Achieved (A/C)
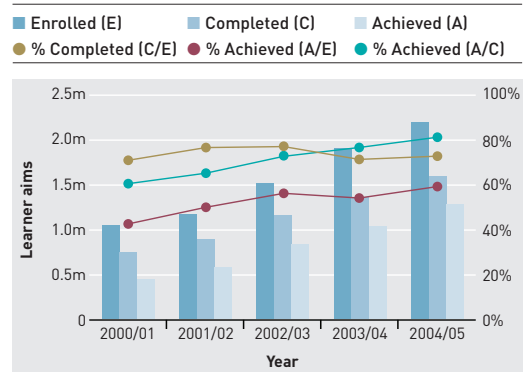
Comparing literacy, ESOL and numeracy

Whilst there was an increase in numbers for participation and achievement in Skills for Life provision over the five-year period, the rate of increase varied between literacy, ESOL and numeracy.

As can be seen from Figure 2.2, literacy provision received the highest proportion of enrolments and achievements throughout, at around 40%. Enrolments for numeracy made up the second-highest proportion over the period as a whole, starting at just under 35% of total provision and reducing slightly to 31.5% by 2004/05. The proportion of enrolments for ESOL remained virtually the same, at just under 26%, though in 2002/03 this figure rose to 32%.
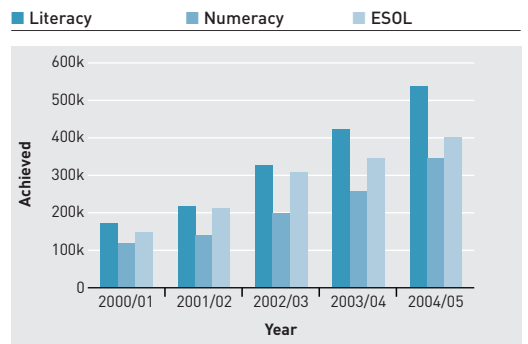
FIGURE 2.2

Total enrolments in literacy, ESOL and numeracy from 2000/01 to 2004/05
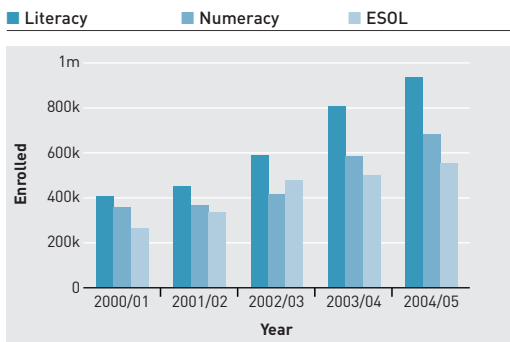
In relation to achievements, numeracy and ESOL reversed their positions. Figure 2.3 shows that throughout the five-year period the proportion of all achievements was higher for ESOL than for numeracy, though from 2003/04 ESOL showed a downward trend.

FIGURE 2.3

Total achievements in literacy, ESOL and numeracy from 2000/01 to 2004/05

However, far fewer ESOL achievements counted towards the Skills for Life target, and they made up an ever-decreasing proportion of the numbers that counted over the five years, as shown in Figure 2.4.

FIGURE 2.4

Achievements counting towards the SfL target in in literacy, ESOL and numeracy
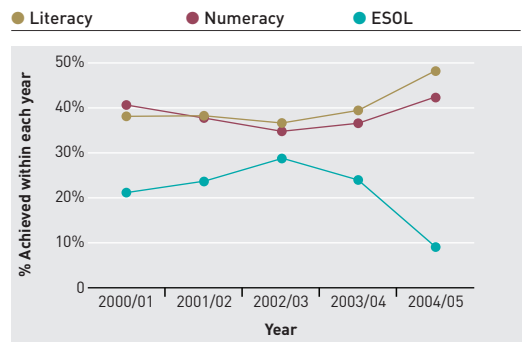
We now turn to look at participation and achievement in each of the three subject areas.

Participation and achievement: literacy

Enrolment and qualifications

Literacy had the highest number of enrolments and qualifications achieved between 2000/01 and 2004/05, compared with numeracy and ESOL. In 2005 43% of enrolments and 42% of all achievements were in literacy.

Overall and as shown in Figure 2.5, figures for participation and achievement in literacy rose throughout the period, so that by 2004/05 enrolments had more than doubled (from 411,187 to 934,796) and achievements had more than tripled (from 171,961 to 539,115).

**Participation and achievement in literacy 2000/01 to 2004/05**
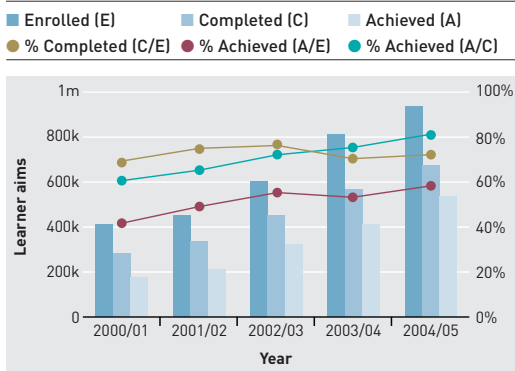
What level of qualifications do learners achieve?

Most of the qualifications achieved in literacy throughout the five years (Figure 2.6) were at Level 1, and between 2000/01 and 2004/05 achievements at Level 1 tripled. Entry level achievements saw a dramatic increase in 2002/03,[4] from a low base of 17,126 achievements in 2001/02 to 116,713, rising more slowly thereafter to reach a total of 123,531

in 2004/05. At Level 2 there was a steady increase in achievements, so that the overall numbers doubled from 53,901 in 2001/01 to 111,795 in 2004/05. However, the proportion made up by Level 1 achievements reduced from their highest point in 2000/01 at 31% to 18% in 2002/03, rising slightly to 21% by 2004/05. Thus in 2004/05 four-fifths (79%) of all achievements were at Entry level (23%) and Level 1 (56%).

Achievement in literacy by level of qualification
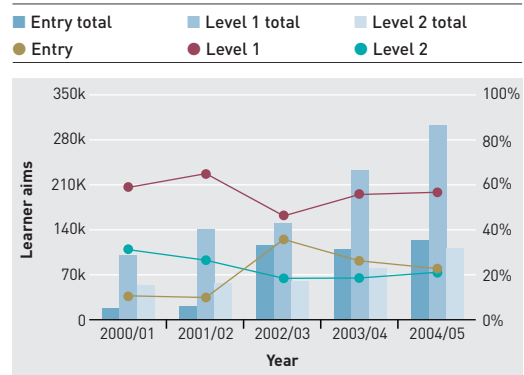
What type of qualification did learners achieve?

As with other areas of education and training there is a range of different qualifications that accredit achievement in the skills of literacy, numeracy and ESOL. One of the things that Skills for Life has done is to regulate which qualifications are funded as part of LSC provision. This has changed over the period under examination as qualifications have been revised over time and brought into line with Skills for Life policy. ESOL qualifications were the last to be brought into line, and there is now a list of recognised qualifications provided by the LSC. The qualifications fall into three broad types: basic skills, key skills and GCSEs. Since 2001, basic skills and key skills share the same national test, although key skills qualifications also require a

4 We treat Entry level achievement as one category because the ILR data does not allow us to distinguish between the three Entry levels.

portfolio. The GCSE is a quite separate qualification, representing the standard qualification in English and maths taken by school students at 16. It is also available to adults, usually through a course at an FE college.

Achievement at Level 1

The number of achievements rose for both basic and key skills at Level 1, but again, the figures were much higher for basic skills than key skills. While achievements in key skills literacy qualifications more than doubled from 16,354 in 2000/01 to 38,397 in 2004/05, those for basic skills literacy qualifications more than tripled, rising from 84,580 in 2000/01 to 265,392 in 2004/05. Although there was a large increase in overall achievements for key skills, in fact, the level of achievement as a proportion of enrolments was virtually the same in 2004/05 (26%) as it was in 2000/01 (25%), whereas for basic skills, achievement as a proportion of enrolments rose from 67% in 2000/01 to 84% in 2004/05.

Achievement at Level 2

At Level 2, learners may take GCSE qualifications in addition to basic and key skills. By far the greatest number of enrolments was in key skills. Key skills enrolments rose from 137,450 in 2000/01 to 192,620 in 2004/05, while basic skills enrolments started at 2,317 and rose to 50,690, and those for GCSEs stayed almost the same throughout the period, at approximately 50,000. However, differences in completion and achievement rates in the different qualifications were so marked, that by 2004/05, the overall number of *achievements* was spread much more evenly across the three types of qualification: 35,050 achievements in basic skills, 45,297 in key skills and 31,448 in GCSE.

Completion and achievement rates in basic skills qualifications were high (87% of enrolments led to completion, and 69% of enrolments to achievement). In key skills, less than half of enrolments (48%) led to completion, and only 24% or enrolments resulted in successful achievement. Not only was there a high attrition rate between enrolment and completion for key skills, but a similar gap between completions and achievement. Only 49% of completions in key skills resulted in achievement. By contrast, 80% of basic skills completions and 93% of GCSE completions resulted in achievement.

Participation and achievement by age

There were considerable differences in participation and achievement by different age groups. As can be seen in Figure 2.7, between 2000 and 2005 the largest number of enrolments in literacy for every year except one was by 16- to 18-year-olds.

FIGURE 2.7

Enrolments in literacy courses by age

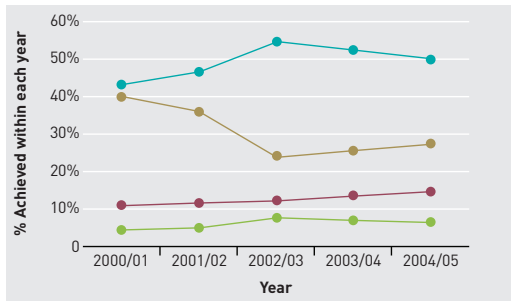● 16–18   ● 19–24   ● 25–59   ● 60 and over
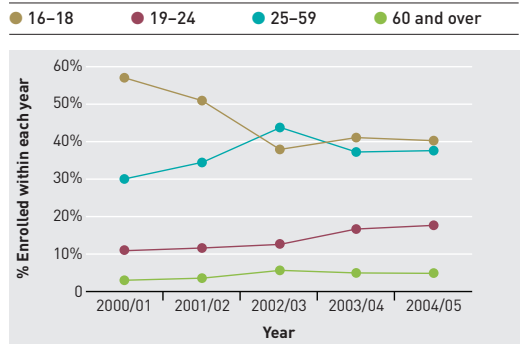
At the same time, the largest number of qualifications achieved in literacy throughout the five years was by those aged 25 to 59 (see Figure 2.8).

FIGURE 2.8

Achievement in literacy courses by age

● 16–18   ● 19–24   ● 25–59   ● 60 and over

FIGURE 2.9

Level 2 achievements in literacy by age

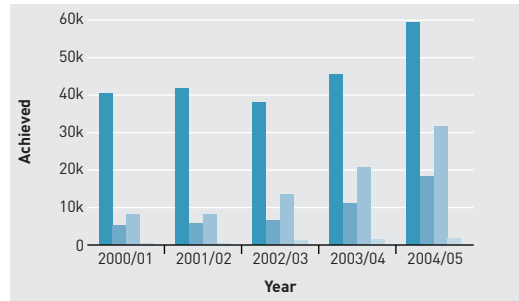■ 16–18   ■ 19–24   ■ 25–59   ■ 60 and over

The exception was achievement at Level 2 (Figure 2.9), where 16- to 18-year-olds represented the highest number of achievements throughout the five years, rising from 40,251 in 2000/01 to 59,236 in 2004/05. This compared with 7,873 achievements by 25- to 59-year-olds in 2000/01, rising to 31,821 in 2004/05.

Are there gender patterns in participation and achievement?
As with Skills for Life overall, numbers for overall participation and achievement in literacy were higher for women than for men.

Figure 2.10 shows a breakdown by gender of the number of enrolments, completions and achievements in literacy provision between 2000/01 and 2004/05. The graph on the left shows females and that on the right, males.

There was a considerable increase in total numbers for both men and women each year from 2000/01 to 2004/05. The total number of

FIGURE 2.10

Participation and achievement in literacy by women and men respectively

■ Enrolled (E)   ■ Completed (C)   ■ Achieved (A)   ● % Completed (C/E)   ● % Achieved (A/E)   ● % Achieved (A/C)

Literacy data: Female

Literacy data: Male
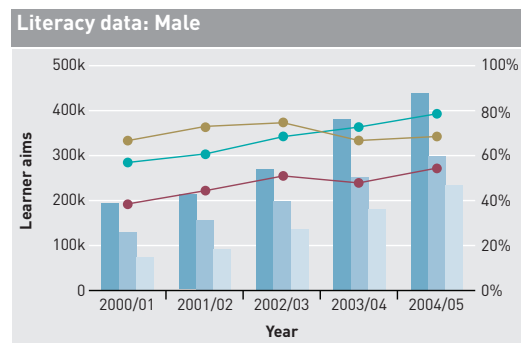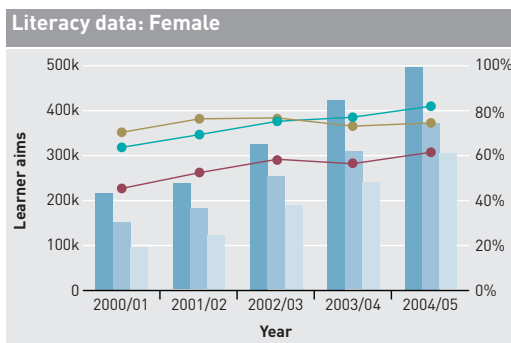
enrolments for both more than doubled between 2000/01 and 2004/05, and the total number of achievements more than tripled. Women made up slightly more than half of the total numbers involved in literacy, and the balance remained virtually the same throughout the five years, with women representing 53% of enrolments, 55% of completions and 56% of achievements in 2004/5.

Ethnicity

We are also able to analyse patterns of participation and achievement in literacy provision by ethnic group. Over three-quarters of the total figures for participation and achievement were from those who identified themselves as White; this proportion rose by just over 3% for both participation and achievement during the five-year period.

Enrolments by Asian learners comprised just over 9% of the total in 2000/01 but fell to just over 6% of the total by 2004/05. Achievements by Asian learners showed a similar reduction, from 10% of the overall figure in 2000/01 to 7% in 2004/05. Enrolments by Black learners as a proportion of the total remained the same throughout at just over 7%, and achievements also remained the same, though slightly higher than enrolments, at 8% of the total. The proportion of enrolments by Chinese learners was the same throughout, though they made up only a very small proportion of the overall number, at 0.6%. Achievements by Chinese learners accounted for 1% of the total figure in 2000/01, falling to 0.7% in 2004/05.

One reason for the changes was that the rise in the total number of learners involved in Skills for Life was much greater for White learners than for other ethnic groups. For example, the total numbers for enrolment, completion and achievement for White learners and for Asian learners between 2000/01 and 2004/05 rose progressively over the five-year period for both groups. However, the actual numbers showed a much greater increase for

White than for Asian learners. Moreover, the figures show that the increase in numbers was flattening out for Asian learners at a greater rate than for White learners by 2004/05.

Participation and achievement: numeracy

Although `A Fresh Start` (Moser 1999) identified numeracy skills amongst adults as a greater 'problem' than poor literacy skills, the numbers engaged in numeracy provision were lower than for literacy throughout the five-year period from 2000/01 to 2004/05. Nevertheless, total numbers for participation and achievement in numeracy rose considerably, as shown in Figure 2.11.

FIGURE 2.11

Participation and achievement in numeracy 2000/01 to 2004/05
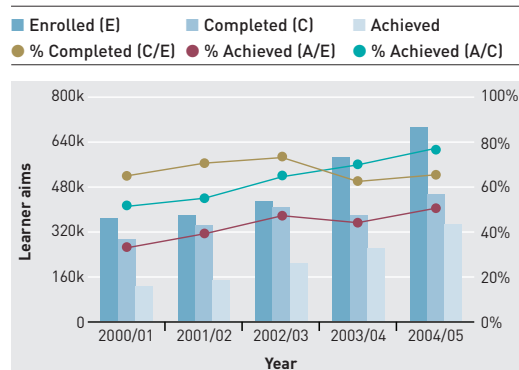
In 2004/05 enrolments showed an increase of 89%, from 362,340 to 686,223. Achievements nearly tripled in this period, increasing from 119,666 to 345,161. The rate of achievement as a proportion of enrolments rose more slowly from 33% of all enrolments leading to achievement in 2000/01, to a 50% achievement rate in 2004/05.

Although numeracy was second to literacy as the most popular skill area for enrolments (except in 2002/03, when ESOL enrolments were higher than those for numeracy) the same was not the case for

achievements. Numeracy achievements represented the lowest proportion for all three skill areas throughout, amounting to 27% of all achievements at the beginning and end of the five-year period, with a slight drop in between.

### What level of qualifications do learners achieve?

Achievement in different levels of numeracy showed some marked differences over the five-year period (see Figure 2.12). Level 1 achievement dominated the overall numbers (as represented by the bars in the figure), rising from 46,239 in 2000/01 to 201,276 in 2004/05, a more than fourfold increase in achievement.

The numbers involved at Level 1 tended to overshadow those for Level 2 achievement, but here too there was a large increase in the number of achievements, from 58,967 at the beginning of the five-year period to 89,215 at the end, representing an increase of over 50%.

Entry level achievements were much smaller in number than both Level 1 and Level 2 achievements, except for one year, 2002/03, when they represented the highest number of achievements compared with Level 1 and Level 2. Overall, Entry level achievements rose from 14,460 in 2000/01 to 54,670 in 2004/05, which nevertheless represented a nearly fourfold increase.

FIGURE 2.12

Achievement in numeracy by level of qualification
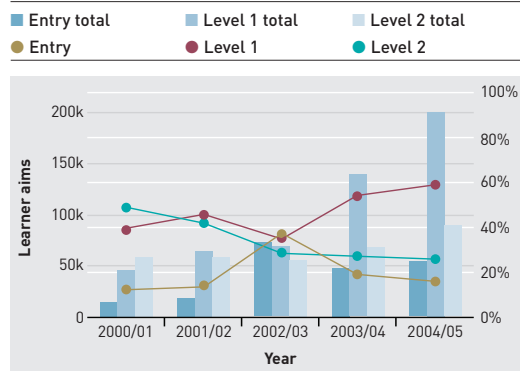
In 2000/01 Level 2 achievements made up the largest proportion (49%) of achievements overall, as shown by the line graph in Figure 2.12. By 2004/05 this proportion had reduced to 26%. This shift reflects the very large rise in the number of Level 1 achievements. Whereas they made up 39% of all achievements in 2000/01, by 2004/05 Level 1 represented 58% of all achievements.

What type of qualifications do learners achieve?

Unlike provision overall, where basic skills qualifications dominated both enrolments and achievements, in numeracy provision enrolments in key skills qualifications formed the highest proportion for all years except 2002/03, while basic skills represented the highest proportion of achievements.

Patterns of participation and achievement in the different types of numeracy qualification – basic skills, key skills and GCSE – showed a trend in favour of basic skills qualifications, which was even greater for achievements (shown in Figure 2.13) than enrolments (shown in Figure 2.14).

FIGURE 2.13

Achievements in numeracy provision by type of qualification

● Basic   ● Key   ● GCSE
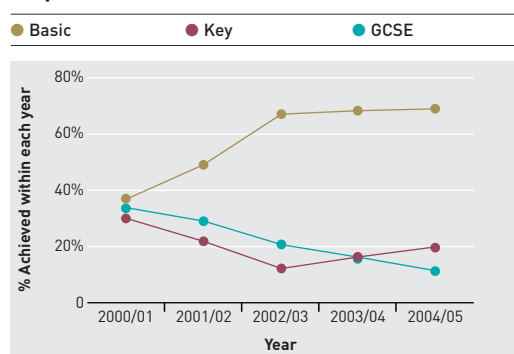
FIGURE 2.14

Enrolments in numeracy provision by type of qualification

● Basic   ● Key   ● GCSE
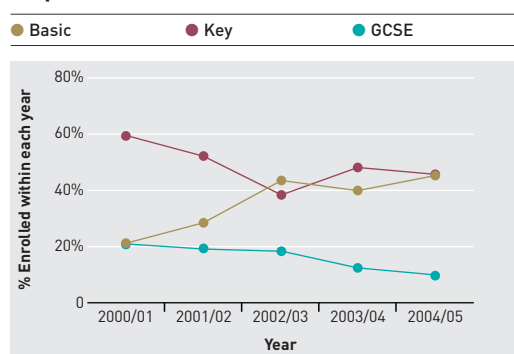
The dwindling proportion represented by GCSEs reflects a reduction in overall participation numbers, from 72,075 in 2000/01 to 65,782 in 2004/05, and an almost static number of achievements (39,768 in 2000/01 and 39,565 in 2004/05).[5]

In contrast, the overall reduction in the proportion of enrolments represented by key skills was not due to a reduction in participation. Enrolments were higher in 2004/05 (311,196) than in 2000/01

(214,274), as were achievements (67,415 in 2004/05 compared with 35,714 in 2000/01).

Participation and achievement by age

Numbers for participation and achievement in numeracy provision rose year on year for all age groups except those aged 60 and over (where the numbers peaked in 2002/03). There were, however, differences between age groups in the figures for enrolments compared to achievements. Throughout the period, 16- to 18-year-olds formed over half of all enrolments (see Figure 2.15), though this proportion reduced from 71% of the total in 2000/01 to 52% in 2004/05. The proportion for all other age bands increased between the beginning and the end of the period, 19- to 24-year-olds showing the greatest increase, nearly doubling from 10% to just under 20% of total enrolments, with 25- to 59-year-olds increasing from 18% to 27% of all enrolments. This distribution was different to that for literacy, where the number of enrolments by 16- to 18-year-olds and 25- to 59-year-olds was almost the same by 2004/05.

FIGURE 2.15

Age distribution of enrolments in numeracy

● 16–18   ● 19–24   ● 25–59   ● 60 and over
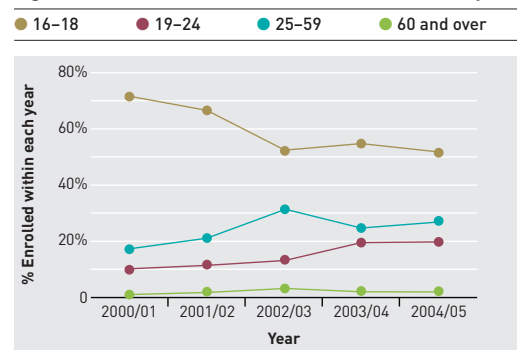
5 These achievements include only achievements at grades A*–C, not achievements at D–G.

Achievement figures for numeracy showed a different picture to that for enrolments, represented in Figure 2.16. Here the falling proportion of enrolments among 16- to 18-year-olds meant that while they made up the majority of all enrolments throughout the five years, it was only in the first, second and fourth years of the five-year period that they clearly formed the largest proportion of achievements (in 2003/04 16-to 18-year-olds formed 41.2% of the total and 25-to 59-year-olds 40.9% of the total). By 2004/05 16-to 18-year-olds represented 40% of all achievements, though they comprised 52% of enrolments, while 25- to 59-year-olds now represented the largest proportion of achievements at 41%. Similar differences between enrolment and achievement rates were found for literacy, though here the proportion of achievements in 2004/05 by 25- to 59-year-olds was much higher (50%) than that by 16- to 18-year-olds (28%).

FIGURE 2.16

Age distribution of achievements in numeracy
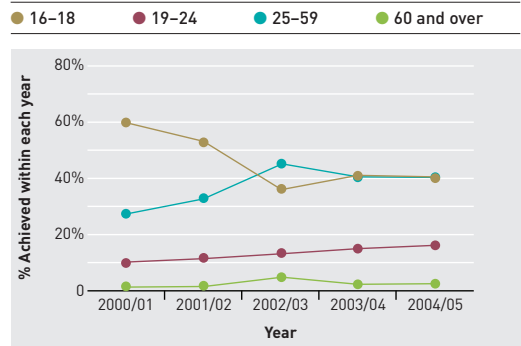
Are there gender patterns in participation and achievement?

As women formed a slightly higher proportion of enrolments and achievements in literacy (just over 50%), it could have been surmised that men would have formed the majority in numeracy provision. However, here too there were more enrolments and achievements by women than by men. Figure 2.17 shows a breakdown by gender of the number of enrolments, completions and achievements in numeracy between 2000/01 and 2004/05, with females shown in the graph on the left hand side and males on the right.

FIGURE 2.17

Participation and achievement in numeracy by women and men respectively
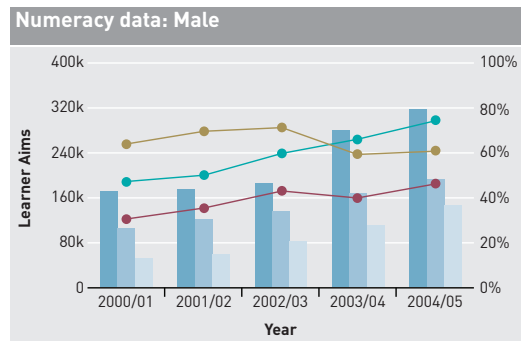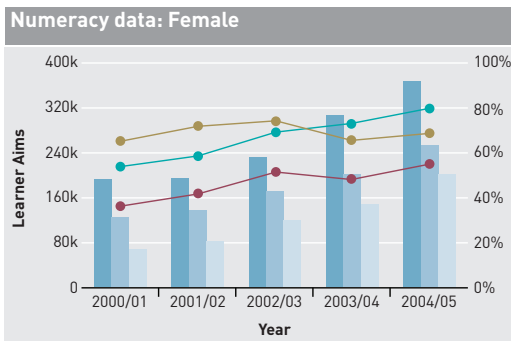
Ethnicity

We are also able to analyse patterns of participation and achievement in numeracy provision by ethnic group. Over three-quarters of the total figures for participation and achievement were from those who identified themselves as White. This proportion rose by 4 percentage points for both participation (from 79% to 83%) and achievement (from 77% to 81%) during the five-year period.

Enrolments by Asian learners comprised 9% of the total in 2000/01 but reduced to 6% of the total by 2004/05. Achievements by Asian learners showed a similar reduction, from 10% of the overall figure in 2000/01 to 6% in 2004/05. Enrolments and achievements by Black learners were around 7–8% throughout the period. Chinese learners made up a very small proportion of enrolments and achievements throughout, 0.6% of enrolments and 0.7% of achievements at the beginning of the five-year period and 0.3% of enrolments and 0.4% of achievements at the end.

As with literacy, one reason for the increase in the proportion of White learners was the greater increase in the actual numbers for participation and achievement by White learners, as shown in Figure 2.18.

Total numbers for participation and achievement in numeracy by White learners

■ Enrolled (E)　　■ Completed (C)　　■ Achieved (A)
● % Completed (C/E)　● % Achieved (A/E)　● % Achieved (A/C)

Enrolments by White learners more than doubled from 251,177 in 2000/01 to 553,404 in 2004/05. Achievements by White learners during the same period more than tripl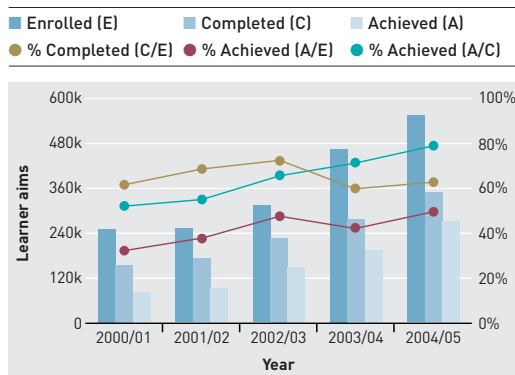ed from 81,203 to 271,833. In contrast, Figure 2.19 shows that enrolments by Asian learners rose by just over one-third from 28,645 to 39,525 between 2000 and 2005, while achievements doubled from 10,665 to 21,813. From 2003/04, the number of enrolments in numeracy by Chinese and Bangladeshi learners actually fell, and achievements by Bangladeshi learners also fell.

Total numbers for participation and achievement in numeracy by Asian learners

■ Enrolled (E)　　■ Completed (C)　　■ Achieved (A)
● % Completed (C/E)　● % Achieved (A/E)　● % Achieved (A/C)
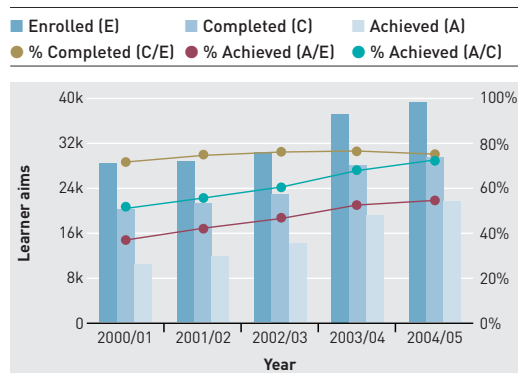
Participation and achievement: ESOL

The numbers for participation in ESOL provision were smaller than for literacy or numeracy, except in 2002/03 when ESOL enrolments were higher than those for numeracy.

Over the five years from 2000 to 2005, enrolments in ESOL represented just over a quarter (26%) of enrolments across all three skills. However, achievements in ESOL represented a higher proportion of total achievements than numeracy in four out of the five years included in this study. ESOL made up 34% of all achievements in 2000/01 compared with 27% for numeracy and 39% for literacy. In 2001/02 numeracy achievements were

slightly higher than those for ESOL (numeracy formed 32% and ESOL 30% of the total).

By 2004/05, after a small rise, ESOL achievements made up a slightly smaller proportion of the total at 31%, but this was still higher than numeracy achievements (27%), with literacy increasing to 42%.

Whilst it might seem obvious to state that learners would not be from the indigenous White population, learners who identified themselves as White still dominated the figures for participation and achievement in ESOL.

Overall figures for participation and achievement in ESOL rose throughout the period, as shown in Figure 2.20 so that by 2004/05 enrolments had more than doubled (from 269,560 to 559,234) and achievements had risen by a greater amount, from 149,737 to 400,255. In addition, levels of attrition between enrolment and achievement were lower for ESOL than for literacy or numeracy. In 2000/01 over half (56%) of enrolments led to successful achievement, and this rose to nearly three-quarters (72%) in 2004/05.
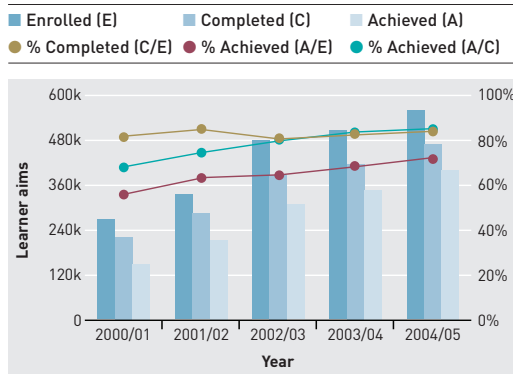
Overall participation and achievement in ESOL 2000/01 to 2004/05

■ Enrolled (E)   ■ Completed (C)   ■ Achieved (A)
● % Completed (C/E)   ● % Achieved (A/E)   ● % Achieved (A/C)

What level of qualification do learners achieve?
Participation and achievement in ESOL was dominated by Entry level and Level 1 (see Figure

2.21). The proportion made up by Level 2 qualifications was small, and grew smaller during the five-year period. There was also a decrease in the actual number of achievements. The number of achievements at Level 2 represented 13% (18,922) of all achievements in 2000/01 and only 4% (14,114) in 2004/05. This might be expected, in that ESOL learners aiming to achieve a Level 2 qualification may well be encouraged to participate in literacy provision, rather than ESOL. Turning to the balance of Entry level and Level 1, Level 1 dominated for the first two years, until 2002/03, when there was a huge increase in participation at Entry level. Thereafter, Entry level showed the highest number of achievements.

Achievement in ESOL by level of qualification

■ Entry total   ■ Level 1 total   ■ Level 2 total
● Entry   ● Level 1   ● Level 2
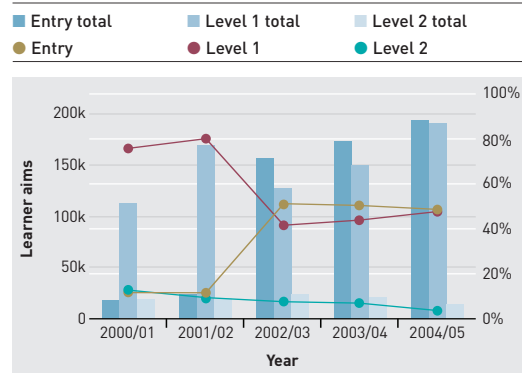
Between 2000/01 and 2004/05, achievements at Level 1 increased by more than 50% from 113,439 to 191,008.

During the same period, Entry level achievements saw a dramatic increase in 2002/03, from a very low base of 17,376 achievements in 2000/01, to 157,139 in 2002/3, rising much more slowly thereafter to reach a total of 195,133 in 2004/05. This meant that by 2004/05, 97% of all achievements in ESOL were split almost equally between Level 1 (48%) and Entry level (49%) qualifications.

Does participation and achievement differ by age?

Between the start and the end of the five-year period, the total numbers participating and achieving in ESOL for all age groups rose considerably. The proportions made up by different age groups showed the highest participation and achievement rate amongst 25- to 59-year-olds, and this was a growing trend.

The proportion of enrolments made up by different age groups is presented in Figure 2.22, and the figures for achievement are shown in Figure 2.23. The pattern for enrolment and achievement is virtually identical for the different age groups. Those aged 25 to 59 years formed 63% of all enrolments and achievements in 2000/01 rising to 70% by 2004/05. For all other age groups, the proportion fell between 2000/01 and 2004/05. Young people aged 16 to18 made up only a small proportion of both enrolments and achievements in ESOL, 9% in 2000/01 falling to 6% in 2004/05.

Are there gender patterns in participation and achievement?

As with Skills for Life as a whole, numbers for overall participation and achievement in ESOL were higher for women than for men.
Figure 2.24 shows a breakdown by gender of the number of enrolments, completions and achievements in ESOL provision between 2000/01 and 2004/05. The graph on the left shows females and that on the right, males.

There was a steady rise in total numbers for women each year from 2000/01 to 2004/05 and a smaller rise for men over the same period, except for the number of enrolments by men in 2003/04, when the number fell slightly.

Between the beginning and the end of the five years, the total number of enrolments by women more than doubled, from 156,460 to 341,491, while that by men almost doubled, from 113,100 to 217,743. Total achievements by women tripled

FIGURE 2.22

Enrolments in ESOL courses by age

from 87,472 to 245,914, while those by men more than doubled from 62,265 to 154,341.

Of the total numbers, women made up more than half of those involved in ESOL, and the balance remained virtually the same throughout the five years, with women representing 58% in 2000/01 and 61% in 2004/05.

Ethnicity

Whilst it might seem obvious to state that ESOL learners would not be from the indigenous White population, learners who identified themselves as White still dominated the figures for participation and achievement in ESOL. The highest proportion

FIGURE 2.23

Achievement in ESOL courses by age

FIGURE 2.24

Participation and achievement in literacy by women and men respectively

■ Enrolled (E) ■ Completed (C) ■ Achieved (A) ● % Completed (C/E) ● % Achieved (A/E) ● % Achieved (A/C)

ESOL data: Female

ESOL data: Male
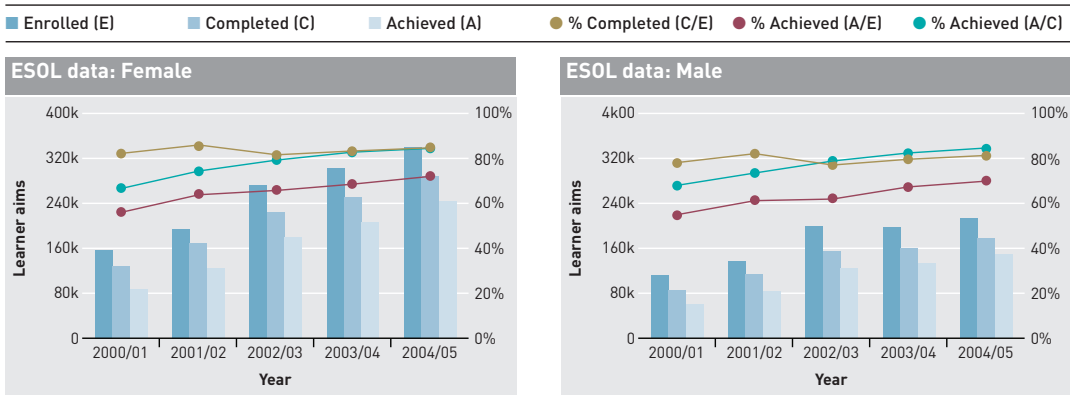
for participation and achievement was by learners who identified themselves as White: 31% of both enrolments and achievements were by White people in 2000/01 and after a slow decline to 23% in 2003/04, the figure for both rose to 34% in 2004/05.

The second highest proportion was by Asian learners, who represented 17% of enrolments and 18% of achievements in 2000/01 and 18% of enrolments and 19% of achievements in 2004/05. For both Black and Chinese learners, the proportion of enrolments dropped very slightly over the five years: for Black learners from 16% of the total in 2000/01 to 15% in 2004/05, and for Chinese learners from 5% to 4%, while the proportion of achievements by Black learners rose from 14% to 15%, and for Chinese learners fell from 5% to 4%.

One reason for the considerable number of White learners involved in ESOL provision may be the rise in migration from eastern European

countries. Figure 2.25 shows a breakdown of ESOL achievements by White people into three categories: White British, White Irish and any other White background. While there is no further information available concerning what 'any other White background' includes, the figure shows a large rise in the numbers identified in this category, especially from 2003/04.

FIGURE 2.25

Achievements in ESOL by different categories of White people

■ White - British ■ White - Irish ■ White - any other background

3

Qualifications and targets

Skills for Life emphasises the importance of nationally recognised qualifications, and the achievement of certificated outcomes in literacy, language and numeracy skills.

In this chapter we provide more evidence on learners' participation and achievement: we identify the levels at which learners achieved and the type of qualifications they were pursuing, and we compare trends in participation and achievement between qualifications that count towards the Public Sector Agreement (PSA) targets and qualifications that don't. We then describe the views of learners and managers on the qualifications introduced under Skills for Life, and we describe the impact of PSA targets on several of the groups most closely involved in the implementation of the strategy.

What do learners achieve?

Levels of qualifications

Skills for Life provision is offered at three levels, starting with Entry level, progressing to Level 1 and finally to Level 2 within the NQF for England.[6] Level 2 is broadly equivalent to GCSEs at grades A*–C, which are considered to represent successful completion of qualifications by 16-year-olds at the end of compulsory schooling. Level 2 is also the first level of qualification defined in government policy on workforce skills as representing an adequate base level of skill in the context of a competitive, globalised economy (HM Treasury 2005; DfES et al. 2005).

Figure 3.1 shows both the overall figures for achievement at these three different levels (shown as bars in the figure), and the proportion of all achievements by level (shown by the line graphs). The bar graphs show that overall achievements were highest for Level 1 qualifications throughout the five years. They were lowest for Entry level at the start of the five-year period in 2000/01, but Entry level figures

increased substantially in 2002/03, overtaking the number of achievements at Level 2. From this year on, Level 2 achievements represented the lowest number for all three levels.

FIGURE 3.1

Comparison of achievements in ALLN by level
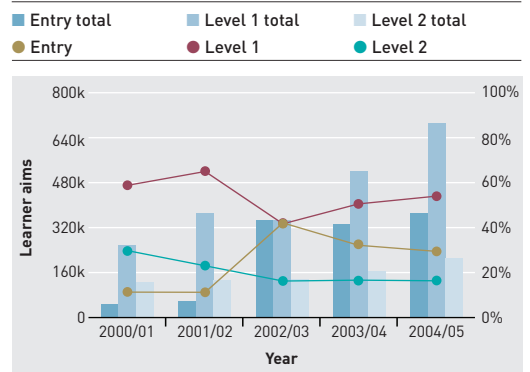
The lines in the graph show the proportion of all achievements by level. Here it becomes clear that the proportion of the total made up by Level 2 achievements fell between 2000/01 and 2002/03, and remained steady from then on at 17% of all

6 www.qca.org.uk/libraryAssets/media/qca-06-2298-nqf-web.pdf

25

achievements. The proportion of the total made up by Entry level rose between 2000/01 and 2002/03 and fell for Level 1. By 2002/03 they shared an almost identical proportion of achievements at 41.6% for Entry level and 41.8% for Level 1. The proportions then reduced for Entry level, to 29.1% of the total by 2004/05 whilst for Level 1 they rose to 54.2% of the total in the same year.

Types of qualifications

Figure 3.2 shows enrolments by type of qualification. In this we can see that basic skills made up the highest number of all enrolments, with 504,050 enrolments in 2000/01 rising to 1,413,086 in 2004/05. Because these numbers increased so considerably, this also meant that the proportion represented by basic skills rose from just over 48% in 2000/01 to just under 65% in 2004/05.

Enrolments in Skills for Life by type of qualification
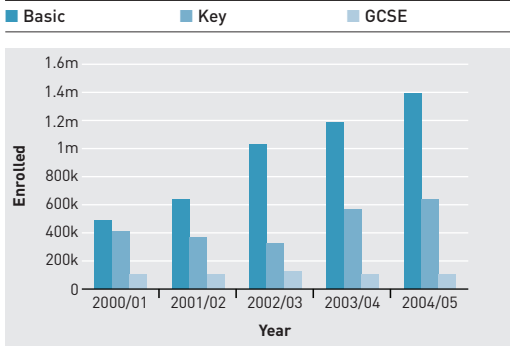
The figures for achievement by type of qualification, shown in Figure 3.3, followed this pattern even more strongly.

Achievements in Skills for Life by type of qualification
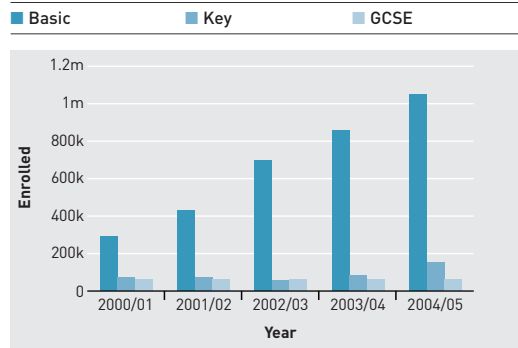
Achievements in basic skills rose from 296,743 in 2000/01 to 1,062,409 in 2004/05. This meant that basic skills qualifications made up an even greater proportion of all achievements, rising from 67% of overall achievements in 2000/01 to 84% in 2002/03, and then remaining almost steady for the following two years. Over the same period there was a small but steady decrease in the proportion of enrolments and achievements represented by GCSEs.

Trends

The LSC data reveal noticeable differences in overall enrolments, completions and achievements between provision which was recorded as counting towards the PSA target and provision which did not count towards the target. These differences are shown in Figure 3.4, which shows the figures for counting provision, and Figure 3.5, which shows the figures for non-counting provision.

FIGURE 3.4

Total participation and achievement between 2000 and 2005 in provision counting towards the government SfL target

Enrolled (E) Completed (C) Achieved (A)
● % Completed (C/E) ● % Achieved (A/E) ● % Achieved (A/C)

In 2004/05 there were twice as many achievements in non-counting Skills for Life provision as in counting provision. Moreover, completion and achievement rates as a percentage of enrolments started out and stayed much higher for non-counting provision. More than 80% of enrolments led to completion over the five-year period in non-counting provision, with a slowly rising trend. For counting provision, the same figures showed an overall downward trend, starting at 67% completion as a percentage of enrolments, rising to 71% in 2001/02, but dropping to 58% in 2004/05.

Achievement rates for both counting and non-counting provision showed a rising trend. However, the figures were much lower for counting provision, and the trend was smaller than for non-counting provision. Achievement in counting provision as a proportion of enrolments started at 33% in 2000/01, and rose by 5 percentage points to 38% by 2004/05, whereas for non-counting provision achievement started at 67% as a proportion of enrolments, and rose by 15 percentage points to 82% by 2004/05. The pattern for achievement rates as a proportion of completions also showed a rising trend for both counting and non-counting provision. Here, the increase was greater for counting provision, with 49% of completions resulting in successful achievement in 2000/01, rising to 65% in 2004/05, an increase of 16 percentage points. For non-counting provision, which started from a much higher base at 82% in 2000/01, the increase by 2004/05 was 10 percentage points.
The differences between counting and non-counting provision were therefore considerable; moreover, an increasing number of enrolments and achievements did not count towards the target between 2000 and 2005.

The number of learning aims taken up and completed in counting provision started out as more than double the figures for non-counting provision in 2000/01, though the difference in number of achievements was much closer (244,003 for counting compared with 199,361 for non-counting provision). By 2004/05 the gap between the number of enrolments for counting and non-counting provision had almost closed, and the figures for completion and achievement were now higher for non-counting provision.
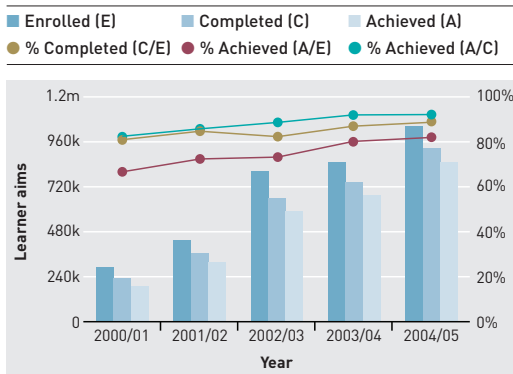
FIGURE 3.5

Total participation and achievement between 2000 and 2005 in provision NOT counting towards the government SfL target

Enrolled (E) Completed (C) Achieved (A)
● % Completed (C/E) ● % Achieved (A/E) ● % Achieved (A/C)

Attitudes towards tests and qualifications

Managers, co-ordinators and tutors

Positive comments about the national tests focused on how they motivated learners and enabled them to gain a qualification and move learners on. This was particularly welcome in prison, with its shifting population, where timing was crucial in supporting learners' sense of progress. A tutor working in prison explained:

'Prisoners can take tests and get their certificate, where in the past they had to wait for a test date and their certificate would arrive after they had moved on.'

The possible benefits for learners did not mean that providers were always enthusiastic. A regional core skills manager in the Midlands described an early attempt to introduce the tests:

'The startling demonstration was when we did the literacy and numeracy Pathfinder, and we were offered the very first literacy and numeracy test, to pilot it. And we wanted to do it. There were 10,000 learners in [our area] and in theory they could all enter the test in three weeks' time. So in my enthusiasm, I said to all the senior managers "How many people do you want to put in? It's free, they'll get a national qualification. Oh, about 12. Well, would you like to ask your tutors how many they want to put in?" About a week later we'd got 60. "Would you like to ask your learners? because it's only a week away now?" and overnight we got 400.'

This senior manager, like others in this position, saw the issue as a continuing problem to work on with the tier of managers below them. They in turn would work with tutors who often had to be convinced that tests would not have a negative effect on the experience of learners.

Learners

Learners also expressed mixed views about qualifications. Most older learners who described learning for enjoyment and fulfilment did not want to take tests, but a few valued them because they had never previously gained qualifications. This older learner in work-based provision described certificates as a real motivator:

'I've got three certificates . . . English Level 1 and 2 and maths, not maths – numeracy Level 1; we're doing our Level 2 today! I'd never had a certificate in my life!'

Some learners with physical or mental health issues found regular attendance and tests difficult but felt a sense of pride when they succeeded. For many others at work, hoping to gain employment or progress within education, qualifications were important to achieving their goals. They provided a marker of progress both for the individuals themselves, to see how far they had come, and for others as an external measure of progression.

A number of higher-level female ESOL learners working at Level 1 and Level 2 in community-based learning were strongly motivated by qualifications. One woman explained:

'Yes, I want to continue "Access to Diploma" course. I think that's at the end of this month in another centre and I will continue until I get a diploma and be certified for . . . Yes, I want to do a course for interpreter and translator.'

A learner attending provision in a probation setting shows that attitudes to studying and qualifications can change over time as goals change:

'I've been a plasterer for 23 years and decided that I've had enough of plastering so I decided to register for this, so I'm going back to college

in December to do a basic fitness instructor course, so I need to get some qualifications.'

The impact of targets

Managers, co-ordinators and tutors

For all those interviewed, the national targets represented an ever-present feature of Skills for Life provision, with courses classified as counting or non-counting towards the Skills for Life targets for qualifications achieved. The strategy set out to improve the literacy, language and numeracy skills of 2.25 million adult learners by 2010. This went together with interim targets of 750,000 by 2004 and 1.5 million by 2007, and all three targets have now been met.

Most managers and co-ordinators were largely happy to have targets as they felt they helped to 'drive up' the quality as well as the quantity of provision. One manager said:

'I've welcomed the targets, because you can get people who have been slushing about within basic skills for years. Now you have to make a decision as to whether you are actually doing any good for that learner, whether you're serving them best, and obviously in the back of your mind you've got the targets.'

Others, however, suggested that Skills for Life targets could act as a blunt instrument that could hamper rather than enable progress. For example one manager felt:

'In terms of measurements we are looking at people who have achieved the test, but there are other people who have made progress and that gets fed back to me by the tutors and that is not being counted and really the government are only interested in Level 1 and Level 2 rather than the Entry levels because the funding goes that way. I just think that we need to think more creatively how we measure the impossible.'

Many tutors were less happy with the targets. Whereas managers and co-ordinators felt they had some flexibility in adapting the targets and working with them, tutors described themselves as having to organise their work to meet the targets. Because funding was tied to achieving targets some tutors felt compromised by ensuring that sufficient learners 'achieved' and were 'counted' to enable provision to continue.

There was a strong view amongst managers, co-ordinators and tutors that the Level 2 target dominated provision, and that other levels did not 'count'. As a result, as one manager explained:

'. . . the weakest and those most in need fall through the net as providers can demonstrate better success rates when they concentrate on learners with higher abilities . . .'

4

Progress and progression

It was a central feature of the Skills for Life strategy to emphasise and support the progression of learners towards achieving certificated outcomes in literacy, language and numeracy skills. The clearest evidence of that is given when learners progress within the qualifications framework, moving, for example, from a lower to a higher level of attainment. We have extensive evidence on how much of this sort of progress learners make below.

Progress takes many forms. Learners can progress by moving from one subject to another, whilst staying at the same level, or they might start a new subject at a lower level than they had already achieved on their existing course. There are also many examples of individual successes linked to, but going beyond, the achievement of basic skills qualifications. A training co-ordinator working with young offenders cited a young woman from Somalia who completed her basic skills test, and his organisation had then helped her to apply for and get a job. Improving her basic skills gave her the confidence to write and submit job applications. Following a basic skills course, the same organisation helped another young man to get a job in a sports company doing low-skilled work, and he had subsequently progressed to the post of assistant manager.

Stories like these underline the fact that there is a great deal more to 'progress' than movement from lower to higher curriculum levels. But equally the importance to learners of making progress within the curriculum levels is not in doubt, and it is progress of this kind that we now focus on.

Learners' progress: how much did they make?

To assess how much progress learners were making under Skills for Life we recruited a sample of 1649 learners on ALLN courses; each learner was tested before and after their courses. Using information from these tests we were able to assess their progress in numeracy, reading or writing during the course of academic years 2004/05 and 2005/06. All learners had been taught by (a subset of) the teachers who were the subject of our Teacher Study.

Learners (other than those pursuing a numeracy course) were counted as literacy or ESOL learners on the basis of their first language: those who said it was English were counted as literacy learners, those who said it was any other language were counted as ESOL learners. This is admittedly unusual: it would have been more usual to classify them according to the nature of the courses they were on. However, information about which courses were literacy and which were ESOL was patchy, and we therefore used learners' own statements about their first language to arrive at the literacy/ESOL classification.

Profile of the learners
Table 4.1 shows how the 1649 learners were distributed across Skills for Life sectors.

TABLE 4.1

Distribution of learners by Skills for Life sectors

Sector	Number	%
Further Education	1352	82
Adult and Community Learning	180	11
Work-based Learning	51	3
Learndirect	39	2
Jobcentre Plus	27	2
Total	1649	100

FE colleges provide about 80% of all Skills for Life provision, and it is reasonable to think that the FE percentage in this sample is representative of the FE learner population as a whole. However, other contexts are less well represented, and there were no learners in prisons in the samples, although about 10% of all Skills for Life provision occurs there.

Of the 1649 learners, 429 were following numeracy courses, 519 had English as their first language and were therefore considered as literacy learners, and 701 had English as an additional language and were therefore considered as ESOL learners.

Women outnumber men among Skills for Life learners, particularly in ESOL, and our samples were also predominantly female. The proportions within literacy learners in this project were quite similar to the Skills for Life figures, but in numeracy and especially ESOL women outnumbered men, to a greater extent than they do in Skills for Life generally.

TABLE 4.2

Numbers of men and women in the samples

	Literacy			ESOL			Numeracy			TOTAL		
	Sample		SfL	Sample		SfL	Sample		SfL	Sample		SfL
	N	%	%	N	%	%	N	%	%	N	%	%
Men	245	47	47	230	33	39	162	39	46	637	39	44
Women	274	53	53	466	67	61	249	61	54	989	61	56
Total	519	100	100	696	100	100	411	100	100	1626	100	100

Over half the learners in this study were under 30, and just less than a quarter were over 39. The large percentages of literacy and numeracy learners under 20 in these samples reflected the recruitment of substantial numbers of FE teachers for the Teacher Study and therefore of their learners for this study.

ESOL learners, and a small subset of numeracy learners, had a wide range of first languages other than English. Within this the proportions with first languages from the Indian subcontinent were smaller than they would have been a few years ago, while European and Middle Eastern languages featured more prominently than a few years ago.

The great majority of literacy and numeracy learners and a quarter of ESOL learners were White. The largest other groups were those of Black and Pakistani ethnicity.

A third of the learners were employed, a seventh were unemployed and the rest were unwaged.

About a fifth of these learners had left school before the age of 16. At the other end of the scale, the high proportion of those in the ESOL sample who left full-time education after age 16 (69%) is consistent with people with more years of education feeling a need to improve their English.

A third of the sample overall had no educational qualifications, with a further 6% having only Entry level qualifications. However, a third of the ESOL learners had qualifications above Level 2. There were also small numbers of literacy and numeracy learners with high qualifications in the samples.

Overall around two-thirds of learners were attending their first ALLN course – very few were also doing another course on the same subject. It seems that providers were having considerable

success in attracting new learners into provision, but not into doing more than one course.

Three-quarters of the literacy and numeracy learners and just under a fifth of ESOL learners had seen the Gremlins advertising. This is consistent with government-commissioned polls estimating the brand recognition of the Gremlins campaigns.

The numeracy learners who were asked why they were doing the course gave responses that were almost equally external to them ('extrinsic') and self-motivational ('intrinsic').

Almost a quarter of the literacy learners considered themselves to have a specific difficulty with reading and/or writing; fewer numeracy learners (11%) and very few ESOL learners (1%) felt the same way.

Over 20% of the numeracy learners reported at least one medical factor which might affect their learning.

Progress

Numeracy learners
Numeracy learners made significant progress, moving on average from the upper end of Entry level 3 to Level 1.

Learners were assessed before and after their courses, and the pre- and post-test scores were available for 239 learners (56% of the total number pre-tested) across the two cohorts. None of the differences between subgroups (e.g. men/women; those with English as first/additional language) were statistically significant.

Literacy and ESOL learners in reading
The literacy assessment included two parallel assessment instruments, each having both an easy version designed for learners at Entry level, and a less easy version designed for learners at Levels 1 and 2.

Literacy learners made significant progress in reading
Learners who took the easy assessment on average moved from the upper end of Entry level 3 to just over the threshold into Level 1.Those who took the less easy assessment on average moved from near the upper end of Level 1 to almost the top of Level 1.

ESOL learners on average moved from near the upper end of Entry level 3 just into Level 1. ESOL learners aged 16–19 made significantly more progress than other age groups.

Pre- and post-test scores on the reading assessment were available for 186 literacy learners (65% of the 284 pre-tested on reading) and 123 ESOL learners (50% of the 245 pre-tested on reading) across the two cohorts.

Literacy and ESOL learners in writing
On average literacy learners did not make significant progress in writing. There were modest improvements in writing for ESOL learners. ESOL learners on average moved from within Entry level 2 to slightly below the threshold for Entry level 3.

Conclusion
The skill levels of all groups of learners attending Skills for Life provision in 2004–06 improved on average, with the exception of the writing levels of literacy learners. The fact that there were very few differences between the different groups we looked at suggests that provision was working equally well for many different groups of learners and hardly any were being left behind.

Progression

Learners make progress in the sense that they improve their knowledge and skills within the context of a current course or programme. Distinct from this, their progression is generally described by showing how they move from their current learning into further learning or

employment (or both). In this section we describe learners' experiences of progression, and the patterns we identified amongst these, drawing on evidence from 416 first interviews and 135 second interviews, which took place on average 10 months after the first.

Experience of learning
We asked learners about their experience of learning, and whether this had made a difference to their lives and their plans for the future. In general, and in line with other studies such as the *National Learner Satisfaction Survey* (LSC 2005) and *The Benefits of Learning* study (Schuller et al. 2004), people reported:

- Positive experiences of learning, particularly when tutors were able to respond to individual needs. Fitting in with everyday lives in terms of the day, time and place of learning was important for participation. Many valued the social experience of learning, which provided structure and interest in their lives.
- Learners described learning new literacy, language and numeracy knowledge as important, as well as the more generic skills of 'learning how to learn'. Both sets of skills were seen as transferable to everyday life.
- Learners described short-term and goal-focused plans such as finding work or improving job prospects by studying subjects needed to accomplish this (e.g. Level 2 numeracy for promotion). Many also described lifelong and life-wide aspirations including career changes, broadening horizons through more general learning, and doing things that promote happiness, well-being and a sense of purpose.

Where learning fitted these broad objectives people were able to continue learning or to progress on to other courses and activities. If people felt their learning was relevant and beneficial in achieving their short- or long-term goals they continued with their participation.

Learners' difficulties
People also described some of the reasons why continuing participation became difficult for them. Some related to provision, particularly whether it would continue, and others were to do with people's lives and changes in their life circumstances. Difficulties were expressed as:

- The class/course did not fit in with learners' lives, for example in the place or time.
- Their own goal changed as they did not want to pursue promotion, their job changed or they became unemployed.
- They were unable to access courses and maintain progress, particularly in Level 2 and Level 3 ESOL provision.
- The employers' learning requirements were sometimes at variance with the learners' own goals, particularly in work-based learning.
- Learners felt coerced to attend or had sanctions imposed, for example through Job Centre Plus provision.

Personal factors
Learners' circumstances changed and often what they wanted to learn, or their opportunity to learn, changed at the same time. Generally, learners' motivation and ability to take up learning opportunities were affected by social factors such as health, caring responsibilities and work patterns, as well as economic factors such as the cost of courses, cost and distance of travel, and childcare. For example, one person lost their job and was not able to participate in work-based learning, several became pregnant, others became ill, and several others changed their minds about studying for a different or better job.

Several factors emerged as significant in people's lives affecting their learning opportunities:

- Being part of a moving population – particularly within prison and probation education, asylum seekers and refugees,

migrant workers and those in certain kinds of employment.

- Experiencing health difficulties, particularly affecting older learners and those with physical or mental disabilities.
- Not being able to access work-based learning if jobs changed, if people became unemployed, or promotion aspirations changed.

What the learners did next

We explored what learners had been doing in between their two interviews; whether they continued with their original study, or a course of a similar level, had moved on to a higher level of study or employment related to their experience of learning, or had dropped out or left learning altogether. We identified three categories of 'moving on', 'moving around' and 'moving out' which captured these potential changes.

Moving on means moving on to other forms of learning. This could be a higher-level course like an Access course, a vocational course (nurse training) or literacy/numeracy and ESOL at a higher level, for example from Entry level 2 to Entry level 3 or from Entry level 3 to Level 1. This could also be moving on in terms of promotion in the workplace or getting a job as a result of study. These relate strongly to both educational and socio-economic notions of progression as well as individual progress.

Moving around means carrying on with the same course, or an equivalent level of learning, without taking qualifications. This could be people who are unable to attend regularly because of physical/mental health issues, people who come mainly for the social aspect of learning, or those who want or need to learn at a slower pace or mainly for leisure. This relates strongly to individual progress, which may be at variance with educational notions of progression.

Moving out means leaving learning altogether. This could be for a variety of reasons from being

disappointed with the experience/outcome of learning, or related to changes in life circumstances, including health and employment. For some, moving out of provision is positive because they have achieved what they wanted to learn. This relates strongly to educational issues of retention and achievement, and also to the broader context of learning in relation to social and personal factors.

TABLE 4.3

Across all six sites – combined numbers of students moving on/around/out by subject area

	Moving on		Moving around		Moving out	
Literacy	21	49%	11	26%	11	26%
Numeracy	9	39%	5	22%	9	39%
Literacy/Numeracy	5	33%	4	27%	6	40%
ESOL	31	63%	10	20%	8	16%

Across the six sites, 74% of learners re-interviewed were either progressing in some way or continuing in learning. ESOL had the highest percentage of learners 'moving on' or 'moving around', which may reflect the long-term and ongoing nature of second language learning, or the importance of the social aspects of learning. We also found (see Table 4.4 below) a difference between rural and urban areas: those in the more rural case study sites were less likely to be 'moving around'. Learners in geographically remote and rural areas may face greater difficulties in attending provision and have fewer alternative learning options.

TABLE 4.4

progression in rural and urban areas

	Largely rural Wiltshire & Swindon; Cumbria & Northumberland		Largely urban Cheshire & Warrington; West Yorkshire; Birmingham & Solihull; London West		Total	
Moving on	25	61%	41	46%	66	51%
Moving around	5	12%	25	28%	30	23%
Moving out	11	27%	23	26%	34	26%
Totals	41		89		130	

5

Learning in context

Literacy, ESOL and numeracy classes are held in a variety of places and contexts. This chapter looks at four examples: work-based learning, prison and probation settings, college provision and community-based provision, which although part of the same strategy, illustrate the significance of the different contexts to learners.

Work-based learning

Learners

People learning at work did so for a variety of reasons, some specifically associated with work and some not. Reasons directly associated with work included promotion, taking on voluntary roles such as union learning representative and other union activities, and keeping up with new levels of work skills, like IT. Some people began Skills for Life learning to support other areas of study (for example those studying for Nursing Assistant NVQ Level 2); in other cases, managers suggested literacy or numeracy courses to staff who had failed hygiene or health and safety courses because of poor reading skills. But learners also cited reasons not connected with work: learning was associated with helping children, overcoming embarrassment, and regaining confidence lost at school.

However, learning at work was vulnerable to changes at work. Several work-based learners described how their motivation to learn diminished when their promotion goals changed. For individuals, the link between learning and economic growth was not always as straightforward as policy documents would suggest (see Wolf 2002). While interviewees spoke of how learning at work provided flexible learning opportunities that fitted in with their lives, when those who learn in the workplace become unemployed or change job they lose access to learning. Many learners, particularly ESOL learners, had more than one job and struggled to fit in work and study. Several told us that because they travelled between different jobs they were unable to participate in work-based study and found the schedule of college classes more manageable.

Tutors and managers

Managers in the workplace spoke of both difficulties and factors that contributed to successful learning provision. Where workplace learning was most successful the company involved was committed to Skills for Life at the highest level of management, and managers at all levels were involved with the activity. For example, one provider managed an extensive programme of workplace learning across the region to a wide variety of companies. The introduction of provision was preceded by a training needs analysis and in this process the role of union learning representatives was particularly important. Their groundwork meant that provision was offered at times to suit employees and their shift patterns.

Tutors in the workplace had to be prepared to teach at night before the night shift started (at 10 p.m., for example), or first thing in the morning (as early as 5 a.m.) before the morning shift. There were also periods when provision might be poorly attended, or might need to be suspended, with a knock-on effect on achievement.

Sometimes these attendance patterns were predictable, sometimes unpredictable:

'Their job at BT in Birmingham is to repair telegraph poles and to go down manholes and to look at the wiring. If it rains and there's a lot of wind about and terrible weather, then we know there will be nobody in the learning centre. So in order to get somebody through an achievement in the allotted time is sometimes a great challenge, because they're actually not going to be there, not because they don't want to be there, but because work takes over, and that's their priority.'

And, of course, no matter what level of attendance, the provider still had to pay the tutors.

Union learning representatives were an important factor in enrolling and being supported on work-based courses. However, union learning representatives reported tensions between work and learning priorities, particularly around issues of funding and resources. Where these issues were resolved learners benefited from flexible learning opportunities, where they were not, learning was vulnerable to being made less of a priority or being cut altogether.

Participation and achievement
Figure 5.1 shows figures for enrolment, completion and achievement in work-based learning provision for 2002/03 through to 2004/05. From a very small base of 8973 enrolments and 818 achievements in 2002/03, provision expanded to 339,561 enrolments and 66,071 achievements in 2004/05.

Participation in work-based learning provision between 2002/03 and 2004/05
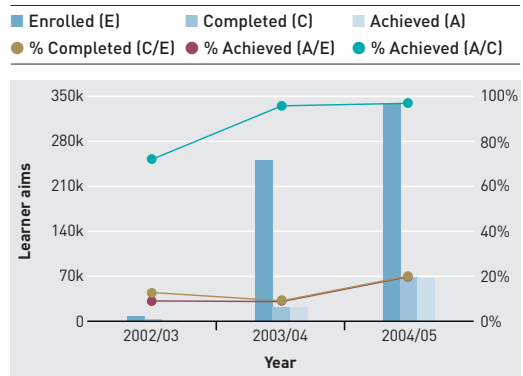
This figure shows very clearly the huge increase in enrolments in work-based learning provision was not matched by a similar volume of increase in achievements. In 2002/03, only 9% of enrolments led to successful achievement. Although this percentage rose over the three years, only 19% of enrolments resulted in successful achievement by 2004/05. In contrast, there was a high success rate amongst those who completed their programme, shown in the ratio of achievements to completions, which rose from 72% in 2002/03 to 97% in 2004/05. These patterns applied to both literacy and numeracy provision, though not to ESOL, where the numbers were very small – only 1195 enrolments in work-based learning ESOL provision in 2004/05, but of these, the success rate was 81% (a total of 970 achievements). In general the figures show both the exponential increase in the availability of work-based learning, but they also raise questions about processes of recruitment, and whether the high levels of enrolment actually match the needs of learners and employers.

Prison and probation

Prison
In the prison context Skills for Life offered the opportunity for prisoners to achieve qualification

outcomes quickly and easily, and encouraged them to progress. However, Skills for Life increasingly came to be seen as dominating prison education provision to the exclusion of other learning, with the NQF Level 2 representing the end point of learning offered to prisoners.

Offenders often move from one prison to another, or from the secure estate back into the community, but records of achievement frequently fail to go along with them. As a result offenders lack evidence of their learning, and have to have their skill level reassessed at a new establishment.

Despite these difficulties, there were many examples of creative projects to enhance Skills for Life provision and the learners' experience. These included a 'Storybook Dads' project, where prisoners could record stories to be sent home for children to listen to, and peer partner projects, where a prisoner with more advanced skills would undergo a certificated training programme and work as a mentor to a less advanced peer.

Although the overwhelming majority of learners interviewed in prisons described experiences of school failure and of being embarrassed by not being able to read or write, many initially attended a Skills for Life course because they considered it a better option than prison work and because it alleviated boredom by getting them out of their cells. Several mentioned that the 'time was right' and they wanted to use their time inside constructively both to enable them to get work on their release and to give something back to society by holding down a job. Learning was key to transforming their lives: as one prisoner described, it was about 'not going back into a life of crime as there is more to life than fighting, football, taking drugs and getting pissed'. The drawback to prison learning was the interruptions that came when they were moved on to other institutions, which often terminated learning altogether.

Many learners described being able to read and write more confidently after attending classes in prison. Learners described how they were able to keep in contact with family members and plan for a future, either working or going to college after release. Most felt that certificates were an important symbol of what they had achieved – one learner sent his home for his mum to stick on the wall to show he was 'improving himself inside'. All described improving their confidence, both in the ability to learn and also to engage socially with others. For many the increase in confidence and their changed aspirations were part of a wider reflective process of assessing long-term goals.

Probation
Probation Service learners chose to attend class as part of their sentence. They felt that this opportunity to gain a qualification was more productive than serving a sentence where they wouldn't achieve anything. These learners also described failing at school and getting by in jobs that didn't require any reading or writing. Like prison learners, probationers were assessing their lives and futures. One 30-year-old, who described himself as a habitual offender, said: 'at 30 you start to question your life, don't you'. He wanted to go on to college and felt for the first time that, with the support he received from the tutor, this was a possibility. Another learner who had been a plasterer for 20 years described wanting a better quality of life, not necessarily better money but that:

'My goal at the end of the day is to wake up in the morning and want to go to work instead of thinking "oh I'm there again I can't do this again".'

These probation learners, working at Levels 1 and 2, were self-selecting and highly motivated. Although enthusiastic about this opportunity to the point of suggesting it be made compulsory for all offenders, there are resource issues

particularly around drug and alcohol addiction for other learners. In both cases, for the prison and probation learners, those who were at the 'right time' in their lives were able to engage successfully in learning using this and increased confidence to plan radical changes in their lives. Some probation interviewees explained that they had been involved in similar courses in the past but that for them it had not been the right time so they had not responded.

College-based provision

Tutors and managers

College staff believed that Skills for Life had dramatically raised the profile of the basic skills work. Interviewees spoke of Skills for Life as including far more than just basic skills and felt that it had a much higher national profile and more funding. The Skills for Life co-ordinator in one college explained:

'If the LSC ring up the directorate and want information it comes to me. In terms of reporting I meet with the Vice Principal on a fortnightly basis. The agenda is set by me and I tell him which departments things aren't happening in . . . when I said to one head of department that I have fortnightly meetings with the VP he said – well I don't get to see him as often as that.'

Many seemed proud of what they were achieving. One manager spoke of how the participation figures in her college had grown by 61% in 2003/04 since the previous year. In spite of this increase she was not concerned that the college would run out of new Skills for Life learners:

'. . . our penetration is no more than 3%. I'm not afraid of running out of people, even if the statistics are not absolutely accurate, on that scale there would still be a lot of people to go at.'

A college principal counselled that funding would need to take account of the fact that the next

tranche of Skills for Life learners was going to be more difficult to reach and would therefore require greater investment in outreach and delivery in small groups. She and others also felt that many of the youngsters coming out of school at 16 still did not have the skills needed:

'The nearest 11–16 school to us is only gaining 15% with 5 A–C passes. When you look then at the agenda of whether things are improving I'm very optimistic that at the college here we have some excellent staff but we still have that real logjam of young people coming through who in that definition of Skills for Life are illiterate and innumerate.'

One of the biggest challenges initially identified by college stakeholders was obtaining staff with the right skills. By the time of their second interview this appeared to become less of a priority, although many felt the solution was only partial, as one Head of School explained:

'Literacy now probably has enough tutors but there is still a big shortage for numeracy and with ESOL it is like feeding buns to an elephant – you couldn't ever fill it up.'

In terms of recruiting staff, many college managers commented on the fact that staff in schools were better rewarded financially than teachers in FE. Many tutors complained that the pay and career progression routes within basic skills were not as attractive as those in mainstream teaching.

Overall, despite some problems, college managers and co-ordinators were pleased by what Skills for Life had enabled them to do, both personally and professionally. One interviewee said she had seen a dramatic change: 'before there wasn't the curriculum, and the professionalism wasn't regarded as being in the sector. It's a quality initiative.' Many others echoed this but warned: 'it's not a quick fix

though'. Others expressed concern that the funding might not last as long as it was needed, particularly in relation to ESOL provision.

Learners

Over half of the people interviewed on college campus/satellite site attended ESOL provision to either learn or improve their English language skills. They gave a variety of reasons for wanting to do this, ranging from wanting to have a better understanding of the requirements for living in the UK – 'I'm living in this country so it's important to learn English' – to wanting to function socially with English-speaking peers in the community – 'to understand better speaking with friends, neighbours' – to being able to access career and work opportunities – 'I want to buy a house in Scotland and set up my own gardening business'. The majority of these learners were aged between 20 and 39 years.

The remaining college learners we interviewed were reasonably evenly spread across literacy, numeracy and mixed provision linked to vocational training. Almost all those in mixed provision were young people aged16–19 years who emphasised their need to fill gaps in qualifications so that they could then move on to a career of their choice. As one young man said: 'I am doing this course next year as well and then construction and hopefully I'll have a proper job when I am 21'.

People involved in non-vocational mixed provision were older learners spread across the 20–29, 40–49 and 50–59 age groups. The majority of these were older women with higher-level English as a second language needs who wanted either to get back into the workforce or improve their employment prospects. For some, becoming more linguistically independent now that their children had grown up was important.

People in literacy classes were more evenly spread across a broad spectrum of ages with the majority of people between 20 and 49 years old. Numeracy students were concentrated in the older age ranges with approximately three-quarters of those interviewed over the age of 50. This quote from a woman in her 40s underlines the sense of stigma that many people felt in relation to their lack of confidence with numeracy:

> 'Well it's the stigma that I never got it. I'm older now and my son's doing his A levels and my daughter is going to approach GCSEs, and I thought I'm too old to do it. But now I'm really glad I've done it. It's another thing in my life that I can put behind me and set off on something new.'

The sense of achievement expressed here was a common thread running through interviews with numeracy students. For many, particularly in older age groups, gaining a numeracy qualification was akin to climbing Everest; something people had been frightened of and never thought they could do. It was almost the 'ultimate learning challenge'.

Community-based provision

For people learning in a community setting, one of the important features of attending this kind of provision was the fact that this was within their communities and near to their homes. This was cited repeatedly as a significant reason for being there, regardless of subject (see also the Adult Learning Inspectorate's report, 2006). One retired numeracy learner who was attending a programme at his great-grandson's school said:

> 'I meet my little great-grandson from school so I don't want to be going travelling far away; I need to be here to pick him up from school . . . It's absolutely ideal!'

A mother with ESOL needs explained that the 'centre was very convenient for her home' and

was therefore able to recruit learners like her who had tight family time schedules to meet. For these learners it wasn't that they weren't prepared to venture elsewhere for learning but initially they needed to build up confidence and re-establish their identities outside of family and home by attending provision in familiar territory. As one mother attending a Family Learning programme within local primary schools explained:

> 'I think it's easier for us three though because we're so used to this school anyway. We're not going on foreign territory as it were. We're confident to be in the school so it's easier for us to come to courses here. I'd probably be nervous. I probably wouldn't go to any other course if it was outside the school, not yet.'

The second noticeable characteristic of community-based provision was that a number of older learners or learners with lower levels of confidence, learning difficulties (e.g. dyslexia), disabilities or health issues (both mental and physical) believed that they could access this type of provision more easily. One older learner said:

> 'Learning one-to-one is best. Especially for people who have learning difficulties it is better to be in a small class. It gives you confidence, it gives me confidence. I don't have learning difficulties, but I would encourage especially people with learning difficulties to come, but it is for everyone. At college there are many young people in class; it is easier to come here for older people like me.'

As these sentiments were reiterated again and again it was clear that community-based learning was reaching people who, for one or more of the reasons discussed above, would not otherwise be in provision.

The majority of learners we spoke to in community learning were either attending ESOL or literacy provision: these two subjects accounted for around two-thirds of the 178 learners interviewed. The other third was split between mixed provision and numeracy, with very few learners engaged in stand-alone IT classes. There was a noticeable concentration of older learners (above the 14–19 age group) in community-based provision, with around two-thirds of learners being over 30 and the remaining third being over 40 years old.

6

Why learners attend classes

Literacy

People attended literacy classes for a variety of reasons. Those most commonly mentioned were: to learn spelling, reading and writing not acquired at school; to gain skills and certificates for employment; to help (grand)children with schoolwork and homework; and to meet other people. People also talked of improved confidence and being able to do different things in their everyday lives.

Some people identified their own negative experiences of learning at school as an important motivation for wanting to acquire the skills to help (grand)children. One mother described the way that learning enabled her to see herself as a better mother:

'I was totally terrified of forms and things, like any bill that came through the post I wouldn't even look at them and basically I just wanted to change it and become a better mother and help my children through school, and sort of get them through school so they can achieve what I haven't. That's the main reason why I joined.'

Her increase in confidence since attending the literacy class meant that she used a dictionary to help her and her children find words they were unsure of, an activity completely new to her family. Some people attending literacy classes who had English as a second language wanted to be able to continue supporting their children as they progressed through school. One mother explained: 'I could help children when small but now they've left me behind'. This learner also

reflected that, though she was born in England, her parents had limited English language and were unable to help her when she was growing up – this was something she was motivated not to repeat with her own children. Several others described how their children had supported them to attend literacy classes so they could improve their communication with their children whose first language was English. Often literacy and language skills travelled from the class to home and back again (see also Pahl and Rowsell 2005, Appleby and Hamilton 2006). This they described as being able to spell properly and read fluently as their children and other family members did.

Many learners said they wanted to attend literacy classes to learn things they had not learned or fully understood at school. This was for a variety of reasons, including being bored, being bullied, having undiagnosed dyslexia, playing truant, dealing with difficult home circumstances or being expelled. For some this had been nearly 40 years ago, whilst for other it was a more recent negative experience. One learner described working for 38 years with his hands to cover his biggest fear of it being found out that he could not read. He described his ambition as simply 'being able to read and spell'. Many described their strategies for coping, which included using family members to manage household bills and paperwork, writing cards, reading maps and writing cheques. Managing these tasks independently, and taking on new areas of responsibility at home and work, was described as an important aspiration by many.

Gaining skills and certificates for employment was frequently mentioned as a reason why people had come to a literacy class. For some this was to manage their existing work more confidently, as many jobs were described as increasingly needing proficiency with literacy and IT skills. Others came to the class to acquire the skills and confidence to seek either promotion or new areas of work. Examples of this were: wanting to move into management, becoming a paid union official, or moving from being a low-grade operative to becoming a higher-grade worker. Many others spoke of 'getting work' or 'finding a job' in more general terms, as their skills and confidence improved.

Nearly all those who attended literacy classes mentioned the social aspect of learning and improved confidence. The social aspect was described as providing intellectual interest, structure in the day and contact with other people. Whether learners were young or old it was described repeatedly as 'getting out of the house' and 'keeping my brain alive'. Confidence was directly related by learners to improvements in their reading, writing and spelling, something people described being embarrassed about previously. Confidence also related to everyday tasks and practices, including having the confidence to cook a family meal independently and being able to read road signs and directions whilst driving (see also Eldred 2002).

Numeracy

People described attending numeracy classes to improve their maths skills for work-related reasons, to help their (grand)children, and simply to prove to themselves that they could do it. In the interviews many people recounted their own difficulties in learning maths whilst at school and wanting to support their children to prevent them experiencing the same difficulties. Others described needing to achieve a maths qualification for promotion, or as an entrance

requirement for a higher-level course, whilst for a number the incentive was to finally make sense of something that had perplexed them throughout life. For some, all three reasons were important.

Many interviewees described their wish to learn new maths skills and to brush up on their existing skills in order to help (grand)children. This was partly so as to keep up with them, and partly to acquire the confidence to support their learning. Many people were aware of how easy it had been for them to get lost or to fall behind in their own maths class at school:

> 'I didn't do very well in GCSEs and I didn't follow any further education after school and now the kids are in school . . . well even the 6-year-old is bringing homework and stuff what I'll help him with so I thought I'd better refresh my memory.'

Although it was predominantly older learners, parents or grandparents, who described wanting to support the maths learning of (grand)children, this was also mentioned by brothers, sisters and other extended family members. Many numeracy learners saw it as a useful family and community resource. For older learners in particular it was the opportunity to get to grips with something that they'd always found difficult or had a sense of failure about that was important.

People described how what they were learning in the maths class was benefiting their everyday life. Examples of this included being able to work out 'three for two' offers in the supermarket, being able to work out interest rates on a car loan, and being able to calculate, rather than guessing, the amount of cleaning fluid per litre for a fish tank.

Many interviewees said they wanted to learn maths and achieve a qualification for their current job, or to be able to continue on to a

higher-level course. Courses mentioned requiring a Level 2 qualification for entrance included classroom assistant, nursing and Access courses. Even when achieving a qualification was the main motivation for attending the class this did not prevent an awareness of other gains such as 'being able to add up in my head' and 'confidence to do other things'.

Other learners described needing the skills represented at a particular level of learning even if the certificate was unimportant. An example of this was a group of B&Q hygiene operatives who were studying at Level 1 to be able to calculate quickly and accurately enough to pass the 'order picker test'. This test was timed, and passing it meant the opportunity of a better job, which had more status and was a financial promotion. For these learners the certificate itself was of secondary importance behind that of the mathematical skill and practice of calculation at speed.

ESOL

Many of those working in ESOL classes at higher levels quoted specific jobs that they were working towards. These included several wanting to train to be nurses or electrical engineers, with others mentioning carpentry and childcare. There were still others with high-level qualifications in their first language wanting to go on to appropriate Level 3, undergraduate or postgraduate qualifications in subjects ranging from accountancy and law through to business management and teaching.

For others, working more slowly and at lower levels, this was expressed more generally as 'wanting to find work', 'getting a job' and 'getting a qualification'. Several women also mentioned that they wanted to become more independent from their family and a job they said would help

them to do this. For many of the women, interviewed at all levels, being able to understand how to access public services in the UK was a priority. Being able to 'speak to head teacher or explain to them any problem with my child', 'go the GP's' and 'travel for the underground' or 'when I buy the bus travel card' were recurring themes.

Many women said that, although they would like the opportunity of finding employment later on, they were learning now to support their children. Women with school-age children described wanting to keep up with their children as they learned English at school and also to help them with their school work – something that became increasingly difficult as the children became older. A number of highly motivated women working at Level1/Level 2 who had school-age children were actively involved in their language communities as interpreters for contemporaries with lower-level English abilities, helping them to access health, community-based and legal services.

Older ESOL learners described wanting to improve their language for social and community reasons; for example, one older learner from Birmingham explained that, although he came to England in 1968, it was only now that he was able to find the time to learn English grammatically. Another said that it helped him get out of the house and, although he was born in England, he wanted to learn 'properly' now and wished he had started a long time ago. Although not tied to employment, older ESOL learners saw the value of learning, for themselves, their families and communities. One older male learner said:

'I am 62 years old and its not too late to learn. I could just sit and do nothing but I am learning . . . it helps [that] there are no exams.'

Issues

Learning and developing skills for work and home

People described the numerous ways they made use of what they learned in class, at home and in work. They viewed their learning positively when it could be transferred from one aspect of their lives to another. A mature male learner with mental health issues described the clear link for him between learning and employment:

'This is the second course I've been on and you know the reason for it all is to get back into employment. That's really the reason really . . . I do a lot of voluntary work with Age Concern and I want to get into a care job and I want to get an NVQ but I've got to improve my spelling really, that's the main reason.'

Learning environments

For many people the environment they learned in was an important part of feeling comfortable, connected and being able to learn at their own pace. For some this meant being able to work on their own, whilst for others it was important to be able to work in a group. For a young man in a work-based army education literacy class the learning environment had been crucial:

'It's helped me because I don't normally like working with other people in the same classroom. I don't feel confident in myself when I work with other people in a classroom. So now this week, with these lads, they've helped me to work with other people.'

Social aspects of adult learning

As in other studies that have looked at the experiences of learners (Barton et al. 2006, Ivanič et al. 2006) people ascribed great importance to the social aspects of learning. A mature female student in work-based provision said:

'I think as a group, more like a group therapy really to get people talking about different things when you're having a break and things like that. . . . when you look at the supermarkets for the price of things you kind of know what you're looking at, roughly what you've got in your purse and what you can spend and what you can't spend.'

For a retired learner in college community-based provision being able to meet younger people with confidence was important:

'. . . doing this course has brought me more in line with the sort of 25–45s and instead of sort of hanging back you join in the conversation or discussion, yes with a reasonable amount of confidence.'

Growth in confidence and identity changes

Many learners described a growth in confidence after attending literacy, numeracy or ESOL provision. This related not only to what they were learning but often more widely to the literacy, language and numeracy practices they used at home, at work and in their everyday lives.

A recently retired Italian woman in college provision explained:

'I thought to myself come on you've been here all these years relying on your husband for writing. I can read I know that in writing I make mistakes and I don't know where to put all of the letters. I thought come here and I could write a few words without looking in a dictionary or whatever. I think I'm chuffed with myself, you know what I mean.'

Some talked of changing from someone who couldn't do things to someone that could, and from being frightened of learning to being a learner.

7

Managers, co-ordinators and tutors: views on Skills for Life

The strategy

Nearly all the managers and co-ordinators brought extensive prior knowledge and experience to their work on Skills for Life, and expressed a critical but positive view of the strategy. Interviewees described how Skills for Life has allowed new projects and initiatives to develop, while emphasising that these built on existing work. However, there was concern about the future. A manager working in adult and community learning said:

'I think Skills for Life is great. It is a really good strategy, it is really well written, it is really inclusive and the fact that we have had money to provide training and to do various projects that have targeted different groups, I think that has been brilliant but there is an issue around sustainability now because a lot of projects have come to an end.'

Most managers and co-ordinators spoke about how adult literacy, language and numeracy learning had become 'destigmatised' compared to previous adult basic education. Widening the definition of basic skills to include Level 2 learners had changed the whole concept of what a Skills for Life learner might be. This was particularly noticeable for those dealing with Level 1 and Level 2 learners, as explained by a Move On regional adviser:

'I think it's a kind of entitlement model that Skills for Life explores . . . It's not so much the deficit – it's more positive, it's about broadening it out. Skills for Life is inclusive and about

entitlement whereas basic skills was a deficit model.'

Managers, co-ordinators and tutors reported that the biggest impact of the strategy and its infrastructure was that the profile of basic skills was significantly raised in the national policy agenda. Increased funding, widening of the levels of entitlement and the introduction of targets produced a higher profile and increasing expectations. Considerable national advertising such as the Gremlins campaign had increased public awareness and increased demand. A family literacy organiser commented:

'I think there's been much more structure to promotion and advertising and trying to get to people, you know the TV ads, the Gremlins, like it or not it seems to work! Then there's the co-ordination of TV campaign, radio and local press. I've really noticed that's far more co-ordinated. Our local LSC had a phone line, which was like talk to Janet about basic skills courses in the area.'

This had led to greater national awareness of literacy, ESOL and numeracy needs and an increased focus on the need to embed literacy, ESOL and numeracy within other courses, particularly vocational training. Embedding skills in this way increased the numbers of basic skills learners; for example, a manager in a large college reported the college had 8000 learners involved with Skills for Life; in a medium-sized college the estimate given was of about 1300 learners with 60 staff.

The strategy makes a strong connection between skills for employability and economic growth in the UK. In the first round of interviews with managers and co-ordinators several talked about how they were developing new initiatives with employers. A manager for army education commented:

'I think it has been successful in reaching more groups, I think particularly looking at those in employment which wasn't really an obvious group to begin with. I think it's great that people are talking about basic skills now.'

Most managers, co-ordinators and tutors commented on the scale and scope of the strategy and its infrastructure. Some found the target numbers almost overwhelming and often confusing. Other managers and co-ordinators, however, found that the very size of Skills for Life was a positive advantage. An ESOL project manager reported:

'Skills for Life is big and everybody knows about it, a real impetus . . . I was in London at a conference yesterday and there were so many things happening that would have been unheard of before. Indeed the fact that you're here doing this research is part of that.'

Some managers, co-ordinators and tutors had issues about the content of the new qualifications and what and how they were delivered, but overall the response was positive. The fact that they were national with clearly defined levels seemed to outweigh any disadvantages:

'The Skills for Life qualifications are national and for life. I'm always glad when they get a national qualification and I stress it is for life, and that when you see job adverts they ask for it and employers accept it.'

The scale of the strategy also made managers, co-ordinators and tutors aware of increased

possibilities to enable learners to progress. A manager of a Professional Development Unit explained:

'In the past a lot of learners came back time and time again for recreational and social reasons. It has forced us to look at learners. Made us work to attract learners who could really benefit from having their basic skills boosted . . .'

However, she also pointed to the danger of moving to the opposite extreme where 'we just hoover all these people up and push them on'. The managers and co-ordinators came from a wide range of different organisations and services, confirming how diverse provision and learners following Skills for Life programmes were. A tutor described the Skills for Life learners she worked with:

'The adult learners I've worked with have had lots of reasons for coming – care assistants who wanted to be nurses, a town councillor who wanted to be able to write credible reports, a man whose wife made him enrol (lasted two weeks), a woman who came because her friend did, a stroke victim determined to relearn.'

Elsewhere, provision was targeted at very specific audiences. The NHS in one area had an ambitious Skills for Life programme with three goals: to improve the skills of the existing workforce, to attract and 'upskill' the potential workforce, and to enable people to become 'expert patients'.

Reaching 'hard to reach' learners

Although 'reluctant' learners in prison represented a captive audience, most other 'hard to reach' learners were less easily attracted into provision. One tutor remembered:

'I lost count of the number of times I sat in libraries in the autumn of 2005 waiting for learners to turn up and enrol on various

courses . . . Seemed so obvious that people with literacy difficulties were unlikely to have picked up leaflets (which were not attractive) in the library. Other tutors I knew were having the same experience.'

Instead, those who were engaging in Skills for Life provision came through various alternative routes. For example, one training organiser reported that learners in the young offenders unit where he worked came to programmes not only via Jobcentre Plus and the Connexions service, but also as self-referrals via word-of-mouth through friends.

If 'hard to reach' learners did attend sessions in formal educational settings, this was sometimes seen as a chance for other professionals to work with them, disrupting the Skills for Life provision. A tutor who taught a class in a local school explained:

'One group of young mothers I taught as part of a Sure Start project had such problems in their lives that they arrived angry or upset or unwell. We were frequently interrupted by professionals – school nurse, social workers, ed psych – wanting to see one of them and knowing that they would be available for a quick chat because they were in the building at that time.'

For many providers, attempts to work with 'hard to reach' learners presented a funding risk, as these learners were less likely to attend regularly and to be able to meet national targets quickly, especially at Levels 1 and 2. A county basic skills co-ordinator explained the consequences of this contradiction:

'This year we have put "hard to reach" learners on the back burner so we could reach our targets. By reaching our targets we get our money and we are then able to go back to the hard to help. Our main target is the number of qualifications at Levels 1 and 2.'

Funding Skills for Life

For those engaged directly with policy, the increased funding for Skills for Life was something of which they were proud. However, applying for funding required additional time resources, which smaller organisations didn't always have.

A manager in a voluntary organisation described an example of this funding difficulty. The first time the LSC tender came out he decided not to bid as '. . . it didn't fit what we'd written, so we said we're not going to submit against that . . .'. However, the LSC changed their criteria slightly, and he did then bid successfully and was pleased by the large sums of money available from the LSC. However, by his follow-up interview he was less enthusiastic, as he felt that the LSC was making increased demands that his organisation could not always meet:

'The LSC demands high levels of accountability but doesn't respond itself. Funding is still an issue and what has been gained can be lost, as expectations get raised it becomes more difficult to respond.'

Even for those working in the mainstream the additional funding from Skills for Life did not address their concerns about the long-term commitment.

With a tighter overall budget nationally in colleges there was also less money to compensate for any individual problems within Skills for Life funding. One tutor/manager was very concerned about a recent change in Skills for Life funding, in particular the loss of the three-hour allocation. She explained the consequences:

'Next year the shortest class will be 12 hours, which will be a more drawn out process for the

learners especially if they do that and then have to go onto a waiting list. But if we do less than 9 hours we wouldn't get any money for the interview and assessment process. It means though that we will have to start teaching them to make up the 9 hours but that won't be easy because we don't know what level learners are at till we have assessed them.'

Managers and co-ordinators of training organisations also had concerns about funding, particularly uncertainties which were beyond their control. A senior trainer in the South West area explained:

'We try to keep the ratio around 8:1 but what the job centre doesn't seem to realise is that if the numbers suddenly double you can't just go and pick a basic skills tutor off the shelf in Tesco! You've got to advertise then interview. It needs to be sustainable because if those numbers aren't going to continue what are you going to do with that tutor?'

Changing curriculum structures and organisation

The widespread use of screening met with some criticism. Many managers and co-ordinators preferred to target specific areas and populations of learners. Many also expressed concern that the various aspects of provision were not necessarily joined up. One manager commented:

'There seems to be very little substantial connection between screening, assessment, diagnosis, learning plans and what's being taught and offering accreditation. That sort of journey round isn't quite working yet in the way that the infrastructure imagines it would.'

The 'professionalisation' of the workforce: staff training and development

Many experienced managers and co-ordinators became involved in training to support the implementation of the new infrastructure, such as the national curricula (DfES 2001a, 2001b, 2001c), the new qualifications and the new Skills for Life materials. This also included capacity-building, specific training both to increase the number of Skills for Life teachers/trainers and also to increase the qualifications of many existing staff with the introduction of a Level 4 qualification in numeracy, ESOL and in literacy. Many staff who regarded themselves as experienced professionals met this with some scepticism at first.

There were also complaints about the Level 4 qualifications themselves. A college manager explained the difficulties:

'The new Level 4 qualifications that are being rolled out by universities haven't had enough basic skills input . . . A lot of the new PGCE students are terrified of teaching new readers because they haven't had those sort of strategies taught them. What they've had is generic literacy with the subject specification for numeracy or literacy.'

However, in later interviews many of these complaints had disappeared, and it was clear just how much training was taking place. A manager/tutor in an English department illustrated the scale of what was being undertaken:

'Last academic year five of us got our Level 4 FENTO. And we have some doing their PCET (Post-Compulsory Education and Training) and they [3] will be doing it next year. The maths workshop have their own programme so this is just the English workshop. And one of our

other centres is running the Level 2 FENTO for the support workers, quite a few of our support workers have gone through that programme.'

As the strategy has progressed there has been heightened awareness of the need for Skills for Life teaching to support learners on vocational courses. 'Embedding' has become an important aspect of delivery. This has raised many issues surrounding training and supporting vocational tutors across different subject areas and areas of professional expertise. A college manager voiced her concerns:

'There are plans but I don't think it is happening yet to deliver the Level 3 Fento to the vocational tutors. I think there is still some resistance and I think it is quite difficult to break that because they don't see their roles as Skills for Life, they are teaching bricklaying or whatever it is. So there's a course that we put on I don't know when.'

8

Conclusions

The Learner Study, along with its companion the Teacher Study (Cara et al. 2008), offers a uniquely comprehensive insight into a major government strategy. It shows, beyond any doubt, the great benefits of large-scale investment in a high-profile, systematic and ambitious programme of reform and improvement in adult literacy, language and numeracy. Some of the benefits are, perhaps, to be expected, although they are no less important for that: the substantial progress that many learners made on their courses, the opportunity their qualifications gave them to pursue their education or to take a first step into employment. Some of the benefits were a great deal more surprising and at least as significant: the numbers of learners who positively valued taking a test at the end of their course; the fact that, whilst almost all learners made significant progress, literacy learners on average did not progress with their writing. And of course the impact of Skills for Life is not uniformly positive: how far has Skills for Life successfully engaged with some of those who are 'hard to reach' – adults belonging to one of the groups it was a priority of the strategy to engage with?

Participation and achievement

Between 2000/01 and 2004/05 there was a large increase in total numbers for participation and achievement in Skills for Life provision. Enrolments more than doubled from 1,043,087 to 2,180,253; achievements almost tripled from 441,364 to 1,284,531.

Literacy
Literacy had the highest number of enrolments and qualifications achieved between 2000/01 and 2004/05, compared with numeracy and ESOL. In 2005 43% of enrolments and 42% of all achievements were in literacy.

Participation and achievement rates in literacy rose throughout the period: by 2004/05 enrolments had more than doubled (from 411,187 to 934,796) and achievements had more than tripled (from 171,961 to 539,115).

Most of the qualifications achieved in literacy throughout the five years were at Level 1, and between 2000/01 and 2004/05 achievements at Level 1 tripled.

Numeracy
The numbers engaged in numeracy provision were lower than for literacy throughout the five-year period from 2000/01 to 2004/05.

Nevertheless, total numbers for participation and achievement in numeracy rose considerably. In 2004/05 enrolments showed an increase of 89%, or almost double, from 362,340 to 686,223. Achievements nearly tripled (a rise of 188%) in this period, increasing from 119,666 to 345,161.

Level 1 achievement dominated the overall numbers, rising from 46,239 in 2000/01 to 201,276 in 2004/05, a more than fourfold increase in achievement.

There was also a large increase in the number of achievements at Level 2, from 58,967 at the

beginning of the five-year period to 89,215 at the end – an increase of over 50%.

ESOL

The numbers for participation in ESOL provision were generally smaller than for literacy or numeracy. Over the five years from 2000 to 2005, enrolments in ESOL represented just over a quarter (26%) of enrolments across all three skills.

Overall figures for participation and achievement in ESOL rose throughout the period. By 2004/05 enrolments had more than doubled (from 269,560 to 559,234) and achievements had risen by a greater amount, from 149,737 to 400,255. Levels of attrition between enrolment and achievement were lower for ESOL than for literacy or numeracy. In 2000/01 over half (56%) of enrolments led to successful achievement, and this rose to nearly three-quarters (72%) in 2004/05.

Qualifications and targets

What level and type of qualifications do learners achieve?

Achievements were highest for Level 1 qualifications between 2000/01 and 2004/05. They were lowest for Entry level at the start of the five-year period in 2000/01, but Entry level figures increased substantially in 2002/03, overtaking the number of achievements at Level 2. From this year on, Level 2 achievements represented the lowest number for all three levels.

Relative to key skills and GCSEs, basic skills made up the highest number of all enrolments, with 504,050 enrolments in 2000/01 rising to 1,413,086 in 2004/05. The proportion represented by basic skills rose from just over 48% in 2000/01 to just under 65% in 2004/05.

Figures for achievement in basic skills rose from 296,743 in 2000/01 to 1,062,409 in 2004/05.

Relative to key skills and GCSEs, basic skills qualifications made up an even greater proportion of all achievements, rising from 67% of overall achievements in 2000/01 to 84% in 2002/03, and then remaining almost steady for the following two years.

Attitudes towards the national tests

Positive comments amongst managers and tutors about the national tests focused on how they motivated learners and enabled them to gain a qualification and move learners on.

For learners hoping to gain employment or progress within education, qualifications were often important to achieving their goals.

Most older learners who described learning for enjoyment and fulfilment did not want to take tests, but a few valued them because they had never previously gained qualifications.

Attitudes towards the targets

Most managers and co-ordinators were largely happy to have targets as they thought that they helped to improve the quality as well as the quantity of provision.

Others, however, suggested that Skills for Life targets could act as a blunt instrument that could hamper rather than enable progress.

Many tutors were less happy with the targets. Whereas managers and co-ordinators felt they had some flexibility in adapting the targets and working with them, tutors described themselves as having to organise their work to meet the targets.

Progress and progression

Learners' progress

We recruited a sample of 1649 learners on ALLN courses, and each learner was tested before and after their courses.

The skill levels of all groups of learners attending Skills for Life provision in 2004–06 improved on average, with the exception of the writing levels of literacy learners.

There were very few differences between the different groups we looked at, suggesting that provision was working equally well for many different groups of learners, and hardly any were being left behind.

Progression
We identified three types of progression:

- **Moving on**: moving on to other forms of learning such as a higher-level Access course, a vocational course or a higher level literacy, numeracy or ESOL course. 'Moving on' might also take the form of promotion in the workplace or getting a job as a result of study.
- **Moving around**: carrying on with the same course, or an equivalent level of learning, with or without taking qualifications. This might apply to people who are unable to attend regularly because of physical or mental health issues, people who come mainly for the social aspect of learning, or those who want or need to learn at a slower pace than many of their peers.
- **Moving out**: leaving learning altogether. This might arise for a variety of reasons, from being disappointed with the experience of learning, to a change in life circumstances. Moving out of provision may be a positive development, indicating that learners have achieved what they wanted.

Learning in context

Work-based learning
Where workplace learning was most successful the company involved was committed to Skills for Life at the highest level of management, and managers at all levels were involved.

Union learning representatives were an important factor in enrolling and being supported on work-based courses.

People had many reasons for learning at work. Reasons directly associated with work included promotion, taking on voluntary roles such as union learning representative and other union activities, and keeping up with new levels of work skills, such as ICT.

Learners also cited reasons not connected with work: helping children, overcoming embarrassment, and regaining confidence lost at school.

Prison and probation

Skills for Life offered the opportunity for prisoners to achieve qualification outcomes quickly and easily, and encouraged them to progress.

However, Skills for Life increasingly came to be seen as dominating prison education provision to the exclusion of other learning, with the NQF Level 2 representing the end point of learning offered to prisoners.

Whilst offenders often moved from one prison to another, or from the secure estate back into the community, records of achievement frequently failed to follow them.

Probation Service learners chose to attend class as part of their sentence. They felt that the opportunity to gain a qualification was more

productive than serving a sentence where they wouldn't achieve anything.

College-based provision

College staff spoke of how Skills for Life had dramatically raised the profile of literacy, language and numeracy. Interviewees spoke of Skills for Life as including far more than just basic skills and felt that it had acquired a much higher national profile than previously.

College managers reported that staff in schools were better rewarded financially than teachers in FE. Many tutors complained that the pay and career progression routes within basic skills were not as attractive as those in mainstream teaching.

Over half of the learners on college campus and satellite sites attended ESOL provision to either learn or improve their English language skills. The remaining college learners we interviewed were evenly spread across literacy, numeracy and mixed provision linked to vocational training.

A sense of achievement was a common theme running through interviews with numeracy students. For many, particularly older learners, gaining a numeracy qualification was akin to climbing Everest; something people had been frightened of and never thought they could do. It was almost the 'ultimate learning challenge'.

Community-based provision

For people learning in a community setting, it was important that provision was located within their communities and near to their homes. This was cited repeatedly as a significant reason for attendance, across all subjects.

Older learners and learners with lower levels of confidence, learning difficulties, disabilities or health issues were able to access this provision with relative ease. The importance of ease of

access was a commonly repeated message: it was clear that community-based learning was reaching people who would otherwise be left out.

Why learners attend classes

Literacy
People attended literacy classes for a variety of reasons: to learn spelling, reading and writing not acquired at school; to gain skills and certificates for employment; to help (grand)children with schoolwork and homework; to meet other people; to improve confidence; and to be able to undertake a larger variety of demanding challenges in everyday life.

Numeracy
People described attending numeracy classes to improve their maths skills for work-related reasons, to help their (grand)children and simply to prove to themselves that they could do it.

Interviewees recounted their own difficulties of learning maths whilst at school, and wanted to support their children to prevent them from experiencing the same difficulties.

Many interviewees needed a maths qualification for promotion or as an entrance requirement for a higher-level course.

ESOL
People attending ESOL classes came from many language communities and backgrounds; some had been born in England, others were refugees or asylum seekers, whilst others were recent economic migrants from Europe.

The vast majority of interviewees said they wanted to learn English to be able to find work. Some spoke of how they wanted to help their children, whilst others said that their ESOL learning would help them integrate into their local community and to communicate on behalf of that community.

For many, particularly women, the primary concern was to be improve their access to public services in the UK such as transport and health care.

Managers, co-ordinators, tutors: views on Skills for Life

Nearly all managers and co-ordinators brought extensive prior knowledge and experience to their work on Skills for Life, and expressed a critical but positive view of the strategy.

Interviewees described how Skills for Life had allowed for the development of new projects, how literacy, language and numeracy had become 'destigmatised', and how the profile of basic skills had been significantly raised in the national policy agenda.

Most managers, co-ordinators and tutors commented on the scale and scope of the strategy and its infrastructure; some found the target numbers almost overwhelming and often confusing; others found that the very size of Skills for Life was a positive advantage.

A large number of interviewees were positive about the content of the new qualifications; however, a significant number expressed reservations.

Links to further information

The Skills for Life strategy has brought innumerable benefits to learners and teachers alike, and this report cannot do justice to its impact on learners belonging to each of the many groups the strategy set out to support. The findings in these pages represent only a small fraction of the evidence amassed during the three years of the study; this is a short summary of three reports on three substantial projects, each including many stories that we are unable to include here. If you would like more information about our full reports then please go to www.nrdc.org.uk

References

Appleby, Y. and Hamilton, M. (2006) 'Literacy as social practice: Travelling between the everyday and other forms of learning'. In P. Sutherland and J. Crowther (eds), *Lifelong Learning: contexts and concepts*. London: Routledge Falmer.

Adult Learning Inspectorate (2006) *The Final Annual Report of the Chief Inspector, 2005–06.* Coventry: Adult Learning Inspectorate.

Barton, D., Appleby, Y., Hodge, R., Tusting, K. and Ivanič, R. (2006) *Relating adults' lives and learning: participation and engagement in different settings.* London: NRDC.

Cara, O., Litster, J., Swain, J. and Vorhaus, J. (2008) *The Teacher Study: The impact of the Skills for Life Strategy on teachers*. London: NRDC.

DfES (2001a) *Adult literacy core curriculum.* London: Basic Skills Agency.

DfES (2001b) *Adult numeracy core curriculum*. London: Basic Skills Agency.

DfES (2001c) *Adult ESOL core curriculum.* London: Basic Skills Agency.

DfES, DTI, HM Treasury and DWP (2005) *Skills: Getting on in business, getting on at work*. London: DfES.

Eldred, J. (2002) *Moving on with Confidence*. Leicester: NIACE.

HM Treasury (2005) *Leitch Review of Skills. Skills in the UK: The long-term challenge. Interim Report.* Norwich: HMSO.

House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts (2006) *Skills for Life: Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy.* Twenty-first Report of Session 2005–06. London: HMSO.

Ivanič, R., Appleby, Y., Hodge, R., Tusting, K. and Barton D. (2006) *Linking learning and everyday life: a social perspective on adult language, literacy and numeracy classes.* London: NRDC.

Learning and Skills Council (2005) *National Learner Satisfaction Survey*, Adult and Community Learning Providers Report 2003/04. Coventry: LSC.

Leitch, S. (2006) *The Leitch Review of Skills: Prosperity for all in the global economy – world class skills.* Norwich: HMSO.

Moser, Sir Claus (1999) *A Fresh Start: Improving literacy and numeracy*. London: DfEE.

National Audit Office (2004) *Skills for Life: Improving adult literacy and numeracy*. London: National Audit Office.

Pahl, K. and Rowsell, J. (2005) *Literacy and Education: The new literacy studies in the classroom*. London: Sage.

Schuller, T., Preston, J., Hammond, C., Brassett-Grundy, A. and Bynner, J. (2004) *The Benefits of Learning: The impact of education on health, family life and social capital*. London: Routledge Falmer.

Wolf, A. (2002) *Does Education Matter: Myths about education and economic growth*. London: Penguin.

THE LEARNER STUDY

THE IMPACT OF THE SKILLS FOR LIFE STRATEGY ON ADULT LITERACY, LANGUAGE AND NUMERACY LEARNERS

SUMMARY REPORT
COMPILED AND EDITED BY: JENNY RHYS WARNER AND JOHN VORHAUS

BASED ON RESEARCH REPORTS BY: YVON APPLEBY, ANN-MARIE BATHMAKER, GREG BROOKS, PAM COLE, MARK PILLING AND LINDA PEARCE

www.nrdc.org.uk