

Bathmaker, A.M. (2007) The impact of *Skills for Life* on adult basic skills in England: how should we interpret trends in participation and achievement? *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 26, 3, pp.295–313.

### *Abstract*

The English *Skills for Life* strategy symbolises the prominent place that adult basic skills have claimed in education and training policy in England since the beginning of this century. The strategy aims to improve the skills of a large number of learners over a ten year period (2001-2010). This paper explores what we can learn about the impact of the strategy from an analysis of available statistical data. The paper presents trends in participation and achievement over the first four years of the strategy, which indicate a pattern of diminishing returns to numbers participating over time, and which may well reflect the growing difficulties the policy will face of engaging 'hard to reach' learners. Alongside this analysis, the paper raises a number of issues concerning the limitations of available statistical data in providing answers to questions such as the progress made by learners and their subsequent progression, both within and beyond adult basic skills provision. The paper goes on to argue that the strong emphasis on a numerical target related to qualification outcomes may serve to focus both practitioners' and policy makers' attention on this aspect alone. This, it is argued, may serve the interests of international benchmarking of skills levels in the population, but may do rather less in helping to improve learners' lives and capabilities.

Keywords: Adult Basic Skills, Skills for Life, lifelong learning, participation, achievement

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## **Introduction**

In 2001 the UK government launched a major policy strategy in England to address adult basic skills needs, entitled *Skills for Life (SfL)*. The strategy responds to growing concern that the basic skills in literacy, language and

numeracy of a considerable number of adults are inadequate to function successfully in 21<sup>st</sup> century society. *Skills for Life* represents the first large scale intervention into the area of adult basic skills education since the 1970s. This paper is concerned with the impact of the strategy on levels of skill in the adult population. It focuses specifically on the picture that we can gain from available statistical data of trends in participation and achievement over the duration of the *Skills for Life* strategy in its first phase from 2001 to 2004.

The work reported in this paper forms part of a study of the impact of the *Skills for Life* strategy on learners' lives, funded by the National Research and Development Centre for adult literacy and numeracy (NRDC)<sup>1</sup>. The study as a whole involves both quantitative and qualitative strands. The quantitative work aims to investigate the impact of *Skills for Life* on learners, by examining existing statistical data, and also by gathering new data using specially-devised tests for literacy, numeracy and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). This paper considers what can be learned from existing statistical data<sup>2</sup>.

The first part of the paper outlines what is meant by *Skills for Life* and identifies what statistical data are available on adult basic skills in England. The second part of the paper presents an overview of trends which can be identified in participation and achievement of adult basic skills over the first four years of the strategy, using data collected by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). The final section discusses issues which arise from using these data to understand the impact of *Skills for Life* on adult basic skills provision, and considers trends identified in the data, the limitations of the data, and implications for the future.

### **What is *Skills for Life*?**

The primary aim of *Skills for Life* is to 'make sure that England has one of the best adult literacy and numeracy rates in the world' (National Audit Office, 2004, p.20). The long term vision is 'ultimately to eliminate the problem' of poor levels

of adult literacy and numeracy (ibid). As the name given to the policy suggests, literacy, language and numeracy skills are deemed essential to people's lives, to enable them to participate or function effectively in work and in society more widely. Increased interest in adult basic skills in current government policy in England is closely linked to concerns for economic competitiveness in a globalised economy, and to concerns about social exclusion and promoting active citizenship. The rise of policy interest in adult basic skills at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the reasons underlying it follow a similar pattern to other advanced industrialised countries (see Hamilton and Barton (2000) for comments on OECD policy; Maclachlan and Cloonan (2003) for comments on Scottish policy, and Searle (2004) for comments on Australian policy). There is broad agreement that current education and training policy is based on a human capital model of skill, within a new work order vision of global capitalism. Here, upskilling is considered essential if individuals are to be employable and able to compete with others in a global economy, and basic and key skills in literacy, language and numeracy are seen as fundamental to wider skill development. The vision implies that economic prosperity follows from achieving high levels of skill and credentials, although this vision has been strongly critiqued by researchers such as Keep and Mayhew (1999).

### *The 'problem' of adult basic skills*

While policy interest in adult literacy and adult basic skills in England goes back to the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *Skills for Life* can be seen as representing one of two significant periods of campaigning in this area by national government. The first was in the 1970s, when the Adult Literacy Resource Agency (ALRA)<sup>3</sup> was established, but as Hamilton and Hillier (2006) have observed in a historical account of policy in this area, adult basic skills have not formed a priority for politicians in England in the intervening period. Current policy interest was sparked by the findings of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) carried

out in the 1990s by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 1997). The OECD reported that the UK had a greater percentage of adults with low levels of literacy and numeracy than 13 of the 20 countries included in the survey, who were its 'international competitors'.

The Moser Report (DfEE, 1999) which followed IALS, suggested that up to 7 million adults in England had poor levels of literacy, and even more had problems with numeracy. Moser's arguments were influential with the DfEE (now DfES) as indicated in the following quote from the DfEE *Skills for Life* strategy document in 2001:

The ground-breaking report, *A Fresh Start*, published in March 1999 following the review chaired by Sir Claus Moser, identified up to 7 million adults in England who cannot read or write at the level we would expect of an 11-year-old. Even more have trouble with numbers. (DfEE, 2001, p.8)

While IALS and the Moser Report acted as significant influences on the then newly-elected Labour Government, and were used to gain financial support for a large-scale basic skills initiative, the findings of IALS in particular have faced strong critiques. These critiques focus on two aspects of how literacy is measured. One involves the technical procedures and assumptions in IALS (see for example, the work of Blum, Goldstein and Guérin-Pace, 2001). The other concerns the idea that there can be a common definition of literacy across cultures, which conflicts with understandings of literacies as socially-situated practices (see for example Hamilton and Barton, 2000).

Despite these concerns, which were published prior to the launch of *Skills for Life*, the subsequent survey carried out in 2002/03 as part of *Skills for Life* (DfES, 2003b), reported that poor levels of literacy affected 17.8 million, well over double Moser's figure, but using a different baseline criterion. This survey has in turn faced critique from Sticht (2004), who believes that:

The *Skills for Life* survey has limited value as a measure of the literacy skills of the adult population 16 to 65 years old in England. It lacks construct validity, meaning that it is not certain what skills and knowledge the survey is assessing. It is inconsistent with the adults' own perceptions of the adequacy of their literacy skills for meeting everyday needs [...] (Sticht, 2004, p.4)

Yet in the National Audit Office Report of 2004, the figure given for adults with literacy and numeracy needs was 26 million (National Audit Office, 2004, p.6), using yet another criterion to that used in the *Skills for Life* survey. Even the smallest of these figures – Moser's 7 million – suggests a major problem, but the figures given in the DfES *Skills for Life* survey and the Audit Office report turn the problem into what seems more like a major crisis. A front page *Guardian* report in January 2006 (Smithers, 2006) entitled '12m workers have reading age of children' indicates precisely how such numbers are used to create a sense of crisis, and pays scant attention to the issues raised in the research debate over IALS, which question how such figures are generated.

The differences in the numbers quoted above result at least in part from how levels which count as insufficient are defined. Whereas Moser talked of adults whose skills did not match those expected of an 11 year old, the *Skills for Life* strategy extends its remit to a much higher level of skill – level 2 in the English national qualifications framework<sup>4</sup>. This is the equivalent of a good GCSE, the achievement goal for 16 year olds at the end of compulsory schooling. Moreover, the scale of the problem is understood in terms of those who have not achieved a qualification outcome. Thus, the DfES and Audit office figures embrace any adult (aged 16-65) who has not achieved a qualification at level 2 in the national qualifications framework

This point is not insignificant in helping to drive and define the current *Skills for Life* strategy. The focus on certificated achievement is emphasised in the headline target for the strategy, which is the number of individuals achieving

qualification outcomes. The strategy as a whole covers three levels of achievement: Entry Level 3, Level 1 or Level 2, which represent some of the lower (but not the lowest) levels of the English National Qualifications Framework (NQF)<sup>5</sup> and which should not be confused with National Curriculum levels in schools.

The scope of the strategy from very low levels of literacy, language and numeracy skills to GCSE-equivalent level 2 skills links in to the government's wider occupational skills strategy, which sets level 2 qualifications as a key benchmark for vocational skills levels in the working population (DfES, 2003c). Moreover, the definition of adult within the *Skills for Life* strategy as persons aged 16-65, which follows the definition used in the IALS surveys, and reflects the current standard working age in England, reinforces the connection with employability and economic competitiveness. The point here is that the *Skills for Life* strategy appears to redefine the nature, not to mention the size of the 'problem', placing strong emphasis on qualification outcomes rather than other evidence of progress, and encouraging also a stronger interest in qualification levels that are perceived to have wider economic value – that is level 2 and above in the national qualifications framework. This is certainly not the way adult basic skills needs have been understood in the past (see Hamilton, 1996), and indicates how *Skills for Life* is not simply the latest means of addressing the long-term issue of adult basic skills, but is acting to change how that issue is understood and dealt with.

### **Available statistical data on adult basic skills**

Central to the *Skills for Life* strategy are quantifiable targets for improvement. When the government introduced the strategy in 2001, it established a target to be met by the end of the decade, with two interim targets along the way. The initial target was to improve the literacy and numeracy skills of 750,000 adults in

England by July 2004 (DfEE, 2001), increasing to 1.5 million by 2007 and 2.25 million by 2010. These targets embrace anyone engaged in learning over the age of 16 (and up to the age of 65) in any form of provision, except for schools and universities, and they are measured by the achievement of accredited outcomes.

This has meant that the collection of statistical data on adult basic skills, particularly on the achievement of qualifications, has become a highly important part of the work of the strategy. The next section of the paper gives an overview of what data are collected on adult basic skills, and indicates what they can tell us about skills levels amongst the adult population.

There are three types of statistical data available in England: firstly, there are data on the scale of need; secondly, there are (very limited) data on learners' progress; and thirdly, there are data on learners' levels of achievement.

Although they all contribute to an overall picture, each type of data offers a different perspective, and it turns out to be very difficult to gauge trends over time as there have been no consistently collected data over a longer period of time.

#### *Data on scale of need*

There have been a number of surveys in England which provide data on the scale of need in adult basic skills (reviewed by Brooks et al, 2001a). The earliest survey which Brooks et al identify was carried out in 1972 as part of the National Survey of Health and Development (Rodgers, 1986). The most recent was undertaken in 2002/3 by the DfES (DfES, 2003b). These surveys collected their data using two main approaches; firstly, self-reporting by adults on their level of skill in literacy, numeracy or ESOL, and secondly, one-off performance tests undertaken by individuals to assess their level of skill. They indicate scale of need, rather than progress over time, and it is difficult to compare scale of need over time, as different approaches to collecting data have been used from one survey to

another.

In addition to the above studies, a baseline survey was commissioned by the DfES at the commencement of the *Skills for Life* strategy, carried out between June 2002 and May 2003 in England (DfES, 2003b). The purpose of the survey was to produce a national profile of levels of competence in literacy and numeracy, and to assess the impact of different levels of skill on people's lives, the latter broken down into work and everyday life. 8,730 randomly selected adults completed a questionnaire, which gathered behavioural and demographic data, and respondents completed two assessments, one for literacy and one for numeracy. The percentage responses were then applied to the population of England as a whole. The data have been used to suggest that in 2002/03 66% or 17.8 million adults (16-65 year olds) had literacy skills at level 1 or below, and that 75% or 23.8 million adults had numeracy skills at level 1 or below. Thus the scale of need, based on this survey, would appear to be enormous.

#### *Data on progress*

Only two studies have been undertaken specifically to assess learners' progress using a skills assessment instrument, where learners are tested on their skill level, and then re-tested at a later date to evaluate progress. Both of these studies investigated adult literacy, and not numeracy or ESOL. The first was in 1976-79, carried out for the Department of Education and Science by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) (Gorman, 1981). The second was undertaken twenty years later in 1998-1999 by NFER for the Basic Skills Agency (Brooks et al, 2001b). These two surveys found gains in both reading and writing. Brooks et al's (2001a) evaluation of the data suggests that in the earlier survey, the gains in writing were considered to be significant in educational terms, whilst in the second study, the gains in reading could be considered significant educationally.



In addition to the above research, there are two further studies, both of which form part of the lifetime cohort studies undertaken in England, where comparable data have been collected over time. The first involved 3000+ people in the 1946 lifetime cohort study who took an identical reading test in 1961 at age 15 and again in 1972 at age 26; the average score had risen significantly (reported in Rodgers, 1986). The second was part of the 2004 sweep of the British Cohort Study (BCS70), which used some of the same items as were used in the previous sweep with this lifetime cohort in 1991-2; the results are only now beginning to appear (Bynner and Parsons, 2005; Parsons and Bynner, 2005). As this paper goes on to discuss, recent data used to evaluate progress in relation to the *Skills for Life* strategy does not actually assess learners' progress, but learners' achievement, which is not the same thing.

*Data on levels of achievement*

More extensive data are available on levels of achievement than on levels of need and progress over time, if achievement is understood as completion of certificated outcomes. Awarding bodies hold data on the number of candidates achieving their qualifications. In addition, since the introduction of the *Skills for Life* strategy, a number of different organisations are involved in providing data on levels of achievement, as shown in table 3.

**Table 3: Organisations which collect data on achievement of *Skills for Life* targets**

Learning and Skills Council (LSC)	data on all provision which is funded in the Learning and Skills sector, particularly further education colleges
Offenders Learning and Skills Unit (OLSU)	data on prisoners and those on probation
Jobcentre Plus (based in the Department for Work and Pensions)	data on unemployed/jobseekers who have basic skills needs
Qualifications Awarding Bodies such as	data on achievement of awarding body

OCR, Edexcel and City and Guilds	qualifications
The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) statistical branch	data from all the above organisations, which are then reviewed and monitored by the DfES

Data on offenders (gathered by OLSU) and data on jobseekers (gathered by Jobcentre Plus) are global figures collected on a regular basis, which simply give the total number of individuals achieving qualifications which count towards the *Skills for Life* target in the collection period. Awarding bodies for qualifications gather more detailed data than this, but data gathered by them which are relevant to *Skills for Life* targets are almost all incorporated into the Learning and Skills Council database. The Learning and Skills Council dataset is the most detailed, offering a breakdown of the data using a range of factors, which include for example age, gender and ethnicity. The work undertaken by the DfES statistical branch checks LSC data against that collected by other organisations, and carries out further analysis, but the DfES does not undertake additional data-gathering. It is for this reason that the analysis below is based on Learning and Skills Council data. Moreover, reports on *Skills for Life* by the National Audit Office (2004) and by the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts (2006) have all relied on LSC data.

The original aim of exploring existing statistical data was to develop a picture of the impact of *Skills for Life* on learners' *progress* based on such data. However, this aim had to be modified, because none of the datasets identified above, including the LSC data, record individual progress with any accuracy. Whilst available data provide information about learners' achievement of certificated outcomes, this is not necessarily the same as progress. This is because the records do not provide accurate data on learners' levels of achievement at the start of a programme of learning, so they cannot offer an accurate picture of subsequent progress. Furthermore, from the point of view of assessing learners'

skill levels, researchers who use standardised assessment instruments would be concerned that even when a record is kept on learners' achievement before and after a programme, these data are not based on matched tests, whereby learners' skills are assessed at the beginning of a programme of study and at a later point using the same or a statistically equated instrument.

Whilst it is therefore important to be cautious about what we can learn about the impact of *Skills for Life* on learners from the statistical data gathered by the Learning and Skills Council, it is nevertheless possible to detect trends in participation and achievement using these data. The next section of this paper presents a picture of these trends.

## **Trends in participation and achievement: an analysis of LSC data**

### *Source and analysis of data*

The analysis in this paper focuses on the first 'milestone' target for the *Skills for Life* strategy, which was to improve the literacy and numeracy skills of 750,000 adults in England between 2001 and July 2004, a target that was met successfully. According to LSC estimates, the number of learners achieving outcomes counting towards the target was 862,000<sup>6</sup>, exceeding the target of 750,000 by over 100,000.

The LSC data were a key source of evidence for measuring progress towards the target, and have been used in a number of reports on *Skills for Life* (for example National Audit Office, 2004; House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, 2006; Smithers, 2006). The LSC collects detailed data on learners participating in LSC-funded provision, many of whom are learning in further education colleges. The purpose of the LSC dataset is to monitor funding and this influences the information that is collected. The Individualised Learner Record records participation in learning by individuals in the form of what are called 'learning

aims'. Records are kept at three stages: firstly, at the outset, when learning opportunities are taken up; secondly, on completion of an agreed programme of study, and finally, when learning aims are achieved, usually in the form of a qualification outcome. There is a list of qualifications which are approved as counting towards the *Skills for Life* target provided by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. Within the LSC dataset, one learner is not equal to one learning aim, because an individual learner may have several learning aims. For example, a learner who is working on both literacy and numeracy will have two different learning aims, as will a learner who is attending ESOL classes alongside a vocational qualification. This does not make it straightforward to quantify the number of individual learners who have participated in provision.

The data used here were supplied by the Learning and Skills Council data division in 2005. They provided a subset of data from the LSC Individualised Learner Record (ILR) relating specifically to adult basic skills. This subset consisted of aggregated *Skills for Life* data collected by the LSC for the years 2000-04. It included learners on adult basic skills courses which counted towards the *Skills for Life* target, and figures for learners on other courses which did not count towards the policy target. The data were provided by the LSC in yearly files, with one complete file for each year from 2000/01 to 2004/04.

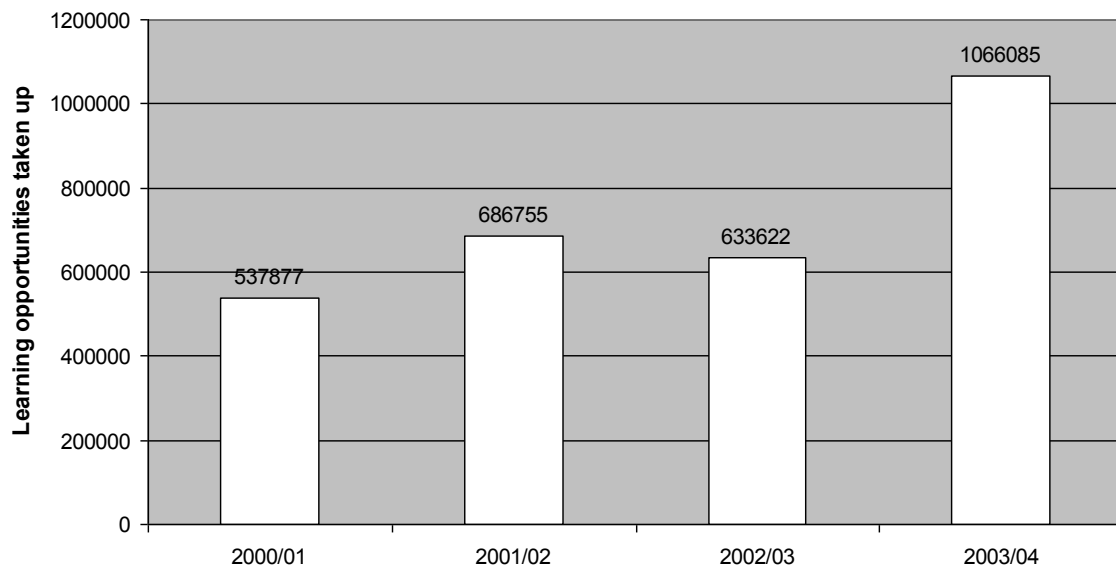
The data were collected in the same way each year by the LSC. Institutions submit data on a number of census dates throughout the year, and the LSC updates their dataset a number of times. Data for all years shown here are taken from the 'final freeze' of data for these years, and considered to be accurate in February 2006 (personal correspondence with LSC). Only the data for learners who counted towards the target are used in the paper, and the data have been used here to make a comparison across years. Thus the current analysis discusses what we can learn about trends over time. Future analysis of the ILR is planned, which will explore in more detail what lies behind this overview.

### Presentation of data

The data presented here show numbers of *learning aims* in the form of learning opportunities taken up, completed and achieved, and not numbers of *individual learners*.

The Figures below show the pattern over four years of take up, completion and achievement of qualifications which relate to the *Skills for Life* target. The first three figures all show an upward trend for participation and achievement between 2000 and 2004. Figure 1 shows how many learning opportunities were taken up which counted towards the *Skills for Life* target each year from 2000-01 through to 2003-04. Over the four data collection periods, learning opportunities taken up rose in 2001-02 and then fell in 2002-03, despite the addition of work-based learning (WBL) in this third year of data collection. They then rose again in 2003-04.

Figure 1 : Learning Opportunities Taken up Per Year



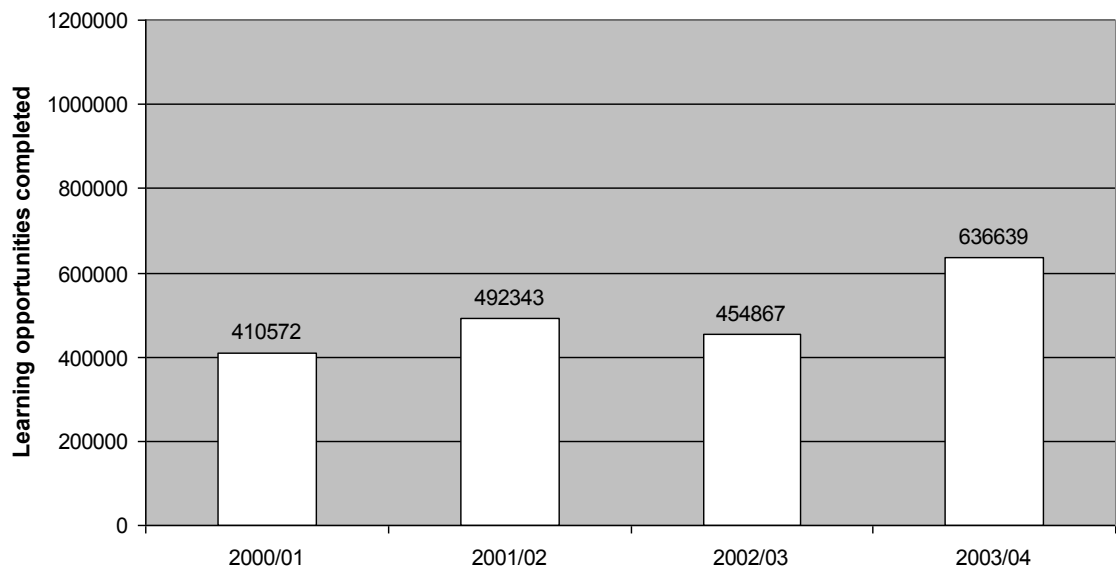
Source: Aggregated data files for SfL data 2000/01 to 2003/04 supplied by LSC July 2005

Figure 2 shows how many learning aims were completed. Learning aims completed includes those which were recorded as achieved, not achieved, and

where the outcome was unknown.

As with take-up, over the four data collection periods, numbers for learning completed rose between 2000/01 and 2001/02, fell back in 2002/03, and then rose considerably in 2003/04.

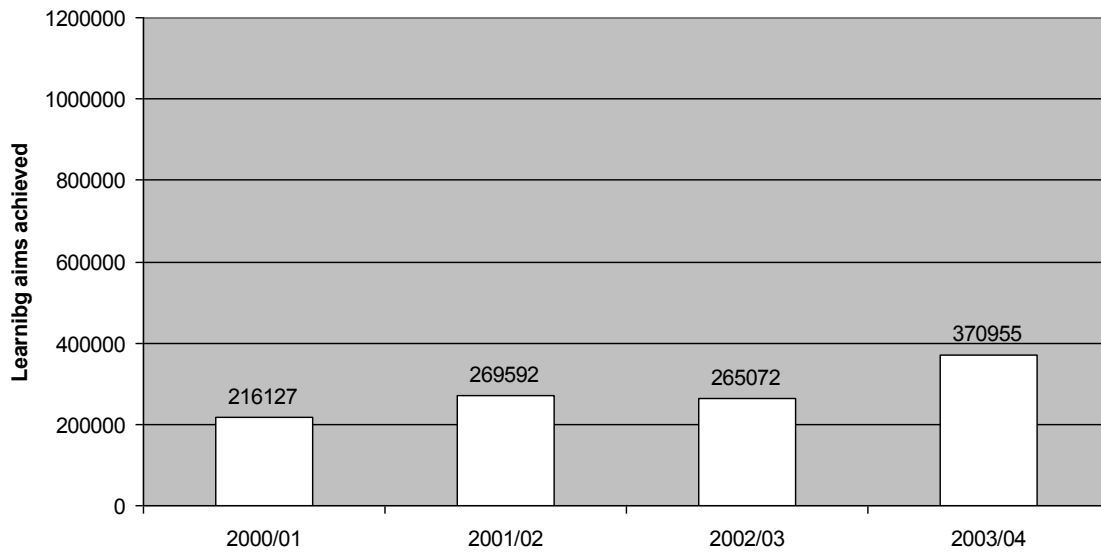
Figure 2: Learning Opportunities Completed per Year



Source: Aggregated data files for SfL data 2000/01 to 2003/04 supplied by LSC July 2005

Figure 3 shows how many learning aims were achieved each year, using only the records for aims which were completed and achieved. These show a similar pattern to learning opportunities taken up; there was a rise between 2000/01 and 2001/02, a small fall in 2002/03 and then a significant rise in 2003/04.

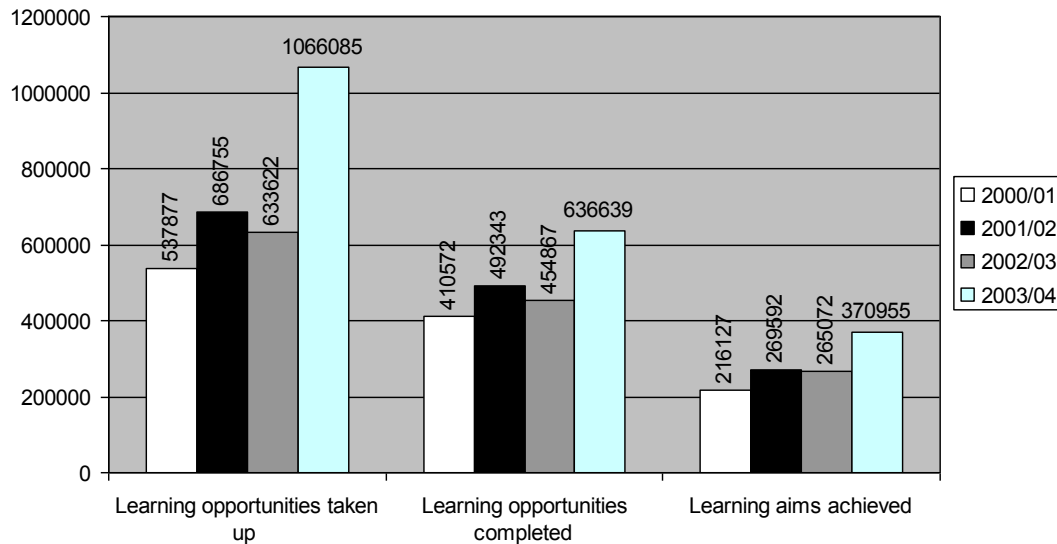
**Figure 3: Learning aims achieved per year**



Source: Aggregated data files for SfL 2000/01 to 2003/04 supplied by LSC July 2005

Figure 4 is a summary of charts 1, 2 and 3, and shows numbers of learning opportunities taken up, completed and achieved together. Here we can see clearly that while there is an overall rising trend in participation, completion and achievement, there is at the same time a big step down in overall numbers at each stage.

**Figure 4: Learning opportunities taken up, learning opportunities completed and learning aims achieved per year**

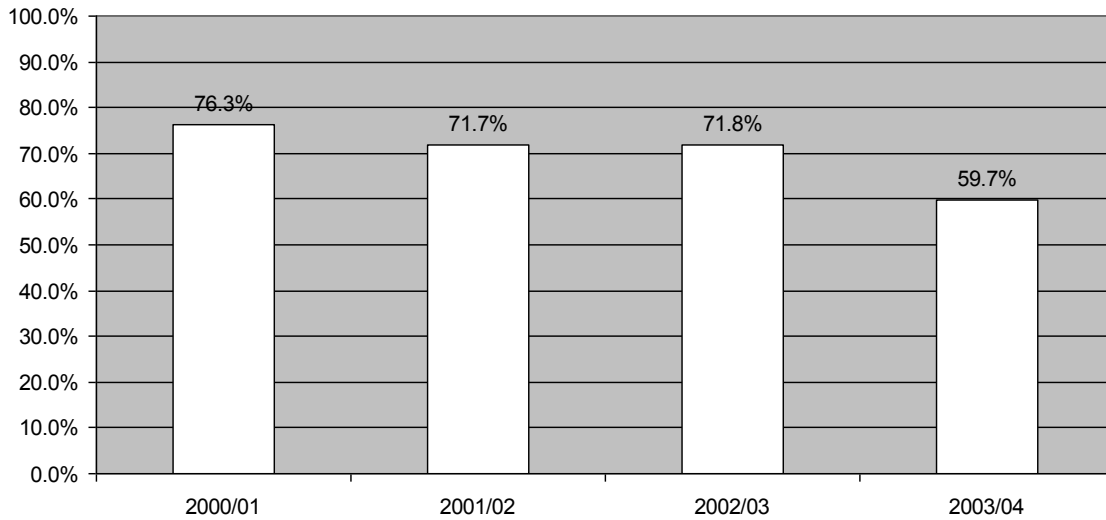


**Source: Aggregated data files for SfL 2000/01 to 2003/04 supplied by LSC July 2005**

The extent of these diminishing returns is more apparent when considering the ratio of completion to uptake, and achievement to uptake, as shown in the next two Figures. In contrast to the upward trend in total numbers over the four years, Figures 5 and 6 indicate a downward trend in percentage completion and achievement over the same period. Figure 5 is a result of expressing the numbers in Figure 2 (learning opportunities completed) as percentages of the numbers in Figure 1 (learning opportunities taken up) and shows what proportion of the learning opportunities initially taken up were followed through to completion. Here there is a reduction in the ratio of uptake to completion of just over 16% over the 4 year period, with 76.3% of learning opportunities completed in 2000/01, dropping to 59.7% completed in 2003/04.



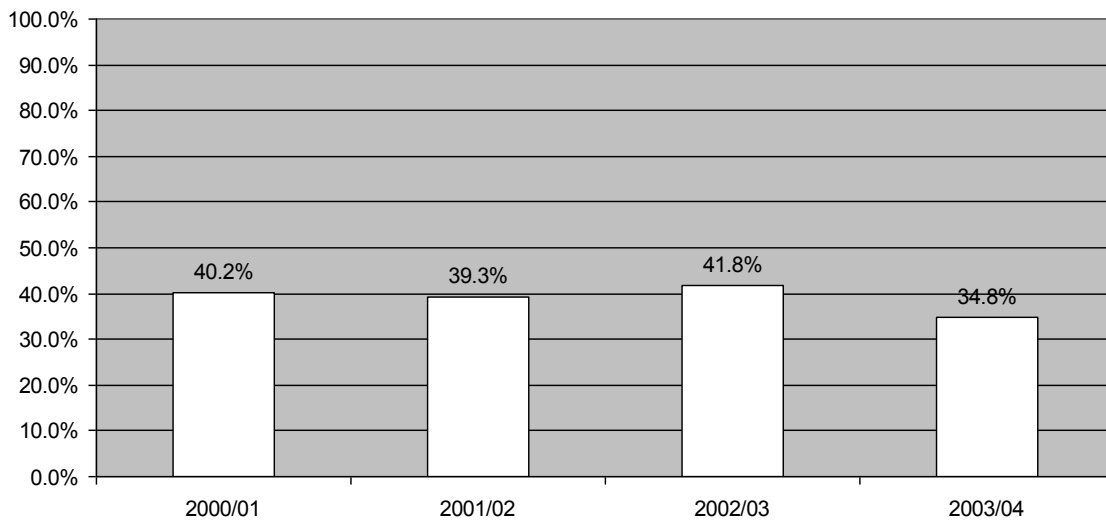
**Figure 5: Learning opportunities completed as a percentage of learning opportunities taken up per year**



Source: Aggregated data files for SfL data 2000/01 to 2003/04 supplied by LSC July 2005

Figure 6 similarly is a result of expressing the numbers in Figure 3 (learning aims achieved) as percentages of the numbers in Figure 1 (learning opportunities taken up). Thus it shows what proportion of the learning opportunities embarked on led to successful achievement. These percentages hovered at around 40% for the first three years, and then dropped to 34.8% in 2003/04.

**Figure 6: Learning aims achieved as a percentage of learning opportunities taken up per year**

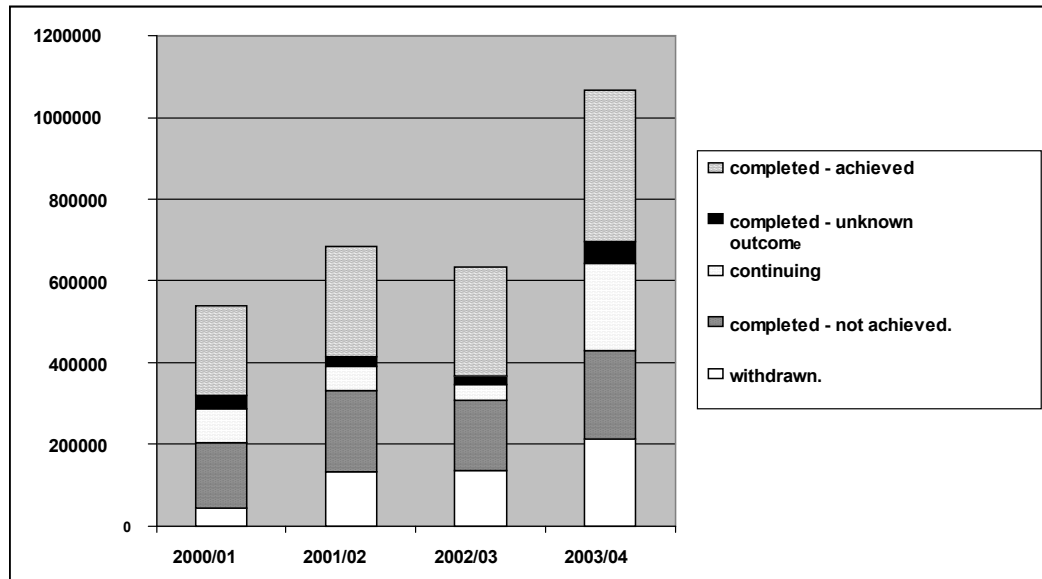


Source: Aggregated data files for SfL data 2000/01 to 2003/04 supplied by LSC July 2005

So in contrast to total numbers for participation, completion and achievement, which rose over the four year period (as shown in Figure 4), there is a downward trend in the proportion of opportunities taken up to those completed, and the proportion of opportunities taken up to aims achieved. What Figures 5 and 6 make clear are the diminishing returns to participation, if measured in terms of completion and achievement of outcomes, for in contrast to the upward trend in total numbers, there is a downward trend in percentage completion and achievement. Thus, by 2003/04, it took a lot more initial participation to achieve the rise in total numbers of learning aims achieved in the final figure for 2003/04.

However, there are different ways in which the LSC outcomes data can be aggregated to gauge the rate of achievement to initial participation. Figure 7 shows a breakdown of how all the outcomes for *Skills for Life* provision were recorded in the LSC database for the period from 2000 to 2004.

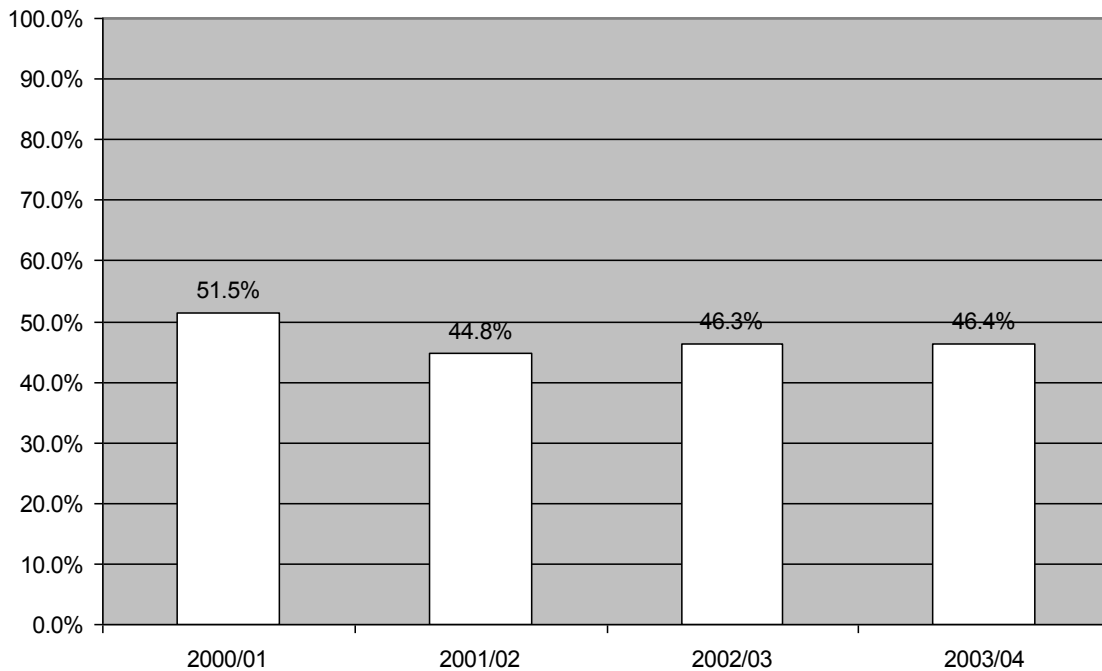
Figure 7: Outcomes of learning opportunities taken up by year



Source: Aggregated data files for SfL data 2000/01 to 2003/04 supplied by LSC July 2005

Five possible outcomes are shown here: completion and successful achievement; completion but outcome unknown; continuation of learning; completion without achievement, and withdrawn. If the numbers for the learners who were continuing to study and whose outcome was unknown are removed from the initial number of learning aims taken up, then the number of learning aims achieved as a percentage of learning opportunities taken up appears higher than in Figure 6 above. This is shown in Figure 8 below. The reason for pointing out these two different ways of presenting the data is that the version presented in Figure 8, not that in Figure 6, was provided in the dataset supplied by the LSC.

**Figure 8: Percentage of learning aims achieved as a percentage of learning opportunities taken up (omitting continuing and unknown outcomes)**



Source: Aggregated data files for SfL data 2000/01 to 2003/04 supplied by LSC July 2005

## **Discussion: unravelling what we can learn from the LSC data**

### *What we can learn from the data*

A number of issues arise from the data presented above. Firstly, efforts to increase participation would appear to be working. However, there is a considerable attrition rate between enrolment, completion and achievement of qualifications. Moreover, this appears to be getting worse. In other words, although more learners were embarking on learning over the four year period, proportionally fewer were completing and achieving. This is a significant concern in relation to the cost of the *Skills for Life* strategy, if it is measured in terms of achievement of qualifications. The above pattern raises a further issue, which relates to the difficulty of reaching what are described in policy terms as the 'hard to reach'. As the data show, it is not just a matter of reaching learners,

but getting them to complete courses, and then undertake assessment and achieve qualifications.

A further issue which arises lies in the way that the data are analysed and presented, which may be influenced by the message that it is wished to convey. Thus the desire to present a more positive picture of the success of *Skills for Life* would lead to the choice of Figure 8 over Figure 6. However, tidying away complexity may obscure important pointers and questions for practice, for the different outcomes recorded in Figure 7 raise questions such as: What does it mean to complete but not achieve? Does it mean that the learners in question left without taking the test? Does it mean that they failed the test? Does it mean that they have yet to take the test? Does it mean that they are still participating in learning and will take the test at some future date?

More fundamentally, in terms of progress with adult literacy, language and numeracy, does completing a course but not having a certificated outcome mean that a person has not improved their skills? For whilst qualification outcomes may offer an apparently straightforward way of providing an overview of 'the state of the nation' in terms of basic skills levels, they may do rather less in terms of providing evidence of progress and improvement by individual learners. This is not intended to suggest that accreditation is not important to learners. As Hamilton and Merrifield (2000, p.271) have observed: 'Many students want credentials, both to boost their self-confidence and to gain access to further training and education.' However, to measure the gains from adult basic skills provision in terms of qualifications alone ignores wider benefits of learning, which are discussed further below.

#### *The limitations of the LSC data*

Although the LSC data comprise the most comprehensive dataset available, there

are limitations to using these data both to measure progress towards the *Skills for Life* targets, and to evaluate progress and progression. It is important to point out here that this is not a criticism of the LSC Individualised Learner Record database specifically, because it was not set up for these purposes. However, the limitations need to be heeded when using LSC data to make claims about *Skills for Life*.

The *Skills for Life* strategy aims to improve the skills of learners. However, what counts as improvement within the strategy is a rather complex affair.

Improvement can be in literacy, numeracy or English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), but it has to be through nationally approved qualifications, and must be at specified levels. Yet there are problems with this specification, for at Entry Level, which is split into three further 'sub-levels', awarding bodies did not disaggregate achievement across the three levels until 2004.

The picture is complicated further, in that the 2001 *Skills for Life* target of 750,000 is intended to mean 750,000 different learners. If a learner achieves in more than one basic skill, in literacy *and* numeracy, or in numeracy *and* ESOL for example, then that learner should still only count once towards the target. Moreover, if a learner achieves at Level 1 and then moves on and successfully completes a qualification at Level 2, that learner should still only be counted once.

In order to identify the number of individuals who count towards the *Skills for Life* target from the above data, a formula has to be used by the DfES, which is based on an estimate of the number of individuals who are working towards and achieving more than one *Skills for Life* target (personal communication, DfES, 2004<sup>7</sup>). It is difficult therefore to be sure that each learner is only counted once. This may prove even more difficult in working towards the 2007 target of 1.5 million, where learners who were included in the 2004 results are not supposed to be counted again.

These issues may have some purpose in the context of attempting to increase the overall number of individuals participating in basic skills provision and achieving qualifications which match the *Skills for Life* approved qualifications. However, it means that a considerable amount of energy and time goes into attempting to check that individuals are not double counted. Moreover, it appears to value one-off participation over progression and participation in a range of basic skills, and, as further LSC data show, there is a considerable amount of basic skills provision which takes place which does not count towards the target.

A further limitation of the LSC data lies in evaluating progress and progression. It is not possible to speak with any certainty about the distance travelled by a learner, because there is no systematic assessment or recording of the level of a learner's achievement on entry to a learning programme. This should raise alarm bells for the *Skills for Life* strategy, if it is supposed to be concerned with improvement by learners. Improvement is defined in the *Skills for Life* strategy as the achievement of a qualification outcome, yet there is no direct evidence that achievement of a certificated outcome actually represents progress by an individual learner from a previous level of skill to another, rather than certification of where that learner already was.

Nor is there accurate information about subsequent progress following the achievement of a stated learning aim. Only learners who remain with the same provider can be easily tracked from one course or year to the next, and even then this may only apply to further education provision which is funded by the LSC.

The same issue applies to progression more widely, that is, what happens to learners in terms of development beyond basic skills: do they progress to further qualifications? Do they find jobs if they are unemployed? Do they move on in their job if they are in employment? The lack of such data has been noted by

Brooks et al (2001a) in the past. They found no representative data on learner progression from general basic skills or ESOL provision to employment or further training and education in their survey of the research in the field.

Although research is currently under way to investigate this (Ananiadou et al, 2004; Metcalf and Meadows, 2005), it has not as yet formed part of the data that are being used to measure the impact of *Skills for Life*.

A further area that is not recorded by the LSC database is progress in a broader sense of the benefits gained by learners as a result of developing their basic skills. For example, one gain identified regularly in research studies is the positive effect on self-image, confidence and self-esteem (see Brooks et al, 2001a). This may be linked to a second gain, which is the decision to continue with education and take further courses. In addition, family literacy programmes have been found to enhance children's learning as well as that of adults, by encouraging and enabling adults to help children with language, literacy and numeracy development and by encouraging them to become involved in their child's school (Brooks et al, 1996, 1997; Hannon and Bird, 2004).

It is quite possible for policy to be concerned with the wider benefits of adult basic skills provision, and to measure success against criteria other than the achievement of qualification outcomes, as the work of Tett and colleagues in Scotland (Tett et al, 2005) shows. They have developed and applied a social capital index to evaluate the impact of the Scottish adult literacy and numeracy strategy, and this has formed a key part of the findings reported to the Scottish Executive, with the goal of 'Closing the Gap' between the disadvantaged and advantaged (Tett et al, 2005, p.9)

Finally, it is worth pointing out that there is much debate about what is assessed, and the way that people are assessed, in order to determine their literacy and numeracy skills. The tests carried out as part of the birth cohort studies started



in 1958 and 1970 in England (Ekinsmyth and Bynner, 1994) were intended to assess what is referred to as 'functional literacy and numeracy' (Bynner and Parsons, 2001, p.283) which Bynner and Parsons define as 'an individual's ability to deal with everyday situations requiring the use of literacy and numeracy skills.' 'Functional' definitions are prevalent in the way that language, literacy and numeracy skills are understood in the context of *Skills for Life*. Nevertheless, the qualifications that count towards the *Skills for Life* target include basic skills, key skills and GCSE qualifications, and these do not automatically represent achievement of the same 'skills'. It might be hoped, in any case, that at least Level 2 qualifications within the English National Qualifications Framework would, by any definition, be some way above 'functional'.

### **Conclusion: The impact of *Skills for Life* on adult basic skills**

The analysis of LSC data in this paper has shown that we can detect trends in participation and achievement in *Skills for Life* provision that raise important questions concerning current adult basic skills policy in England. The data show a picture of overall increases in numbers participating and achieving in *Skills for Life* provision in the four years leading up to the first milestone target, but at the same time, a trend of overall diminishing returns. For practitioners, the figures raise important questions, such as what happens between enrolment, completion and achievement - why are attrition rates as high as they appear in the data? For policymakers, the trends suggest that they need to be aware that *Skills for Life* targets are likely to become increasingly harder to achieve, and to require greater investment in participation to secure a continued rise in achievement in the future.

However, the paper has also drawn attention to the limitations of using the LSC data to make claims about learners' progress (which are specifically not the 'fault' of the LSC data). There is currently no accurate means of measuring

individual progress. We can comment on numbers for participation in provision and achievement of target qualifications, but these numbers do not demonstrate that individuals have improved their basic skills. This has implications for monitoring progress towards the 2007 and 2010 targets, and suggests the need to improve the way that individual learners' progress and progression are recorded.

At the same time, the pursuit of more detailed and 'accurate' data may have more to do with a policy agenda focused on national economic competitiveness than on improving learners' lives and capabilities. In this respect, the paper has suggested that the policy emphasis on targets in the form of qualification outcomes contributes to a framing of the 'problem' of adult basic skills in particular ways. It constructs the issue as one which is strongly focused towards the economic competitiveness of England in comparison with other countries, particularly OECD countries. In relation to this concern, we are encouraged to believe that many adults cannot gain employment or function adequately in employment with their current levels of literacy and numeracy skills. Yet a considerable number of adults are in employment, albeit possibly low-skilled employment, even though they have limited literacy and numeracy skills (Bynner and Parsons, 1998; DfES, 2003b). The major policy focus on qualification outcomes may in fact have more to do with establishing national benchmark data than with enabling individuals to make progress.

The issues focused on in this paper – the analysis of statistical data on *Skills for Life* and how we should interpret them – reflect a significant shift in the positioning and purposes of adult basic skills provision in England. In the space of a few years, such provision has moved from the margins to the mainstream, and from beyond the gaze of politicians and education policy makers in government departments to one of their central concerns. What this paper demonstrates is how this shift has served to refocus attention towards

participation in centrally approved courses, leading to the achievement of approved qualification outcomes, rather than towards more broadly-defined goals of adult education. That this does not have to be so is demonstrated in the somewhat different emphasis that there has been until now in similar work in Scotland.

A strategy which is based on narrowly-defined functional definitions of literacy, language and numeracy, and which centres around the pursuit of targets related to qualification outcomes, concentrates policy-makers' and practitioners' energy on counting and quantifying outcomes. Whether this best serves the long-term improvement of adults' capabilities in basic skills, and their participation in society as citizens as well as workers, is a question to which we should constantly return.

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## APPENDIX 1: APPROVED *SKILLS FOR LIFE* QUALIFICATIONS AND THEIR EQUIVALENCE

Whilst the list of recognised and approved qualifications is long, in summary it includes:

- 1 national literacy and numeracy qualifications accredited by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA)
- 2 national ESOL qualifications accredited by QCA (currently includes qualifications being submitted for accreditation)
- 3 key skills test in communication or application of number at level 1 or level 2
- 4 national tests for adult literacy and numeracy at levels 1 and 2. These are identical to the key skills tests on offer, and learners may then go on to build a portfolio of evidence to achieve a key skills qualification.
- 5 full key skills qualification in communication or application of number at level 1 or level 2 (a test and a portfolio of evidence)
- 6 GCSE Maths or English at grade D-G (level 1) or C and above (level 2)

Table 4 shows the levels of equivalence of these qualifications, highlighting where these count towards the *Skills for Life* targets.

**Table 4: levels of equivalence of different qualifications relevant to *Skills for Life* targets**

	Qualifications framework				
	National Qualifications Framework	Key skills	Standards for adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL	General/academic qualifications	National Curriculum levels in schools
Level	5				
	4	4			
	3	3		A levels	
	2	2	2	GCSE A*-C	
	1	1	1	GCSE D-G	4 to 5 (11-15 years)
			Entry 3		3 (9 - 11 years)
			Entry 2		2 (7 - 9 years)
			Entry 1		1 (5 - 7 years)
	Pre-entry				

Note: shaded boxes show what qualification levels count towards the *Skills for Life* targets

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<sup>1</sup> National Research and Development Centre for adult literacy and numeracy (NRDC) Study of the Impact of the *Skills for Life* Learning Infrastructure on Learners, Project no. PG5.4, 2004-2007.

<sup>2</sup> The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and not necessarily those of the NRDC.

<sup>3</sup> ALRA was an agency of The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE). ALRA eventually became the Adult Literacy Unit (ALU) and then the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit (ALBSU) and is now known as the Basic Skills Agency (BSA).

<sup>4</sup> See the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) website for up-to-date information on the framework at <http://www.qca.org.uk/>.

<sup>5</sup> See Appendix 1 for qualifications which count towards the *Skills for Life* target, and for a table of equivalences across qualifications. The English Qualifications and Curriculum Authority ([www.qca.org.uk](http://www.qca.org.uk)) provides details of the full national qualifications framework.

<sup>6</sup> Figure taken from LSC Headline Stats Spreadsheet, overall summary sheet (estimate as at April 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Personal interview with representative of DfES statistical branch, 1 July 2004.