

BENCHMARKING DATA 2002/03 TO 2004/05

Success, Retention and Achievement Rates in Further Education Institutions in England

Welcome to the Learning and Skills Council Benchmarking Data. This part of the LSC website sets out levels of success, retention and achievement in further education institutions in England (known as Benchmarking Data) for the period 2002/03 to 2004/05. The Learning and Skills Council publishes national FE Benchmarking Data annually. This publication updates the Benchmarking Data 2001/02 to 2003/04 published in Summer 2005 and expands upon the information originally made available in the full year plus Statistical First Release (ILR/SFR10) published in April 2006 at the following [link](#).

Purpose

- Allows institutions to assess their performance and assists their planning of action to improve the success, retention and achievement rates of their students
- Supports institutions in the process of setting targets as part of their 3 year development plans set out in *Success for All*
- Informs the process of performance review by Local Learning and Skills Councils

Viewing the data

The Benchmarking Data is split into four main categories; primary data, supporting data, qualification level data and demographic data. It is subdivided by qualification type and institution type. Success rates along with two measures of retention and achievement rates appear on each table. The data can be accessed via the internet at <http://benchmarkingdata.lsc.gov.uk>.

Background

The publication of national Benchmarking Data is part of the Council's strategy to support institutions in raising the standard of their work. Benchmarking Data on student success, retention and achievement allows institutions to assess their performance, and assists their planning of action programmes to improve the success, retention and achievement rates of their students.

The term *Benchmarking Data*, rather than 'benchmarks', is used throughout this document. *Benchmarking Data* is used to imply a reference point for comparison, and not necessarily a standard of best practice.

As part of the Success For All initiative, all institutions agree annual targets for improving learner success rates with the LSC in their 3 year development plans. Institutional target-setting informed by national Benchmarking Data is an integral part of the institutions' strategies to secure continuous improvement.

Approach

The Council's approach to publishing Benchmarking Data is to publish a manageable amount of information, drawing on existing statistical measures.

The Benchmarking Data have been derived from institutions' *Individualised Learner Record* (ILR) and *Individualised Student Record* (ISR) returns and provides a range of national statistics for success, retention and achievement.

This year four levels of national Benchmarking Data are presented:

- primary data tables showing national averages of success, retention and achievement rates, plus spread of variability by institution type and notional level

- supporting data tables showing success, retention and achievement and spread of variability by institution type, notional level and broad qualification type
- national Benchmarking Data for individual qualifications by area of learning.
- demographic data showing national averages of success, retention and achievement by gender, disability and ethnicity.

The underlying methodology used to update the Benchmarking Data to 2004/05 has been slightly modified from the 2003/04 publication produced in November 2005. The main changes to the methodology are:

- there have been some changes in the learning aims database (LAD), for example, alignment of 'sector subject area' and 'notional level' for qualifications in the same mapping group
- the move to Sector Subject Area codes is now complete. We will not be presenting results by area of learning any more.

Presentation

There are two retention rates and achievement rates shown in this publication as in last year's publication. The definitions of the success, retention and achievement rates can be found in the definitions section. The inspectorate bodies are keen to see both of these retention and achievement measures to assist them in reaching judgements on individual institutions results in comparison with national figures.

Key Skills qualifications have not been included in the Benchmarking Data owing to inconsistencies in the way that they were recorded on the ISR. UFI qualifications are also not included.

Short qualifications, where the student expects to complete in fewer than 24 weeks, are distinguished from longer qualifications. The downloadable files also show Benchmarking Data for short qualifications of less than five weeks expected duration and short qualifications of between 5 and 24 weeks expected duration.

The Benchmarking Data shows the results for general further education and tertiary colleges, sixth form colleges and external institutions that recruit a high proportion of their students from deprived areas and which had a widening participation factor for 2004/05 of above 1.075. Typically these WP institutions would recruit at least half of their students from disadvantaged areas. Success, retention and achievement rates for these groups of colleges can sometimes be lower than for other institutions.

Results for 2002/03 and 2003/04 have been recalculated and, as a consequence of revisions to institutions' data and the learning aim database, they may differ from *Benchmarking Data 2001/02 to 2003/04* published in November 2005.

Using Benchmarking Data

Institutions can measure their performance by comparing their results with the published Benchmarking Data. This information will support the process of setting targets for 2005/06 and beyond. Individual institution results will also be used by local LSCs to compare and evaluate the performance of providers.

Where an institution's performance differs from the Benchmarking Data, it will wish to explore the reasons for this by calculating success, retention and achievement rates for particular parts of its provision and comparing these with statistics for similar provision at national level. To facilitate this comparison, a more detailed breakdown of the Benchmarking Data by broad type of qualification, and individual qualification aim is also available.

In some cases there may be a difference between institution statistics and the national Benchmarking Data because the mix of qualifications at the institution is significantly different

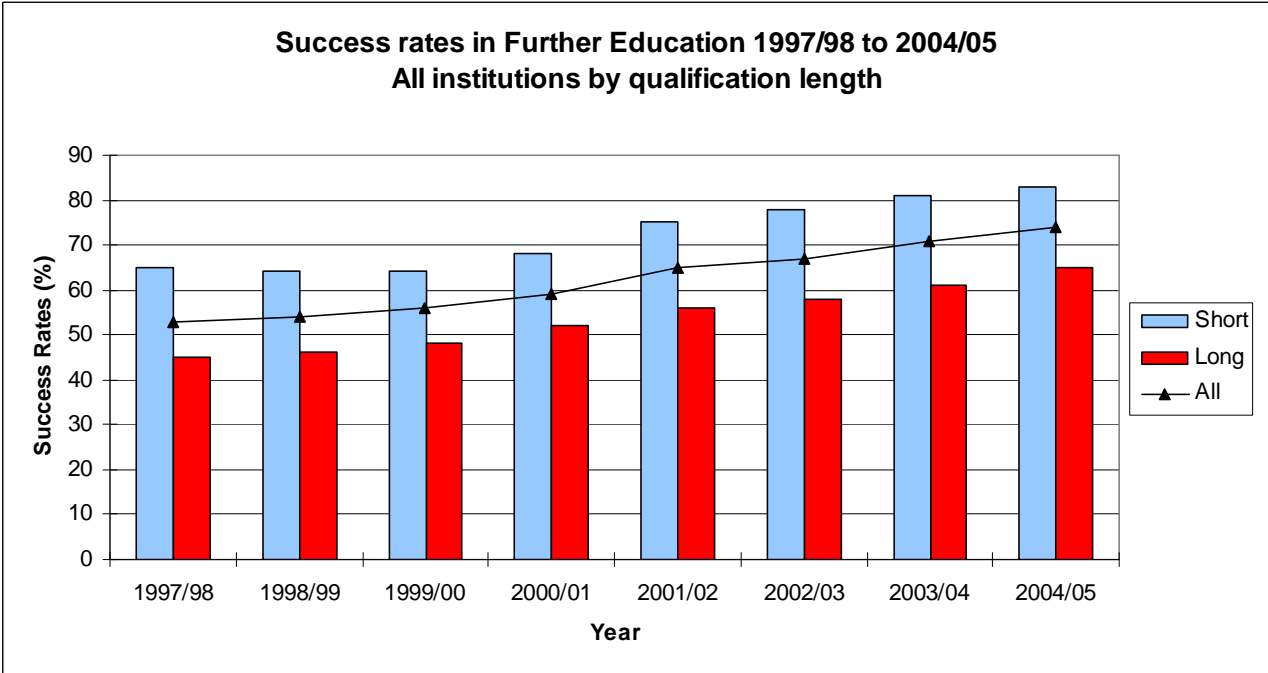
from the national mix, which means that for comparison purposes the Benchmarking Data should be adjusted. An example of how to adjust the Benchmarking Data is shown in the definitions section.

KEY FINDINGS

This section presents the key findings drawn from the Benchmarking Data about success, retention and achievement rates.

1. Overall success rates have increased by 2.6 percentage points from 2003/04 to 2004/05 to stand at 73.8%. Success rates for long and short qualifications have increased by 3.5 and 1.6 percentage points to 65.2% and 82.8% respectively.
2. The upward trend in learner achievement has been sustained across all types of FE provider and across all notional NVQ levels of learning aim. Success rates for FE sector colleges have risen to 75% and so exceed the target of 72% established within Success for All. The target figure of 72% was reached two years early in 2003/04 and in the subsequent 12 months success rates have moved forward another three percentage points.
3. The analysis that follows indicates that this increase in success rates was recorded by nearly all sections of the FE sector. It is clear that there is no single factor acting on one narrow part of the sector that is driving the increase in success rates. The results are consistent with an overall increase in the quality of provision.

Figure 1: Success rates in Further Education 1997/98 to 2004/05



4. The trend since 1997/98 has been for overall retention rates to exceed overall achievement rates and for achievement rates to show greater year on year improvements. This 'catching up' by achievement rates resulted in retention and achievement rates being virtually equal at 84.6% and 84.2% respectively in 2003/04. In 2004/05 retention and achievement rates increased by just over one percentage point to be equal at around 86%, the difference between them having now closed to less than 0.1%.
5. This is the first time that improvements in retention and achievement rates have had a broadly similar impact on the improvement in success rates. Unpublished qualitative

research also indicates that institutions are increasingly focusing on raising retention rates as a key element in their quality improvement programmes.

6. The success rate for 16-18 year olds taking full level 2 qualifications has improved by 12 percentage points over a two year period to 64% in 2004/05, with the success rate for adults following the same programmes increasing by 11 percentage points to 59% over the same 2 year period. This represents a significant step forward in the work to achieve the level 2 PSA targets.
7. The 12 percentage point increase in success rate for 16 - 18 year olds (over 2 years) was a key contributory factor towards the 3% increase in the proportion of young people achieving Level 2 in 2004/05 compared with 2003/04. For more details see: SFR 06/2006 (23 February 2006) - Level 2 and 3 Attainment by Young People in England.
<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000637/index.shtml>
8. Learning aims at level 2 showed the greatest increase in success rates of 5 percentage points. Levels 1 and 3 showed an improvement in success rates of 2 and 3 percentage points respectively.
9. Analysis by sector subject area shows that most categories improved their success rates in long courses by between 3 and 5 percentage points. Leisure, Travel and Tourism showed an increase of 6 percentage points in success rates for long courses. Long course success rates for Preparation for Life and Work were the same as in the previous year; this was the only category not to show an increase.
10. Success rates of learners from ethnic minorities in 2004/05 have all shown increases of between 1 and 3 percentage points compared with 2003/04. Black African, Black Caribbean and Chinese ethnic groups have shown the greatest improvement in success rates and in each of these groups, success rates for males have increased more than for females. Bangladeshi and Pakistani ethnic groups have shown the lowest improvement in success rates with increases of around one percentage point.
11. The gender gap in favour of female learners has closed by half of one percentage point from 2003/04 to 2004/05 to just under two percentage points. Analysis by age group shows that the gender gap only exists in the 16 - 18 year old cohort; there are no differences in the adult age group. Within the 16 - 18 age group the difference in success rates has fallen by one percentage point to 4 percentage points in 2004/05. Progress towards males achieving similar success rates to females can be seen across all sector subject areas and across all ethnic groups.
12. Success rate for learners with disabilities are broadly the same as those for learners not having disability, although female learners aged 16-18 with a disability have success rates 2 percentage points lower than similar learners who do not have a disability.

DEFINITIONS AND DESCRIPTIONS

Summary of calculation method

The method takes data for each college from the following ILR return and four ISR returns to create the Benchmarking Data:

- ISR22 (December 2001; 2000/01)
- ISR25 (December 2002; 2001/02)
- FO5 ILR (2003; 2002/03)
- FO5 ILR (2004; 2003/04)
- FO5 ILR (2005; 2004/05).

ISR22 is used to provide information on learners starting qualifications that were expected to end in 2001/02 or later, i.e. courses of three years or more duration. In a similar manner, ISR25 is used to provide information on learners starting qualifications that were expected to end in 2002/03 or later; for example learners on a two year GNVQ programme expecting to end in 2002/03. The results in this publication were calculated using the hierarchy table, available on the website at <http://providers.lsc.gov.uk/LAD/downloads/MiscDownloads.asp> under the heading Mapcodes.

Learners and their qualifications are matched across the five years of ILR and ISR returns using the learner reference, course code, start date and expected end date to calculate the number of starters at the beginning of each programme, retention across the whole programme, and success and achievement levels. Only qualifications that learners expected to complete between 2002/03 and 2004/05 are included in the publication.

The Benchmarking Data is built from cohort level, a cohort being a particular qualification being studied over the same duration and expecting to end in the same teaching year. Only cohorts, which consist entirely of Council-funded learners or a mixture of Council-funded and non Council-funded learners, are included.

Presentation issues

- The 'number of starters' is rounded to the nearest 100 in the Benchmarking Data in this publication and the supporting data.
- Where the number of starters is less than 500, results and percentiles are not shown.
- The percentage breakdown of number started may not add up to 100% due to rounding.
- The Benchmarking Data for individual qualifications on the Council's website shows 'number of starters' un-rounded, but does not show Benchmarking Data for qualifications with less than ten starters.
- Since the data is calculated at qualification level, learners studying more than one qualification will appear once for each of their qualifications

Coverage

The Benchmarking Data for 2002/03 to 2004/05 has been calculated for 522 institutions where ISR22, ISR25 and ILR F05 (2002/03, 2003/04 and 2004/05) data were available. This includes:

- 23 specialist colleges; agriculture and horticulture colleges and art, design and performing arts colleges
- 102 sixth form colleges.
- 137 external institutions.
- 260 general further education and tertiary colleges, including designated colleges. Of these 55 with a high number of learners from disadvantaged areas are included in the data

The 5 institutions excluded from the Benchmarking Data consist of:

- 3 institutions that have credibility issues with their data
- 2 institutions for technical reasons, following analysis to show that issues with their data had an impact on the national picture

The results for 2002/03 and 2003/04 have been recalculated since *Benchmarking Data 2001/02 to 2003/04* published in November 2005 for the following reasons:

- a number of colleges have revised their ILR data

- there have been some changes in the learning aim database; for example some qualifications have changed sector subject area or have a known notional level where it was previously unknown
- there have been slight changes in the methodology used to calculate the Benchmarking Data
- to maintain consistency when showing results by using the same set of colleges for each year

In most cases the changes due to recalculations of success, retention and achievement rates are slight.

A, AS, A2 and GCSE grades

The variable quality of data in the 'grade' field of the ILR and ISR means it is not yet possible to accurately differentiate the ranges of GCSE grades. In the Benchmarking Data the number of GCSEs achieved is calculated as the number of GCSEs achieved at grades A* to G for all colleges.

Qualification Level Benchmarking Data shows the percentage achieving a 'high grade' calculated from the grade field in the ILR to provide an indication of the A* to C achievement rate for GCSE's, and the A to B achievement rate for 'A' levels.

The Effects of Widely Differing Mixes of Qualification Type

The example below shows how the Benchmarking Data can be adjusted to match the mix of qualifications at an individual college, where the mix of qualifications at the college is significantly different from the national mix.

The example relates to adult learners studying at level 3 in a general further education college. The starting point is the average retention and achievement rates for different level 3 qualifications for all general further education colleges and for our example college.

Table 1.
Notional level 3 qualifications, learners aged 19 and over

	Average for GFEC/TC			Example College
	retention rate %	achievement rate %	breakdown of enrolments %	breakdown of enrolments %
All qualifications	78	72	-	-
GCE A/AS/A2	67	64	18	10
GNVQ	68	77	9	5
NVQ	82	73	17	50
Other long	83	64	56	35

In our example college, the level 3 provision for adults includes many more NVQs, and fewer GCE A/AS/A2 levels, GNVQs and Other qualifications than nationally. In order to check whether the published Benchmarking Data for all level 3 qualifications is an appropriate comparator, the following calculation may be used:

Average GFEC/TC retention rate = 78%

GFEC/TC retention rate for mix of qualifications in example college comprising:

10% GCE A/AS/A2 retention rate of 67% = 6.7

5% GNVQ retention rate of 68% = 3.4

50% NVQ retention rate of 82% = 41

35% Other long retention rate of 83% = 29.05

80.15% rounds to 80%

The same approach can be used for achievement rates. Strictly, the breakdown of enrolments for completed qualifications with a known outcome should be used rather than the number enrolled, but this is unlikely to have a significant effect:

Average GFEC/TC achievement rate = 72%

GFEC/TC achievement rate for mix of qualifications in example college comprising:

10% GCE A/AS/A2 achievement rate of 64% = 6.4

5% GNVQ achievement rate of 77% = 3.85

50% NVQ achievement rate of 67% = 33.5

35% Other long achievement rate of 75% = 26.25

70.00 rounds to 70%

As can be seen, the adjusted Benchmarking Data are similar to the original Benchmarking Data, despite the very different mix of qualifications in the example college. In practice, mix of qualification types is unlikely to be a significant factor for most colleges. This method can be used on success rates and both types of achievement and retention rates.

Age group

A learner's age group is calculated from their age as at 31 August in the year they started their qualification. Learners of unknown age are included in the age group 19 and over. Learners under 16 years are included in the 16-18 age group. All tables show the Benchmarking Data divided into two age groups: 16-18 and 19 and over.

Short qualifications

A qualification is 'short' if it has an expected length of less than 24 weeks. In practice the majority of short qualifications are of 12 weeks duration or less. Short qualifications (excluding short Key Skills qualifications) are shown separately, since the success, retention and achievement rates for these qualifications are significantly different from those of longer qualifications. In addition, the downloadable files show Benchmarking Data for short qualifications split into two subsets: less than five weeks expected duration and between 5 and 24 weeks duration.

Notional NVQ level

Qualifications are grouped according to their NVQ level or notional equivalent according to the categorisation of each qualification on the Council's qualification database. The levels are:

level 1	includes qualifications at level 1 and level 'E' (entry level), such as NVQs, foundation GNVQs and other foundation or pre-foundation qualifications
level 2	includes level 2 NVQs, intermediate GNVQs and precursors (BTEC first certificate or first diploma, City and Guilds Diploma of Vocational Education at intermediate level), GCSEs and other intermediate level qualifications
level 3	includes level 3 NVQs, advanced GNVQs and precursors (BTEC national certificate or national diploma, City and Guilds Diploma of Vocational Education at national level), advanced VCEs, GCE A, A2 and AS levels and other advanced level qualifications
level H	all level 4 and 5 qualifications including HNCs, HNDs, access to HE qualifications, NVQs at levels 4 and 5, and other higher level professional qualifications.
Level X	Qualifications with unknown or unspecified level

Key skills have been excluded from the Benchmarking Data due to inconsistencies in the way that they have been recorded on the ISR.

Widening participation factor

Each college has a widening participation (WP) factor calculated by the Council. It is based on the number of learners recruited from areas with different levels of deprivation, using a modified version of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions' Index of Local Conditions. Learners with addresses in postcodes with high levels of socio-economic deprivation are allocated a factor according to the level of deprivation. Learners can also qualify for widening participation in other ways, such as the homeless or asylum seekers. The higher the number of these learners, the higher the WP factor. The WP factor therefore provides a basis for identifying both individual and geographical disadvantage.

Specifically the WP factor has been calculated by comparing the total number of funding generated by each college, by the number of generated excluding widening participation funding units.

Analysis of colleges grouped by WP factor showed that it would be useful to publish separate benchmarks for general further education and tertiary colleges with very high WP factors, as the success, retention and achievement rates for these colleges as a group, were sometimes below other colleges of the same type.

Benchmarking Data for general further education and tertiary college, sixth form colleges and external institutions which have a widening participation factor for 2004/05 of above 1.075 are shown separately. For information on historical calculations of widening participation factors please see last year's benchmarking data documentation (available from <http://www.lsc.gov.uk/National/Partners/Data/Statistics/LearnerStatistics/LearningAimOutcomes/FESuccessRates/fe-benchmarking-data.htm>).

Pseudo Code

The pseudo code describing the standard algorithms used to calculate success, retention and achievement rates for the inspectorate spreadsheet and the Benchmarking Data for further education institutions in England will be published on the LSC website.

Qualification Codes

The qualification codes shown in the qualification level data tables can be mapped to the qualification codes used in ILR F05 (from the learner aims database (LAD)) using the hierarchy table that can be found at <http://providers.lsc.gov.uk/LAD/downloads/MiscDownloads.asp> (see table labelled Mapcodes). In this hierarchy table the mapcode column corresponds with the qualification codes shown in the qualification level data tables on the Benchmarking Data website.

Number of starters

The 'number of starters' is the number of enrolments on qualifications where the learner was expecting to complete the qualification that college year. Details to note on the definition include:

- (a) the number started excludes any learner who transferred onto another qualification. The qualification the learner transfers into will be included as a start on the new qualification.
- (b) learners who start on a qualification and withdraw before the 1 November of their first year are not recorded on the ILR and as such are excluded from the number of starters.
- (c) each qualification a learner is enrolled on is shown as a separate 'start'
- (d) the 'number of starters' includes some non Council-funded provision as set out in the summary of calculation method section.

(e) A learner on a two year programme who began their studies in October 2001 would appear in the results for 2002/03 as this is the college year in which they expected to complete their qualification, even if they withdrew in the first year of their programme.

Success rates

Success rates are calculated as the number of qualifications achieved divided by the number of starters who do not transfer out. It can also be derived by multiplying achievement rate by retention rate

Retention rate (inc. continuers)

The retention rate (inc.continuers) is the number of learners continuing or completed, divided by the number of learners who started the qualification, excluding transfers out. For programmes of study of two years or more, retention is calculated across the whole programme, i.e. from the start to the end of the qualification. This measure was previously called retention rate in the Benchmarking Data 1998/99 to 2000/01.

Retention rate

The retention rate is the number of learners completed, divided by the number of learners who started the qualification, excluding transfers out. For programmes of study of two years or more, retention is calculated across the whole programme, i.e. from the start to the end of the qualification. The retention rate (completers only) will be lower than the retention rate (inc. continuers) when a significant amount of learners are recorded as "continuing or intending to continue the learning activities leading to the qualification aim" beyond their expected end date. This is the definition of retention rate which was used in the Statistical First Release 04 (ILR/SFR04). This measure was previously called retention rate (completers only) in the Benchmarking Data 1999/00 to 2001/02.

Achievement rate (known outcomes)

The achievement rate (known outcomes) is the number of qualifications learners have fully achieved divided by the number of completed qualifications with a known outcome. Partial achievements are not included as achievements. This measure was previously called achievement rate in the Benchmarking Data 1998/99 to 2000/01.

Achievement rate

The achievement rate is the number of qualifications learners have fully achieved divided by the number of completed qualifications. This denominator includes those completers recorded with unknown outcomes in the ISR, for example outcome code 4 'exam taken but result not known' or outcome code 5 'learning activities are complete but exam has not yet been taken'. Partial achievements are not included as achievements. The achievement rate (all completers) will be lower than the achievement rate (known outcomes) when a significant amount of learners are recorded as "learning activities are complete but the exam has not been taken and there is an intention to take the exam" or "exam taken but result not yet known". This is the definition of achievement rate which was used in the Statistical First Release 04 (ILR/SFR04). This measure was previously called achievement rate (all completers) in the Benchmarking Data 1999/00 to 2001/02.

Measures of institution variability

Measures of institution variability for success, retention and achievement rates enable colleges to compare their results against the range for the sector or particular groups of colleges. The measures are also shown on the supporting data on the Council's website for results by broad qualification type and institution type.

The results in this publication show the rates which:

- 10% of institutions meet or surpass (90th percentile)
- 25% of institutions meet or surpass (75th percentile)
- half of institutions meet or surpass (median or 50th percentile)
- 75% of institutions meet or surpass (25th percentile)
- 90% of institutions meet or surpass (10th percentile).

Measures of variability are published where there are sufficient numbers of institutions to calculate a meaningful result.

The measures of variability are calculated at institution level in order to provide information on variation between institutions. This is different from the mean success, retention and achievement rates, which are calculated as the average rate for all the relevant enrolments, weighting each enrolment equally.

The measures of variability weight each institution equally. This means that learners in smaller institutions have a greater bearing on results than those from larger institutions. The results for small groupings, such as qualifications being studied by adults in sixth form institutions, will be affected by this weighting more than others.

The differences between the two methods can be seen by comparing the average or 'mean' rate, with 50th percentile or 'median'. In many cases the difference is slight, whereas in others such as notional level 1 qualifications in sixth form institutions, the difference is greater. In this case the median is higher than the mean due to a number of institutions with relatively few learners having high levels of retention and achievement. These institutions are given the same weight in the calculation of the median as other sixth form institutions with a larger number of learners thereby increasing the median institution result.

Both the mean success, retention and achievement rate and the measures of variability are valid and useful measures, depending on whether the overall performance of the sector is of interest (mean success, retention and achievement rates) or the variability between institutions is the focus (measures of variability).