

First Level 2 qualifications among adult learners in the North East

Date of issue	2 April 2008
LSC office	North East Region
Publication intent	Public

Summary

- 1 There is a strong policy focus on adult attainment at Level 2 and, increasingly, at Level 3. This policy focus is reflected in LSC targets.
- 2 More people in the North East hold Level 2 qualifications than ever before. 67 per cent of the region's working age population are qualified to Level 2 or above, in line with the national average.
- 3 A qualifications gap remains at Level 3. Some 43 per cent of the region's working age population are qualified to Level 3 or above, compared with 48 per cent in England.
- 4 The available evidence suggests that adults in full Level 2 and Level 3 FE and WBL provision in the North East are more likely to be undertaking a first full Level 2 than the national average.
- 5 An increased focus on firstness is evident in FE provision in the region.
 - The *number* of adults undertaking first full Level 2 qualifications in FE provision in the region is increasing.
 - The *proportion* of adults in full Level 2 and Level 3 FE provision who are undertaking their first full Level 2 is also increasing.
 - Increases in the region are not as significant as those in England, where the degree of firstness in FE provision has historically been lower than in the North East.

Introduction

- 6 This paper looks at the evidence on the prior qualifications of adults in LSC-funded learning provision in the North East, and assesses the extent to which adult learners are undertaking first Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications.

LSC North East Region

Regional Office

Moongate House 5th Avenue Business Park Team Valley Gateshead Tyne and Wear
NE11 0HF

T 0845 019 4181 F 0191 491 6159 www.lsc.gov.uk

- 7 The paper summarises findings from national research which aimed to measure the proportion of adults enrolled in LSC-funded FE provision in November 2006 who were undertaking their first full Level 2 qualification.
- 8 It also draws on analysis undertaken by LSC North East's Planning and Performance team.

The policy focus on Level 2 and Level 3

- 9 The Government has long had a policy focus on Level 2 qualifications as (along with literacy and numeracy) the foundation of skills for employability and lifelong learning.
- 10 Increasingly, the Government is also focusing its policy on Level 3 qualifications. The Leitch Review recommended shifting the balance of intermediate skills from Level 2 to Level 3. In response, the Government set a Public Service Agreement target for Level 3 attainment among adults for the first time in the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review.
- 11 The Education and Skills Bill announced in the 2007 Queen's Speech places a duty on the LSC to secure the proper provision of courses for adult learners to attain first full Level 2 qualifications without paying tuition fees, and to ensure that adults aged 19–25 can attain a first full Level 3 qualification without having to pay tuition fees¹.

Targets

- 12 The LSC is committed to delivering Government targets for adult achievement at Level 2 and Level 3. The LSC is responsible for delivering against a Public Service Agreement target set in the 2004 Comprehensive Spending Review to:
 - reduce by at least 40 per cent the number of adults in the workforce who lack NVQ 2 or equivalent qualifications by 2010; working towards this, one million adults in the workforce to achieve Level 2 between 2003 and 2006.
- 13 We are also responsible for delivering new PSA targets relating to adult skills set in the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review, which build on the ambitions set out in the Leitch review. The new targets include:
 - over 90 per cent of adults to be qualified to at least Level 2 by 2020, with a commitment to achieve 95 per cent as soon as possible
 - 68 per cent of adults to be qualified to Level 3 by 2020.
- 14 Working towards these targets for 2020, the Government has set interim targets for 2011:
 - 79 per cent of working age people to be qualified to Level 2, and 56 per cent to Level 3, by 2011.

¹ Education and Skills Bill briefing at <http://www.number10.gov.uk/files/pdf/2.Education%20and%20Skills%20Bill.pdf>

- 15 Regional performance against these targets is considered in our Regional Strategic Analysis.
- 16 Our Regional Commissioning Plan 2008/09 sets regional targets for volume delivery of first Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications among adults. Delivery outcomes for adult achievement of first full Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications will be agreed with providers through the Summary Statement of Activity.

Definitions

- 17 A **full Level 2** qualification is equivalent to five GCSEs at grades A*–C.
- 18 A **full Level 3** qualification is equivalent to two A-levels.
- 19 A **thin** qualification is one which is relatively short and requires relatively few guided learning hours compared with a full qualification at the same level.
- 20 A **first** full Level 2 qualification is a full Level 2 or higher qualification where the learner's highest prior qualification was below this level. This includes Level 3 qualifications equivalent to a full Level 2 or higher, undertaken by learners with no prior qualification at Level 2.
Similarly, a first full Level 3 qualification is a full Level 3 or higher qualification where the learner's highest prior qualification was below this level.
- 21 **Firstness** is a measure of the proportion of learning aims at a particular level which are undertaken by learners without prior qualifications at that level.
- 22 **Adults** are defined in this paper as all people aged 19 and over. This definition differs from those used to measure progress towards PSA targets², but reflects the evidence available at regional level.

Qualification levels among adults

- 23 More people in the North East hold Level 2 qualifications than ever before. Achievement has improved faster in the North East than in England, and the proportion of the region's population qualified to Level 2 (67 per cent of working age people) is now in line with the national average.
- 24 A third of the working age population, however, are not qualified to Level 2. Estimates suggest that more than 500,000 adults living in the region don't have a Level 2 qualification³.
 - Women are less likely to have Level 2 qualifications than men.
 - Older people are less likely to have Level 2 qualifications than younger people.
 - People from BME communities are less likely to have Level 2 qualifications than white people. Adults from Bangladeshi or Pakistani communities are least likely to be qualified to Level 2.

² The 2004 PSA target measures attainment among economically active adults aged 19 to retirement. The 2007 PSA target measures attainment among adults aged 19 to retirement regardless of economic activity.

³ DIUS (2007) *Qualifications and Participation in Learning at a local level: England 2006*.

- Economically inactive adults are less likely to hold qualifications at Level 2 or above than unemployed people who are actively seeking work, who are in turn less likely to have Level 2 qualifications than those in employment⁴.
- 25 Despite improving achievement, around 313,000 adults in the region who are in employment or seeking work (27 per cent of economically active adults) still don't have a Level 2 qualification. And an estimated 189,000 economically inactive adults (52 per cent) aren't qualified to Level 2.
- 26 Achievement at Level 3 has also increased, but people living in the North East remain less likely to be qualified to Level 3 than average. 43 per cent of the region's working age population hold qualifications at this level, compared with 48 per cent in England.
- 27 50 per cent of economically active adults in the region are qualified to Level 3 or above, close to the national average. Attainment at Level 3 among economically active adults has risen faster in the region than in England⁵.

Surveys of prior qualifications of adults in FE

- 28 Historically, LSC data on the prior achievement of learners has been patchy, and our learner data has been little help in monitoring our contribution to the 2004 PSA target for adult attainment at Level 2.
- 29 To help monitor our contribution, surveys of learners' prior achievement have been commissioned annually by DfES and subsequently by the LSC since 2003. The surveys have been designed to provide results at national level, but were not intended to be robust at regional level.
- 30 The most recent research⁶ involved interviews with a representative sample of 3,007 learners aged 19 plus in England. 132 adult learners in the North East were interviewed as part of this main sample.
- 31 In addition, the North East sample was boosted to improve the robustness of analysis at regional level. A total of 635 interviews were completed with adult learners in the region.
- 32 The research looked at three groups of learners: adults undertaking full Level 2 qualifications in November 2006, and those undertaking thin Level 3 or full Level 3 qualifications at that time.
- 33 The survey asked learners about all qualifications they had attained before starting the course they were on, including attainment at school or college, and through work or training.
- 34 Each respondent's highest level of prior attainment was then determined, based on the methodology used in the Labour Force Survey. This is consistent with the way in which qualification levels are measured in terms of the Level 2 and Level 3 PSA targets.

⁴ ONS Census of Population 2001.

⁵ DIUS (2007) *Qualifications and Participation in Learning at a local level: England 2006*.

⁶ IFF Research Ltd (2007) *Prior Qualifications of Adult Learners in Further Education 2006/07*.

National headline findings

- 35 The survey estimates that among the 287,958 learners in England who were undertaking full Level 2, thin Level 3 or full Level 3 qualifications in November 2006, 28 per cent were studying for their first full Level 2 qualification. This represents approximately 81,000 learners who if successful would pass the Level 2 threshold.
- 36 Learners on full Level 2 provision were the most likely to be undertaking their first full Level 2 qualification (38 per cent). Those on thin Level 3 provision were least likely to be doing so (16 per cent).

Table 1: Adults undertaking first full Level 2 qualifications, England, 2003/04–2006/07

	Proportion undertaking their first full Level 2			
	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
FE full Level 2	39%	38%	38%	38%
FE full Level 3	21%	22%	22%	20%
FE thin Level 3	n/a	9%	15%	16%

Source: IFF Research Ltd (2007) *Prior Qualifications of Adult Learners in Further Education 2006/07*

- 37 The research suggests that there has been no statistically significant change since 2003/04 in the likelihood that adults in FE are undertaking their first full Level 2 qualification.

North East findings

- 38 The survey estimates that among the 17,129 adults enrolled on a full Level 2, full Level 3 or thin Level 3 course at an FE provider in the North East in November 2006, 31 per cent were studying for their first full Level 2 qualification. This represents approximately 5,300 learners who if successful would pass the Level 2 threshold.
- 39 Adult learners on full Level 2, full Level 3 or thin Level 3 courses in the North East were slightly more likely than average to be working towards a first full Level 2 qualification (31 per cent of these learners in the North East, compared with 28 per cent in England).

Table 2: Adults undertaking first full Level 2 qualifications, North East, 2006/07

	Number of learners	Proportion undertaking their first full Level 2
FE full Level 2	3,460	42%
FE full Level 3	1,433	19%
FE thin Level 3	267	34%

Source: IFF Research Ltd (2007) *Prior Qualifications of Adult Learners in Further Education 2006/07*

- 40 As is the case nationally, learners on full Level 2 courses in the North East were most likely to be working towards their first full Level 2 qualification (42 per cent).
- 41 Fewer adults on full Level 3 courses were working towards a qualification which would count as their first full Level 2 (19 per cent, a statistically significant difference).
- 42 Around a third of those on thin Level 3 courses were working towards their first full Level 2 qualification. This is not a statistically significant difference from the other two groups.

Profile of learners undertaking their first full Level 2

- 43 The characteristics of adult learners working towards their first full Level 2 qualification in the North East broadly reflected the characteristics of all adult learners on full Level 2, full Level 3 and thin Level 3 courses.
- 44 Adult learners working towards their first full Level 2 qualification in November 2006 in the North East were typically:
- female
 - older than those already qualified to Level 2
 - white
 - on part-time courses
 - economically active.

Table 3: Characteristics of adults undertaking first full Level 2 qualifications, North East, 2006/07

	FE full Level 2		FE full Level 3		FE thin Level 3	
	All adult learners	First full Level 2 learners	All adult learners	First full Level 2 learners	All adult learners	First full Level 2 learners
Male	43%	41%	36%	28%	44%	26%
Female	57%	59%	64%	72%	56%	74%
19–24 years old	30%	20%	44%	25%	33%	30%
25–44 years old	53%	56%	46%	61%	38%	24%
45 years old – retirement	16%	23%	10%	12%	24%	29%
Over retirement age	1%	1%	–	2%	5%	17%
White	95%	95%	91%	89%	97%	100%
Black and minority ethnic	3%	2%	7%	9%	–	–
Ethnicity not stated	1%	2%	2%	2%	3%	–
Full-time learners	22%	22%	44%	41%	21%	20%
Part-time learners	78%	78%	56%	59%	79%	80%
Economically active	90%	90%	91%	83%	82%	69%
Economically inactive	10%	10%	9%	17%	18%	31%

Source: IFF Research Ltd (2007) *Prior Qualifications of Adult Learners in Further Education 2006/07*

- 45 The majority of adult learners on full Level 2, full Level 3 and thin Level 3 courses in the region held prior qualifications at Level 2 or above. In particular, adults on thin Level 3 courses were often qualified to Level 3 or above (55 per cent). More than a quarter (28 per cent) of adult learners on full Level 2 courses held prior qualifications at Level 3 or above.
- 46 The prior qualifications at Level 2 or above held by adult learners in the North East were more commonly academic qualifications than vocational, with few learners holding qualifications of both kinds.

LSC data on prior qualifications of adults

Adults in FE-funded learning

An important caveat

- 47 A-levels are significantly undercounted in analysis of full Level 2 and Level 3 provision based on ILR data, because of the methodology used to aggregate A-levels delivered over two years as distinct AS and A2 qualifications to equivalent NVQ levels. A-levels are therefore also undercounted in analysis of firstness based on ILR data.
- 48 This issue is particularly significant in provider-level analysis. Providers whose balance and mix of provision tends towards A-levels are disproportionately affected.
- 49 The Management Information Governance Board is considering proposals to change the methodology used to aggregate A-level qualifications to equivalent NVQ levels, which will enable more robust analysis of full Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications, and of firstness.
- 50 In the meantime, analysis of firstness in FE-funded provision should be considered indicative, rather than definitive.

Adults undertaking first full Level 2 qualifications in FE-funded learning

- 51 ILR analysis suggests a higher degree of firstness among adult learners in FE-funded provision in the North East than that indicated by the survey.
- 52 ILR analysis also suggests that the degree of firstness among adult learners in FE-funded provision in the North East compares favourably with national averages.
- 53 According to the ILR, among the 28,223 adults who participated in FE-funded full Level 2, full Level 3 or thin Level 3 courses in the North East in 2006/07, 38 per cent were studying for their first full Level 2 qualification. This represents over 11,300 learners who if successful would pass the Level 2 threshold⁷.
- 54 In particular, ILR analysis suggests a higher proportion of adults on FE-funded full Level 2 courses in the North East are undertaking their first full Level 2 than the proportion indicated by the survey.

⁷ Individualised Learner Record 2006/07 F05.

Table 4: Adults undertaking FE-funded first full Level 2 qualifications, 2006/07

	North East		England
	Number of learners	Proportion undertaking their first full Level 2	Proportion undertaking their first full Level 2
FE full Level 2	17,086	53%	50%
FE full Level 3	11,077	21%	23%
FE thin Level 3	60	23%	18%

Source: Individualised Learner Record 2006/07 F05

55 ILR analysis suggests a lower proportion of adults on FE-funded thin Level 3 courses in the North East are undertaking their first full Level 2 than the proportion indicated by the survey. This difference is likely to be due to the small number of learners on these courses, where modest differences in the number of learners undertaking first Level 2 qualifications are magnified in percentage terms.

Growth in first full Level 2 qualifications

56 The continuing shift in FE-funded provision in the region towards full Level 2 courses includes a particular shift towards *first* full Level 2 qualifications.

57 According to the ILR, 38 per cent of adults undertaking FE-funded full Level 2, full Level 3 or thin Level 3 qualifications in the region in 2005/06 had prior qualifications below Level 2. This proportion rose to 40 per cent in 2006/07.

58 Between 2005/06 and 2006/07, the number of adults undertaking FE-funded full Level 2, full Level 3 or thin Level 3 qualifications in the North East increased by 7 per cent. Among them, the number of adults who were undertaking first full Level 2 qualifications rose by 15 per cent.

59 This growth in firstness among learners in full Level 2, full Level 3 and thin Level 3 qualifications was not as pronounced in the North East as in England as a whole, where the degree of firstness has historically been lower and there has been more room for improvement.

First full Level 2 qualifications and fee remission

60 Almost three quarters of adults undertaking first full Level 2 qualifications in FE-funded provision in the North East in 2006/07 (73 per cent) had fees remitted through the Level 2 entitlement. This compared with just over half (57 per cent) in 2005/06.

61 15 per cent had fees remitted for another reason, such as receipt of income-related state benefits. This was a fall from 21 per cent in 2005/06.

- 62 3 per cent of adults undertaking first full Level 2 qualifications in FE-funded provision in the North East in 2006/07 appear not to have had their fees remitted⁸. This was a similar proportion to that in 2005/06.
- 63 Some 678 adults in FE-funded provision in the North East in 2006/07 were flagged in the ILR as having fees remitted through the Level 2 entitlement, but were not undertaking a full Level 2 qualification. This was an increase of 17 per cent compared with 2005/06.

Differences by institution

- 64 There are significant differences in the degree of firstness among adult learners in FE-funded provision in different providers in the North East.
- 65 Patterns of growth in FE-funded full Level 2, full Level 3 and thin Level 3 provision, and in the number of learners undertaking first full Level 2 qualifications, also vary across different providers.
- 66 This reflects the nature of the provision at different institutions, as well differences in institutional practices relating to adult qualifications and fee remission.
- 67 Significantly, comparisons between providers are also affected by the undercounting of A-levels in analysis of full Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications, and firstness, based on ILR data.

Planned delivery

- 68 According to the LSC's Planning and Modelling system (PaMs), we planned to deliver 16,295 adult learners on full Level 2 qualifications in FE-funded provision in 2007/08. Of these, 8,198 learners (50 per cent) would undertake a first full Level 2 qualification. This represents a slight fall on the degree of firstness achieved in 2006/07 (53 per cent).
- 69 The Regional Commissioning Plan 2008/09 expresses our aspiration to increase firstness rates. The plan sets volume targets for first full Level 2 and Level 3 achievements. Provider allocations will include an element relating to first Level 2 and Level 3 achievement volumes in Adult Learner Responsive provision (reflected in PaMs).
- 70 Although the Regional Commissioning Plan does not set specific targets for improved firstness rates, and these are not explicitly reflected in provider allocations, low firstness rates will be considered a contract compliance issue.

⁸ These adults are not flagged in the Individualised Learner Record as having their fees remitted. This may be a coding issue, rather than an indication that they have paid fees.

Table 5: Adults undertaking FE-funded first full Level 2 qualifications, 2005/06 and 2006/07

	North East						England					
	2005/06			2006/07			Change 2005/06–2006/07			Change 2005/06–2006/07		
	Number of learners	Number undertaking their first full Level 2	Proportion undertaking their first full Level 2	Number of learners	Number undertaking their first full Level 2	Proportion undertaking their first full Level 2	Change in number of learners	Change in number undertaking their first full Level 2	Change in proportion undertaking their first full Level 2 (percentage points)	Change in number of learners	Change in number undertaking their first full Level 2	Change in proportion undertaking their first full Level 2 (percentage points)
FE full Level 2	15,869	7,908	50%	17,086	8,981	53%	+8%	+14%	+2.7	+9%	+62%	+16.6
FE full Level 3	10,261	1,966	19%	11,077	2,343	21%	+8%	+19%	+2.0	-3%	+41%	+7.1
FE thin Level 3	165	25	15%	60	14	23%	-64%	-44%	+8.2	-42%	-22%	+4.6

Source: Individualised Learner Record 2005/06 F05, 2006/07 F05

Adults in Train to Gain provision

- 71 ILR data on EQ8 and Train to Gain provision is incomplete, and we cannot test the historical impact that delivery of Train to Gain might have had on firstness rates in FE-funded provision among providers delivering learning funded through both streams⁹.
- 72 4,760 adults in the North East achieved a full Level 2 qualification through Train to Gain between April 2006 and July 2007, and 250 achieved a full Level 3. Achievement at these levels has been better than expected, at 105 per cent against profile to August 2007 – higher than in any other region¹⁰.

Adults in Work Based Learning

- 73 Learners aged 19–25 years old who started full Level 2 and Level 3 WBL programmes in 2006/07 in the North East were more likely to be undertaking a first Level 2 than the national average.
- 65 per cent of 19–25 year olds starting Apprenticeships in the North East in 2006/07 were undertaking a first full Level 2, compared with 60 per cent in England.
 - 95 per cent of 19–25 year olds starting NVQ-only WBL programmes at Level 2 in the North East in 2006/07 were undertaking a first full Level 2, compared with 90 per cent in England.
 - 26 per cent of 19–25 year olds starting Advanced Apprenticeships in the North East in 2006/07 did not have prior qualifications at Level 2, compared with 21 per cent in England.
 - Very few 19–25 year olds started NVQ-only WBL programmes at Level 3 in 2006/07, and analysis of their prior qualifications is not possible.

Paper creator Andrew Rowell
Date created 17 October 2007
Publication no. LSC-P-NER-080007

⁹ One hypothesis is that some adults who might previously have undertaken FE-funded learning have instead participated in Train to Gain provision delivered by the same provider, thereby depressing that provider's firstness rates. It will be easier to test this hypothesis in future, as more complete ILR data on Train to Gain provision in 2007/08 becomes available. The shift to Demand Led Funding models will also facilitate similar analysis.

¹⁰ LSC Train to Gain Regional Data Book, Period 16 (April 2006–July 2007).