

## **Firstness Rates for Full Level 2 and Full Level 3 Achievements**

### **Introduction**

1. This article explains how we determine and use 'firstness rates' to count government funded learners that achieve their first full Level 2 or first full Level 3 qualification.

### **Measuring Firstness**

2. Administrative data returned by Further Education colleges and training providers through the Individualised Learner Record (ILR) allows us to measure the volume of full Level 2 and 3 qualifications achieved.
3. We can also calculate, from the Prior Qualifications Survey (PQS), a "firstness rate". This rate represents the proportion of learners that have achieved a full Level 2 or 3 achievement for the first time – implying that before they achieved their qualification, they only held qualifications at a lower level.
4. Applying this firstness rate to the volume of full Level 2 and 3 qualifications achieved from the ILR allows us to produce an estimate of the total volume of learners achieving a first full level 2 or 3 qualification.
5. More detail on the PQS and the ILR is given below.

### **The Prior Qualifications Survey**

6. The Prior Qualifications Survey (PQS) is a survey of adult learners who are studying a full Level 2 or 3 qualification in further education and is conducted on behalf of the Skills Funding Agency and Young People's Learning Agency. The survey is a telephone interview using a representative sample of learners, whose information is taken from the ILR. The latest PQS sampled 9,000 adults in learning during November 2009; 3,000 from each of Adult Learner Responsive (ALR), Train to Gain (TtG) and Apprenticeships.
7. The survey consists of around five minutes of detailed questions. Respondents are first asked to indicate whether they had achieved any qualifications from school, college or university, from an apprenticeship, through work or government schemes or through any other sources. Those who confirmed that they had achieved a prior qualification from these sources were read a list of qualifications and asked to confirm whether or not they had achieved each of these, and to give details of any other qualifications (including those achieved outside of the UK) not appearing on this list. From this list of qualifications

achieved and answers to supplementary questions regarding the number and level attained, a highest level of qualification held was assigned to each respondent.

8. The resultant firstness rates from the PQS for the latest year are shown below. The sample size is shown as well as a 95% confidence interval. A confidence interval is used to indicate how reliable the estimate is; the smaller the confidence interval the more reliable the estimate is. For example the first row for full level 2 in FE, has a sample mean firstness rate of 39% and we can be confident that the true firstness rate for all learners would lie within the confidence interval of 2.5%, i.e. between 36.5% and 41.5%.

**Table 1: Results from Prior Qualifications Survey, November 2009**

| Learning route    | Qualification Level | Sample size | Firstness Rate | 95% Confidence interval |
|-------------------|---------------------|-------------|----------------|-------------------------|
| Further Education | Full Level 2        | 1,505       | 39%            | ± 2.5%                  |
| Further Education | Full Level 3        | 1,499       | 56%            | ± 2.5%                  |
| Train to Gain     | Full Level 2        | 1,500       | 37%            | ± 2.4%                  |
| Train to Gain     | Full Level 3        | 1,500       | 56%            | ± 2.5%                  |
| Apprenticeships   | Full Level 2        | 1,500       | 25%            | ± 2.2%                  |
| Apprenticeships   | Full Level 3        | 1,500       | 49%            | ± 2.5%                  |

### Comparing the PQS to the ILR

9. The ILR collects information on prior attainment of learners, where a learner or a training provider can declare the level of learning they have previously achieved.
10. The PQS in 2009/10 reported on the differences between the prior qualification level recorded through the survey compared to the corresponding ILR data on prior attainment. The learners' responses to PQS were compared to the same learners' data in the ILR. The results showed that for some learners there were differences in the two data sources. Table 2 below shows the results of comparing learners' prior qualification levels on the PQS to those collected on the ILR.

**Table 2: Prior Qualification Levels on the PQS compared to the ILR**

|                                  | Base* | ILR and survey measure the same | ILR higher | Survey measure higher | Survey inconclusive** |
|----------------------------------|-------|---------------------------------|------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Row percentages</i>           |       |                                 |            |                       |                       |
| Adult Learner Responsive Level 2 | 1,181 | 41%                             | 13%        | 41%                   | 4%                    |
| Adult Learner Responsive Level 3 | 1,277 | 43%                             | 11%        | 42%                   | 4%                    |
| Train to Gain Level 2            | 1,476 | 36%                             | 10%        | 50%                   | 4%                    |
| Train to Gain Level 3            | 1,474 | 40%                             | 9%         | 46%                   | 5%                    |
| Apprenticeships Level 2          | 1,470 | 31%                             | 10%        | 54%                   | 5%                    |
| Apprenticeships Level 3          | 1,475 | 31%                             | 9%         | 51%                   | 9%                    |

\*Base - All records with prior attainment level data provided on the ILR

\*\* 'Survey inconclusive' refers to cases where the level of the highest prior qualification as recorded in the survey cannot be definitively determined.

## Firstness Rates

11. Consideration of the results of the two data sources shows that;

- The PQS uses more detailed questioning than the ILR, and asks up to around 30 questions (depending on the type of qualifications held) rather than only a few on the ILR.
- The ILR is completed by the provider based on earlier paperwork or conversations with the learner, whereas the PQS is completed by direct and detailed questioning of the learner himself/herself.
- Comparison of the PQS and the ILR results for the same learner show different results in a large number of cases.
- The PQS has produced firstness rates for a number of years that are consistent.
- The PQS samples are representative of the ILR (that is the learners surveyed in the PQS were randomly selected from all the Level 2 and Level 3 learners who were recorded on the ILR). Additionally the firstness rates reported on the ILR by those who we subsequently surveyed on the PQS were very close to the overall ILR firstness of all Level 2 and Level 3 learners.
- Labour Force Survey analysis of people who are currently studying for a full level 2 qualification found that firstness is around 40%. This is similar to the PQS results.

12. The conclusion of this analysis is that whilst the completeness has improved, the accuracy of the information in the ILR is not suitable for the purpose of measuring the firstness rate. The PQS results are a more reliable information source and therefore should be used to measure firstness.

13. Table 3 below sets out the levels of firstness which are applied to full Level 2 and 3 achievements from the ILR and the source of the rates used. It shows the rates used for full Level 2 and Level 3 learning, and the rate applied to those learners who are Level 3 ‘jumpers’ – i.e. they are undertaking a full Level 3 qualification without having a prior qualification at Level 2.

**Table 3: Firstness Rates and Their Source, by Funding Stream**

| Funding stream                       | Year    |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
|--------------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
|                                      | 2002/03 | 2003/04 | 2004/05 | 2005/06 | 2006/07 | 2007/08 | 2008/09 | 2009/10 |
| <b>FE (including Ufi and ASL)</b>    |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
| Level 2                              | 39%     | 39%     | 38%     | 38%     | 38%     | 37%     | 39%     | 39%     |
| Level 3                              | 55%     | 55%     | 54%     | 54%     | 54%     | 56%     | 57%     | 56%     |
| Level 3 jumpers                      | 21%     | 21%     | 22%     | 22%     | 20%     | 19%     | 20%     | 20%     |
| <b>Apprenticeships</b>               |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
| Level 2                              | 32%     | 32%     | 32%     | 31%     | 30%     | 29%     | 28%     | 25%     |
| Level 3                              | 46%     | 46%     | 46%     | 47%     | 48%     | 49%     | 50%     | 48%     |
| Level 3 jumpers                      | 12%     | 12%     | 12%     | 13%     | 13%     | 13%     | 14%     | 13%     |
| <b>Train to Gain (including ETP)</b> |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
| Level 2                              | n/a     | 54%     | 54%     | 63%     | 79%     | 69%     | 47%     | 37%     |
| Level 3                              | n/a     | n/a     | n/a     | 95%     | 95%     | 83%     | 64%     | 56%     |
| Level 3 jumpers                      | n/a     | n/a     | n/a     | 75%     | 75%     | 51%     | 26%     | 23%     |

**Source**

|  |   |
|--|---|
|  | Prior Qualifications Survey (PQS)   |
|  | Train to Gain Evaluation Survey   |
|  | Employer Training Pilot (ETP) Survey  |
|  | There was no survey for this year, therefore the first year of the survey data is used        |
|  | Not applicable - ETP started in 2003/4 and TTG started in April 2006. There was no L3 in ETP. |
|  | No survey. Rates have been linearly interpolated between 2004/05 and 2008/09                  |

14. For Further Education, the firstness rates in the above table were taken from the PQS. As there was no survey in 2002/03 the next year’s firstness rate was used for that year. Any Full Level 2 or 3 learners in University for Industry/Learn direct and Adult Safeguarded Learning use the FE rate. This is because there are so few learners in these funding streams and a survey for this small population would not be cost-effective. The qualifications taken by these learners would be similar to those in the FE funding stream.

15. For Apprenticeships the PQS was only conducted in 2004/05 and 2008/09. The firstness rates from the 2004/5 and 2008/9 PQS surveys are fairly similar. The ILR firstness from 2005/06 to 2007/08 has remained consistent but considerably higher than the PQS results when learners with “unknown prior attainment level” were treated as first/non-first in the same proportion as the “knowns”. We therefore feel that it is correct to extrapolate the firstness between the two PQS surveys rather than use the ILR for the missing years, because the ILR is not in line with the PQS.

16. Train to Gain (TTG) began part way through the 2005/06 academic year, in April 2006. There were two large TTG evaluations carried out in 2006/07 and 2007/08 which asked about prior qualifications in a similar manner to the PQS. The firstness rates obtained from these two surveys has been used in table 3. PQS surveys were also carried out for those two years. The PQS and TTG evaluation firstness results were similar, but the TTG evaluation results were used in table 3 as the sample sizes were much larger. There was no TTG

evaluation in 2008/09, so the PQS firstness was used (with a higher sample size than in previous years).

17. The Employer Training Pilot (ETP) was the predecessor of Train to Gain. It began in 2003/04 and ran for three years. Only Level 2 qualifications were delivered. There were two evaluations carried out in 2004/05 and 2005/06 which asked about prior qualifications in a similar manner to the PQS. The firstness obtained from these surveys has been used in table 3.

### **Future Plans**

18. It is very difficult to collect prior attainment through the ILR given, as mentioned above, the diversity in processes providers need to utilise to collect this information from individuals and also the level of accuracy you can reasonably expect from self reporting. However, we wish to move towards using the administrative source for measuring firstness rates given the benefits of coverage and costs and are progressing several initiatives to improve the accuracy of this data. In the interim we will continue to use the PQS surveys as a basis for estimating firstness rates.

### **Feedback and Queries**

19. If you have any feedback and queries on this document please contact the Service Desk on 08702 670001 or [servicedesk@thedata-service.org.uk](mailto:servicedesk@thedata-service.org.uk)