

Firstness Rates for Full Level 2 and Full Level 3 Achievements

Introduction

1. This article clarifies the 'firstness rates' used for measuring the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) funded First Full Level 2 and First Full Level 3 achievements. This paper replaces the first version of the paper which was released in June 2009. These achievements contribute to some of the Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets that BIS have.

The Targets¹

2. The current adult **Level 2 PSA target** is for 79% of working age adults² to be qualified to at least level 2, by 2010/11.
3. People are counted as being qualified to level 2 and above if they have achieved at least either 5 GCSEs grades A* - C or equivalent (e.g. O levels, CSE Grades 1s), two A/S levels, or any equivalent qualification in the Qualifications and Credit Framework.
4. The current adult **Level 3 PSA target** is for 56% of working age adults qualified to at least full level 3, by 2010/11.
5. People are counted as being qualified to level 3 or above if they have achieved either at least 2 A levels grades A-E, 4 AS levels graded A-E, or any equivalent qualification in the Qualifications and Credit Framework.
6. The targets count people who have attained the relevant level of qualifications. Performance against the target is strongly influenced by the number of people gaining qualifications at Level 2 or 3 for the first time. This is known as achievement of a 'First Full Level 2' or 'First Full Level 3' qualification. The proportion of Full Level 2 achievements that are First Full Level 2s is known as the 'Level 2 Firstness Rate', and similarly for Level 3 achievements.
7. The Labour Force Survey (LFS) is used to measure progress against these two PSA targets. Performance against these targets is published in the Post 16 Further Education SFR which is available at <http://www.thedataservice.org.uk/statistics>

¹ Further information on the targets can be found at http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/d/pbr_csr07_psa2.pdf

² Working age adults are all women and men aged 19 to State Pension age, including both economically active and inactive.

LSC Operational Target

8. The PSA targets are defined in terms of a proportion of the population being qualified to a certain level. The Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) (formerly the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills) translates the PSA targets into the number of qualifications that are needed to deliver this target, and the number of these that the LSC are required to deliver.
9. This provides an LSC operational target for the purposes of planning, budgeting, and performance management of providers. This operational target is published as part of the Statement of Priorities, alongside the volumes of provision that it plans to contribute towards the national PSA targets, based on a set of assumptions and the funding available.

Measurement of the LSC Operational Target

10. The LFS is used to measure progress against the PSA targets. However, administrative data provided by the LSC's Individual Learner Records (ILR) allows the LSC to measure the volume of Full Level 2 and 3 achievements. These can be combined with survey information on "firstness rates" i.e. the proportion of full level 2 or 3 achievements that are first, to come up with estimates of the LSC contribution to these PSA targets.
11. There are two sources of information to measure the firstness rates to use to measure the contribution of the LSC towards the PSA targets. These are the Prior Qualifications Survey and the ILR dataset.

The Prior Qualifications Survey

12. The Prior Qualifications Survey (PQS) is a survey of adult learners who are studying at full level 2 or full level 3 in further education and conducted on behalf of the LSC. The survey is a telephone interview using a representative sample of learners, whose information is taken from the ILR. The methodology is very similar to the LFS which is used to measure the PSA target.
13. 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 was assigned to each respondent.

14. 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 for FE, has a sample mean firstness rate of 39.2% and 95% of the time the true firstness rate of all learners will lie within the confidence interval i.e. between 36.6% and 41.8%.

Table 1: Results from Prior Qualifications Survey 2008/09

| Learning route | Level | Sample size | Firstness Rate | 95% Confidence interval |
|-------------------|--------------|-------------|----------------|-------------------------|
| Further Education | Full Level 2 | 1,403 | 39% | ± 2.6 |
| Further Education | Full level 3 | 1,417 | 57% | ± 2.6 |
| Train to Gain | Full Level 2 | 740 | 47% | ± 3.6 |
| Train to Gain | Full level 3 | 260 | 64% | ± 6.1 |
| Apprenticeships | Full Level 2 | 475 | 28% | ± 4.5 |
| Apprenticeships | Full level 3 | 525 | 50% | ± 4.3 |

Note: Train to Gain is the November 2008 sample

Prior Attainment in the ILR

15. 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. There is also an option for “not known”. The completeness of this information in the ILR has increased over recent years from 57% of Full Level 2 learners having “not known” prior attainment in 2004/05 to 17% in 2007/08.
16. The PQS in 2008/09 reported on the differences between the survey measure and the 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. For example, the FE PQS survey agreed with the ILR level in 46% of cases; in a further 41% of cases, the ILR indicated a lower level of prior achievement; and in 13% of cases, the ILR indicated a higher prior achievement than suggested by the respondent on the PQS.

Firstness Rates used to measure the LSC Operational Target

17. The LFS is used to measure the progress against the PSA Target, however to measure the contribution of the LSC a firstness rate is applied to information from the ILR on Full Level 2 achievements and Full Level 3 achievements. This firstness rate can be taken from the PQS or the ILR.

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

- The PQS uses more detailed questioning than the ILR, which is based on the LFS 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 (i.e. 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.

19. The conclusion of the 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 are therefore used to measure the contribution to target.

20. Table 2 below sets out the levels of firstness which are applied to the operational target from 2002/03 onwards, 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 2: Firstness Rates by Academic Year and Funding Stream

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

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 |

Note, due to changes in data collections as a result of Demand Led Funding, Further Education is Learner Responsive from 2008/09.

21. 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 less than 15,000 learners in these funding stream which is under 10% of the FE full L2 and L3 learners and a survey for this small population would not be cost-effective. The qualifications taken by these learners would be similar to the FE funding stream.
22. 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.
23. Train to Gain (TTG) began part way in 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 obtained from these two surveys has been used in table 2. 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 2 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). Note that in table 1, the confidence intervals for L3 are wider than for L2 as the sample size is lower.

24. 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 2.

Future Plans

25. 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 to move to this in due course. In the interim we will continue to use the PQS surveys as a basis for estimating firstness rates.

Feedback and Queries

26. If you have any feedback and queries on this document please contact the Service Desk on 08702 670001 or servicedesk@thedataservice.org.uk