



National Research and Development Centre
for adult literacy and numeracy



The
University
Of
Sheffield.

***‘Stepping Stones’:
progression from non-counting provision to
counting provision within Skills for Life***

Quantitative strand

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Project team and authorship

When working on the project, all members of the team were based at the University of Sheffield.

Professor Greg Brooks, project director

Dr Sammy Rashid, project statistician (to March 2007)

Dr Mark Pilling (now at University of Manchester), project statistician (from March 2007)

Jacquie Gillott, project secretary

Sammy Rashid (25% of the research, 0% of authorship) did a great deal of the groundwork (learning the mysteries of the (then) Learning and Skills Council and HEFCE files, getting the data into a suitable form for analysis, doing some initial analyses, and providing clean files for his successor), and taught Mark Pilling all he needed to know to do the main analyses. Mark Pilling carried out all the remaining analyses, and provided all the Tables and Figures (70% of the research, 30% of authorship). Greg Brooks directed the project, including specifying the statistical analyses, wrote all the original text of the report in 2008, and lightly updated it in 2013 (5% of the research, 70% of authorship).

Acknowledgments

The project team wish to record their gratitude to

- the (then) Department for Education and Skills, for funding the project via NRDC
- the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, for funding publication of this report
- Anita Hallam, Leigh Smith and Joy Loveridge of LSC for facilitating access to the LSC data, and
- Mark Gittoes of HEFCE for providing the file which enabled us to identify unique individuals within the LSC databases.

Independent peer review

The report was independently peer-reviewed by Dr Andrew Jenkins (Institute of Education, University of London) and Prof. Alison Wolf (King's College London).

1. Summary

1.1 Context

The government established the *Skills for Life* strategy for improving the basic skills of adults in England in 2001. Basic skills comprise literacy, numeracy and ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages). The government also set targets for the number of adults it wanted to achieve a first basic skills qualification (750,000 by 2004, 1,500,000 by 2007, and 2,250,000 by 2010), and criteria for the types of qualification, and therefore courses, which would count towards those targets. The courses which ‘counted’ were, essentially, all literacy, numeracy and ESOL courses with at least one learning aim for a qualification at Entry level 3 or Level 1 or Level 2 of the (then) National Qualifications Framework (NQF), except that Entry level 3 courses in Speaking and Listening did not count; nor did any courses with aims only at Entry level 2 or below. (For more detail on this see Appendix A.) At an early stage, all learning aims in the Learning and Skills Council’s databases were flagged as counting or non-counting in this sense and, as explained in Appendix B, for this project those flags were taken as the operational definition of counting and non-counting provision.

The project explored the amount of progression from adult literacy, language (= ESOL) and numeracy (ALLN) *Skills for Life* provision which did not count towards the national qualification targets to provision which did count towards those targets. The project aimed to provide both some quantitative facts about the amount of such progression, and some qualitative understanding of the factors influencing it. The quantitative strand was undertaken by a team at the University of Sheffield, and the qualitative strand by researchers at Lancaster University and the Institute of Education, University of London. This is the report of the quantitative strand; for the report of the qualitative strand see Hodge and Koutsoubou (2015).

One implication of the way ‘progression’ was defined for this project needs to be explained immediately. ‘Progression’ might normally be taken to imply movement up the levels of the NQF, but for present purposes policy-makers and administrators were interested in all forms of progression, including movement sideways or even down in terms of NQF levels.

The project was commissioned by the (then) Department for Education and Skills in 2005, and this report was essentially complete by August 2008; the detailed statistical analyses required explain the length of time. To prepare for publication, some further editing was done in November-December 2009 and in March-May 2013.

The analyses in this report cover the period 2000/01 to 2004/05, the academic years for which validated Learning and Skills Council (LSC) data were available at the point when the main analyses were being conducted. The updates in 2009 and 2013 could not encompass carrying the analyses on from 2004/05 to further academic years; that would have required a great deal of time and further funding, and both of the statisticians who had worked on the project had by then moved on to other work.

The project as a whole was conceived of as having possibly important implications for policy questions relevant to *Skills for Life*, for example: Was the amount of progression high or low? What factors might influence adult learners to move on, or not? It was commissioned, and early drafts of this report were available, in time for the findings to be considered during the refreshing of the *Skills for Life* strategy in 2007-08.

1.2 Research questions

For the original wording in the project proposal of the research questions to be tackled by the project, and an account of those tackled by each strand, see Appendix C.

This report is organised in terms of the questions the quantitative strand attempted to answer; these are listed below in the order in which they were tackled. They are based on qs. 1, 2, 3, 5 and 6 in the project proposal, but re-ordered, expanded and re-worded in order to sequence them more logically and make them more clearly answerable from the available data:

1. How many learners enrolled on ALLN courses between August 2000 and June 2005?
2. How many enrolled with one or more non-counting aims and not simultaneously or previously with a counting aim, and what percentage did they represent of all those who enrolled?
3. How many of those who enrolled with only non-counting aims enrolled for literacy / ESOL / numeracy / any combination of these?
4. How many of those who enrolled with only non-counting aims enrolled at Entry level / Level 1 / Level 2?
5. Overall and within each subject, how many of those who enrolled with only non-counting aims enrolled at Entry level / Level 1 / Level 2?
6. Overall and within each of the subjects and levels, how many of those who first enrolled with only non-counting aims later enrolled with at least one counting aim, and what percentage did the latter represent of the former?
7. What was the profile (in terms of gender, age and ethnicity) of those who progressed to counting, and how do they compare with those who did not progress?
8. What types of course did learners who progressed come from and go on to?
9. What was the average interval and range of intervals between enrolling with only non-counting aims and progressing to counting?

1.3 Method

A full account of the methods used is given in Appendix B. Briefly, we analysed the Learning and Skills Council's databases for academic years 2000/01 to 2004/05 at the level of individual learners. Those databases were based on learning **aims**, and not on individuals, so in order to identify individuals we used a file supplied by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). We searched for each individual learner's first appearance in the databases. If on first appearance an individual had a learning aim which counted towards the government's targets for *Skills for Life*, that individual was logged but his/her data were not further analysed. If, on the other hand, on first appearance an individual had only one or more non-counting learning aims, we looked to see whether that individual turned up again later with a counting aim. Once all those who progressed (or not) from non-counting to counting had been identified, analyses were carried out of their characteristics, the subjects they had studied (literacy, English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), numeracy), and (for those who had progressed) the interval between enrolling as non-counting and enrolling as counting.

We also had separate access to data from one very large College of Further Education in the London area and used these for some comparisons with the national data.

1.4 Headline findings and conclusions

In the five academic years 2000/01-2004/05, 3.75 million learners enrolled on adult literacy, language and numeracy courses in England. Of those, 1.35 million (44%) first enrolled with only non-counting aims.

The great majority of enrolments were in literacy or ESOL (79%). Most enrolments were at Level 1 (61%).

About 13% of learners who first enrolled with only non-counting aims later enrolled with a counting aim within the period covered. The College of Further Education in London had a progression rate double this figure.

Those learners who did not progress from non-counting to counting may have achieved their personal goals on a non-counting course; some may have progressed to Level 3.

The largest single number of people progressing moved from not counting at ESOL Level 1 to counting at ESOL Entry level. Substantial numbers also progressed from not counting at ESOL Level 1 to counting at ESOL Level 1, and from not counting at ESOL Entry level to counting at ESOL Entry level. Smaller but still quite large numbers moved within levels of literacy. Other numbers were small.

By far the most frequent interval between enrolling as non-counting and enrolling as counting was one month, and most of the one-month intervals were from August to September in each year.

It seems likely that this represented strategic initial and re-enrolment of learners by providers for funding reasons, which may in turn explain why:

- more than half of all non-counting enrolments were at Level 1;
- the largest number of learners who progressed were those who went from non-counting at ESOL Level 1 to counting at ESOL Entry level; and
- the progression rate was highest each year for learners who enrolled in August.

The college in London may have had lessons for other providers. Otherwise, these quantitative findings provided few ideas for increasing progression rates, except perhaps encouraging providers to encourage learners more strongly to re-enrol with a counting aim. The accompanying qualitative report (Hodge and Koutsoubou, 2015) provides more detail.

2. Questions and answers

2.1 How many learners enrolled on ALLN courses between August 2000 and June 2005?

3,748,366

This figure represents unique individuals, i.e. each person is counted only once even if they enrolled more than once.

2.2 How many of them enrolled with one or more non-counting aims and not simultaneously or previously with a counting aim, and what percentage did they represent of all those who enrolled?

1,349,633 (43.9%)

By exclusion, the figure for those who first showed up with at least one counting aim (including those with a simultaneous non-counting aim) was 1,724,265 (56.1%) – no further analysis was done on this group.

By ‘not simultaneously or previously’ we mean ‘not in the same or any earlier calendar month’.

See Appendix B for how learning aims which were counting were distinguished from those which were not.

2.3 How many of those who first enrolled with only non-counting aims enrolled for literacy / ESOL / numeracy / any combination of these?

Table 1: Learners who enrolled with only non-counting aims, by subject

	N	%
Literacy	503707	37
ESOL	560863	42
Numeracy	116074	9
Literacy and numeracy	145923	11
Literacy and ESOL	16267	1
Numeracy and ESOL	3832	<1
All three	2967	<1
Total	1349633	100

2.4 How many of those who enrolled with only non-counting aims enrolled at Entry level / Level 1 / Level 2?

See Table 2, and note that the LSC datasets did not differentiate consistently within Entry level, so that it is impossible, here and in the rest of these analyses, to give figures for numbers of learners at Entry levels 1, 2 and 3 or for progression within Entry level.

Table 2: Learners who enrolled with only non-counting aims, by level

	N	%
Level 2	21628	2
Level 1	828363	61
Entry level	330653	24
More than one aim, in different subjects	168989	13
Total	1349633	100

N.B. In Table 2, learners who enrolled with more than one aim in different subjects are not separated by level because their aims could be at different levels. Also, learners who enrolled with aims at different levels within the same subject are analysed only at the highest level they enrolled for – see Appendix B.

2.5 Overall and within each subject, how many of those who enrolled with only non-counting aims enrolled at Entry level / Level 1 / Level 2?

See Table 3 and Figures 1 and 2.

Table 3: Learners who enrolled with only non-counting aims, by subject and level

	N	%
Literacy – Level 2	9813	1
Literacy – Level 1	361185	27
Literacy – Entry level	132709	10
Literacy sub-total	503707	37
ESOL – Level 2	7579	1
ESOL – Level 1	390743	29
ESOL – Entry level	162541	12
ESOL sub-total	560863	42
Numeracy – Level 2	4236	<1
Numeracy – Level 1	76435	6
Numeracy – Entry level	35403	3
Numeracy sub-total	116074	9
Literacy and numeracy	145923	11
Literacy and ESOL	16267	1
Numeracy and ESOL	3832	<1
All three	2967	<1
Total	1349633	100

N.B. In Table 3 and Figures 1 and 2, learners who enrolled with more than one aim in different subjects are not separated by level because their aims could be at different levels. Also, learners who enrolled with aims at different levels within the same subject are analysed only at the highest level they enrolled for – see Appendix B.

Figure 1: Learners who enrolled with only non-counting aims, by subject and level, numbers

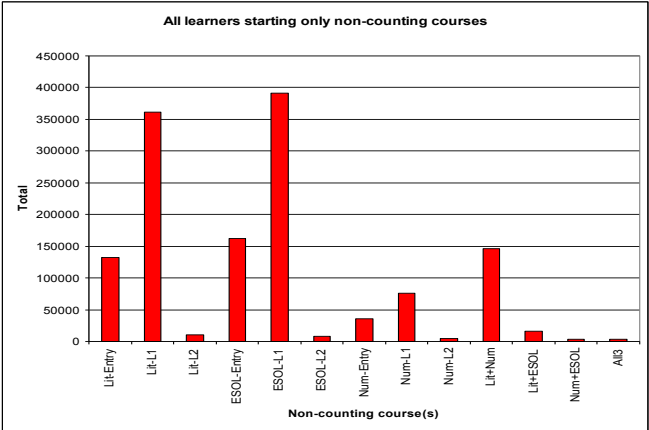
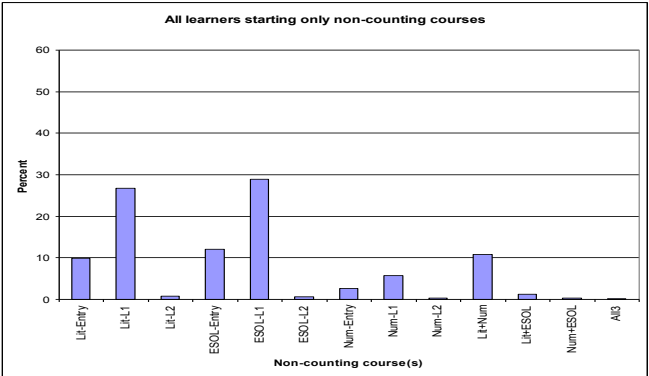


Figure 2: Learners who enrolled with only non-counting aims, by subject and level, percentages



The small numbers enrolling in numeracy and enrolling at Level 2 were not surprising. The fact that non-counting ESOL learners outnumbered non-counting literacy learners may have been at least partly due to Entry level 3 Speaking and Listening not counting (see Appendix A). Entirely unexpected was the fact that distinctly more than half of all initial non-counting enrolments were at Level 1; for some speculation on this, see section 2.10 below.

2.6 Overall and within each subject and level, how many of those who first enrolled only with non-counting aims later enrolled with at least one counting aim, and what percentage did the latter represent of the former?

See Table 4 and Figures 3 and 4.

Table 4 shows how many learners first enrolled only with non-counting aims and, within those, how many progressed to a counting aim, by month, academic year and overall. Figure 3 presents that information graphically: the blue line shows how many learners first enrolled only with non-counting aims, the red line how many of those later progressed to a counting aim, by month. Table 4 also shows those who

progressed as a percentage of those who had enrolled, by month, and Figure 4 presents that information graphically.

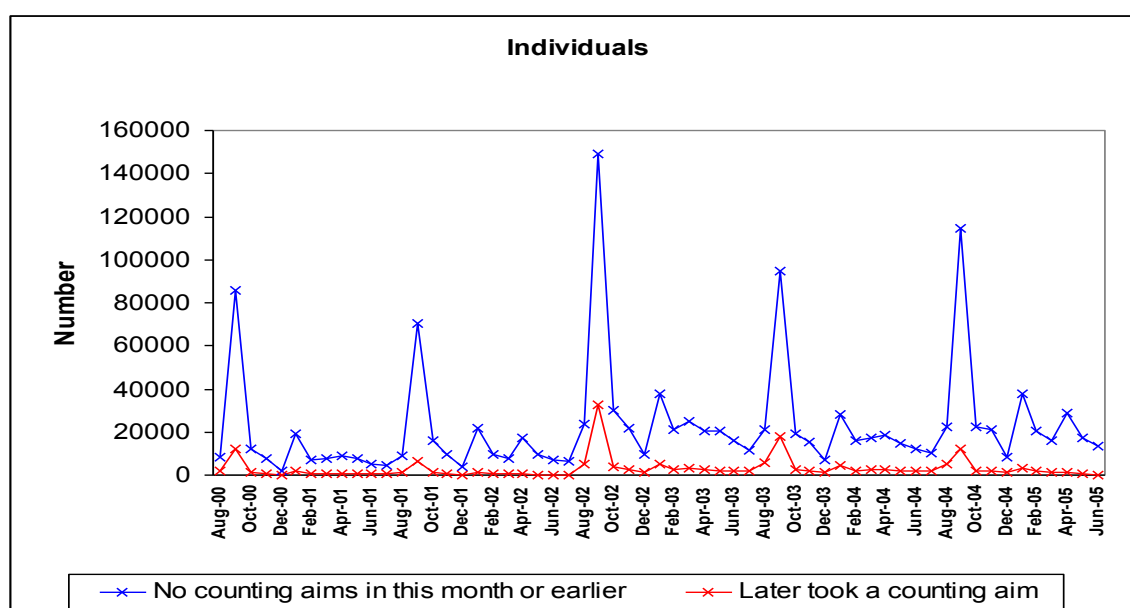
Table 4: Numbers of learners who enrolled with only non-counting aims and, within that, of those who progressed to a counting aim, by month, August 2000-June 2005, with percentages of progression

Date	(a) Numbers of learners who enrolled with only non-counting aims	(b) Numbers of learners who progressed to a counting aim	(b) as % of (a)
Aug-00	8366	1804	22%
Sep-00	85703	12357	14%
Oct-00	12058	1218	10%
Nov-00	7699	804	10%
Dec-00	1857	185	10%
Jan-01	19072	2183	11%
Feb-01	7144	668	9%
Mar-01	7788	656	8%
Apr-01	8969	885	10%
May-01	7434	589	8%
Jun-01	5115	474	9%
Jul-01	4747	806	17%
2000/01	175952	22629	13%
Aug-01	8970	1405	16%
Sep-01	70593	6267	9%
Oct-01	16053	1248	8%
Nov-01	9652	528	5%
Dec-01	4040	257	6%
Jan-02	21961	1185	5%
Feb-02	9877	494	5%
Mar-02	7918	400	5%
Apr-02	17337	655	4%
May-02	9446	220	2%
Jun-02	6725	180	3%
Jul-02	6598	166	3%
2001/02	189170	13005	7%
Aug-02	23785	5420	23%
Sep-02	148956	32769	22%
Oct-02	29963	3870	13%
Nov-02	21886	2316	11%
Dec-02	9610	1150	12%
Jan-03	38011	5411	14%
Feb-03	21003	2367	11%
Mar-03	25189	2926	12%
Apr-03	20700	2288	11%
May-03	20643	2124	10%
Jun-03	16094	1864	12%
Jul-03	11394	1902	17%
2002/03	387234	64407	17%

Table 4, cont.

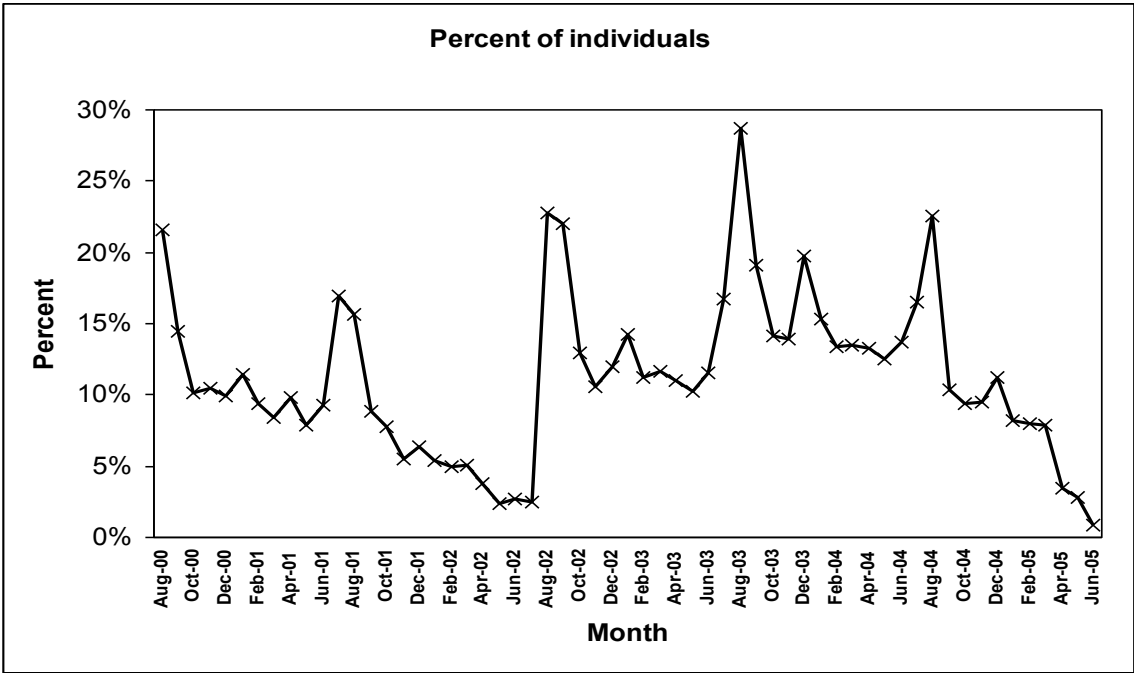
Date	(a) Numbers of learners who enrolled with only non-counting aims	(b) Numbers of learners who progressed to a counting aim	(b) as % of (a)
Aug-03	20995	6017	29%
Sep-03	94999	18107	19%
Oct-03	19069	2700	14%
Nov-03	15647	2174	14%
Dec-03	6974	1376	20%
Jan-04	28168	4304	15%
Feb-04	16175	2172	13%
Mar-04	17401	2342	13%
Apr-04	18260	2414	13%
May-04	14804	1858	13%
Jun-04	12066	1653	14%
Jul-04	9937	1646	17%
2003/04	274495	46763	17%
Aug-04	22269	5021	23%
Sep-04	114753	11861	10%
Oct-04	22241	2093	9%
Nov-04	20944	1980	9%
Dec-04	8613	963	11%
Jan-05	37630	3087	8%
Feb-05	20496	1630	8%
Mar-05	16108	1274	8%
Apr-05	28860	1004	3%
May-05	17418	488	3%
Jun-05	13450	113	1%
2004/05	322782	29514	10%
TOTAL	1349633	176318	13%

Figure 3: Numbers of learners who enrolled with only non-counting aims and, within that, of those who progressed to a counting aim, by month, August 2000-June 2005



N.B. Only alternate months are labelled.

Figure 4: Learners who progressed on to a counting aim as a percentage of those who enrolled with only non-counting aims, by month



N.B. Only alternate months are labelled.

Figure 3 shows very clearly that enrolments of learners with only non-counting aims peaked in September each year, with a minor peak each January and (in 2002 and 2005) another in April.

As can be seen from the percentages, the great majority of learners who enrolled with only non-counting aims did **not** progress to a counting aim.

The progression rate was particularly low in 2001-02 but picked up again in the next 2 years. The apparent tailing-off at the end of Figure 4 is due solely to there being very few months left in which learners could show up again. However, because there were very few relevant enrolments in the last few months (see Table 4) removing them would not significantly affect the overall progression rate of 13%.

That figure may seem surprisingly low; several considerations are relevant to it:

- The two statisticians who worked on the project (Mark Pilling and Sammy Rashid) independently wrote programs to check one subset of the analysis; their programs worked slightly differently, but came up with the same figure, so we are as sure as we can be that the figure of 13% is accurate.
- Feedback from experts in the field, including some large providers who checked their own local databases, appeared to confirm that the overall percentage was correct.
- Some providers achieve much higher progression rates – see section 3.

- It may be that many learners, especially those with busy and/or less organised lives, reached their personal goals by achieving a non-counting aim, and therefore did not feel the need to move to a counting aim; whether a requirement to take a test played any part in this cannot be known from these data.
- On the other hand, some learners did return to learning after a considerable interval – see section 2.9. Others may have progressed direct to Level 3, and would therefore have fallen outside the remit of this project.
- Particularly at lower levels, it can take learners more than one academic year to move from one level to another. Comings (2003) estimated that in the USA it took about 150 hours for learners to move up one grade level, but most learners attended provision for 70 hours a year or less. It seems probable that figures for England would be similar.

Figure 4 shows very clearly that the progression rate was highest for the August cohort of learners each year. For a suggested explanation see section 2.10 below.

2.7 What was the profile (in terms of gender, age and ethnicity) of those who progressed to counting, and how did they compare with those who did not progress?

The relevant data are shown in Figures 5-7 for literacy learners, 8-10 for ESOL learners, and 11-13 for numeracy learners; within each set of Figures the first shows gender, the second age, the third ethnicity. No other demographic information was available. In each Figure the labels for the bars should be interpreted as follows:

Non_Steppingstones	=	learners who did not progress
Steppingstones	=	learners who did progress

For example, in Figure 5 the yellow bars show the percentages of literacy learners with only non-counting aims who **did not** progress who were female (left) and male (right); the turquoise bars show the percentages of literacy learners with only non-counting aims who **did** progress who were female (left) and male (right); and so on.

Figures 5, 8 and 11 show that there were more female than male learners in all three subjects. Figures 6, 9 and 12 show that the majority of learners were in the (admittedly wide) age-range 25-59. Figures 7 and 13 show that the great majority of literacy and numeracy learners were of white ethnicity, but (as would be expected) Figure 10 shows that the great majority of ESOL learners were of other ethnicities. However, Figure 10 also shows that the largest ethnic group among ESOL learners was no longer Asian (Bangladeshi, Indian, Pakistani), as had been the case only a few years earlier, but 'Other'. No further subcategorisation of the latter group was available, but information from the quantitative data strand of the Learner Study (Brooks and Pilling, 2013; Rhys Warner *et al.*, 2008; Vorhaus *et al.*, 2009) suggests that they were largely people from the Middle East.

Essentially, all these Figures show that the demographic differences between learners who did progress and those who did not were negligible.

Figure 5: Percentages of literacy learners who did and did not progress, by gender

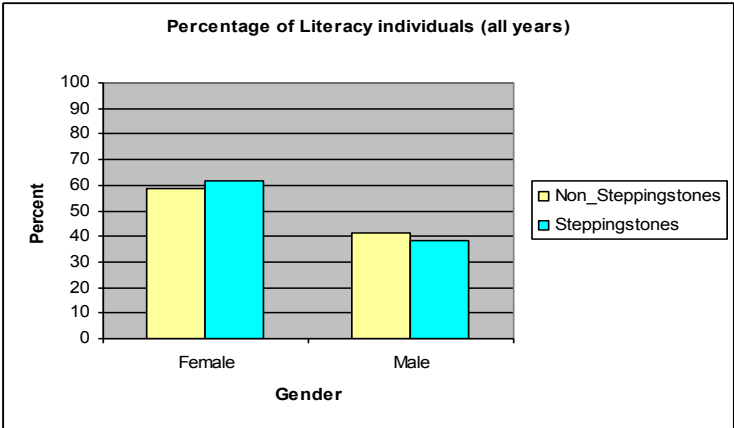


Figure 6: Percentages of literacy learners who did and did not progress, by age

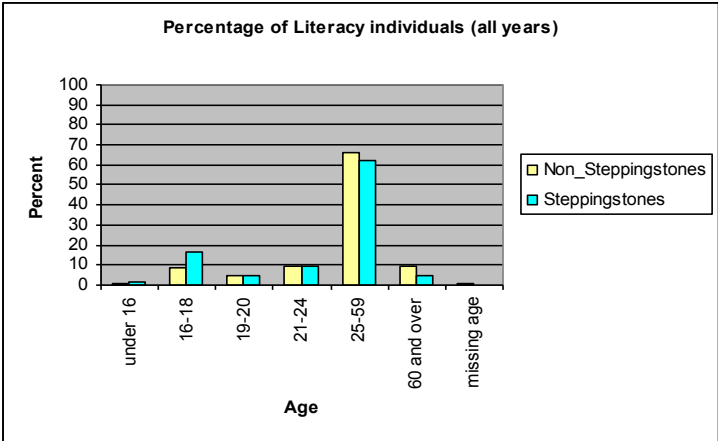


Figure 7: Percentages of literacy learners who did and did not progress, by ethnicity

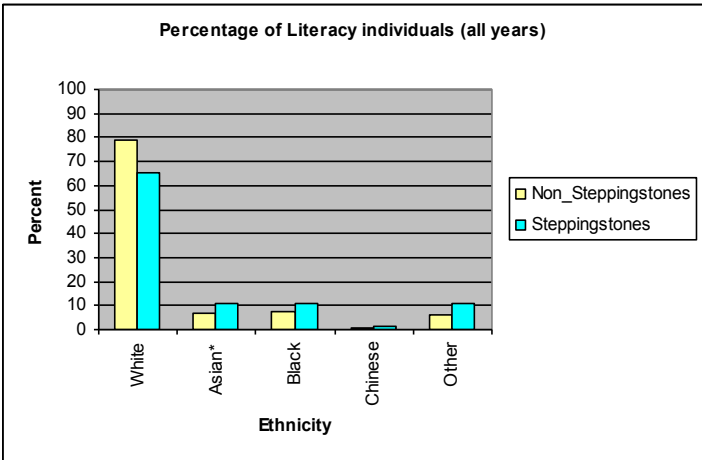


Figure 8: Percentages of ESOL learners who did and did not progress, by gender

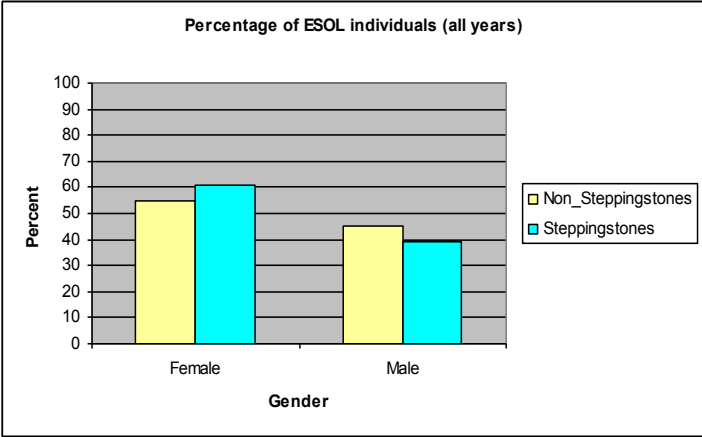


Figure 9: Percentages of ESOL learners who did and did not progress, by age

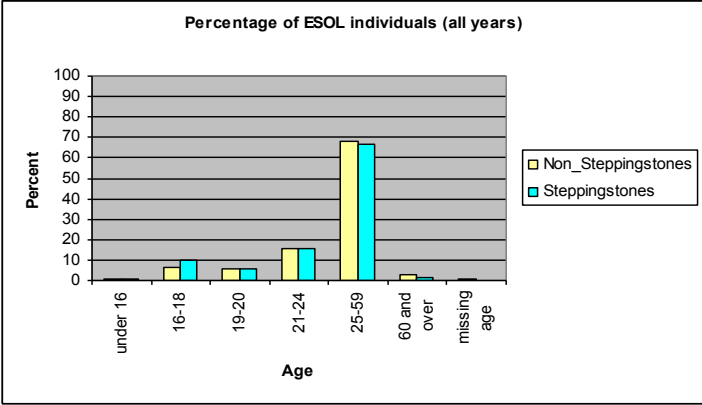


Figure 10: Percentages of ESOL learners who did and did not progress, by ethnicity

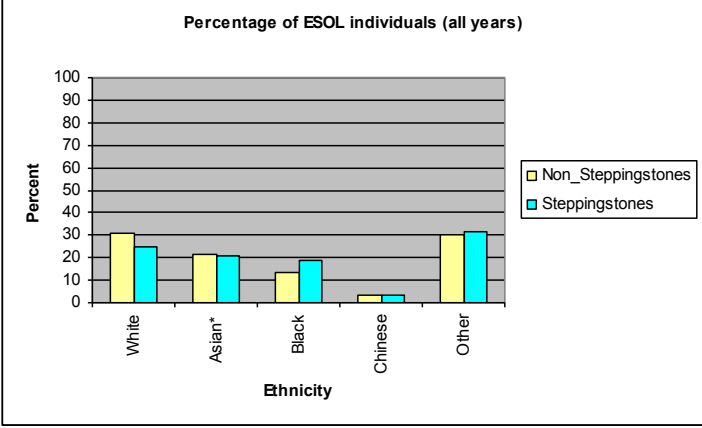


Figure 11: Percentages of numeracy learners who did and did not progress, by gender

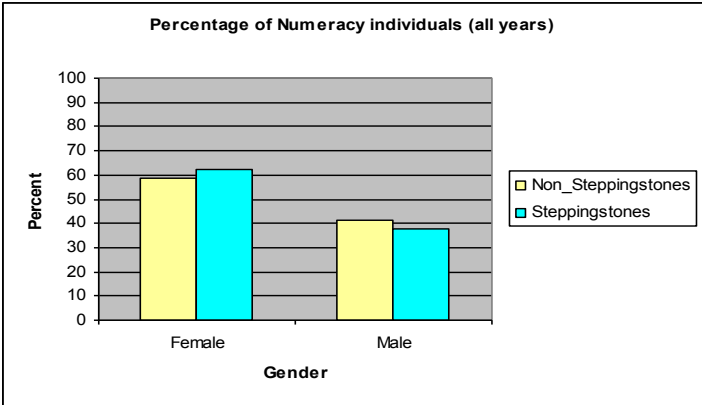


Figure 12: Percentages of numeracy learners who did and did not progress, by age

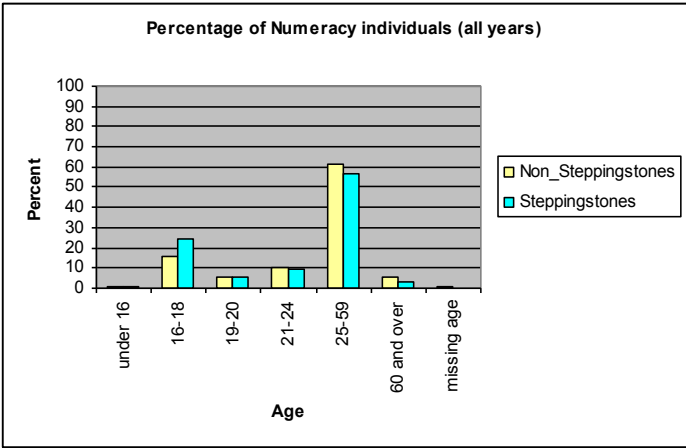


Figure 13: Percentages of numeracy learners who did and did not progress, by ethnicity

