



National Research and Development Centre  
for adult literacy and numeracy

# **Stepping stones: progression from non-counting provision to counting provision.**

**Qualitative strand**

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## **1. Introduction**

This project is exploring the relationship between literacy, numeracy and language provision which 'counts' towards national qualification targets and the provision which does not - so-called 'non-counting' provision. We wanted to identify the factors which influence learners' progression from 'non-counting' (NC) to 'counting' (C) provision. With this aim we carried out six focused case studies of adult education providers, three in the South of England and three in the North in order to gain a wide representation of different types of population, geographical differences and diverse local cultures.

Our study complements a bigger strand of quantitative analysis which worked on the ILR (Individualised Learner Record) database. The qualitative study therefore works in a complimentary manner to the quantitative results and aims to inform the numbers and explain the complex adult pathways into education, the motives and external factors that bring adults into learning or draw them out of the learning circle. The two studies are driven by the same research questions. These research questions will also be the basis of this report.

## 2. Methodology

The sites agreed to participate in our study after invitation was sent out in emailing lists or via existing contacts, for example the North sites were involved in other NRDC studies (add footnote). One South based researcher and one North based researcher carried out the research design, data collection, analysis and writing. Qualitative methods were used; in-depth interviews were carried out with managers, teachers and students of the sites. The target was 1 manager, 2 teachers and 6 learners in each site however the 6-learner number was not always attained due to last minute absences.

Analysis was carried out on a site by site basis and then as a whole data set. The coding frame used was based on the 7 research questions (see section 2.1 below). Emerging themes were recorded which inform these broad areas of exploration, and which address in particular the relationship between qualifications and motivation for learning. In addition to the coding frame based on the research questions, we also explored emerging themes and issues arising from the different types of provision and how progression is connected to institutional culture. This report of the research was written collaboratively by the two researchers.

### 2.1 Research areas

We addressed the following areas of enquiry:

- the impact of non-counting provision on progression to qualification bearing provision as explained by type of course, learners' profile and needs and provider infrastructure.
- the profile of low-skilled adults that non-counting provision attracts and the reasons they attend.
- the impact of national targets and funding on the delivery of non-counting provision and progression particularly in relation to those assessed with low level LLN skills.

The study aims to draw out two perspectives:

- 1) *Top down perspective*: how national policy and funding agendas, organisational structures such as national targets and funding streams affect the provision offered and the ways in which progression from non-counting to counting learning is perceived and promoted.
- 2) *Bottom up perspective*: how human factors - adult learners, the teachers, the managers and social factors such as family, work, future ambitions, background cultures interact in complex but recognisable ways and how these factors influence the style of provision and progression routes sometimes conflicting with national or organisation agendas.

The report will be developed around our sub research topics in order to facilitate drawing together conclusions from both the quantitative and qualitative parts of this study. Within each question however we will try to elaborate on how the different providers as well as how the different stakeholders (adult learners / teachers / managers) view and approach progression issues. The content of the research topics have been set out for this report as follows:

- profile of adults attending non-counting learning
- reasons adults give for attending non-counting learning
- types of non-counting learning which adults attend and delivery differences between counting and non-counting learning
- profile of adults who progress and those who do not progress to counting learning
- reasons given by adults for progressing or not to counting learning
- issues around funding of non-counting learning related to progression **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
- the effect of the national targets in the delivery of non-counting and counting learning

## 2.2 Profiles of the research sites

The sites are a range of types of adult education providers: three Further Education colleges (FE), two Adult and Community Learning colleges (ACL) and one charity organisation which provides basic skills courses as part of their support services. The three South sites come from within or near to London and the Northern sites are all located in the North West. However these sites cater for a wide diversity of adults, demographic contexts, organisational ethos and strategy which taken together highlight the multiple factors which influence adult learning and progression.

FE and ACL providers represent the bulk of adult education provision. The FE sector is by far the biggest provider of adult education as well as of non-counting provision, taking up almost 80% of adult learning; ACL provision follows with a 5% share. It was essential therefore to prioritise in our investigation these two types of providers. These however have some important similarities, most notably their dependence on LSC funding and therefore on the national targets with regard to achievement and progression.

The sixth site, a charity organisation is an example of how an organisation works with funding other than LSC which also implies that they are free from the government agenda. This is not a typical basic skills provider; however it can serve as a comparative study and alternative context for exploring a specific cohort of adult learners and their complex needs in relation to life and

learning and issues related to progression in the type of learning context this organisation represents.

### South sites

#### **South FE College**

##### *General context:*

This is a large FE college outside of London to the north. It has a large sixth form provision for 16-19 years old students. It also has adult education provision of 12,000 part time and 2, 500 full time students studying a variety of non-counting and counting courses. There is also work based learning providing local businesses with the opportunity to develop the skills of their employees. There is a lot of attention to achieving targets, high performance and being competitive in the market. As a consequence there is great attention to qualifications which are explained in detail on the college website. Funding comes mainly from LSC but there is a supplementary source from ESF which gives to the College “great flexibility”.

##### *Skills for Life provision:*

With regard to Skills for Life learners, there is Basic Skills, ESOL, EFL, and Key Skills provision. Also, there is additional support to students on vocational programmes and students with learning difficulties.

The number of Basic Skills students the college caters for is approximately 1,450 of which 1300 are in ESOL and 150 in other Basic Skills courses so ESOL learners are the main learner cohort that the institution caters for and as such they shape the provision of the courses. The largest group of the ESOL cohort is of East European male migrant workers very much linked to the labour market. The other smaller ESOL group is women, mainly of Asian origin. The third main group are a large population of students with learning difficulties.

As we shall see the above populations are the main receivers of the non-counting provision in this college, but their different needs lead to different types of motivation, progression and completion of courses as well as different pathways from non-counting towards counting courses.

#### **South ACL College**

##### *General context:*

This college operates in one of outer London’s largest boroughs with a culturally diverse population. It is a large ACL that provide adult education to approximately 15,000 locals in 1,600

courses within the college venues as well as in other outreach centres. It receives a variety of funding with LSC being the major funder. This is probably the reason why the top priority is “post-16 national learning targets”.

*Skills for Life provision:*

There are approximately 2,500 learners in basic skills provision per annum. 1500 learners are in ESOL and 1000 in literacy and numeracy. With regards to levels in this provision the majority is at Entry level (1, 2 and 3) with some at Level 1 and 2.

The basic skills learners come from minority ethnicities mostly from the Caribbean and English speaking African countries. A large number of white ethnic learners of basic skills have some type of learning difficulties. Regarding ESOL classes –which is a major basic skills subject- the profile of adults include those of Asian background who have been living in the borough for a long time and know how to speak English but have little or no English literacy or maths skills. Also ESOL classes have a large number of refugees and asylum seekers many newcomers from EU countries, particularly from Poland. The main language spoken in the ESOL programme is now Tamil because there is quite a sizeable refugee community from Sri Lanka; the second main language is Polish showing the recent large increase of Polish students, most of whom attend the evening classes.

In literacy and numeracy subject areas there is also a high demand for courses in the evening because many of the learners work. The college also runs courses in the community as part of their outreach strategy. For example there is a large family-learning provision in schools in partnership with Surestart as well as classes held in a family centre, in a library and ESOL classes in a mosque.

**South Charity Organisation**

*General context:*

This organisation operates in inner London and caters for homeless people. Its primary mission is to support vulnerable homeless people with a range of services, to help them to move away from living on the streets and homelessness assisting them towards finding a home and living independently. One of these services is the provision of basic skills. The organisation is a charity and draws funding from various donors and European funding streams. It was previously funded by LSC but the organisation now has a different funding arrangement for reasons that will be explained in section 3.7.

The organisation provides services to approximately 2,800 people. It is not an educational institution and adult education is not the primary service. Most of their services are around approaching people who are homeless and on the streets, providing shelter for them and

helping them to build up their confidence. Most of the teaching of either counting or non-counting courses comes after a long process of helping to move people from the streets, providing them with safe shelter and having worked already on treating various addictions or abuse. Education comes at a point where people are considered to be able to start developing a more stable independent life.

*Basic Skills provision:*

There are approximately 150 People engaged in Basic Skills learning. The provision offers short courses geared around their needs related to accommodation. Some of them are Basic Skills courses embedded into the independent living skills training. Delivery is normally on 1-1 and drop-in basis. Therefore there is only a small team of tutors (3 tutors only) and students.

North sites

**North FE College A**

*General context:*

The college is situated on the outskirts of a large town on the edge of a large rural area. This is traditionally a manufacturing area but volatile markets and employment instability have resulted in a continuing decline and low pay structures. This means that young people go into low paid, low value work. There is a tradition of low aspiration and low self esteem amongst communities in this area. High levels of deprivation and relative poverty (4 of the country's top deprived wards) further fuel this. Consequently significant numbers of young people underachieve at school, with this model continuing into adulthood. There are also a significant number of young people with learning difficulties attending college. The college has had to revise its literacy and numeracy provision in order to address increasingly low literacy and numeracy achievement at school in the catchment area. The potential market for LLN provision across the three boroughs served is 36,000. Many are likely to have low levels of both literacy and numeracy. They have strong employer and training agency partnerships through the construction and engineering departments.

*Skills for Life provision:*

Skills for Life provision consists of Discrete Skills for life delivered in college sites, traditional outreach centres and community venues; embedded Skills for Life and /or Key Skills in vocational courses - Entry, foundation and L1 LLN/Key Skills as an integrated part of the curriculum; LLN through Learning Support delivered through the Learning Support Service – 1 to 1, in small groups or integrated into the main programme. There is now less community based work partly due to the need to focus resources in response to demographic changes i.e. young migrant workers with no links to an established community and wanting to fast track and



be in a main college. These are mostly East European, under 30, single living in shared, rented accommodation and in low paid jobs.

Now that Skills for Life is mainstreamed there are Curriculum Leaders for Literacy, Numeracy and ESOL who work with all the Curriculum Managers across college although this may be in different ways in each area, for example some may send learners out of their department to English and Maths workshops, others may address needs in-dept and some may do both depending on the needs. Key Skills is a separate department working mainly within vocational areas but in discreet literacy and numeracy classes but there are plans to merge them with Skills for Life. The priority is to move towards a more fully embedded approach cross college.

### **North FE College B**

#### *General context:*

The college is situated in a large city containing many diverse and multicultural communities. In recent years the city has seen considerable urban regeneration. Despite this there are many socio-economic indicators that show continuing underlying problems. The loss of employment in manufacturing means that unemployment rates are almost twice the national average and there is below average health and low educational attainment. The city has proportionally higher Black and Chinese populations than for the North West region as a whole. Other ethnic minority communities include, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and other Asian ethnicities.

According to the Basic Skills Agency Benchmark Information of 1996/97, many wards of the city where this city is located have a higher than average proportion of the population who experience difficulties with literacy and numeracy (BSA, 1997) – 31- 39% as against 24% nationally.

#### *Skills for life provision:*

This College has three main city centre sites and most of its basic skills provision is delivered in over twenty community based study centres throughout the city. These Skills for Life multipurpose flexible teaching rooms are often delivering several areas of learning at the same time [maths, English and Information Technology /Computing (ITC)] have been designed to respond locally to individual learning needs. Students can drop in for additional support if they are taking other courses within the College or they can follow an individual programme of work which may include Basic Maths and/or Basic English and/or Return to Learn courses. The Return to Learn programme is designed 'for people who want to make that first step back into education and has been very successful in attracting hard to reach individuals and communities. It complements the Basic Skills programme and includes a wide range of subjects from line dancing, local history or ITC. However this provision has been increasingly under threat and has

suffered cuts due to LSC funding criteria related to national Skills for Life targets. There is a move to lessen outreach provision and focus rather on the study centres, as these provide a better learning experience and offer a wider range of courses. However they require that learners travel to a specific location which is not always convenient. Learners are enrolled for 4 hours literacy and/or 4 hours numeracy each week as standard. The college uses the BSA initial assessment for all primary basic skills learners.

The two centres we worked in were very different. The larger of the two, a college main site, offered 14-19 full time foundation provision in a dedicated space as well as drop in workshops in literacy, numeracy and IT. The smaller centre just provided the basic skills drop in workshop provision. There was no ESOL provision in these two centres (though it is extensive in the college), so this college cannot be included in reference to FE ESOL provision in this report.

### **North ACL College**

#### *General context:*

This college is located in a small city. The levels of reported crime are much lower than the national average. It is a university town and a relatively high proportion of the adult population are students. The dominant employment sector is the service industry and percentages of people working in both health and education are higher than the regional and national averages. Lancaster has a minority ethnic distribution close to the regional average and has the feel of a fairly cosmopolitan city for a town of its size, partly due to the international student population attracted by the university. The ACL is a small community college near the centre of Lancaster dedicated to adult education delivered at the central site and across 50 community based sites across this region of the North West. Skills for life is one of the Adult College's principal programme areas, along with a wide range of general adult education activities on a part-time basis, including Access to Higher Education courses, counselling, Family Learning, General Studies, ICT, Modern Foreign Languages, Teacher Training and Visual and Performing Arts. It also offers some National Vocational Qualifications in partnership with local employers.

#### *Skills for Life provision:*

The Skills for Life department provides part-time courses from pre-entry to Level 2 in literacy, numeracy and ESOL. Most courses take place once a week at the central site with some provision offered in the community venues. All the Skills for Life provision was organised on a 'roll-on, roll-off' basis, although there is a move towards a termly registration structure in order to improve retention statistics.

The college has a reasonably stable population of learners, some who have attended entry level classes for years whilst others pass through other courses including pre-GCSE and GCSE classes. A significant proportion of the ESOL provision caters for spouses of people studying or working at the university, often people studying for English language tests (IELTS) with the aim of entering University. Other significant groups of people in ESOL classes are people from the town's established community of people of South Asian heritage and people of Chinese backgrounds working in the catering business. Recently there has been a large increase of migrant workers joining the ESOL provision.

### 3. Findings

The findings from analysis of the interviews with managers, teachers and students are organised below as they answer each research topic.

#### **3.1 Profile of adults attending non-counting learning**

##### 3.1.1 Profile of main learner cohorts

The general profile of the adult learner cohorts in the colleges (FE and ACL) depends partly on the type of college and on the demographic context as already highlighted in the descriptions of colleges. For example in all FE colleges in ESOL provision there were cohorts of adult male migrant workers from Eastern Europe, but the 'other nationalities' profile differed depending on the demographics of the established ethnic minority profile in each areas. In the South FE and ACL Colleges there were refugees and asylum seekers from a variety of countries whereas the North College sites were not located in main dispersal areas so had far fewer of this cohort. The dominant language apart from English shared between the class groups also depends on the demographics of the area, as the following example shows:

*The main language spoken in the ESOL programme is now Tamil because there is quite a sizeable refugee community from Sri Lanka and the second main language is Polish showing the big influx we have had of Polish students, most of whom come in the evening.*

Manager, South ACL College

In all the colleges in this study ESOL is mainly NC though other NRDC studies (see references P.81) show that this is not the case across the board in ESOL provision in Britain. In contrast to the large ESOL provision in the South colleges, at the FE and ACL colleges in the North, both on the edge of rural areas, the ESOL provision was a small part of the SFL provision as they were mainly geared to cater for a breadth of different learning needs in a majority white ethnic student body.

The type of college affects the learner cohort profile. For example In the North FE colleges the Skills for Life provision sits within a context of a majority of young people on higher level counting provision including work-based learning whereas in the ACL colleges this is not the case as these colleges are solely for adults.

The homeless organisation had a more specific cohort of people, though diverse, had in common the fact that they had entered provision with the purpose of moving on in life post drug and alcohol addiction.

### 3.1.2 Characteristics of different learner cohorts

Each 'group type' of the learner cohort carries with them specific demographic as well as cultural characteristics.

#### *ESOL students*

Migrant workers are, in the main, young and attached to the market economy. Some are educated to high standards in their own country and have good study skills and some are less educated and have less developed study skills. Many asylum seekers and refugees have already achieved well educationally and some have degrees from their home country. Having the urgent goal to integrate and find better paid employment means that they are well motivated. However we found that some lower educated migrant workers are more motivated to be working than to go on to further study like many well educated asylum seekers and refugees. Many of these are high achievers, bilingual and have language learning skills.

In all the colleges studied the women of Asian heritage from well established resident communities have a very different profile to the migrant workers and asylum seekers. They are of a mixture of ages and the reasons they attend non-counting courses are not necessarily market oriented. The younger women have, in the main, just arrived from their home countries for marriage; some want to access further study and employment and others do not have that aim. The older women have been in the country for years but have:

*.. lived in a close community within their own family confines and never learned very much English.*

Teacher, South FE College

In both the North and South colleges the literacy and numeracy courses also have ethnic minority students, in the South ACL they are mostly coming from Caribbean or African English speaking countries and in the North colleges mainly young, well educated people from South Asian countries.

There is an "overlapping group" between ESOL and literacy / numeracy courses characterised by older women of Asian origin who may have been living here for a long time and speak English but cannot read or write to the same level. It is not possible to typecast adults in NC learning by ability either. For example in the North ACL College there were non-literate people like a Bengali lady who had been working at the same level for the third year and also people

like the University professor who has gone from E3 to L2 in two years. The issue of ESOL literacy was highlighted by several tutors as in need of further attention in research and policy.

#### *Adults with learning difficulties*

Many people, particularly in NC provision, may have a different degrees and types of mild mental, physical or behavioural disability but those, mainly at Entry 1 and 2, that have more marked difficulties have different support needs than other entry level students at that or the higher NC levels. Adults with learning difficulties are mixed profile in terms of demographics and social factors. In the South FE and ACL colleges they are of a variety of ethnicities, ages and sexes whereas in the North FE and ACL colleges they are mainly of white ethnic background. In the North colleges there are strong links between social and health issues and learning with other agencies referring adults to SFL provision from day care, probation, drug rehabilitation centres (these two mandatory), MIND etc. Literacy and numeracy is sometimes people's only learning entitlement if they are unemployed or over the age limit.

#### *Homeless organisation clients*

The homeless organisation on the other hand has a less well-defined clientele in terms of "demographics" but better defined in terms of social with educational needs; in addition their clients are not self-presenting in joining the organisation so their learning is mandatory. The most distinctive characteristic is that those learners who attend non-counting –or counting courses- have successfully established a less chaotic lifestyle. Their clientele is more reliably defined by tutors by terms such as "*less chaotic*", "*phase in their lives with more stability*" or "*in need to boost their soft skills such as confidence and self reliance*" which will be discussed more in other sections. Typically, they have recovered from previous addictions or similar problems, have been placed successfully in accommodation and are in a process of recovering their confidence and personal skills of living independently and managing their own living space. In the above organisation the provision of non-counting and counting courses comes as a support stage within the process of helping people out of homelessness. The complications of such chaotic lives most probably mean that any cohort of learners will be as varied as the reasons that push them into the streets in the first place.

#### 3.1.3 The 'labelling' issue

A recurring theme from tutors and managers from all the colleges is the fact that it is not possible to typecast adults in NC learning and there is the feeling that they can be too easily categorised and labelled by policy makers and even by providers themselves. Notions such as lack of confidence, vulnerability, mental health issues, family instability and poverty can be uncritically applied to people in NC learning thus stereotyping them. Although the majority of

people who have been referred from health organisations as part of rehabilitation, job centre advisors, or those persuaded by friends and family are those attending NC provision rather than C this is not exclusively the case. For example people who have been held back by depression, or drug and alcohol abuse may join NC or C provision depending on their abilities. In terms of confidence tutors argue that some Entry 1 learners might be very confident and have no trouble adjusting whereas they have seen, for example, employed people or PGCSE students who are very nervous of coming back to college and who are phased by being in a mixed level class. People may have missed out at school for various reasons or not grasped things and want to brush up their Maths for example. Many people of differing general ability struggle with Maths and have a fear of it. These are not just older people returning to learning. The Northern FE colleges both stated that they were also getting a lot of school leavers coming in at Entry 2 and 3. People with more marked learning difficulties are usually attending NC provision but there are many people with milder learning difficulties in C provision.

#### 3.1.4 Gender issues

Learning in both counting and non counting provision is gendered. Many women see their family needs as a priority and learning as second to this. Some women have been made to feel it isn't worth educating women and have met with resistance as a child and from their partners and children. But also there are also many who are assertive and want to do something for themselves now that the children are older, such as numeracy for those who failed GCSE.

There appear to be generally more women than men in NC provision overall (excepting the migrant worker cohort who in every college are predominantly male), perhaps, according to one tutor, because it is harder for men to face up to it at this level. One FE centre manager commented:

*... most adults who could benefit from NC provision are still 'out there' especially the men.*

Out-centre manager, FE College B

The ACL colleges, the smaller outlying community sites in North College B and the FE college A at the edge of a rural area had a lot of people in NC provision who have been coming for a long time and for whom the social aspect of their learning was of great importance, this was less marked than in the other FE colleges.

### 3.1.5 Key summary points

- Colleges have a similar breadth of NC clientele though they are widely diverse in terms of numbers of different cohorts which reflect demographics and in the ages, educational, cultural backgrounds and social histories and circumstances of learners both within and across the cohorts (ESOL, literacy, numeracy, learning difficulties, homeless organisation clients).
- In some areas there are strong links between social and mental health issues and NC learning as highlighted particularly in relation to the clientele within the charity provision.
- It is impossible to typecast adults in NC learning; they can too easily be categorised and labelled with certain characteristics
- NC learning is gendered – mainly women, apart from the migrant worker cohort, are attending NC courses.
- ACL colleges and community based centres had more ‘long term’ adults who are dependant on the social aspect of attending learning, such as students with more marked learning difficulties.

## **3.2 Reasons adults give for attending non-counting learning**

### 3.2.1 Diversity of reasons

In order to properly explore the progression routes of adult learners we need to know what brought them into learning in the first place. Most of these reasons may be also the motivators of persistence and progress into higher levels as will be discussed in section 3.4 and 3.5. There are a diverse range of reasons that adults come into non-counting education. Some are exactly the same as for people in counting, the only difference being that they start at a different level: These reasons can be:

- work related;
- developing skills to survive in everyday life;
- give meaning to life when circumstances suddenly change;
- testing the waters for something they plan to do but are unsure about or to build self-confidence;
- to cope with new job demands;
- to gain citizenship;
- to gain a qualification.

In many cases it is a combination of more than one of those listed. This range of reasons given by adults for going back into learning, starting with the low level NC courses, were common to all the providers. However it seems that reasons that were work and survival related were more



highlighted in FE and ACL contexts especially in ESOL provision. The so called 'soft skills' of confidence building was not a reason given by ESOL students who mainly presented with high self-esteem and self confidence even if more reserved and traditional. But soft skills of building up self confidence and grabbing 'the second chance' appeared to be more important to adults learning in literacy and numeracy classes, particularly the lower levels and also in the homeless organisation.

Here are some of the reasons that FE and ACL learners have given to their tutors why they wanted to come into learning, for example surviving in everyday life by being able to use basic services:

*(a) Because they (i.e. those in low-level courses) have to go to hospital and doctors and then they understand. So they have to learn because they want to know what their children know, or they're going to see doctors.*

*(b) Start reading and writing. Reading, writing, I can't fill the forms. [...] Filling forms is very difficult to me.*

Learners, entry 1 ESOL, South FE College

In all FE and ACL colleges there are a range of reasons given not only within the whole SfL provision but also within each class of each site and most often a person had multiple reasons. In general it was found that those with clear goals like wanting to help their children or wanting to do another course or job are much more geared to achieving a higher level than those who say "I want to brush up on my skills".

### 3.2.2 ESOL students

As mentioned in section 3.1 ESOL students' reasons for joining classes are dependent on social circumstances, cultural expectations and level of English rather than their general educational level. For example migrant workers from Eastern European countries are highly motivated to get qualifications as soon as possible for citizenship and for work.

Older South Asian heritage women come to learn English mainly in community based classes of FE or in ACL, to support their children's learning and for something to do with their friends.

Amongst the younger recently arrived South Asian heritage women, some see it as a first step to further study and for others it is for more social reasons and in order to be able to support their children's learning. In other studies such as *Adult Learners' Lives* (Barton *et al* 2006; Ivanic *et al* 2006) there have been large numbers of young South Asian heritage students well educated in their own countries who are motivated by wanting to access further education and work.

### 3.2.3 Young people

Young people who left school with no or few qualifications were often very difficult to motivate in literacy and numeracy classes, especially if these were not embedded. The reason they arrive in provision if it is not their choice is because there seem to be few other options especially if they cannot find employment. One literacy tutor said that it is important to help young people to think beyond generalities so the SfL tutor needs also to be a career advisor in these situations.

*Young people they come in fairly disillusioned and don't have much motivation really to envisage themselves in any job or role or career ...it's fairly bleak that there's not motivation or challenge. ...so if young people come in and say I just want a job you have to make it more specific ...it's not that they really just want to work in Tesco's so you say "let's see what skills you have and take it from there"...*

Literacy lead tutor, North FE college B

### 3.2.4 Older adults in literacy and numeracy learning

In some cases family members encourage people to attend:

*Alice: He's [husband] seen this advert , you know, go for spellings and reading so he said to me "would you like to go?" and I said "yeah I'd love to go but I'm not saying I'll stay at it...the first time I went I couldn't write my name and address."*

Alice, aged 80, who has attended for 16 yrs has now achieved entry 2 in English, Maths and IT. She loves learning and loves the company and likes taking homework to do at home.

Some attend as a step to moving into further education and a new career:

*Amelie: To get on a course for what I want to do [sociology] they sent me here to brush up on everything beforehand"*

Others say they it will help them to become more independent and also to develop reading and writing for leisure:

*Mary: You can become independent...not relying on other people...and I think it's nice to stick your nose in a book"*

*Pattie: I am here for myself whereas before ... I couldn't go because of you know it would hinder somebody else you know. I mind my nephews, that's why I only come on Wednesday because it gives them a chance to finish off their education....and there were lots of ..family things, domestic things, in fact it was almost a jinx.*

Work related reasons were given by some people such as getting a job, keeping it, being promoted and performing it properly for example related to newly introduced practices and regulations:

*Some people want to work and because they can't fill in the form they need to learn because of that.*

Some have been encouraged by employers to come:

*C: I was struggling at work reading job cards and that so I asked my boss and he sorted it all out....he got it in touch with college.*

Chris's tutor came to the workplace then later he felt confident to attend evening classes at the college. Chris also had very personal reasons for wanting to develop his reading and writing:

*"I was struggling to read my letters, you know the private letters what I need so that 's why I thought well I'm going to have to do something about it because I don't want to keep asking other people what does this mean?"*

It can be triggered by a change in life circumstances. Some people, like Gareth in his 30's, Shami in her 50's and Mark in his 60's are at a stage where they are ready or they need to change direction in their life and start with the basics:

*Gareth: To me it's a new step in another direction because I've been on a building site half my life.... and I'm going into youth work now...*

*Shami: Find nice job because I'm sewing in a factory now ...you know my legs is not right. My husband died six years ago...I can't be paying bill all.*

Her neighbour phoned the college for her as she could not communicate well enough in English.

*Mark: I had an accident ..I can't really farm now you know. ...I don't know what made me go, just something..it was just looking at the wall [in hospital] , thinking what else can you do, you've got to do something else.*

Some people join as a first step after a difficult period in life to build self esteem:

*Emma: I don't want to go into my personal details , but it's only now I'm building more confidence for myself and doing voluntary work, so it's all to help me on to try and get a reference to go on into part time work.*

Emma started in NC provision and has been coming on and off for several years and now is ready to take Level 1 English and Maths. E.

Any one individual may have more than one or multiple reasons for re- entering learning. Sadie, like many other adults, had multiple reasons some related to work and some for personal development. Re-entering learning may help as follows:

a) to manage better:

*I just thought, "I'm thirty , it's time I got my finger out..I don't just want to get by anymore. They've [the factory where she works] been taken over by a massive firm and they're doing everything by the book, rules, health and safety, paperwork left, right and centre...it's like every time we do like a sample of curtains I'll have to write exactly what I've done with it, so I can ...if the order comes through say in six months I can look back and see how I've made it, what cottons and fabrics I used....*

b) to understand and protect her rights:

*"The new firm came in and they were banging everybody with disciplinaries...Now first one I just bowed down to, the second one I thought 'been here thirteen years...are they trying to get rid of me because it cost them more".*

Her brother explained everything but she wanted to feel in more control which then led to an important decision.

*I'd seen this leaflet that you get from college through post about Line Leader which is what I want to do. But then I thought , well I need to sort my English out first."...so that's how I ended up here.*

c) To develop herself intellectually:

*"I just would like to be cleverer".*

d) To gain a qualification

*"I'd like to gain a qual. To say want I do, what I can do"...*

### 3.2.5 Homeless organisation clients

The following are the range of reasons why they (clients) started their courses most of which were also given by adults learners in college provision. By the same token many of the reasons given above can be related to the reasons given by this organisation cohort. The difference being that the current social conditions of these clients put them in a different provisional context than most adult learners, where basics skills' learning was not the main priority.

#### Reasons related to health and well being:

For some the social reasons were stronger than to gain learning outcomes whereas for others these were also important as they looked to the future:

*I think there are people out there who are probably mentally ill like and they still want to get out, they have still got a life haven't they and they just want to go and communicate and socialise with people you know, um and then there are people that just want to set themselves up for a career and want to improve*

*I have known people and they have got issues, they have got mental problems or whatever, they just go to college and they want to be around people to keep them stimulated, them people as well they don't want to be sitting at home...*

### Making sense of the world

For others it is the transforming effect of the learning experience for making sense of the world:

*Truthfully, no disrespect, I felt like a foreigner in my own country, there was things I couldn't read, I am walking round like an idiot, so now I have the opportunity with my tutors to learn to read, I want to learn everything, everything, give it to me, it is quite empowering [...] For me it is something to prove to myself that I am the same as everybody else because for so many years I have been told that I am not normal, not being able to read you know so this is my own journey*

One person stressed the importance of participating in non-qualification learning because it gives the chance to test one's self and one's abilities before committing to something larger and more demanding:

*Introductory yes I think it is important yes because it is no point committing yourself to doing something long term course if you are not prepared, it is nice to be able to do a short course and have a combination of short courses because a short course would show whether or not you are ready, whether you want to do the course and if you do want to do the course then there is the longer version you know.*

Lastly just making up for a lost but important chance due, for example to ill health, problems at home or not getting on at school:

*Well the thing is when I left school, I left school without any qualifications and that is what motivates me.*

### 3.2.6 Key summary points

- There are is a diverse range of educational, employment and health related reasons that adults come into non-counting education. Some are exactly the same as for people in counting provision. The most commonly mentioned were: work related, trajectory to further education, integrate in a new country, cope with life demands, make up for lost opportunities.
- 'Soft skills' of building up self confidence and grabbing 'the second chance' are very important to adults in literacy and numeracy classes, and in the homeless organisation. They are less salient to ESOL students who generally have a higher self esteem.
- Any individual may have multiple reasons for entering NC provision

- Those with clear goals are much more geared to progression than those who say “I want to brush up on my skills”.
- Young people who arrive in NC provision not of their own choice do so because there are few other options particularly if they cannot find employment.
- Many young people with no/few school qualifications enter adult learning for example Entry to Employment, feeling disillusioned and with little motivation.
- The majority of older adults are very well motivated to achieve their personal goals. Persistence is not mentioned an issue but rather social and health reasons are mentioned as more likely to interrupt learning.

### ***3.3 Types of non-counting courses which adults attend and delivery differences between non-counting and counting learning .***

“Type of course” is any aspect of the course such as style of delivery, subject or time/place of delivery. By style of delivery we mean the different organisational arrangements in the learning environment e.g. one-to-one tutorial, group work, drop-in workshops etc. By subject we mean the SfL subjects of ESOL, literacy numeracy or other need addressed within the context of basic skills. By time/place we mean, the reasons for day or evening classes, whether they take place at the college/ organisation main site or at a community base or any other time/place flexible arrangements made in order to work around learners needs. In relation to all these aspects we are exploring the reasons behind these choices and learners’ and teachers’ responses to this diverse provision.

#### ***3.3.1 What underpins the type of NC course adults attend***

What underpins adults choices are: *what the college is able to offer* according to its funding and resources which might affect, for example the degree of streaming or of one to one support or outreach. Other criteria affecting choices are *current circumstances*, for example if you are employed in the day you need to attend in the evening; *learning style*, for example whether you prefer a group, a drop-in workshop; *level of confidence*, for example whether you feel more comfortable in a large or a smaller learning environment . A tutor at the North ACL college found that several women aged 30-40 years had chosen to come to ACL rather than FE because it is an adult environment and less ‘school like’; and *learning purposes/goals*, for example LLN embedded in a vocational subject or fast tracking to achieve qualifications as soon as possible.

### 3.3.2 Responding to adult learners' needs - different types of NC learning

In all colleges and organisations courses are arranged to be student-centred wherever possible and there is an effort to accommodate as many people as possible. Despite this, particularly in ESOL provision there are often waiting lists. North FE college A is gradually increasing its work-placed provision but also offers specific work related provision based at college, for example for taxi drivers, who do have a work place learning base. The same college has recently been forced to cut back its community based ESOL provision. This is in order to use resources to cater for the growing body of migrant workers who are not attached to a particular community and need to be based at college. A manager at the South FE College explains how they are responding to adults' needs in their provision:

*We try and fit our courses around times that we perceive to be convenient. For instance [...] we have a site in the community, [...] because we have a lot of ladies, around school times, so we base the courses from half past nine to three so the mothers can pick their children up from school. And if we're doing courses for Eastern bloc we do it in the evenings when they've finished work, so we start at times that fit in with their work patterns. If we do it at a workplace we do it after their shift or before their shift so we try and structure the courses that fit in with the individual needs.*

Manager, South FE College

The homeless organisation also goes to its clients rather than them having the inconvenience and anxiety of accessing learning elsewhere:

*... The main centres for the group work are the resource centre in Camden. Mostly we go to the hostels which all have a training room. So we really go to the clients as far as possible, either to do group or to do one-to-one. The way to engage hardest to reach learners is one-to-one because they won't address it otherwise.*

Manager, South, charity organisation

In the North FE college, through partnership work with agencies such as Sure Start, their numbers in NC provision have increased in a deprived area where they had previously been unable to recruit.

#### *Discreet NC courses*

In all the provision we found that literacy and numeracy day courses which were exclusively NC rather than mixed NC/C level were mainly attended by people with marked learning difficulties or who had some kind of mental disability though managers and tutors said these are often difficult to specifically define. 14-19 year olds at FE colleges attend discreet literacy and numeracy group classes (mixed C and NC) as part of their foundation access courses. For this

group discipline issues are central for both those who are in C and NC learning. Tutors say that as they are young, disengaged school leavers they are not motivated and do not see relevance of the compulsory literacy element to their course.

#### *Fast-track classes*

The North ACL college has responded to increased numbers of people coming 'off the street' with the specific aim of taking national tests by providing 'fast track' classes in literacy and numeracy for those working towards level 1 and 2.

ESOL, literacy and numeracy fast trackers want to be helped to get qualifications as quickly as possible; this is in contrast to the slower/easier pace of ESOL community classes and NC learning. Adults in classes like these commented that the learning was not as contextualised to everyday life as in the more traditional literacy classes they had been in previously. The major focus in the fast track classes is on preparing for tests working on grammar and punctuation rather than on individual topics of interest. The style of delivery is more whole group work and practice rather than being individual centred learning.

#### *Embedded learning*

In North FE college A there was well established SfL embedded work on pre- foundation vocational courses such as health and social care, motor vehicle and administration. This had been successfully developed by committed course leaders who recognised the benefit of literacy and numeracy learning which was directly relevant to their vocational goals and personal development. This model had not taken off college wide despite college promotion of embedded learning. In other colleges there were plans to move more into embedded learning partly in order to reach funding targets.

#### *ESOL*

Another interesting issue around type of non-counting courses attended particularly by the South FE and ACL Colleges is the fact that most of the delivery is around ESOL provision. Both colleges have mentioned that the delivery of ESOL is disproportionately bigger than the other subject areas. Even within the other subject areas there is an embedded ESOL aspect –e.g. literacy courses to speakers of English as a second language who have not mastered the reading/writing aspect and need to address this now. ESOL – on more individual level with NC or with those who are not familiar with the Latin script, for example Thai v. Polish. At level 1 differences are more blurred.- 2 volunteers – 1 for general class and 1 for two who need the most support.

#### *Integrated learning*



The homeless organisation did not differentiate among subjects or levels because of the small number of students in basic skills which means that they cannot form large enough groups to cater for each level. After all as they stressed numerous times they are mainly trying to address the most basic of basic skills: that is confidence to engage with further learning. This can be done through all subject areas and levels.

#### *Volunteers*

In the North ACL College they employ a considerable number of trained volunteers. They, with learning support staff, do a lot of the one to one work or small group work with lower level learners in mixed C and NC level learning groups and workshops. Tutors here feel that this is very important because of the size of classes and the roll on roll off system which means that people are at completely different levels:

*The difference in delivery is that with C learners there are no volunteers/ learning support. For NC learners there are lots of volunteers and learning support. Teaching mixed levels is difficult. Much is not different between C and NC – the teaching is flexible according to need. They are small groups (about 6) but I can't manage without volunteers or the learners distract each other and many can't work on their own.*

Literacy tutor, ACL, North College

### 3.3.3 Delivery differences between NC and C learning

#### *Streaming issues*

In some colleges they stream for different levels on different days where possible. As one FE tutor put it: “*people get a better deal ...streamed*”. However this is not always possible:

*In the college we can have that luxury but in the community we don't ...because we might only be in that area once a week.*

Skills for Life manager, North FE College A

Sometimes there is a mix in college classes to fit with people's time commitments if they cannot attend the class streamed for them. Another FE tutor explained the challenge of mixed levels in one class:

*In mixed evening classes if there is a small % NC you can absorb them but even if there is only 10% NC you cannot manage the class*

Literacy Tutor, North FE College A

#### *Mixed level learning*

The vast majority of NC learning we observed or documented from interviews was taking place in mixed level NC/C classes or workshops such as in FE evening literacy classes, ACL literacy

and numeracy workshops, FE community based workshops and learning in the homeless organisation. In all college sites there was a mixed model of delivery of 1 to 1, small groups and workshop type learning. In the FE College with community based study centres there was a deliberate model of mixed level workshops with mainly individual learning plans and tutors giving 1 to 1 support. Most tutors thought this worked well but others said that it could be undermining for lower level students sitting next to higher level students. The adults we spoke appeared to be quite happy with the arrangement except for a 17 year old young man who would rather have been in a group with other young people. A 19 year old young man in an adult evening class had the same view but had to attend the evening class as he was working in the day.

There was a difference of opinion of the impact of 'workshop' type organisation. One or two tutors felt that they lose more adults at NC Entry 1 due to feeling exposed and uncomfortable in a large workshop site especially if they roll on later than others. Mixed level workshops present challenges for tutors in terms of differentiation and in hiding that differentiation. Tutors at the FE drop-in centres do not spend much time with adults working at the lowest level as most have dyslexic or learning/social needs and can get learning support. At pre-entry level there is more group work.

Tutors had different opinions around the question of difference between C and NC delivery. One tutor felt that there was no difference in the organisation between NC and C delivery:

Regarding the type of non-counting courses vs. counting courses in the South FE context there was no difference mentioned. Others say it does differ:

*(a) "Everybody's different so I just change the delivery according to the person - differentiation" [ within C and within NC].*

Numeracy lead tutor, North FE College B

*(b) I find that the NC students need more ...explanation about the skills they are learning , whereas the C students tend to show more independent skills. NC students need more reiteration in a number of ways before we can assess what they've learnt. They need more 1 to 1 time and the nature of that 1 to 1 time is different. This teacher 'hides' anxiety causing tasks such as form filling within a discussion which relates to it such as booking a holiday. Literacy is more intimate, emotional and linked to everyday life for NC whereas with C students preparing for the test it is more remote.*

Literacy lead tutor, North FE College B

*Style of delivery*

The style of delivery in the colleges is dependant on the subject taught. For example, teacher led whole group work is more dominant in ESOL and fast track literacy and numeracy. In ESOL this is most commonly the result of ESOL students being streamed more and having common language learning and assessment goals at their particular level. The balance tips more toward workshop type individual learning and one-to-one support in the lower level literacy and numeracy classes –particularly numeracy though at pre-entry there is more often a group approach. Regarding organisation of delivery in literacy/numeracy classes for those with moderate learning difficulties the FE Colleges described a mixture of delivery styles that are geared to the students’ needs. Contrary to what one would expect group/class work is not always the typical delivery mode:

*We support on an individual basis about 500 to 600 students and the groups are about 300.*

Manager, South FE College

#### *Learning support*

Learning support is offered in all colleges for those with specific learning difficulties:

*Our courses for students with moderate learning difficulties or behavioural difficulties or social difficulties are delivered in group....and the groups will have a teaching assistant [...] We have students who are doing a whole raft of vocational courses. If they have a particular need, i.e. a mobility need or they’re dyslexic or they’re autistic etc. etc., we provide 1-to-1 support for them.*

Manager, South FE College

#### *Homeless organisation learning*

In the homeless organisation the learning is organised on an individual basis and is supported one-to-one, with very little group work:

*... Skills for Life is mainly one-to-one because we work with people who who’ve only just started to address their basic skills needs and who wouldn’t want to do it in a group because they’re ashamed. We do sometimes do group work: there’s a course “It’s Your Move”, which is pre-tenancy training and tenancy sustainment training to keep your tenancy. That is always delivered in a group. Because the clients tend to be more confident because they’re ready to move on and maintain a tenancy”.*

Manager, South charity organisation

#### 3.3.4 Key summary points

- All sites expressed that the difference of NC from C learning is that it responds to different learning, social and personal needs. All colleges/organisations make every effort to respond to these needs.
- This commitment builds on: what the college can offer, adults' different learning styles, levels of confidence, levels of ability and purposes and goals for learning
- All colleges/organisations go out to provide community based learning for adults 'where they are' who are hard to reach in the main site
- In the support organisations e.g. the homeless organisation, the organisation of learning is mainly around the current social needs for survival. Learning is integrated of all levels rather than subject /level specific.
- There was a difference of opinion of the impact of mixed level 'workshop' type organisation.
- The consensus is that adults get a better deal if they are streamed to level where possible
- Trained volunteers are employed only in one ACL college. There they are viewed as a vital resource in mixed level learning groups.

### ***3.4 Profile of adults who progress and those who do not progress on to counting learning***

To explore factors related to progression, we first need to ask what we mean by 'progression'. The 'profiling of progression' through adult populations is important not only for practitioners and policy makers but also to inform the theory of what drives learning. Progression routes may indeed differ among groups whose demographic characteristics are either the cause or the signifiers of such routes. These routes may be wholly through the Skills for Life framework from NC to C or Skills for Life may be just one ladder within a broader framework from which diverse individuals and groups of people make their choices. Progression to counting courses in particular will include interplaying factors from those related to personal life plans and circumstances, to responding to society trends and to the market place. Diverse groups of learning adults exist within any one educational organisation. The policies and courses offered, in response to those diverse needs, can also affect progression.

#### **3.4.1 Progression linked to the reasons adults started attending courses**

We see in the above section that progression relates in a different way to the purposes and goals of each individual as well as to their abilities. For this reason most providers say they

could not easily categorise ‘types of learners’ who do and don’t progress on to counting provision:

*“There’s no pattern of progressing everyone’s different really”*

Manager, out-centre North FE College B

There is a link between motivation to progress and need to progress. It is obvious for example that the goal of getting a job may pull one toward a learning path that may require qualifications and a more persistent and urgent progression route than helping youngsters at school which does not formally require anything. For example you cannot simply say that people with learning disabilities tend not to progress on to counting learning. It depends on the degree and type of learning disability. To say most ESOL learners move on to counting courses is not to give a full picture. Adults also have other differences related to, for example educational background, cultural expectations and ability which can complicate the profile of progression from non-counting to counting courses. Adults then have different defining characteristics which influence progression – these can be social, personal or cognitive or more commonly a mixture of these factors. So rather than defining ‘types of people’ who progress from NC to C it is more helpful to discuss mitigating factors affecting progression.

#### 3.4.2 Cognitive factors affecting progression

All providers stated that people who have marked learning difficulties or learning disabilities which are also cognitive difficulties are not as likely to progress from NC to C.

*Some students are not able to [progress], particularly adults with learning difficulties they reach a ceiling where they’re not able to move into counting [...]*

Manager, South FE College

Those who are maintaining their level of ability in literacy, numeracy and language learning rather than progressing, or who have plateaued after initial progress are the least likely to progress from NC to C. A numeracy manager/tutor said that people with short term memory problems take longer to progress in numeracy than those with longer term memory. She said that many adults plateau at entry 2 Maths and will tend not to go much further. An ACL literacy tutor spelt out the consequences for some learners:

*It’s very difficult for those who’ve plateaued – they’ve done everything that is available free and there is nothing else for them and now you have to move them out after some*

*time , not to work but to nothing,. LSC don't fund sewing anymore, keep fit etc so there's nothing for them to do.*

Literacy Tutor, North ACL College

Many individual learners have different cognitive abilities for literacy and numeracy and most learners have spiky profiles. A tutor said of adults in her E1/ 2 literacy class:

*Some students are fantastic on computers, they know all the basics , can use power point, publisher logging on and basic word processing...they could progress to a IT class "There are other ways of progressing" eg a student who has gone to a NC criminology course and computers for beginners.*

Literacy Tutor, North ACL College

In FE community outreach and in ACL in particular, where there are larger numbers of adults in NC learning, there are situations where people are maintaining their skills levels or plateauing where it is not felt by tutors to be appropriate for them to be pushed to progress. For these learners their NC learning is vital to them socially and practically as a citizen. It supports their everyday living linking literacy and numeracy in class to their everyday life demands such as money, bills, forms, health leaflets etc. For many adults on NC courses who have been in college for several years, it is their only free learning entitlement and option. Some of the FE and ACL providers have excellent facilities and learning support for those with learning difficulties.

### 3.4.3 Social factors affecting progression

#### *Turbulence and turnings points*

In the homeless organisation the profile of learners who progress to counting courses has to do with their lifestyle and turning points in their lives rather than demographics or other well-defined factors. More specifically those who progress are:

*the people whose life is stable enough, because a lot of our learners, their lives are quite chaotic, they don't have the stability to be able to engage in structured learning...*

Tutor, South charity organisation

A different insight into how learning may be the turning point in somebody's life rather than the product of a progression path is given by the homeless organisation:

*.. we also think that if somebody has a chaotic lifestyle and they can engage in learning that that then helps them to have a more structured lifestyle. So it's not one or the other, it can work the other way, that learning and engaging in learning in a structured way can support somebody to sort out other things in their life.*

Manager, South charity organisation

### *Interrupted learning*

Interrupted learning or 'dipping in and out' (Barton et al 2006) which leads to taking longer to progress is more, but not exclusively, prevalent at lower NC levels. Examples include the need to work to save up for Christmas, pregnancy, illness in the family, depression. In these situations family matters override learning matters. This seems to be gendered; many women with families come for a couple of years or so then need to take a break for family reasons or to earn money. The college has no control of this kind of outside factors and Skills for Life progression is not the main goal of many adults who are learning. All providers mentioned that a small minority of adults do just 'disappear without trace and there is a limit to the amount of follow up that is appropriate with adults.

*Sometimes I worry about people who disappear maybe for personal reasons – family, work. I phone a couple of times but not after that. I don't want to appear pushy; these are adults and what right do I have you know to be phoning them and saying get back to your English class*

Literacy tutor, North FE college B

### *Related to employment*

People who do move from NC to C are mainly those who have re-entered learning for reasons related to their employment or to gaining employment, many of whom are women returning after their children become less dependent on them. These include classroom assistants, care assistants and people with vocational NVQ's who want to go a step further. Many people interlace discreet learning with work learning and achieve progression in both:

*It might take years to progress to level 2 but in the mean time they are progressing at work, in their repertoire of learning getting a promotion or doing a trades course.*

Lead tutor, North ACL College

In the North FE college A there have been a "good percentage" moving from workplace tasters into accredited learning at college. Some ACL providers reported that there has been a significant number of people who "come in off the street" wanting to take national tests. Most of these people are starting at a C level but some start at E3 and progress.

### *The comfort zone*

Several providers mentioned 'the comfort zone' as a social factor that relates to progression. Some adults who come for social reasons and who are enjoying learning for its own sake can get over attached to a particular tutor, learning group and place and can find it extremely difficult

to move out and on into a different learning environment. Most tutors seemed aware of the need to address this.

#### *Adults re-entering learning – stepping stones*

Some people who enter access such as Fresh Start or foundation vocational courses later in life are likely to progress from NC to C as they see this a 'first step' and want to carry on as far as they can even if their goals beyond learning are not yet defined. Some of these adults have held down jobs for years but covered up their basic skills weaknesses. Having seen adverts or campaigns on TV or heard on the grapevine or been offered the chance at work many of them progress steadily from NC to C.

For some re-entering learning may not be seen by them as a stepping stone but rather as a way to reach a particular learning goal. Some may come in at entry 3 and have the skills but need to 'get up to speed' again before moving on, as one FE tutor put it "*like riding a bike once you've learnt you just have to brush up.*"

Tutors gave the example of medical secretaries, people who come from work to do a customer care course or to brush up on their Maths. Many of these people will not necessarily progress into C Skills for Life even though most have the ability. Some boost their skills for work purposes or to go on another course which is not Skills for Life such as Spanish or Sociology. Those who move to C at the outset are often from an NVQ or training background and just want a level one or two certificate in English or Maths.

#### *Social factors related to ESOL progression*

In terms of demographics / social factors the providers report that there are larger numbers of men ESOL learners that progress quickly from NC to C for reasons linked to the labour market. However NRDC studies with other providers (see references p.81) show that women asylum seekers and refugees and increased numbers of younger women of established ethnic minorities, well educated in their own countries are fast tracking from NC to C unless they are ESOL students with a language/script obstacle to overcome. Those with literacy needs, i.e. the least educated or those needing to learn a different script take longer but do progress. The speed of this depends on the education, language and study skills adults bring with them into learning.

*Usually the men progress. The Eastern bloc countries are very motivated to achieve, they need to achieve and get a job, the motivator is that they need to earn a living and they need to progress in their job. Whereas the Asian ladies [...] they're not encouraged to progress [...] and do not practice at home.*

Manager, South FE College



Cultural traditions do still disfavour some women moving on from community based provision or NC College provision into C and vocational learning but for others it is their individual choice to stay at home. However NRDC studies (see references) have shown that there are many ethnic minority women who do move on in learning when the time is right for them. An example in this study is Shami in her 50's, who was recently widowed, who has re-entered learning in order to get a better job now that she has to be the breadwinner. Particularly less educated women who come for social reasons and to help their children rather than for work are less likely to go from NC to C as they don't need it to survive.

Another aspect of progression can be related to age and the academic background:

*[Those who progress] seem to be younger and academic so they kind of want to go on. They obviously have an academic background in their own country. The ones that stay at the lower level are slightly older, probably more settled, they're doing English more, as I said, to get by.*

Tutor, South FE College

The importance of previous academic experience was also mentioned in other sites. For example one manager in the North FE college A mentioned the issue of progression from ESOL classes.

*Most people in the ESOL classes we covered have finished secondary school so they do not really need basic skills so won't go to a literacy class unless it's for a specific reason. There is a need to look more at ESOL progression.*

Also a tutor explained the link between need and motivation to progress of some less educated ESOL students.

*Some ESOL students as soon as they reach a level of function in Literacy they don't want to continue in more than Level 1 courses because they've mastered English enough to function every day and they don't perceive the need. Usually the higher level courses for ESOL are mainly those that want to achieve either a University place or employment*

ESOL tutor, North ACL College

#### *Social factors related to young people's progression*

The North FE colleges reported that young people (16+) who are not willing 'learners' tend to see college as an extension of their social lives at this stage.

*Many young people who have not achieved from school and are from the most disadvantaged backgrounds come in depressed, unmotivated, disillusioned, feel it is bleak and don't envisage themselves in any job/career so don't easily move on.*

However there are young people who have messed around at school but quickly come round to realising they want to get on.

*Lily, she was thrown out of a local school and she's been one of the best students this year, absolutely wonderful, really learnt, got down to it and she's doing an NVQ level two in business next year."*

Tutor, North ACL College

The same tutor felt that what makes this possible for young people is being treated with the individual respect that they felt they had not had at school in a large class.

Most providers said that older adults who drop off for social issues are much more likely to come back into learning within a couple of years than younger people whose priority is money and a job. However they said that older people are much less keen to progress into vocational learning. Staff feel there is a tension between their agenda as older learners and that of the SfL agenda which is pushing for progression into vocational learning.

#### 3.4.4 Types of progression

The SfL framework is one route for progression but there are others. People progress sideways on to other courses rather than up a level sometimes such as on to a computer on-line course or a student magazine group or a local history course. Some E3 (not E1/2) are doing counting with non-counting courses like English, Maths and computers.

Adults often learn and progress in different places at one and the same time.

*"In the evening literacy class people are doing lots of other things not just going up the ladder at the college - NVQ through other colleges, training at work, access courses elsewhere. Skills for Life at this place is just a part of the equation."*

Literacy tutor, North FE College A

Many, particularly migrant workers, leave ESOL/SfL learning once they have got a job and asylum seekers sometimes leave to join friends who are established in a different area. Those that remain in ESOL learning will not start thinking about options beyond ESOL until the beginning of Entry 3. Some tutors do feel that ESOL learners can get unnecessarily held back by a lack of language awareness of some vocational tutors who wrongly believe that ESOL students at this level will not manage the language of the vocational course and/or by ESOL tutors focus on grammatical correctness and the over stringent and narrow standards demanded to pass entry 3 ESOL which ESOL tutors feel to be of a much higher standard than Entry 3 literacy as it involves more writing.

### 3.4.5 Perceptions of progression

Although this question is phrased from a quantitative perspective, the qualitative data raises some interesting insights as to how the progression of the students is perceived by the providers and teachers. For example, whether progression is perceived as satisfactory given factors which work on a micro-level and which cannot be reflected by official numbers. Also there is an insight as to whether progression is perceived as necessary past certain levels and how personal aims do not always involve the type of progression set by government aims. The general comment from all organisations is that *most of the students of non-counting courses tend to move on rather than not*. This does not always mean moving on to counting courses; the higher the level the more factors enter the progression equation. For example in the South FE College it was reported that about 5% drop out, 20% stay in the same level and the rest (i.e. 75%) moves on in some way. Seemingly the progression 'rate' is perceived as satisfactory in this college at least by the teachers:

*Progression... I think our students have always done that anyway. Obviously you have some that go off and you lose, like find jobs, I think most of ours keep wanting to progress.*

Tutor, South FE College

*Some learners leave rather than progress on [in SfL] because they got what they wanted, brushed up on their skills or got a job or certificate. A lot don't see it as an inevitable hierarchy of levels where they will keep going until they get to the top. Influencing progression is about making them aware of all the choices and opportunities they have – upwards, sideways and outwards to jobs."*

Tutor, North ACL College

Perceptions of what 'progression' means are mainly shared by providers in quite broad terms. There are exceptions, managers who see progression in more narrow terms related only to the SfL framework. Interestingly the management of one ACL college articulates progression in terms of the college's achievement and whenever progression does not occur they still explain this in relation to their systems and structures. For example:

*We try and progress them on and I think we are very successful at progressing people on because there are a lot of courses and each level is divided into entry 1a, entry 1b, entry 1c so they can move up. In some of the community classes that is not possible in the same sort of way because you can perhaps only have one level and you do have people staying in the same class longer*

Manager, South ACL College

However in the teachers' experience, from the same colleges most students who attend non-counting courses "*intend to move on*" and it is only "*very rarely*" that they do not.

Most teachers said that they never think of adults as being C or NC, they think about each individual and try to respond to each ones' learning goals and needs.

*I wasn't aware of this C, NC thing because we value every students' achievement in terms of their learning ...we don't categorise and label people in those terms.*

Manager, North FE College B

However several admitted that they were very aware of the targets and the need in general terms to encourage people to move on more than they would have done in the past.

Some tutors and managers felt that policy makers are not aware enough or respectful enough of adults' realities and personal choices for learning. As one put it:

*Metaphors such as 'revolving doors' are an insult to students. In reality they may not have time to be full time learners, they are doing other things.*

Many felt that progression in learning should be seen as a very broad, positive concept rather than being narrowly defined by a framework of levels to steer people through, which can be disrespectful of individuals' priorities:

*Through knowing each learner you know how to encourage them ...it's about opening up people's opportunities for learning rather than just getting them to the next level. To feel excited about learning and to want to do it, that isn't chasing someone down an L1 /L2 path, regardless of what they want to do.*

Literacy tutor, North FE College A

#### 3.4.6 Progression issues – the homeless organisation

In the homeless organisation, the progression issue and its tracking are more complicated because of the vulnerability of their clients and the fact that most of the courses are non-counting. More specifically with regard to the first point the organisation is more interested in building their "soft skills" such as confidence and self esteem which they believe is the basis of any learning. Because of dealing with people with turbulent lives, attending a course does not always mean having settled in a course. On the flip side, leaving a course does not mean leaving for ever which is also true for many other adults who dip in and out of learning for various reasons. Despite this:

*More people complete what they start than don't*

Manager, South charity organisation

From a student's report though it seems that the retention throughout the course is not that great which however may reflect the vulnerable stage of these specific learners:

*I think a lot of people [leave] like I said there was 20 of us and now it has gone down to 8*

Student, South charity organisation

With regard to the second point, it is common that many clients, having achieved a confidence boost, progress –not to higher level courses within the organisation as there are not many on offer - but on to other organisations:

*Many times an organisation like us takes a “soft outcomes” approach and boosts up confidence and social networks. The people then go ahead and do a counting course in another organisation with such a provision.*

One may say that other organisations carry on with involvement in adult learners' lives after the 'difficult work' has been done. The voluntary sector (and those running non-counting courses) does not always get the credit they deserve for their part in the journey of progression of the learner just because it does not show on recorded data.

#### 3.4.7 Key summary points

- Providers and learners broad views of progression contrast and conflict with the more narrow view of funders
- Progression routes may be upwards through the SfL framework from NC to C or may be through a variety of other routes, sideways or outwards to jobs
- Most adults intend to move on and it is only rarely that they do not
- Policies and courses offered can negatively affect progression of adults in NC learning
- Progression is linked to the reasons adults started attending courses
- There is not a pattern to progression from NC – it is very individual
- There is a link between the motivation to progress and the need to progress i.e. urgency of employment goals/needs and survival needs
- Adults within and across cohorts have diverse defining characteristics which influence progression – social, personal, educational, cognitive or a mixture of these
- It is often not appropriate to push people who are 'maintaining' skills or who have 'plateaued' in learning for cognitive reasons
- The progression profile of adults in social support organisations has to do with turbulence and turning points rather than demographics or other well defined factors
- Progression should be influenced by people's own priorities and choices not by targets
- Learning that is interrupted for various social reasons is often (but not always gendered) and leads to women taking longer to progress according to their abilities and goals; family needs takes priority over their own learning goals

- People who move from NC to C learning are mainly those who wish to gain or re-gain employment
- Adults often learn and progress in different places at one and the same time
- Progression in terms of 'soft outcomes' is not recognised and not recorded which affects support organisations, particularly the charity sector who deals with the most vulnerable people

### **3.5 Reasons given by adults for progressing or not progressing to counting learning**

#### 3.5.1 Adults' perception of progression

We need to make clear that the "counting vs. non-counting" distinction is an administrative term that is not relevant to the students' experience of learning. To a certain extent it is not relevant to teachers either and is only relevant to the management of the organisations as it is closely related to funding. In this sense and since this question will be elaborated from the learners' point of view we need to stress that as far as learners are concerned all courses count. It is difficult to explain the distinction of "counting vs. non-counting" to them as most of the non-counting courses still end in a certificate or qualification via which assessment of progress is achieved. In the students' mind this is something that counts towards their learning, personal aims and sense of achievement.

*No adults on NC courses come and say "I want to work towards National tests".*

*However they can end up moving on and being quite happy to take the next test.*

Many adults talk about wanting to 'keep going' and some mention wanting to go to 'the next level' but they do not generally differentiate between C and NC. Several students just wanted to keep going with their English and Maths for themselves and go as far as they could and did not mention it in relation to work. For one it had led her to want to fill in other gaps in her education and she would have liked to do history and geography too.

*I've said to my mother-in-law. ".I did struggle because I didn't go to school until I was nine and I said to her "well, I wouldn't mind doing history and geography" because, I'd never done anything, only the basics, so it would be nice to go....*

Literacy Learner, North FE college, A

There are different attitudes to national qualifications; many are not aware of them at all; to most some kind of certificate is very important and most tutors are not in favour of the gradual phase out of college certificates

*College certificates are not encouraged anymore but it is important for learners on NC courses especially. If it takes two years or more to achieve a higher level.*

*Once entry levels see themselves achieving small chunks they'll be more open to the national test –we talk about it as an assignment not test. A Small number relish it.*

*They've had no chance at school so can get recognition at last and something to show for it – certificate. They've gained the trust that you won't put them through what they can't cope with – when they're ready – flexibility is key.*

Literacy tutor, North FE College

To others, like Penny who want it for personal development reasons rather than for work a national qualification holds more status and meaning:

*Penny: I think if you have a qualification it give you the confidence, whereas even if you've done the work I can get a college certificate I don't think that's as important you know really.*

Several tutors mentioned the strategy of linking SfL learning to the goal of GCSE's.

*We always mention GCSE. ..not as equivalents but that the learning they are doing is the underpinning skills you need for GCSE.*

However in one FE College, mixed-level evening class national tests had been 'sold' to adults as GCSE equivalents. Even some level 1 learners talked of "taking my GCSE". This has given the L1/2 more status in adult learners' eyes though it could be argued that this is misleading in that L2 Maths is not equivalent to GCSE Maths.

*"I said [to her husband] at the end of it , I'll get my GCSE and it's worth doing just to get that....you can go anywhere then."*

Another tutor explained that adults who were maintaining their 'level' or had plateaued, in the cognitive sense, had a different perception than college.

*Learners see it differently than college and don't see why that [progression] should happen if they are happy. People with marked learning difficulties do not move on to C so this affects college targets though it's fine for them [the learners].*

A key point from most adults learning in all organisations is that they seemed to be very motivated to progress with their learning in some way which may or not end up moving from NC to C. This is regardless of whether the courses have a prestigious qualification at the end of it or not. For example here is how an ESOL, Entry 1/2 learner put it:

*Certificate or no certificate we want to read and write. [...] I have problems listening and writing and speaking, I don't thinking about certificate.*

Learner, South FE College

### 3.5.2 Adults' purposes for progression

Most of the reasons adults give for progressing to higher level courses are identical to the reasons that brought them into the non-counting courses in the first place. The most prevailing ones are to do with getting a job and progression into existing jobs, voluntary work and to qualify for modern apprenticeship schemes, making use of public services and every day life or "surviving" as most have put it.

### 3.5.3 Influence of teachers on progression

Many learners said that once they had felt comfortable in the class and realised that they were brighter than they had thought they were, they were happy to work towards a higher level test when encouraged by their teacher. In one FE evening class, many have gained, with tutor encouragement and confidence in their own progress, what one adult, Margot, calls an "*appetite for learning*". Several of them have now decided to carry on though it was not their original intention.

Most learners cited teacher qualities as being a crucial reason for them staying and progressing in learning. Many students talk about the confidence they have gained which has given them to motivation to go as 'far as I can'. Teachers continually valuing *progress*, not just progression, are essential to 'learner confidence' for keeping on towards their own goals.

Emma, a literacy learner in a community based FE class who initially had little self confidence, has very gradually progressed over a few years to level 1.

*not being under pressure has nurtured progress...I don't think if I was under a lot of pressure, I think that would put me off.... I have to do a bit more here before I could go on to do other things." She wants eventually to get a part time job and also carry on with English and Maths.*

### 3.5.4 Progression and 'the comfort zone' issue

Since the need to change the balance of counting and non counting provision in order to procure funding tutors have sometimes found it hard to move on some long established learners



though there is also the issue that some have plateaued cognitively and it is not easy to find a progression route for them.

*A lot of learners have been doing Sfl a long time accessing other courses sideways- handwriting, art etc, but Sfl is their 'home' and we have not managed to move some for 14 yrs. This is not seen by learners as at all negative. The ethos was different then [before] – learning for the pleasure and fulfilment of learning.*

Lead literacy tutor, North ACL College

Some adults brought up the issue of transition from a safe known place to an unknown learning environment.

*P: I can go to...[to do GCSE Maths] but it wouldn't suit me as much, I wouldn't feel as happy, I wouldn't feel as comfortable and also its predominantly young very young there..whereas here you get a really good mix.*

#### 3.5.5. Key summary points

- Most adults seem very motivated to progress in some way which may or may not mean moving from NC to C learning
- Reasons for progressing from NC to C are mainly related to reasons for entering learning in the first place, particularly with regard to employment
- Many adults who want to 'keep going' are doing it for themselves and do not mention it in relation to work
- Most adults cite teacher qualities, encouragement and increasing self- confidence motivating them to "go as far as I can" often not originally intended.

#### **3.6 Issues around funding of non-counting learning with regard to progression**

Funding arrangements particularly those connected with LSC, seem to be an area of controversy among all sites. The controversy arises mainly related to the targets attached to the funding which, if met, are supposed to promote progression. As discussed in earlier sections views of progression differ between policy makers, funders and providers and this suggest that the targets only promote certain kinds of progression. There are differences among the sites particularly in the way that managers and teachers negotiated the pressures they faced, the priorities of their organisations and their learners' needs.

### 3.6.1 Funding arrangements

To put this discussion into context, the biggest source of money for learning in adult education is LSC and therefore all providers of learning services will have some LSC experience of setting targets with regard to progression. It seems that LSC funding fits the profile of some organisations more than others, for example it sits better –although not without problems- within the FE colleges, less well in ACL colleges and not at all well with the homeless organisation. This is the case because in ACL there tend to be higher number of adults in NC provision who will not easily progress through SfL levels. Also if “learning” is the sole service it is easier to control for other factors and monitor progression. In the case of the support provision such as the homeless organisation, learning is only one of the services provided and does not usually constitute the main priority for very vulnerable people. In addition these types of organisation have to deal with “the whole person”, which makes progression less predictable. More specifically in the FE and ACL sector the major stream of funding for non-counting courses is the LSC. There is however some European Social Fund (ESF) money and neighbourhood renewal funding which, according to managers, allows for more flexibility and for accommodating NC learner needs in particular, because the money does not come with targets attached to it. However the result of such arrangements is that as qualifications are important in the college’s mission this does have some impact on the non-counting delivery because ESF funding is not usually long term enough to realise progression even in the broadest sense.

### 3.6.2 Clashing agendas

A major issue is that government targets and learners’ needs often do not coincide which can affect the progression of those in NC learning and also the courses that can be offered (i.e. those that hit the targets receive more attention). Staff in all colleges feel very worried about why the government are looking at the issue of C and NC fearing that further cuts might be on the way. They feel that the importance of NC learning is not recognised in funding terms and that the most vulnerable learners are not getting the level of provision needed which is their only free entitlement to education of any sort. Two managers pointed out the mismatch of the widening participation agenda, lifelong learning agenda and not funding NC learning. As one FE tutor put it:

*All this targeting of innovative learning in the community then people have the guts to progress to college and the door could be slammed.*

Literacy tutor , North FE college A

FE managers express the views of staff in all colleges regarding these funding issues:

*I think, this year particularly, the funding has been cut so we're asked now to make a choice and the choice has got to be students who are going to hit the targets. And that's the negative aspect of LSC funding. They are making us make a choice, so the students who are going to lose out really are those with learning difficulties or those with second language problems, who don't hit the national targets because of their level of skills.*

Manager, South FE College

An FE tutor expresses the conflicting agendas between the system of funding and of responding to learner needs:

*A person who's done E2 and doesn't get E3 is a loss for the tutor, the college and the person because the only thing that is measured which affects funding is retention and achievement. But you can't throw him out – he is a human being with needs for learning. The flexibility is with managers and tutors not with the system.”*

*The qualifications mill*

One of the issues that this major dependence on LSC funding creates, is a push towards a “qualification mill” that colleges should promote which again is not viewed necessarily as compatible with learners' needs:

*I think they [qualifications] have become increasingly more important and we have to report to the LSC on our achievement and success rate and all the time they are pushing them up, I am going to a meeting this afternoon about how ours are too low and we have got to get them up and so I think that it is a bit like turning people through a qualification mill, you know, get them through, but... I hope that that doesn't come through to the teachers because we wouldn't want them to work like that, we want them to put the needs of the learners first.*

Manager, South ACL College

There are particular concerns about the focus on young learners which may cut learning opportunities for older learners, particularly at the lower levels:

*Cuts in education budgets and a focus on offering more courses on the basis of previous achievements means that funding will be moved toward things that attract young people. I think the whole provision is going to shrink and still fill ...but there will be lack of attention, time and flexibility at the lower levels which will affect older learners.*

Skills for Life manager, North FE College B

There is a tension between inspection and funding agendas. One college was given a lower grade because they did not offer enough community based provision, the irony being that this type of provision is not supported by LSC funding. The issue of funders taking a too narrow view of progression routes was highlighted by the same FE manager:

*It's frightening for us that LSC only look along LLN routes whereas people might go to Level 1 voc with E3 SfL and don't have to do L1 SfL but will do it at the right time for them but they might not get the lit/num support to support their voc. in a workshop. LSC think that they are funding us to get people straight on to LLN but it doesn't work like that.*

### 3.6.3 Social impact of cuts to NC learning

Managers and staff are very worried about the knock on social impact of this, as one put it:

*In five years time there'll be a problem with poor health statistics. It gives a lifeline ...that formal routine once or twice a week and also the flexibility....".come back as soon as you can and keep in contact with us and that's going to be squeezed.*

Lead literacy tutor, North ACL College

An ACL manager pointed out the financial constraints for people of moving on from Skills for Life to other types of learning:

*People should be encouraged to go from Skills for Life to other courses to continue their learning but this is difficult due to financial considerations –it's not free. Moving sideways is a positive step but there are not many options left that are funded. LSC pushing us out of 'other' provision and into very fixed ideas about L1 and 2. There have been big cuts form NC to C in the last few years in LLN and 'other provision' even if LLN is embedded eg pottery with literacy :*

Lead literacy tutor, North ACL College

### 3.6.4 Strategies and responses to funding targets

All managers and lead tutors in FE and ACL were all too aware of the need for making changes but feared the threat to their current learning ethos particularly in supporting lower level learners:

*It's a good culture to have but it isn't going to keep the college going. Managers must act. There needs to be a big culture change here but we would not like to lose the ethos and approach here.*

Manager, North ACL College

*We are faced with taking action or having action taken. It's very sad..lower level literacy needs people are dropping off the edge. E1 and 2 will get a hammering next year.*

Skills for Life Manager, North FE College A

Colleges have had to reduce the offer of widening participation courses such as first aid and line dancing which were also hooks to progress on to Skills fro Life. Managers and tutors regret the fact that positive sideways progression options are now limited for lower level learners.

*If people weren't ready for the next level they could go sideways and maintain what they'd learned through another subject and maybe come back later. Now unless they have English at a certain level they can't go sideways. They have to keep doing English at the same time which may not fit with their wishes or the time they have available for study. Managers have introduced this to maximise the amount of basic skills going on in the faculty –a hook to do more Sfl. Most don't, they drop the English and do their main interest.*

Lead Literacy tutor, North FE College B

It takes colleges a while to refine its responses to unpredictable demographic changes, such as large numbers of migrant workers starting courses but then moving on to work in other places mid course. One FE college, in order to keep up the retention figures, last year moved from whole year enrolment to a 'chunks of learning' approach enrolling each term. An ACL college also said that funding needs to continue to support short outreach courses which may be C and NC for transient groups such as migrant workers, travellers and for those in bail hostels, drug/alcohol rehabilitation provision and probation.

One of the ACL colleges are trying to move on as many learners as possible who are ready then they can give room and spend time with those who can't move on too quickly. However they are concerned that there will still not be enough funding to support the large cohort who comes for NC provision at their college and other community colleges. They feel that the shift they need to make from 20 /80 C to NC 80/20 C to NC is unachievable in a small college that does not take a large cohort of 16-19 years olds but they hope to reach mid way between. The same college is introducing embedded Skills for Life in Family Learning programmes and running post Family literacy/numeracy classes for national test preparation.

In disadvantaged urban areas there is a link between Skills for Life and Object One European funding to give holistic support to learners and not compartmentalise LLN learning which needs continued support from funders:

*We work together all the time with the job club, job fairs . View of progression that goes beyond levels DISC: we look at the whole person, what they've achieved where are you up to a, what are you planning to do – its student centred rather than college target centred.*

Out-centre Manager, North College B

Some centre managers feel forced to be 'inventive' and find a way round the gaps that the new policy causes:

*We can manipulate targets by devious means. Some of them are really clever so I put them in for L1 tests 'for practice' it doesn't harm them so I can justify it and then we meet targets and we can fund the lower level learners*

Out-centre Manager, North FE College B

However this focus on qualifications and attaining targets is not always perceived as negative. Though most did not share this view, a few teachers mentioned that it had had a positive effect because it had made the provider reflect on their work and it provided a basis for upgrading the teaching profession in a positive way. Two tutors in an ACL college who had both recently moved from work-based learning felt that management should be more proactive instead of reactive:

*if [targets] has made us rethink our strategies a little bit we have reviewed our procedures... With targets you are obviously upgrading the teacher qualifications and then that has got to be a positive [...] Negative side well there has been a lot more administration, paperwork for teachers without any extra money but I think that is part of the course in the job.*

Lead numeracy tutor, North ACL College

This ACL college plans to promote embedded Skills for Life within other courses such as ICT, Access to Higher Education, Healthy Living, Local History and Psychology. Embedded learning in the larger FE colleges is more geared to young people in vocational learning.

In most colleges, though not all, issues around funding and the pressure of attaining government targets were not just a worry experienced at college management level but, more seriously, had spilled over into teaching and learning i.e. the chalk face of delivery, which will be discussed in the next section.

### 3.6.5 The Homeless organisation funding issues

However funding and particularly LSC funding has been experienced differently by the homeless organisation. The importance on qualifications as a means to measure whether targets have been met seems to be counter productive for such a provider and their clientele:

*You can imagine it's quite counter-productive if we try and make people do qualifications and they're not well enough or they don't think it's important. These are people that haven't been supported through their lives and so it's very important that we work with them to identify what is important to them. And if qualifications are going to help them to reach their potential and get the job they want or get the volunteering they want or build up their confidence or just because they want a qualification then yeah, we support them to do it. Not just because it's government targets, because we don't have government money, I mean we do but not LSC money.*

Manager, South charity organisation

The organisation used to receive money from LSC in the past but they felt extreme pressure with the requirements of meeting the targets attached to this funding. Therefore they have turned to other type of government money (such as the Association of London Governments or ALG) as well as ESF. They view this as more appropriate for their mission because:

*... the emphasis of that funding is on building up social network, and helping people to engage in the community.*

Manager, South charity organisation

And again:

*[The ALG] have given us really appropriate funding, more based around client engagement than really hard outcomes. [...] We were funded as well by the LSC but as I said before their targets were too inappropriate for us.*

It seems that the way targets are set and the way government has decided to monitor how these are met does not work for vulnerable learners and providers that cater for them. In their case they perceive LSC targets as too 'hard outcomes' oriented and they would like LSC to also prioritise 'soft outcomes' and to seek advice from providers like them in how these could best be evaluated.

*[The LSC refuses to] look at the distance travelled, because the distance travelled is very different and very individual obviously for each client.*

Also, because the voluntary sector deals with the whole person as opposed with one of their needs, they would like a more intimate relation with the funder. As one teacher put it:

*for an organisation like us, [...] to have a funder who is more like a partner and that respects the fact that we know what we're doing I think that's quite important*

Teacher, South, charity organisation

### 3.6.6. Key summary points

- Charity organisations are dealing with the 'whole person' which makes progression less predictable
- Government targets conflict with the needs of many learners which can affect progression and the courses that can be offered
- There is a mismatch between policy agendas i.e. the widening participation agenda, lifelong learning agenda yet with less focus and funding for NC learning
- There is particular concern that NC learning opportunities for older adults will decrease in the context of more focus on young learners in counting provision
- There is a concern for the knock-on social effect of decrease in funding to support NC learning, particularly with regard to deteriorating physical, mental and emotional health
- A narrow view of progression routes may jeopardise learner progression which support their aims and needs
- Providers need time to refine its responses to unpredictable demographic change such as migration and should not be penalised in funding terms
- Most providers feel that the targets are unreachable and unfairly applied without enough consideration to the diverse NC adult learner cohort profile

## **3.7 The effect of the national targets in the delivery of non-counting and counting learning**

### 3.7.1 Targets culture

This final topic overlaps greatly with the issue of funding from LSC and with issues raised in the above section. Most prominent of these issues is the 'targets' culture and how meeting LSC targets is experienced by different providers in delivering their provision. More specifically how providers think the targets fit with their learners needs and if not, which learners are affected by this mismatch. The key related finding is that the low-level courses do not get the support they deserve with regard to their crucial role in adult LLN learning, policy makers acknowledging only the "stepping stone" part of their purpose. This role is measured by the numbers of learners that



are being pushed into counting courses which really matter to the government in reaching their targets. Hence the term “non-counting” and “counting” which all teachers and managers interviewed objected to. Teachers and managers took a much more holistic approach to lower level courses which views a more adult centred (rather than target centred) approach as a moral imperative and human right based on the needs and aspirations of the adults they are working with.

### 3.7.2 Conflicting agendas and ethos

All colleges, FE and ACL clearly expressed the impact of targets on their provision, as one FE manager puts it:

*We're driven by targets [in both positive and negative ways]. The positive is that people very often it's their first qualification and they want to achieve it, but the negative is, particularly at the lower levels, the moral issue. We are driven by achieving national tests at Level 1 and 2... what happens to the students at E1 and 2? If there's a choice we have to be driven by the targets and we have to give up courses at the lower levels because we're not funded for it. So we're driven by the funding and the targets.*

Manager, South FE College

Another FE manager (North College A) also explained the dire consequences for the lowest level provision at his college:

*The low level literacy and numeracy needs people are dropping off the edge. E1 and E2 will get a hammering next year*

Skills for life Manager, North FE College A

The tension between the government agenda and a moral ethos in lower level provision was also expressed by all FE and ACL colleges.

*We are driven by targets and progression. Some people think that's morally wrong, particularly for students with learning difficulties. And the new national targets aren't conducive to moral issues, they're not conducive to students with learning difficulties at lower levels and most definitely not for lower level ESOL learners because the national targets are accreditation first rung level 2, 16-18 and that really doesn't fit in with the government's agenda and the government's agenda is what we're funded for. So there is a tension between the government targets and educational establishments' moral responsibility to provide learning for everybody who walks through our door.*

Manager, South FE College

*If we were told everyone had to do a qualification that would disturb me and it would lessen learners' ownership of what they want to do and we might lose some due to feeling too pushed....Accreditation has become the be all and end all in an ideal world they [policy makers] could just accept that they're [learners] are getting a lot out of it.*

Teacher, North ACL College

### 3.7.3 Standardising targets – the 80/20 issue

There was also a lot of concern from all colleges related to the “80/20” proportion, i.e. the target of achieving an 80% counting provision and a 20% non-counting provision.

*Something like 70% of our enrolments are at entry 1 and entry 2, and the other 30% are entry 3, level 1, and level 2. The college wants us to try and turn that around so that we're hitting the national targets more. I'm not sure how we're going to do it because if the higher levels are not there then we're going to be turning entry 1 beginners away and then possibly having places that we're holding on to for students that don't exist.*

Teacher, South FE College

This target at this time looked unrealistic, particularly for providers who had larger numbers of existing NC provision in response to the demographic needs in their catchment area. This particularly affects ACL provision which does not have 16 to 19 years old intake. It was acknowledged that there was less pressure and a longer time frame for ACL providers to meet the targets than for FE providers though the end target was the same.

An FE manager said that the time framework for meeting targets did not account for the time it takes to refine responses to demographic changes such as the coming and going of migrant workers which affect retention targets. He feels that the extent and the pace of the cuts from NC to C is very difficult to manage. In particular he described it as a “*Time bomb*” for community provision.

*Middle aged ESOL learners won't be supported for much longer. We are faced with taking action or having action taken. It's very sad.*

Skills for Life Manager, North FE College A

He also explained that there are tensions between LSC and policy makers/inspection agendas. They were given a lower grade as there was not enough community based ESOL provision but at the same time this is not supported by LSC funding.

However though the majority of staff interviewed viewed the targets as negative there were those who had joined the ACL college more recently from work based learning who felt that there was a positive side to the current pressures. They felt that the college needed to be more proactive in moving established learners on and also in expanding recruitment out into the community more in order to bring in sufficient funding. They felt that the push and commitment toward embedded literacy/numeracy was positive.

*There is a sense that if we can get the targets in these areas we will have the money to cater for the lower levels.*

Lead tutor, North ACL College

One ACL college who experience the 80/20 target as restricting would really like to offer even more non-counting courses than what they already deliver. More specifically:

*... we would like more non accredited courses and it would give us more flexibility to do sort of interesting new courses, like we are running an ESOL and retail course at the moment and we are doing that through non accredited learning and it is very well subscribed and a lot of learners want to learn how to get shop-work and improve their English at the same time. So if we didn't have this 80/20 thing I think we could do more of those interesting embedded projects which we would really like to do*

Manager, South ACL College

#### 3.7.4 The homeless organisation

The homeless organisation are in a different position as they do not have the pressure of meeting LSC targets as they are not funded by them any more. They expressed their relief of being disengaged from the targets 'mindset' and moreover they questioned whether levels of qualifications is a valid way of measuring the value of low-level provision:

*No we don't [feel any pressure for meeting targets]. Because we don't have that funding. Because our current funding doesn't have targets to do with qualifications so we've cleared that so we purely look at whether it's useful for clients.*

Manager, South charity organisation

They feel that setting targets on hard-outcomes cannot capture the non-linear nature of adult learner progression:

*In educational environments where they're being funded very particularly for hard outcomes they don't have the luxury if it is a luxury, which it probably shouldn't be, of dealing with the whole person. But in organisations like ours, when the final focus is not education but the whole life, you have to look at the whole person and learning is one of many support services. [...] But trying to communicate that with funders like the LSC*

*who are very particular about targets getting those diagnostics, getting those assessments done, watching that progression it's not linear, [...] is a very real frustration.*

Tutor, South charity organisation

### 3.7.5 Curriculum issues related to national targets

Many teachers feel that it is very difficult to deliver a broad and intellectually challenging enough curriculum to meet people's learning needs and their potential i.e. building on what they bring into learning. They feel that the pressure to meet targets and having to prepare for highly prescriptive tests is dumbing down literacy learning in particular and narrowing people's literacy, language and numeracy learning experience in a way that is not helpful to adult learners in the longer term. One tutor felt that under the current policy agenda entry level has been degraded to the status of:

*"almost synonymous with charity or altruism hiding behind the skirts of countable provision which props it up".*

*There's a bigger picture that the accountants don't see undoubtedly...the issue of the curriculum and tests being narrowly aimed to achieve a quick qualification "the real issue is the nature of the qualification and the detail of it. You have to deal with quite small points i.e. getting the full stop in the right place and yet some of these students can read quite high level text but struggle with the test. What you've got is almost like a primary school curriculum, E1 and E2 but people have a lot else up there and a lot of ideas and don't always want to be focusing on little things, they want to explore more .... reading for inference , bias, mixed messages, use of language, media text right from E1, those great, wonderful , sophisticated reading skills which people can learn before they're really reading the words, that's all gone hasn't it – there's no creativity and no critique.*

Out-centre manager , North FE college B

An ESOL tutor commented that her students were keen to take national tests. However she was concerned that the tests are not ESOL student friendly as they are too culturally narrow related to British culture.

The mismatch between the learner-centred purpose of the ILP and the push for qualifications was mentioned by several teachers.

*“I do think policy can be very inflexible...it’s very difficult when you’re saying you’ve got to do this unit and then on the other hand you’ve got an ILP saying I want to do this, I want to do that.”*

Tutor, North ACL College

### **3.7.6 Mode of delivery issues related to national targets**

Another difference pointed between the non-counting and counting courses was related to deliverance and more particularly related to tests:

*... both work towards the national curriculum so they would be covering the same sort of group learning outcomes but the main difference is the exam courses have quite a lot of specific preparation for the exams so they will have mock tests and practice mocks and things and towards the exam there is quite a lot of that and people have to be drilled into doing the exams but that is the main difference. There is a bit more freedom in the non-accredited courses to do sort of extra curricula things like going on visits, having guest speakers in but I mean they still do a bit of that in the other courses. [...] Students don’t see any difference between the courses*

Manager, South ACL College

### **3.7.7 Pace of delivery issues related to national targets**

In an FE college teachers mentioned the pressure they were under and the increased workload.

*The pressure to retain students, putting them in for tests as soon as possible so we don’t lose them but this means we’re invidulating every month which is more work.*

*I’m fairly reflective about this but not when term one starts, I suppose I just get wrapped up with the kind of river of it which is assess, diagnose, action plan , assessments, assignments, out it rolls again.*

Lead Literacy Tutor, North FE College B

Staff from all colleges voiced their concern about pushing people to progress up a Skills for Life level within one year before they are ready and in some cases it may take several years and will plateau:

*If you are pushing people before they are ready it’s not good especially when so many have a maths phobia from school.*

Lead Numeracy Tutor, North ACL College

*It’s completely unrealistic to think that an adult who comes in at E1 or 2 (unless ESOL) will come out with L2 one day. E1 is a massive area and after the summer holidays people may have forgotten to how to write their name, spelling etc. It’s only once a week*

*for 2 or 3 hours. You can maintain but you can't expect massive progression. There is a huge jump to E2.*

Lead Literacy tutor, North FE College B

*The key factor related to moving on is really the pressure to move them on. I've changed my mind a lot – you have to move people on to make room for others. But there is the danger that everything is driven by qualifications rather than learners needs and goals.....Managers and funders need to understand that progression isn't straightforward. If you haven't taught basic skills you may not understand why somebody can't come in at E1 and get to L1 but to a literacy tutor that's obvious.*

Literacy tutor, North ACL

Another tutor felt that some people may be able to pass the next level test within a year but many of these would not really be ready for entering a higher level course or have developed their writing skills enough.

*Are you going to really be able to prepare people for managing their everyday lives and further study "you know if I sent you out of here and you're going to the job centre and fill that form in now, are you going to be able to do it. Also the students that can pass these tests – can they go away competently now saying yeah I know how to punctuate a sentence.*

Out-centre manager, North FE College B

Adults often have spiky profiles so will progress at different rates according to their different abilities.

*Eva could have got level 1 last year but it was her writing she wanted to develop. Frank might get E3 reading, then next year S/L and next year writing*  
(As above)

This tutor said, like many others, said that in an ideal world she would want to slow down and just offer certain units (see quote above) on a more individual level with adults at lower levels suited to their abilities and needs.

*This [target driven provision] works for those who have a clear goal towards qualifications and the ability to achieve these but for those who can't write sentences but they need to fill in forms they need to stay there for a while and be worked with in a slower way.*

(As above)

Some colleges have managed the need for a longer time in on level by awarding college certificates for the first year. Many but not all tutors felt it was a backwards step to phase these out as is happening:

*If we feel they need two years they'll do a college certificate for a year and then the year after they'll do the assignment. There's an enormous leap between entry 3 and level 1... if it's a new student and I need a longer period of assessment, I've learned that I'd be more likely to put them on a college certificate first, even if they're very eager for the test, just in case, then you can transfer them later because I think once they've done their City and Guilds and they've achieved it but they're not really ready for the next level then there's a gap.*

Lead Literacy tutor, North FE College B

Others mentioned the threat that targets had on student centred assessment as well as the learning itself:

*If there were no pressure towards the tests there would be a stronger and clearer focus on particular students' needs and we would not invite them to do a level if they were not ready....It affects what you teach and how you teach it, it affects your scheme of work and affects how student centred you're going to be.... I've started to ask myself okay, this person will do E3 but will they be able to do level 1 next year?*

Tutor, North FE College B

### 3.7.8 Key summary points

- There is tension between the government agenda and a moral ethos in lower level provision. Teachers take a more holistic, adult centred approach (rather than target centred) approach to lower level learning which views education as a moral imperative and human right to be based on the needs, aspirations and abilities of the adults they work with. Targets can threaten this ethos.
- There is an issue as to whether levels of qualifications is a valid way of measuring the value of low-level provision
- Setting targets on hard-outcomes cannot capture the non-linear of much adult learner progression
- The pressure to meet targets and prepare for tests is dumbing down LLN learning and narrowing people's educational experience
- National Tests are not ESOL student friendly; they are too British culture specific

- The pace of expected progression is often unrealistic – people being pushed to move up a level too quickly leaving gaps in their learning, particularly writing skills, and leaving them badly prepared for coping with higher level learning



## 4. Conclusions

The link between non-qualification and qualification-bearing adult provision is a controversial issue and has much to say about attitudes of society on learning and policy making that reflect these attitudes. Particularly, attitudes related to social capital, purposes for learning, and social welfare and in particular how public money should be distributed and whether by prioritising one provision over the other reaches those in need.

The reasons people at an NC level enter learning are as diverse as they themselves and many of these reasons overlap with those in C learning. These include educational, employment, social and health reasons. They range from wanting to build up their confidence to getting back into work and people often have multiple reasons for entering learning. Most people enter learning according to their own priorities and choices and are highly motivated which may or may not be in relation to moving up Skills for Life levels. Others, particularly some disaffected young people are less motivated as learners but it may be the only option they have to continue their education and have time to grow up and make positive choices for learning and work. There is an underlying deep concern amongst providers that people's priorities, choices and needs for learning at a NC level are being increasingly threatened by the drive to support the kind of NC learning that will lead to progression to C learning.

### Benefits of NC learning

All teachers and managers are passionate about making every possible effort to respond to the learning/social needs of every cohort of adult learner. This moral commitment builds on adults' diverse purposes, goals and abilities in learning and on what the college is able to offer.

*I wasn't even aware of this C/NC thing because we value every qualification every students' achievement in terms of their learning.*

Out-centre manager, North FE College B

Indeed in much provision there is no distinction between C and NC even in one learning group, each one working and being supported towards their own learning goals according to their abilities. Also many adults are working at NC and C levels at the same time. This is why the term 'C and NC learning' is more useful than 'C and NC courses'.

Practitioners are in one mind as to the vital role of NC learning even if some people are not able, for whatever reason, to progress to C learning:

*...self confidence, something to do in life, achievement (not levels) amazing things like making books .a whole publication for their writings either that have been scribed for them that they've made up or the they've written with support. They enjoy it so much*

*meeting other people and doing something that's creative and it's getting their brains going and its good for humanity isn't it.*

Literacy tutor, North ACL College

For some people who are facing life crisis, for example related to drug and alcohol dependence or homelessness, linking literacy to everyday life is the main priority and preparation for tests is not a priority at this stage in their lives so the NC learning they do is vital to them:

*.. I would say the non-counting provision has specifically to do with what the learner needs for their life, the skills that they need, so we're working on skills, but they're the softer skills (e.g. skills to do with confidence, answering the telephone, reading and writing linked to life: respond to their post, deal with their post, pay their bills, read to their children, go to a café and order food).*

Manager, South charity organisation

### Progression

Adult learners, teachers and providers take a broader view of progression than funders who look to progression through Skills for Life levels. Progression is very individual and depends on people's learning histories, current circumstances, purposes for learning, their abilities and what types of learning are offered to them. It was clear from this study that the large majority of adults in NC learning were well motivated whether or not they were aiming for nationally recognised qualifications or not.

People take time to progress and some people take a long time; the difference learning has made to their lives is hard to measure but deeply significant:

*Bridie, 80, has gone from being non-literate to entry 2 in eight years and is now moving into entry 3. She's amazed, not at the levels but at "the metal sheet that has been lifted."*

*This is the real impact on some people's lives*

It is clear that in adults' lives periods of learning often take place in phases and is often not the main priority in people's lives, family, earning money, progression at work and other interests can take precedence, as one tutor said: " *in reality they often haven't time to be full time learners - they're doing other things.*" It needs to be recognised that adults' will decide when and where to engage in learning and 'not being in learning' or 'leaving learning' for various reasons should not be seen as 'not progressing'.

## Assessment

The study shows that teachers and adult learners are generally in favour of tests and gain great confidence and sense of achievement, even if it was not their original intention to take them.

Despite this there is large concern that the LLN curriculum and moving from NC to C i.e. level 1 tests, does not prepare people for 'real' reading and writing in everyday life or on other courses and so it short changes people in terms of meaningful learning that can be transferred.

## Target driven learning

There is tension between the government agenda and a moral ethos in lower level provision. Providers and practitioners take a more holistic, adult centred approach (rather than target centred) to lower level learning to be based on the needs, aspirations and abilities of the adults they work with. Targets can threaten this ethos and discriminate against learners who need to be in NC provision:

*There's a discrimination process going on and I would always hang on to people as long as it was helping them learn things.*

Out-centre manager, North FE College B

*Too much focus on targets is bad, just picking people off who are in spitting distance of getting a test because if you have your funding based on that that's the way it's going to go isn't it.*

Lead literacy tutor, North ACL

## The moral and democratic right to education

Many managers and teachers view adult education, including LLN, as a moral imperative and human right whatever people's potential for progression on to counting learning:

*Everyone has a right to education...it's not their fault. NC learning must have a place or they would be excluded altogether ...They will "fall off the edge, disappear into the ether."*

Lead Literacy tutor, North ACL College

All managers and tutors expressed the need for funding to reflect commitment to all people in the learning environment, rather than driving too hard towards achieving national targets.

*There is a real need to keep funding NC learning – it's about helping people with their lives and helping them to improve skills as much as they can. This does not necessarily*

*mean all of them are going to enter paid employment but it is a matter of the significant benefits to the individual and to society as a whole of people realising their potential.*

Lead literacy tutor, North ACL College

This study does not view non-counting and counting provision as conflicting. It recognises both as important for social cohesion and in catering for populations whose interests do not always overlap. It sends out a strong message to policy makers and funders to uphold the right of all people to be able to access education which is right for their particular needs and purposes.

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