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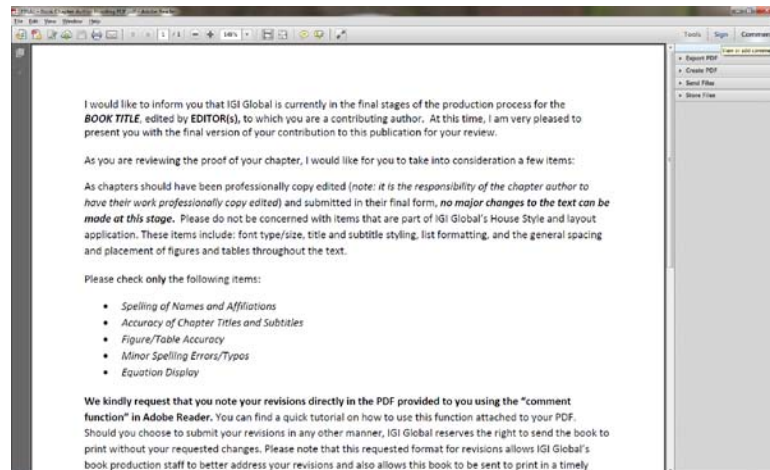
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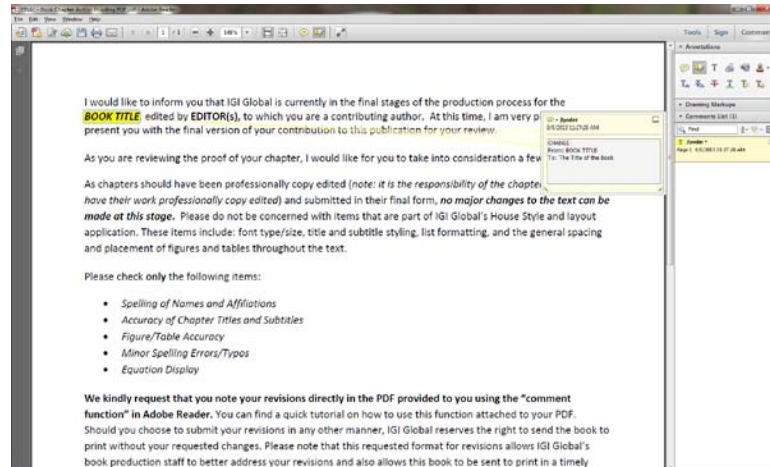
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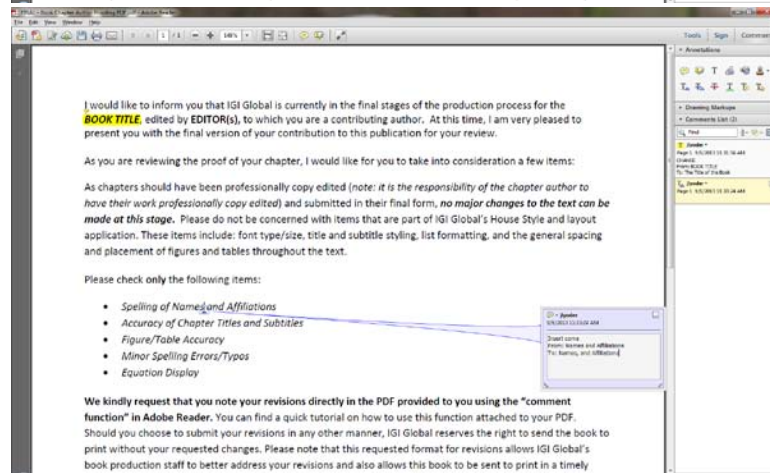
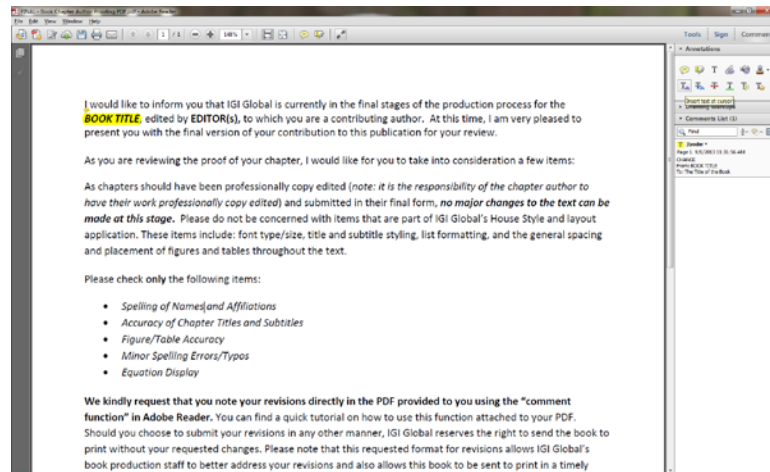
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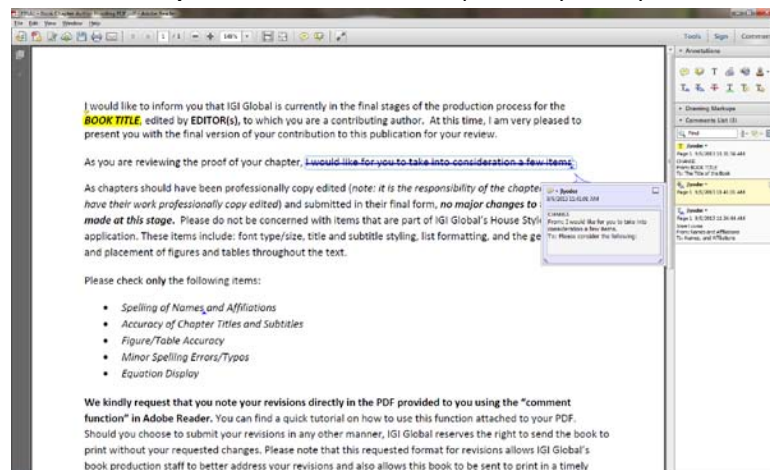
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Prisoners' Basic Skills and Subsequent Education Involvement

An Analysis of Individualised Learner Records Data in England

Olga Cara, Centre for Education in the Criminal Justice System, UCL Institute of Education, London, UK

Brian Creese, Centre for Education in the Criminal Justice System, UCL Institute of Education, London, UK

ABSTRACT

The Centre for Education in the Criminal Justice System (CECJS) at UCL Institute of Education recognises that, in order to design a coherent prison education system, it is necessary to have an informed understanding of the current educational levels of the learners. Until recently, information available on the levels of literacy and numeracy skills of the prison population was considerably out of date, and therefore unhelpful to the current context. However, from this current and ongoing work we are beginning to gain an updated picture of skill levels. In November 2015, CECJS released an initial analysis into prisoners' basic skills levels based on the 'mandatory assessments' in English and maths in 2014/15. This paper builds on that analysis using the official data gleaned from the 2014/15 Individualised Learning Record database, which is both consistent with, and supplements, the information from the prison education providers. The paper is structured to first validate the overall findings of the initial report regarding skills level of the incoming prison population. It examines how the assessment data is used by providers to inform placement of prisoners on appropriate basic skill courses, and analyses the progression trajectories of prisoners. It then details the performance of prisoners on basic English and maths courses, including their progression and achievement. The findings suggest a system that is failing to deliver education to its most vulnerable learners in prison. The majority of prisoners, including those with the lowest skills levels of English and maths, do not progress to higher levels and are insufficiently challenged. Of those prisoners enrolled on courses of study, only half complete and often only at levels lower than their previously assessed levels. The conclusion provides recommendations for policy makers and urgently calls for more research.

KEYWORDS

Literacy, Mandatory Assessments, Numeracy, OLASS 4, Prison Education

INTRODUCTION

It has become commonplace for the media to talk of the crisis in England's prisons.¹ Years of austerity policies have seen prison staff numbers decline steeply, leading to a rise in negative data including an increase in suicides of inmates, and of violent assaults between inmates and between inmates and staff (Howard League, 2014).

The education record is equally poor; in 2016 only 35 percent of prison education services were rated as 'Good' or 'Outstanding.' The Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) annual report for

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2016 notes that: 'For too long, education and training in prisons and young offender institutions have not been effective enough in giving prisoners the opportunity to gain the knowledge and skills they need to remain out of prison after release. Around 60% of prisoners leave prison without going on to employment, education or training (Ofsted, 2016, p. 103).'

In England and Wales, prisoners lose the rights of citizenship, such as their right to vote, and education is not seen as a fundamental right (Hawley, Murphy, & Souto-Otero, 2013). The availability and type of education for prisoners varies as political agendas change, with the focus currently on education for employability. Funding for education which does not immediately fit this criterion, such as courses designed to promote personal or social skills, has become more difficult to obtain, particularly for those on long sentences or who already have higher levels of education. Prisoners are expected to take out loans for higher level education (above English Level 2/international Level 3), and these are not available to support any degree-level education for a prisoner with more than six years left to serve (Ministry of Justice, 2012).

Professionals working in prison education were enthused in 2016 by the results of Dame Sally Coates' review (Coates, 2016), which sought to put education at the heart of prison regimes, and give prison governors responsibility for education in their prisons. David Cameron's government accepted these proposals, but days later the government changed leadership after the European Union referendum, the Minister for Justice resigned, and the Coates agenda has since been quietly dropped.

The current difficulties in staffing appear to have led to problems in providing education. Prison education is, in general, provided in facilities away from the prisoners' cells, and so they need to be accompanied to education by officers. Education providers report that there are often insufficient officers to do this, meaning prisoners are not able to attend class. This leads to many frustrating hours where education staff sit in empty rooms with no one to teach. The Prison Inspectorate Report on Wandsworth prison conducted in 2015 noted: 'Severe staff shortages across the prison resulted in too many men being unable to attend scheduled purposeful activities, or attend them on time, because there were too few staff to escort them to learning and skills and work activities (H.M. Chief Inspector of Prisons, 2015, p. 50).' This remains a common theme in prison inspection reports.

Surprisingly, despite the English education system being highly focused on data, it is not at all clear what the educational profile is for the prisons sector. It is assumed that large numbers of prisoners have low literacy and numeracy skills, and high numbers have learning difficulties or disabilities, but accurate statistics are difficult to find (see, for example, Alm & Andersson, 1997). The prison system has great difficulty in identifying these prisoners, does not routinely use screening processes, and is overly dependent on self-report by prisoners (see HM Inspectorate of Prisons and HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2015). Before the Centre for Education in the Criminal Justice System started its work on establishing the literacy and numeracy skills levels of prisoners in 2014, the most recent figures for England originated from a flawed comparative exercise in 2002 and, despite the weaknesses of that survey being well known, these figures are produced regularly to support policy initiatives (see Brooks et al., 2001, pp. 22-24 and the citation of Brooks's later findings in Creese, 2016, pp. 14-15 for a full discussion).

BACKGROUND

While it is widely agreed that education can be an important element in reducing recidivism, the exact ways in which this works are still not clear. As in many fields of social studies, it is difficult to eliminate all the other potential factors which might affect a prisoner's future path on release, and so most studies showing the effects of education are general rather than specific. Nonetheless, an analysis by the Centre for Economic Performance (Machin, Marie, & Vujić, 2010), supports the idea that improving the educational attainment of marginalised individuals can help reduce crime, and Schuller (2009) identified economic, social and moral rationales for improving lifelong learning for offenders. Behan (2014), working with Irish prisoners, concludes that educational spaces which

allow students to voluntarily engage in different types of learning, at their own pace and at a time of their choosing, can be effective in helping prisoners move away from offending behaviour, while evidence for effective strategies are outlined in a New Zealand study (Lukkien & Johnston, 2013). Further, US studies (Davis et al., 2013; Wilson et al., 2000; Aos, et al., 2006) similarly support the idea that prisoners can reduce rates of reoffending by participating in education programmes. This has been recently supported by a joint Ministry of Justice and Department for Education report which suggests that it is participation in education, rather than any subsequent qualification, which leads to a significantly lower re-offending rate on release from prison (Ministry of Justice & Department for Education, 2017). Tett and colleagues (2012) make a specific case for promoting the role of the arts in enabling prisoners to engage with learning, and the impact this has on their rehabilitation and desistance from crime. They argue that participating in arts projects builds an active learning culture and encourages the improvement of oral and written literacy skills through the use of positive pedagogical approaches.

From these studies, it is clear that education is, at the very least, a part of the process by which prisoners can be successfully reintegrated into society. Models of change or transition through education also stress the importance of the so-called 'soft skills' of self-esteem, self-confidence, good communications and self-knowledge (Schuller, 2009); similarly, the Prisoner Learning Alliance Theory of Change suggest five key benefits arising from prison education: Culture, wellbeing, human-capital, social-capital and knowledge, skills and employability (Champion & Noble, 2016). While it may be that these benefits arise from participation in prison education, it remains the case that some of these soft skills are necessary before adults embark on more formal education, and may be thought of as underpinning their educational potential. Self-esteem and communications skills in particular are necessary to equip prisoners into any meaningful education provision. It is, therefore, not sufficient to restrict educational goals to basic skills and vocational studies and assume this will be adequate. If the prison system is to have the desired transformative effect, it needs to engage with the 'whole person' and seek to produce more balanced, more mature, educated citizens.

Despite some positive rhetoric, the fact is that prisoners find it very difficult to gain employment on release, regardless of their English and maths qualifications or their vocational expertise. A recent Ministry of Justice report found that: 'Two years after release from custody in 2008, 15 percent of offenders were in P45 employment, with 29 percent of offenders starting a P45 employment spell at some point in the two years following their release from custody (Ministry of Justice, 2011).' Similarly, A Department for Work and Pensions report found that just 19 percent of those leaving prison and referred to the Work Programme have found a job which they have held for six months or more (Department for Work and Pensions, 2016, Table 2.8).

The fundamental difficulty is that they have been prisoners, and are required to declare this when applying for a job. Many prisoners understand this fully and do not view vocational training as providing actual employment skills.

The government spends a great deal of money on prison education², and yet there are no robust data reports to demonstrate what proportion of the prisoner population has Level 3 and above qualifications or entry-level literacy. There is no available information on what percentage of prisoners do not have English as a first language, or do have a university-level qualification.

There are also questions about whether or not prison education is delivered at the best levels for prisoners. In a small piece of work conducted on education provision for young prisoners (under 25 years) in custodial settings, the majority of qualifications gained were at a rather low level (Entry level 3 or Level 1) (Hurry et al., 2012). The question was whether this was a good reflection of learner profiles or was not sufficiently aspirational. In one institution, around 35 percent of the young people had initial assessments at Level 1 and around 25 percent at Level 2 or above, yet only about 10 percent of qualifications achieved were at Level 2 or above.

If we accept the argument that education is important in transforming the lives of prisoners, then there should be a much greater understanding of the educational levels of the prison cohort, so that education can be planned to meet the needs of that cohort.

ENGLISH PRISON EDUCATION

As basic skills education in the context of delivery in the secure estate in England is particularly complicated for the non-specialist, requiring an understanding of the adult basic skills system and the ways in which prison education is contracted and managed, it is worthwhile briefly outlining some of the major aspects of this system.

Education services for all public-sector prisons³ are contracted through the Offenders' Learning and Skills Service (OLASS) contract. The contracts offered to providers in OLASS reflect the earlier offender learning review, and were set out in *Making Prisons Work: Skills for Rehabilitation* (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011). Lead prison governors working with the OLASS providers are able to determine the most appropriate provision to meet the needs of learners in custody.

At the time this data was collected, there were four organisations providing learning and skills training for offenders across the English regions: Novus (the prisons education department of The Manchester College) ran prison education in five regions, Milton Keynes College in three regions, and Weston College and PeoplePlus in one region each.

In 2001, as part of the national Skills for Life initiative, core curricula were drawn up for adult literacy and numeracy. These took individual topics (e.g. shape and space) and listed specific skills or knowledge that would be expected at different levels. The lowest level is Entry level 1 (EL1), which progresses through Entry level 2 (EL2) and Entry level 3 (EL3) to Level 1 (L1) and Level 2 (L2).

In general, Level 2 is considered roughly equivalent to a GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education); Grade C or above, generally accepted as the threshold level of competence in the English school system.

Initial assessments have been used for many years. Since August 2014, it has been a mandatory requirement that the OLASS prison education providers conduct English and maths initial assessments which are termed Mandatory Assessments (or MAs) on all new prisoners entering the system.⁴ All the details on how MAs are conducted are left to the education providers. There is no guidance on which product to use for these assessments, or when they are to be conducted, or any other contextualisation. Prisoners are asked to self-declare any learning difficulties or disabilities, and again the ways in which providers ascertain this status is left to their discretion. The details of the MAs are added to the Individualised Learner Record (ILR) database which holds the educational records of all post-compulsory education funded through the Skills Funding Agency (SFA).⁵ This is the data which we have used in this study.

METHOD

In our initial report into prisoners' basic skills levels (Creese, 2015), we used data obtained directly from the four prison education providers, and used the 2011 Skills for Life survey (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2012a, b) as a comparator. This allowed us to compare prisoners' basic skills levels with the skills levels of the general population. We have continued to use this survey data in this paper. Similarly, we have used the Skills for Life programme definitions of 'functional literacy' and 'functional numeracy' (Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, 2007). That publication defined these as relevant indicators of skills levels that allow prisoners to function normally within society; functional literacy is defined as Level 1 skills and above, while functional numeracy is defined as Entry level 3 skills and above.

Table 1. Comparing skills levels between ILR data and initial CECJS Report

Skills Levels	English		Maths	
	ILR Data	CECJS Report	ILR Data	CECJS Report
L2 & above	12.7%	13.8%	8.8%	9.0%
L1	35.3%	36.2%	32.3%	33.7%
EL3	29.7%	29.7%	37.3%	36.7%
EL2	13.2%	12.9%	14.6%	14.8%
EL1 & below	7.9%	7.4%	6.1%	5.8%

Notes: There were 896 (1%) English IAs and 708 (1.2) maths IAs where level was unknown

We obtained permission from the Skills Funding Agency to use the entire Individual Learner Record (ILR) dataset for all prisoners (all learners funded through the Offender Learning and Skills Service contract) in education during the year 2014/15. Our aims in using the dataset were:

- To validate the overall findings of the initial report regarding skills levels of the incoming prison population that was based on the data received directly from providers;
- To explore the progression trajectories of prisoners by combining their initial assessment data and subsequent enrolment on functional skills courses;
- To analyse the performance of prisoners on functional skills courses, including their progression and achievement; and
- To understand how the Mandatory Assessment data is used by providers to inform placement of prisoners on appropriate basic skills courses.

The ILR database records the learning aims (i.e. qualifications studied), the learner outcomes, and the funding for the provider. These learning aims are recorded on an official list of courses managed by the Skills Funding Agency. For each qualification, details are shown of level, appropriate guided learning hours, and what funding can be drawn down (Skills Funding Agency, 2016).

The Mandatory Assessments are considered a learning aim and are listed on this system, and providers are funded for completing these with learners at the start of their learning programme. All subsequent learning undertaken by learners within the same year is also recorded on the same database so allowing an examination of progression trajectories and learning outcomes.

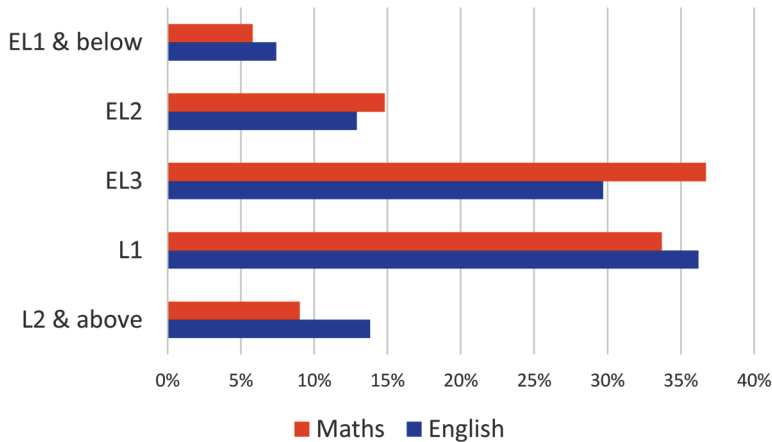
FINDINGS 1: COMPARING DATA FROM INDIVIDUAL LEARNER RECORDS (ILR) WITH INITIAL CENTRE FOR EDUCATION IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM (CECJS) STUDY

The Individual Learner Record (ILR) data received from the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) consists of the learning records of 544,368 learning aims that correspond to 126,143 learners in the year 2014/15. The data includes 74,626 Mandatory Assessments (MAs) in English and 74,302 MAs in maths. After removing duplicates, these became 73,515 in English and 73,197 in maths.

Comparing the assessment data from the ILR with our previous CECJS report findings (Creese, 2015) we see that the results correspond:

As we anticipated, the official data matches the initial data collected directly from providers very closely, with the largest - but still small - differences being for those assessed at Level 1 in maths and at Level 2 and above in English.

Figure 1. Prisoners' English and maths skills' levels



The differences between the English skills levels of prisoners and their maths skills are more clearly seen in Figure 1.

In terms of numbers of prisoners, around 15,500 have English skills of Entry level 1 or Entry level 2, and 15,100 have maths skills of a similar level. At the higher end there are 9,300 prisoners who assessed as having English skills at Level 2 or above and 6,400 with maths skills at or above Level 2.

This validates and supports the earlier conclusions reached by the study team, i.e. that, while the literacy levels of prisoners are very poor, numeracy levels are broadly similar to those found in the general population. The ILR data includes self-declared information on prisoners' prior educational attainment. Although we report this data here, we do not consider these figures to be highly reliable, given the lack of supporting documentation (i.e. certificates) and often lack of understanding of different levels. This is also the view of prison educators we have consulted. Around 19 percent of prisoners claimed qualifications at L1 or below, and 27 percent full Level 2 or above. The remaining 54 percent reported either having no qualifications or not knowing what they might have.

It should be noted that, whilst more than 27 percent of prisoners report having full Level 2 or full Level 3 qualifications, only 13 percent (English) and 9 percent (maths) were assessed as having Level 2 skills and above (see Table 1).

FINDINGS 2: FUNCTIONAL SKILLS ANALYSIS: MANDATORY ASSESSMENT AND ENROLMENT ON COURSES

While there are many small and low-level English and maths qualifications taken in prison, this study looks only at Functional Skills qualifications. These are mature, well-understood and recognised qualifications used widely in the adult education sector. They range from Entry level 1 through to Level 2.

The prison authorities do not collect data on how many offenders do not have English as their first language. There were, however 3,622 learning aims for ESOL related learning, mostly short courses and at quite low levels. Most of the education providers, however, tend to enrol ESOL learners on Functional Skills English learning aims, so this figure tells us little of the extent of ESOL need in prisons.

There were 28,378 English Functional Skills and 26,631 maths Functional Skills learning aims (enrolments) recorded. Table 2 shows the split for enrolments for different levels of English and maths Functional Skills learning aims.

Table 2. English and maths Functional Skills learning aims by level, 2014/15

	English Functional Skills		Mathematics Functional Skills	
	No. of Enrolments	%	No. of Enrolments	%
Level 2	5837	20.6%	5425	20.4%
Level 1	10549	37.2%	10954	41.1%
Entry level 3	6611	23.3%	7526	28.3%
Entry level 2	3448	12.2%	2132	8.0%
Entry level 1	1930	6.8%	594	2.2%
Total learning aims	28376	100%	26732	100%

A specific objective of this study was to analyse the relationship between the mandatory English and maths assessments (MAs) and subsequent enrolled study programmes (level and subject).⁶ If we compare the learning aims data with the MA data, we do not see the smooth progression intended. In the post-compulsory education sector as a whole, Skills Funding Agency guidance is that learners should be enrolled on a learning aim one level higher than their assessed level, i.e. the level at which they are considered to be currently operating. So, a learner who is assessed as being at Entry level 3 would be expected to enroll onto a course at Level 1.

We then looked at the Mandatory Assessments (MAs) versus learning aims for all prisoners who did an English or maths MA. Table 3 shows that 31 percent were assessed as having Entry level 3 skills in English. If we look at all those prisoners who enrolled on a functional skill, 37 percent were enrolled onto a Level 1 English course. Similarly, while 35 percent were assessed as having Level 1 English skills, only 21 percent of those enrolling on functional skills went into Level 2 courses – and it is likely that many of those will have already been assessed at Level 2. The maths MA proportions and learning aim proportions show the same pattern.

These global percentages suggest that, in general, for both English and maths, far fewer prison learners are enrolled on Level 2 courses than might be expected (given Skills Funding Agency guidance), while the proportions enrolling on Entry level 3 and Level 1 courses are higher than might be expected.

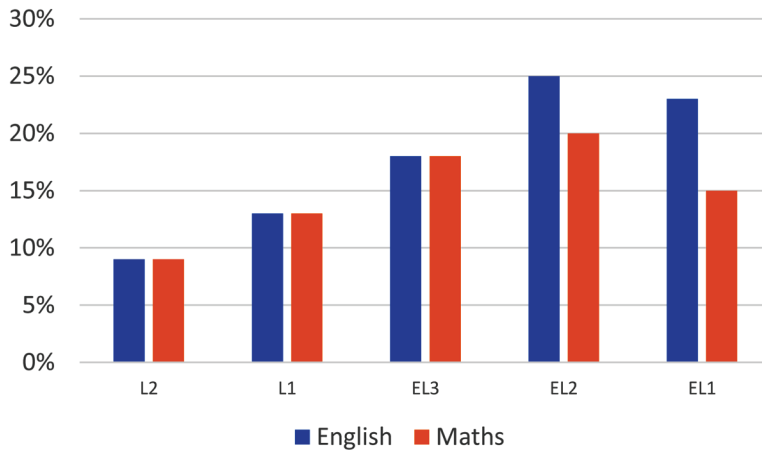
We analysed this apparent under-enrolment of prisoners on certain levels in more detail. For English, we find significant numbers of prisoners enrolled on courses at levels below what would be expected. For instance, of those assessed as having English skills Entry Level 3, only 51 percent were subsequently enrolled on an English functional skills Level 1 learning aim, while 41 percent were enrolled on lower level courses and 7 percent on higher. Enrolments on maths courses were generally slightly more in line with expectations, though there remain significant numbers enrolling on courses below, or even way below, what would be expected.

These results suggest that all too often prisoners are enrolled on courses which provide insufficient challenge and so fail to make the sort of progress in their English and maths skills that we might

Table 3. Comparison of English and maths MAs and learning aims

English	MAs	Learning aims	Maths	MAs	Learning aims
L2 & above	11.8%	20.6%	L2 & above	8.2%	15.3%
L1	34.6%	37.2%	L1	32.5%	46.2%
EL3	31.3%	23.3%	EL3	36.8%	28.2%
EL2	14.1%	12.1%	EL2	15.7%	8.1%
EL1 & below	8.2%	6.8%	EL1 & below	6.7%	2.3%

Figure 2. Percentage of prisoners enrolling on a Functional Skills qualification by level of MA



expect. By entering prisoners on lower level courses than they should, this lack of progress is difficult to detect when looking at overall success figures.

There is a problem for prison education providers who have prisoners assessing at Level 2, as there are no fully funded English or maths options for levels higher than Level 2. Consequently, there are limited opportunities for prisoners assessed at Level 2 to make further progress in English or maths. GCSE provision is currently negligible in prisons with less than 100 engaged in GCSE English and maths qualifications across the entire system. Nonetheless, there must be a suspicion that by entering prisoners on courses below their capability, education providers can improve success rates, an important indicator at the time of this research. Selecting 'less demanding' courses for prisoners could boost provider success rates. In General Further Education provision the Skills Funding Agency check the validity of course placements, something it is extremely difficult to do in a prison context.

FINDINGS 3: FUNCTIONAL SKILLS ANALYSIS: PARTICIPATION

The data revealed a high number of prisoners who do not enroll on any functional skills learning aims during their stay. For example, while 5,802 prisoners were assessed with English at Entry level 1, only 1330 (23 percent) actually enrolled on a functional skills learning aim. In maths, only 15 percent of those who assessed at Entry level 1 actually started a functional skills learning aim.

Figure 2 illustrates that prisoners assessing with Entry level 1 (EL1) or Entry level 2 (EL2) English skills have a slightly greater chance of enrolling on a Functional Skill than those assessing at the same levels in maths. Less than 15 percent of prisoners assessing at Level 1 or over actually enrol on a Functional Skill.

FINDINGS 4: FUNCTIONAL SKILLS ANALYSIS: ACHIEVEMENT

Achievement is described on the Individual Learner Records in the following terms:

- **Completed and Achieved:** The prisoner completed the learning aim and received the qualification.
- **Continuing With the Learning Aim, Where the Learner Has:**
 - undertaken an assessment but has not yet received a result,⁷ or
 - transferred (either to another course with the same provider or to another provider).

Table 4. English and maths functional skills pass and qualification Achievement rates

English	Pass Rate	QAR	Maths	Pass Rate	QAR
EL1	87%	45%	EL1	89%	55%
EL2	87%	51%	EL2	90%	58%
EL3	84%	50%	EL3	81%	50%
L1	77%	46%	L1	77%	49%
L2	80%	49%	L2	87%	56%
Total	82%	48%	Total	82%	52%

- **Completed and Not Achieved:** The prisoner completed the course of study but did not pass the final assessment.
- **Withdrawn:** In this category there is a field for reason for withdrawal.

Approximately one third of those who start functional skills learning aim are withdrawn, a far higher rate than we see outside of prison. On the record, the most often stated reason is ‘due to circumstances outside the provider’s control.’ The main reason for this high number is likely to be short sentences, with prisoners leaving prison before completing their course of study. We might also expect high numbers of transfers as prisoners are frequently moved to other establishments, but this does not seem to be the case. This again seems puzzling and in need of further investigation.

We have calculated pass rates by comparing those who completed and achieved to all those who completed and not achieved. Numbers of withdrawals and of those continuing (which includes transfers) are excluded from these figures.

Using this criterion, we find that pass rates for Entry level learning aims are high, generally close to 90 percent, and in line with (or even better than) the post-compulsory education sector as a whole (See Skills Funding Agency, 2016b). Level 1 and Level 2 rates are slightly lower.

We have also looked at qualification achievement rate (QAR) comparing those who completed and achieved to all those who enrolled (excluding continuing and transfers) and here the rates are much lower than in the FE sector more generally. These analyses suggest that the main challenge is to keep prisoners on courses rather than their achievement (see Table 4).

Many prisoners go on to enrol on further functional skills learning aims. This may happen quickly, after a transfer for instance, or after a gap of several months. While many prisoners achieve their second learning aim, the number who achieve in third and subsequent learning aims falls rapidly. So, for example, for English functional skills, 6,252 prisoners gained a qualification in their first or second learning aim but only a further 188 successfully completed their third or fourth learning aim.

As illustrated by the QAR figures above, it is clear that many of those who do start functional skills learning do not complete their qualification. Figures 3 and 4 analyse the first functional skill learning aim only, and show that, for English, just under half of those prisoners who enrolled on functional skills learning aim did not complete it. For maths, 44 percent of prisoners who enrolled did not complete.

This means that, of the 27,267 prisoners who assessed as having Entry level 3 maths skills, 4824 enrolled on a maths functional skills course, and 2135 actually completed and achieved a maths functional skill.

More globally, therefore, we can see that of the 73,515 prisoners who completed their English MA, only 6,233 actually completed a functional skills learning aim, around 8 percent. For maths, of the 73,197 prisoners who completed their maths MA, just 6,375 completed a functional skills learning aim, around 9 percent. While some of those who failed to complete their first learning aim

Figure 3. Outcomes for all English functional skills enrolments

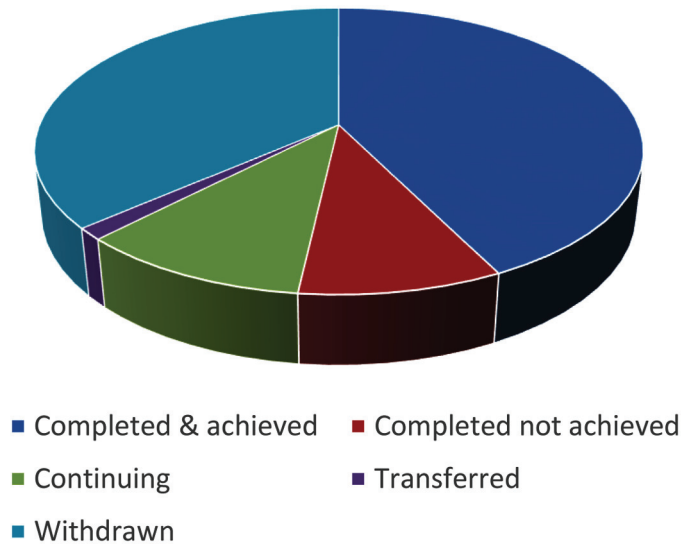
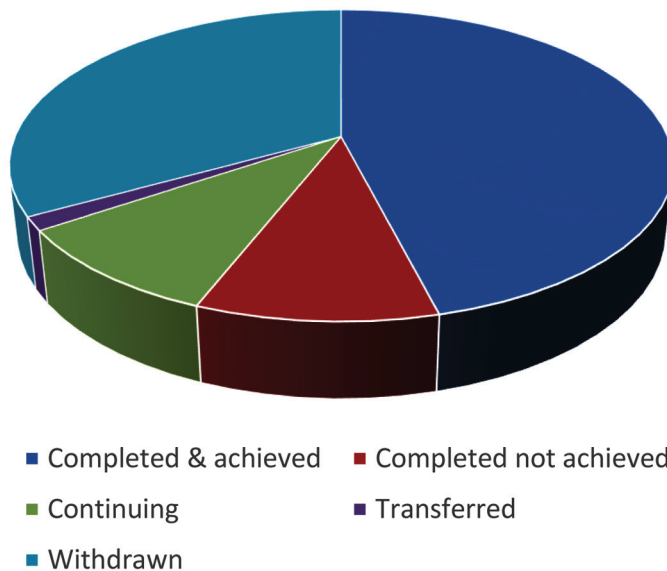


Figure 4. Outcomes for all maths functional skills enrolments



will have gone on to enroll and complete others, we know the numbers achieving subsequent learning aims are fairly low.

There may be many good reasons for this low rate of participation; many prisoners are on very short sentences and there will be insufficient time to engage with education, and there will always be a cohort who will not engage in education if they have a choice. Others will be lost in the churn which is such a feature of the prison system and they may be in prisons which do not offer appropriate courses. Nonetheless, the figures do suggest that a large number of prisoners are slipping through the system without any significant engagement in English and maths education.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The data gleaned from the Individualised Learner Record database supports the findings from the CECJS initial study into the mandatory assessments that while the literacy levels of prisoners are very poor, numeracy levels are broadly similar to those found in the general population. This is not altogether surprising, as the CECJS study was based on provider data, which would also have been the basis of the providers' ILR submissions. There are two ways of viewing this result. It is certainly reasonable to conclude, as so many do, that prisoners in general have very poor English and maths skills. However, if you compare those skills with the general population, then it is clear that the more serious deficit is in the prevalence of prisoners with Entry-level English skills. We would suggest that this should be a priority for prison authorities (Creese, 2016).

Although there is a great deal of data available on the ILR, there are significant problems with establishing the validity of some of that data. It would be very interesting to understand prisoners' previous education records, for instance, but the prior attainment data is entirely self-reported and without any further validation. The figures here suggest that over a quarter of the cohort claim prior qualifications of Level 2 or above, while for the same group only 13 percent (English) or 9 percent (maths) are initially assessed at Level 2 or above. However, 41 percent claim no qualifications, and this too seems unlikely, given the age profile and current qualifications-oriented schools system. One solution to this problem might be a more routine method of linking the ILR with the main schools database, the National Pupil Database. This would allow education staff to see a continuity of educational experience without relying on personal testimony.

None of the officially collected data records whether English is a prisoner's first language or not. This information must be vital, not just for a prisoner's education but for all communications with that prisoner. While the data does tell us something about the number of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) learning aims, all the prison education providers prefer to enrol ESOL learners on English Functional Skills courses. Providers, suggest these are more appropriate courses for them, which may be the case, but at the time of this research there were significant funding incentives for education providers to use Functional Skills rather than ESOL-specific qualifications.

Close analysis of progression through educational levels suggests that there is insufficient challenge for prisoners that enter education. Too often prisoners are enrolled on courses below their capability. This is particularly, noticeable for those prisoners who should be enrolled on Level 2 courses but are enrolled on much lower qualifications. The data cannot supply reasons, but we suggest several possible causes. It is possible that there are insufficient teachers qualified to teach Level 2 in prisons, as there is more demand for Entry level and Level 1 teaching. However, it may be that, by entering prisoners on courses below their capability, education providers can improve success rates. This is certainly possible given the huge turnover of prison learners through the system, meaning that it is very difficult for the Skills Funding Agency to monitor standards.

The number of prisoners taking standard secondary education qualifications (GCSEs) in English or maths is very small, less than 100 during the period of this study. This means that those who are assessed at Level 2 have no progression route open to them. OLASS education providers are slowly considering how to meet the considerable logistical challenge of offering GCSE qualifications, but the numbers going through the system remain very small.

Of most concern is the number of prisoners, particularly those with very low assessments, who do not enroll on a functional skills programme at any level. Less than a quarter of prisoners enroll on a functional skills learning aim, and half of those never complete. While there may be many good reasons for prisoners not engaging in education, such as the prevalence of short sentencing, the figures suggest large numbers of prisoners are slipping through the net of education provision. Giving education greater priority and importance within the prison system might be a way of gaining more prison-wide support for education.

Sentencing policy really needs to reflect on the importance of prisoners being given an opportunity to engage with education in a meaningful way during their incarceration. It is an indictment of prison education that so many prisoners with low basic skills continue to be failed by the prison education system.

CONCLUSION

The evidence from this study suggests that prisoners in education are not receiving an adequate educational experience. Far too few prisoners are engaging in formal education at all, and the numbers of prisoners successfully achieving qualifications are very low compared to need. Given the evidence stressing the importance of education to prisoner rehabilitation, this suggests a major failure of the current prison education system.

It is clear that many prisoners have low English and maths skills on entry to prison. This in turn endorses our previous conclusions that, using the Skills for Life definitions of functional literacy and numeracy, the English skills level of prisoners are substantially below those of the wider population, while the maths skills levels are on a par (Creese, 2015). The ILR data shows that 20 percent of the prison population, around 15,000 prisoners, have very low basic skills levels (Entry level 1 and Entry level 2), and supporting this group should be a major government priority. The data also shows that many prisoners (over 9,000 English and over 6,000 maths) do have higher skills and the lack of a progression route through standard secondary education (GCSEs) is a major concern. Delivering GCSEs in prison is a complex problem but needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

The ILR database does not currently identify ESOL speakers, and therefore we cannot report how this impacts on low literacy and numeracy skills. It is difficult to understand why this data is not part of the standard set of data collected from every prisoner on entering the system, and we recommend that this be done at the earliest opportunity.

The overwhelming majority of prisoners, including those with the lowest skills levels, never enrol on a functional skills course, even those assessing at Entry level 1, and there is no data to explain this. Where prisoners are enrolled on courses of study, only half complete. Again, there are no records to explain this. Where prisoners do enrol and complete, it is often at a level lower than their mandatory assessment justifies. Courses above Level 2 are rare, as funding is focused on those with lower skills. Prison education deserves a more thoughtful and flexible approach to its processes and funding. Education should be a part of every sentencing plan from the start.

Given the recent acknowledgement from the Ministry of Justice as to the importance of participation in education (Ministry of Justice & Department for Education, 2017), these findings contribute to a picture of a system that is not only failing to deliver education for its most vulnerable learners but not contributing to the rehabilitation process. If criminal justice is to be seen as more than simply throwing away the key, policy-makers would benefit from revisiting previous initiatives that focused on raising the profile of education in prisons to improve rehabilitation and reduce re-offending rates.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ See, for example: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/aug/02/prisons-crisis-perverse-government-reforms-prison-governors-association>, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-38596034>, <https://www.ft.com/content/462c4a0e-e3cd-11e6-9645-c9357a75844a>, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/03/22/four-new-jails-planned-ministers-tackle-prisons-crisis-amid/> all 2017
- ² According to a 'Freedom of Information' request (https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/contract_values_for_olass_4) the value for the four OLASS contracts in 2013/14 was just over £131 million.
- ³ There are a small number of private prisons which commission education independently, as do all prisons in Wales.
- ⁴ Mandatory Assessments are given to all prisoners who are aged 18 or over. Different systems apply to younger prisoners.
- ⁵ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/individualised-learner-record-ilr>
- ⁶ A study programme consists of a number of individual learning aims. The data we have analysed is for English and maths learning aims by level (EL1 – L2)
- ⁷ In this analysis, those awaiting results were considered to be continuing with their learning aim.

APPENDIX

Table 5. Glossary of acronyms

CECJS	Centre for Education in the Criminal Justice System at UCL Institute of Education
ESOL	English for speakers of other languages
FS	Functional Skills
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
IA	Initial Assessment
ILR	Individualised Learner Record database
LDD	Learning Difficulties and Disabilities
MA	Mandatory assessment
OFSTED	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills
QAR	Qualification Achievement Rate
SFA	Skills Funding Agency