

An assessment of the English and maths skills levels of prisoners in England

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Although the direct links between education and reducing recidivism in prisoners are problematic, there is little argument that education is a factor in promoting reintegration and rehabilitation. There is a current focus in prison education on education for employment, and yet there are no recent or unambiguous data about the skills levels of the prison population. The most often quoted figures are both 15 years out of date and deeply flawed in terms of their comparisons with the general population. This article sets out a new study that takes the mandatory initial assessments carried out on every new prisoner between August 2014 and July 2015 and compares them with the national Skills for Life survey conducted in 2011. This provides us with some hard facts about the English and maths skills of the past year's intake of prisoners. The conclusions argue that while the numeracy skills of prisoners are better than previously understood, the cohort has extremely poor literacy skills, and addressing these needs should be a priority for government.

Keywords: prison education; literacy; numeracy; mandatory assessments; OLASS 4

Introduction

Despite declarations from the United Nations and the European Union, education in prisons in England is not considered a universal entitlement but is provided or offered to groups within the estate on the basis of changing policy priorities (UN, 2009; European Council, 2000). England is not that unusual in this, the rights granted by these international organizations being largely seen as an aspiration rather than an actual policy goal (Czerniawski, 2015). While education for young offenders of school age is mandatory, other provision is provided in accordance with wider government priorities. As an example, prisoners are currently only allowed to embark on a university degree if they are within eight years of release, a change in policy from a few years ago. Some of the arguments around the philosophy of prisoners' rights to education have been previously aired in this journal by John Vorhaus (see Vorhaus, 2014, and also Starkey, 2012).

Education is seen across many countries as having a positive role in leading prisoners out of the reoffending cycle. Studies from around the world show that participation in education and training reduces the likelihood of prisoners reoffending (Machin *et al.*, 2010; Schuller, 2009; Davis *et al.*, 2013; Wilson *et al.*, 2000; Aos *et al.*, 2006; for a scheme that reduced reoffending among young people who had offended, see Tarling and Adams, 2011).

Nonetheless, the direct causal link between education and reduction in recidivism remains difficult, as most prisoners have a complex array of issues and challenges on release, and linking any one cause to a successful reintegration with society is highly problematic.

In common with other government priorities, the current emphasis for prison education has been on education that is deemed to assist prisoners gaining employment after their release (see

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Transforming Rehabilitation, MoJ, 2013). The current Offender Learning and Skills Service¹ (OLASS) contract demands an emphasis on three elements:

- English, maths, and ESOL
- Vocational qualifications including ICT
- Employability skills.

(Skills Funding Agency, 2012)

The same guidance makes it clear that prisoners over 24 who wish to pursue higher studies such as A levels, Level 3 vocational qualifications, higher education qualifications, or advanced-level apprenticeships need to self-fund these studies by applying for a student loan.

Education in prisons has been found to be consistently poor in inspections by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), and the current annual review (Ofsted, 2015) confirms this poor reputation. However, it should be noted that each of the providers has well-performing as well as poorly performing prisons, suggesting that the management of the prison has a crucial impact on the quality of provision. A recent article in this publication (Rogers *et al.*, 2014) detailed the need for the prison system to focus more clearly on the education and training needs of those prisoners under 25.

There is a general consensus across many international studies that the basic skills levels, the skills associated with literacy and numeracy, are in general disproportionately poor for prisoners (see Prison Reform Trust, 2013; Davis *et al.*, 2013; Dawe, 2007). A report on education provision for the under-25s in custodial settings (Hurry *et al.*, 2012) found that the majority of qualifications gained were at a relatively low level (Entry Level 3 or Level 1). In one institution for which quantitative data were available, around 35 per cent of young people were assessed as being at Level 1, and around 25 per cent at Level 2 or above – yet only about 10 per cent of qualifications achieved were at Level 2 or above.

Earlier data

It is fundamental to providing effective education that it is pitched at the correct level. This has been challenging in England because of a lack of reliable information about prisoners' educational levels.² Statements such as this are frequently made concerning the skills levels of English prisoners:

In the prison population, a lack of basic skills is common: 48% of prisoners have a reading age at or below the level of an 11 year old (this increases to 65% for numeracy and 82% for writing skills).

(Canton *et al.*, 2011: 18)

Although these figures originate from a House of Commons written answer, and are sourced from a report by the Social Exclusion Unit (2002), they are misleading.

The figures for the general population were taken from the 1996 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), which had the aim of profiling the literacy skills of adults using an internationally agreed measure and gaining data for international comparison (see Carey *et al.*, 1997). The IALS data refer to the proportions of adults aged 16 to 65 in England, Wales, and Scotland estimated to have been at or below Level 1 of the IALS scale in 1996, though it should be noted that the numeracy figure is for 'quantitative literacy', that is, the ability to solve arithmetical questions embedded in text, a different skill from that addressed by the numeracy test used in prisons. The figures for prisoners refer to all prisoners, male and female, adults and young offenders, tested on admittance in England and Wales in financial year 2000/01 (Home Office, 2001).

However, the comparisons between the two sets of figures are problematic: firstly the boundaries between levels of the basic skills tests used in prisons at the time were lower than

those in IALS, making comparisons very difficult; in 2001 the boundaries between UK levels were deliberately raised to coincide with those between IALS levels (see Brooks *et al.*, 2001: 120–21; Rashid and Brooks, 2010: 49, 60).

Secondly, and far more seriously, the nomenclature of the levels in the two scales is out of synch by one. IALS Level 1 corresponds to ‘below Level 1’, or Entry Level as it is now called, in the UK; so ‘At or below Level 1’ of the UK scale corresponds to ‘At or below Level 2’ of the IALS scale. So the better comparisons between the IALS and prison statistics are as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Prisoners and general population basic skills comparison

Characteristic	General population (estimated % at or below IALS Level 1)	Prisoners (estimated % at or below UK Entry Level)
Numeracy	23	37
Reading	21–23	31

Since these figures were derived, there have been two further rounds of international adult skills testing: the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) has replaced IALS as the global comparative benchmark, and there have been considerable changes in the methodology and practice of assessment of adult basic skills.

So while it might be useful to correct these misunderstandings, it seems better to produce improved figures for the prison cohort, not just more up to date, but more accurate and with a better comparison with the general population.

Background and context

Basic skills education in the context of delivery in the secure estate is particularly complicated for the non-specialist as it requires an understanding of the adult basic skills system and the ways in which prison education is contracted and managed. The Offenders’ Learning and Skills Service Phase 4 (OLASS 4) was introduced in August 2012. The contracts offered to providers in OLASS 4 reflect the earlier offender learning review and were set out in *Making Prisons Work: Skills for rehabilitation* (BIS, 2011). Lead governors working with the OLASS providers are able to determine the most appropriate provision to meet the needs of learners in custody. The Skills Funding Agency (SFA) is accountable for funding and is responsible for performance management of the OLASS contracts across the unit of procurement. Lead governors meet regularly with learning and skills providers to discuss and review delivery.

The SFA has contracts with four organizations who provide learning and skills training for prisoners across ten areas of England. Novus (the prisons education department of The Manchester College) runs prison education in London, the North East, the North West, Kent and Sussex, and Yorkshire and Humber; Milton Keynes College runs prison education in the East Midlands, South Central and the West Midlands; Weston College in the South West; and PeoplePlus (formerly A4E) in the East of England.

Since August 2014 it has been a mandatory (and funded) requirement that the OLASS providers conduct initial assessments (IAs) in English and maths on all new prisoners entering the system. These are referred to as mandatory assessments or MAs. Those prisoners moving around the system but who have been in the system for longer than six months may be given a further IA, but this would be for educational reasons and there would be no mandatory payment. Those returning to prison should not receive an MA if they have had one within the previous six months, even if they have been out of prison in the interim. All the details of how this is carried out are then left to the providers. There is no guidance on which IA to use when the IA

is conducted or any other contextualization of the MAs. Prisoners are left to self-declare any learning difficulties or disabilities (LDD), and again the ways in which providers ascertain this status is left to their discretion.

The use of IAs is common across all provision of English and maths in the FE and adult sectors, and in recent years they have been used as part of a funding system designed to ensure that adult students are enrolled on courses that will lead them to progress. IAs are based on the adult core curricula and designed to evaluate learner strengths and weaknesses across a wide range of subject areas. Currently there are a large number of competing IAs, and providers across the sector are free to choose any IA they like. This may be seen as problematic, since each test has its own strengths and weaknesses (Brooks, 2013b). There are long-standing concerns about the quality of IA data, and these concerns are exacerbated by the constraints of the prison system.

The adult core curriculum for literacy and numeracy took individual topics (for example, shape and space) and listed specific skills or knowledge that would be expected at different levels. The lowest level for adult skills 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). This is the terminology used throughout this report.³

Aims of study

The specific aim of the study was to improve our understanding of prisoners' literacy and numeracy levels on entry to prison, and to compare this with the profile of the country as a whole. It has always been clear that this initial study should be seen as the start of that process and provides only the first analysis of the MA data, just those collected by the education providers between August 2014 and July 2015.

This paper outlines the methodology used to collect those data, presents the findings, and includes a short discussion, together with an outline of how further research should evolve. This research has been conducted with the assistance and cooperation of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), the SFA, and the four OLASS providers, and could not have been conducted without their generous support.

How research was conducted

The analysis has been conducted using the provisional data provided by each of the OLASS providers on a prison-by-prison basis. The data only cover English public sector prisons. The official MA data, which are agglomerated rather than broken down into individual prisons, have now been released by BIS (see below), and are in line with the provisional figures used here.

For the year 2014/15 all four providers have used the BKSB IA tool, a popular online initial assessment tool, which was developed initially by West Nottinghamshire College.⁴

In order to understand how the basic skills levels of prisoners compare with those of the general population, we need to know the profile of English and maths skills for the country as a whole. The national survey conducted by BIS during 2011 (BIS, 2012a; BIS, 2012b) has been used as the benchmark, and in all the following tables data from that survey are used as the key benchmark with which to compare prisoners' skills levels. There has been a subsequent international survey of adult basic skills in England, the 2013 PIAAC survey. However the BIS study used very similar assessment tools and approaches to that used in collecting the MA data, which makes it more appropriate.

It should also be noted that the use of the words English/literacy and maths/numeracy is problematic. While the current political agenda uses English and maths, largely because of its

focus on GCSE qualifications, the skills levels were derived from the adult literacy and numeracy curricula. Similarly the IA tests were originally created in a world of 'literacy and numeracy' and have only recently had 'English and maths' assigned to them. This paper makes no systematic attempt to distinguish between English/literacy and maths/numeracy and they may be read to have similar meanings; their use is more dependent on context.

Qualitative findings on delivering the MAs

As previously noted, the way in which providers conduct the MAs is not subject to guidance, and these differences in process are likely to have an impact on the validity of the data collected. In order to understand how great such differences might be, research visits were carried out in two prisons. In these visits we were able to talk in depth to those responsible for conducting the MAs, and see some of the associated task work and record keeping. Information was also received from prison education staff about the process of conducting the MAs from two other prisons. Together these prisons represent a Young Offender Institution (YOI), a local Category B prison, a Category C, and a Category D prison. YOIs are for prisoners aged between 18 and 21 and in this study they are male institutions; the female YOIs are all within female prisons and their results are presented together.

In three of the prisons, the MAs were delivered via the 'Virtual Campus', the secure online prisons computer system. MA results were entered onto the Individualised Learner Record (ILR) database; in two prisons data were also entered onto the Prison National Offender Management Information System (p-NOMIS) and in one case the Learning Records System (LRS), which collects data relating to learners registering for relevant post-14 qualifications. The providers all check internal databases to see if the prisoner is already on the provider's records, and the ILR to see if they have done an MA anywhere else within the past six months. If they have, they will not be required to do another MA. After the MA has been conducted, prisoners are given an opportunity, either in one-to-one sessions or in group situations, to register as having a learning difficulty or disability. The exact way in which this was done differed between establishments.

Two of the prisons had a policy of not allowing prisoners to go into the workplace unless they assess as LI English and maths. Staff felt that this had proved an important incentive for prisoners to try and maximize their MA scores. In the YOI visited, prisoners can study English and maths while being in the workshops. They are offered an incentive of £10 to pass English and maths, which helps motivation. Most prisoners at the YOI take a full Functional Skills course, though many do some individual units as well. The staff try to get prisoners through Functional Skills in six weeks.

This small sample shows that while there is a similarity in approach, much of the detail varies between prisons, and that detail could have an impact on the validity of the MA data.

Quantitative data from MAs

The individualized data have been received from 104 prisons.⁵ The data come from all four OLASS 4 providers, and cover all types of prison. In total there are just over 123,000 assessment results for English and maths.

Overall skills levels

As a starting point, an analysis was made of how the MA results for the total number of prisoners admitted to prison during 2014/15 compare with the literacy and numeracy levels of the general population.

Starting with literacy (Table 2), we see that there is a higher percentage of prisoners at every level below L2. The difference between L2 skills inside and outside prison is very stark, a difference of almost 43 percentage points.

Table 2: Prisoners’ literacy levels compared with the 2011 Skills for Life (SfL) survey

English/literacy					
Levels	EL1 & below (%)	EL2 (%)	EL3 (%)	L1 (%)	L2 & above (%)
All prisons	7	13	30	36	14
SfL 2011	5	2	8	29	57

In the general population 86 per cent have literacy skills at L1 or above, whereas in prison the figure is only 50 per cent. If L1 literacy is considered the appropriate skill level for succeeding in most types of employment, ‘functional literacy’ as it was termed in the Skills for Life programme, then this represents a significant barrier for prisoners looking to gain employment on release.

The numeracy data (Table 3) provide a different pattern. The lower skills levels for numeracy are quite similar to the general population and while 12 per cent more prisoners have EL3 skills, 5 per cent more have L1 skills. The shortfall at L2 is neither surprising nor as large as for literacy.

Table 3: Prisoners’ numeracy levels compared with the 2011 Skills for Life (SfL) survey

Maths/numeracy					
Levels	EL1 and below (%)	EL2 (%)	EL3 (%)	L1 (%)	L2 and above (%)
All prisons	6	15	37	34	9
SfL 2011	7	17	25	29	22

In the case of numeracy, 51 per cent of the general population have L1 or above skills, whereas 43 per cent of prisoners are assessed at that level.

Looking at the two results graphically (Figure 1 and Figure 2), it can be seen that the profile of skills is very different for literacy and numeracy.

The evidence here appears to suggest that a significantly greater proportion of the prison population has poorer literacy than in the general population, with the difference at EL3 (30 per cent at this level in prisons compared with 8 per cent) being most marked. The situation for numeracy is very different. If we look back to the Skills for Life definition of ‘functional numeracy’, all those with EL3 skills and above, we find more of the prison population have skills at these levels (80 per cent) than in the general population (76 per cent), a highly unexpected result.

MA data by gender

In one sense, comparing prisoners’ English and maths levels and those of the general population is neither reasonable nor valid. The general population has a fairly even gender mix, but the prison population is strongly biased towards males. In fact, only 6.5 per cent of the assessments were for female prisoners and 5.5 per cent of assessments for YOI inmates, which restricts their validity for these two groups.

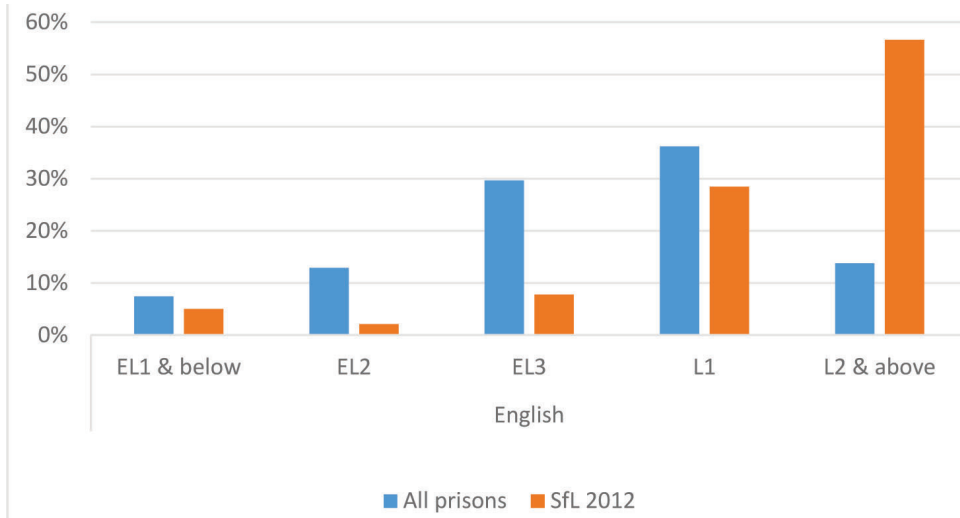


Figure 1: Prisoners' literacy levels compared with the 2011 Skills for Life (SfL) survey

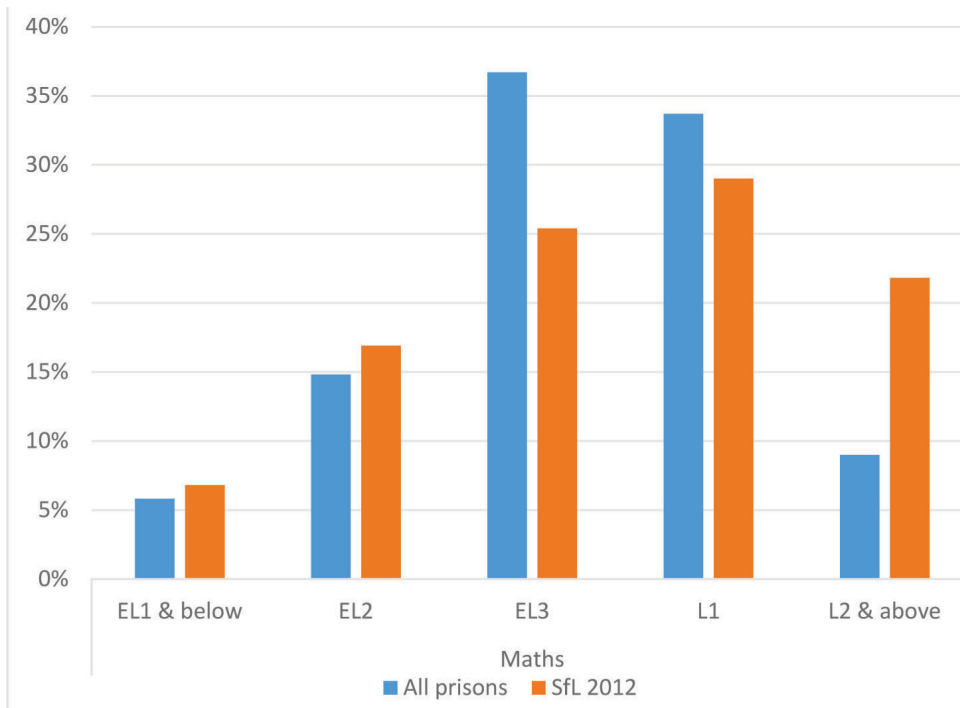


Figure 2: Prisoners' numeracy levels compared with the 2011 Skills for Life (SfL) survey

However, we can separate out the adult males from the female estate and the YOIs to see what impact gender has on skills. Figure 3 illustrates that, in general, female prisoners have marginally better English skills than males, and that YOI inmates have similar levels to females in prison. Of

assessments from the female estate, 53 per cent were at L1 or above, while only 49 per cent of males reached those levels. This is reversed with maths skills (see Figure 4). Here males show better skills than females, though again YOI inmates score as highly as males. There is a larger gap in maths, with 43 per cent of males assessed at L1 or above and only 33 per cent of females.

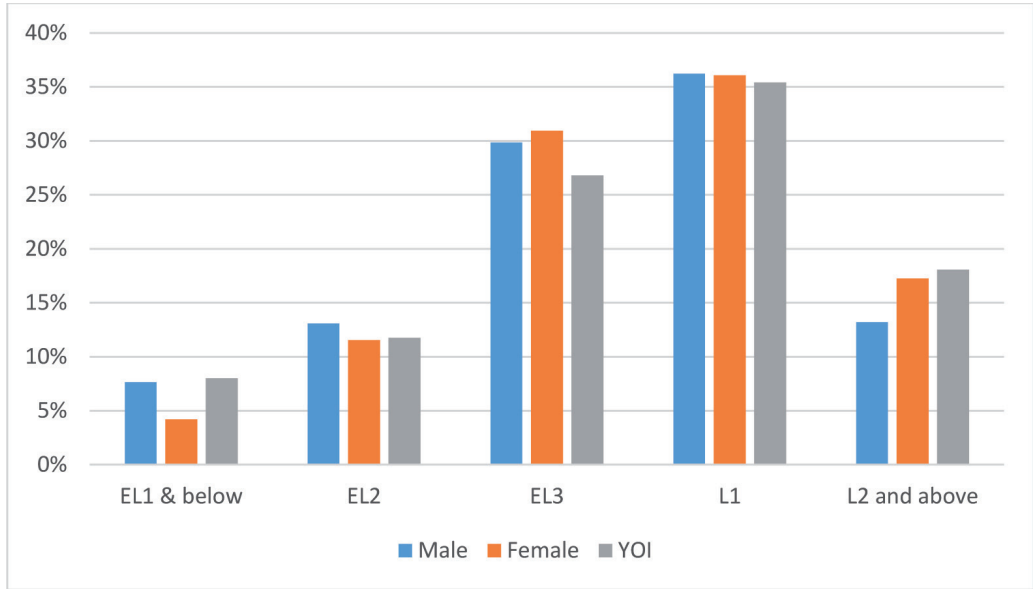


Figure 3: Prisoners' literacy levels by gender

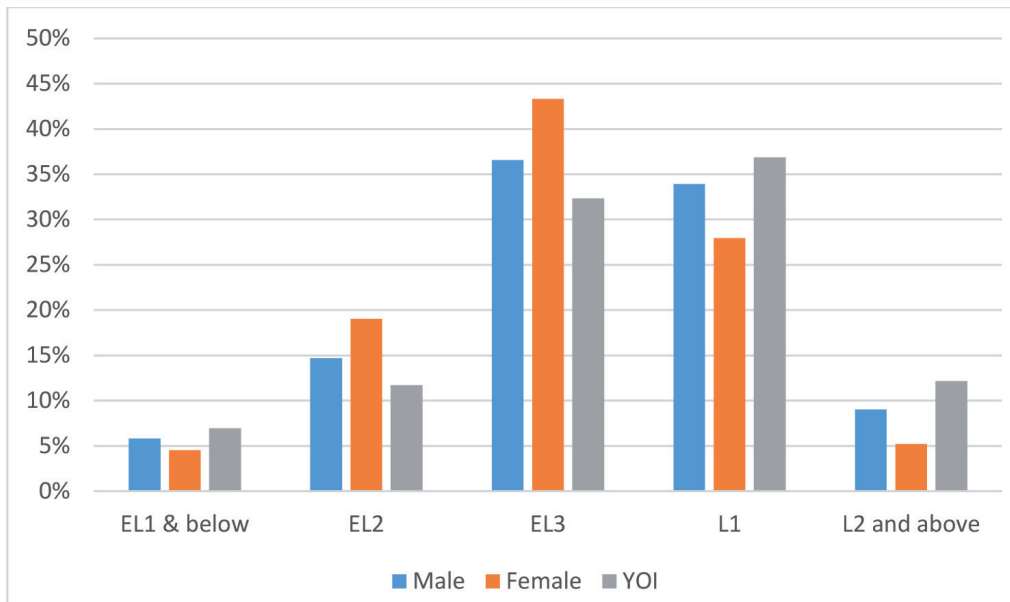


Figure 4: Prisoners' numeracy levels by gender

Figures 5 and 6 directly compare the male and female England populations with the assessments from male and female prisons. These largely confirm the impressions given by the total prison population results, that the levels of English skills in prisons are very poor compared with outside, but that for maths, particularly at L1, the comparison is much closer.

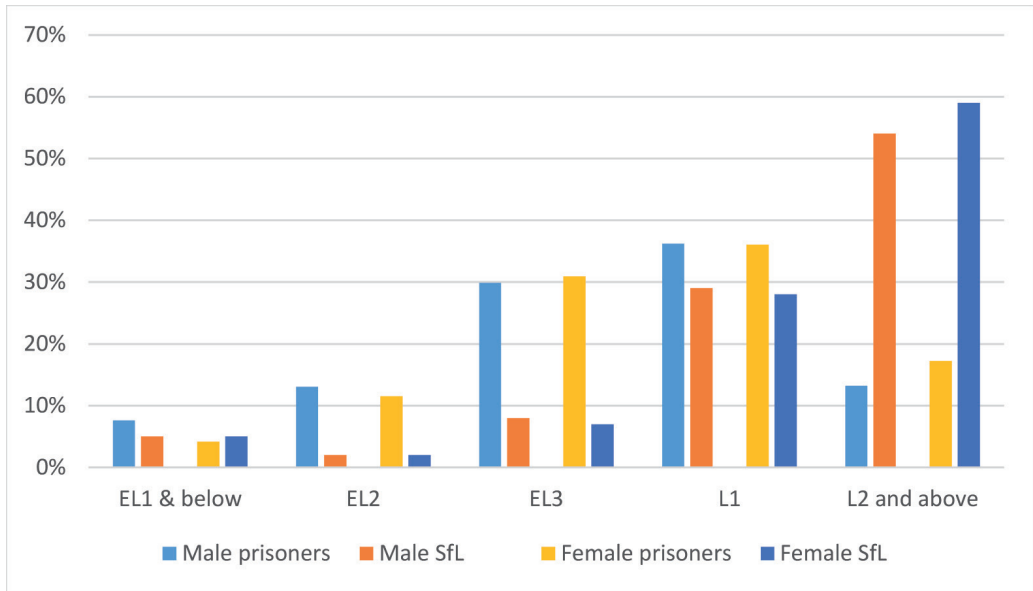


Figure 5: Prisoners’ and SfL 2011 literacy levels, by gender

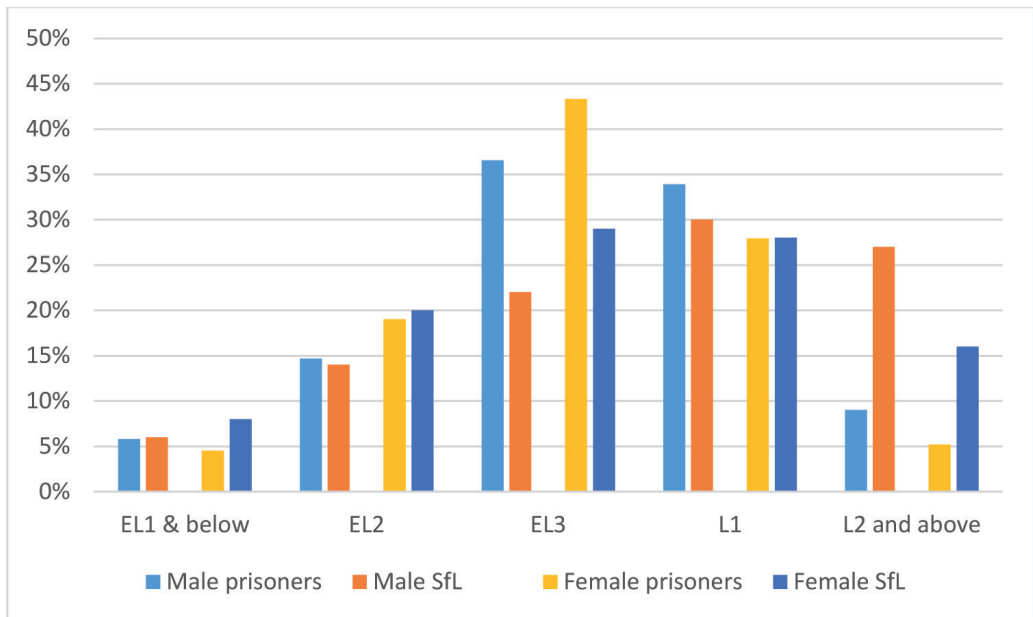


Figure 6: Prisoners’ and SfL 2011 numeracy level, by gender

MA data by prison category

Prisoners in England are placed in several different categories – A, B, C, D – according to the crimes committed and an assessment of their risk to the public:

- Category A prisoners are those who would pose the most threat to the public, the police, or national security should they escape. There is a very high level of security at Category A prisons.
- Category B prisoners do not need to be held in the highest security conditions but, for Category B prisoners, the potential for escape should be made very difficult.
- Category C prisoners cannot be trusted in open conditions but are considered to be prisoners who are unlikely to make a determined escape attempt.
- Category D prisoners can be trusted in open conditions.

Female prisoners and young offenders are not categorized unless they have been deemed Category A. Prisoners can move between categories, as they have their category reviewed at regular intervals (Moj, 2011).

It is impossible to sort the MA results rigorously by prisoner category, as we only have data by prison, and many prisons accept prisoners from several different categories. For instance, a local prison is routinely Category B, although by its nature it will have cohorts from all categories, as well as youth offenders. Nonetheless, prisons are officially categorized by the highest level of prisoner, and we have used this categorization here.

Using this admittedly imperfect classification, we do see a different profile across categories. In both English and maths the levels of prisoners in Category A and Category B prisons are markedly lower than those in Category C and Category D prisons. L2 and above assessments in Category D prisons are noticeably closer to those of the general population (see Figures 7 and 8).

Although it is currently not possible to match MA results with individual prisoners' categorizations, the data nonetheless illustrate that different types of prisons do have prisoners with different profiles of basic skills.

MA data by provider

While we received data from all four OLASS 4 providers, the numbers involved were very different (see Table 4).

Table 4: Number of assessments by provider

Provider	Number of assessments	Assessments per prison
Milton Keynes College	42,027	1,400
PeoplePlus	13,365	1,336
Novus	57,585	1,028
Weston College	10,243	1,138
TOTAL	123,220	

Nonetheless, it is interesting to see if there are any differences in the skills profiles of the four providers, and Figure 9 shows this comparison. Despite the disparity between numbers of assessments, we might expect that the profiles would be fairly similar to each other.

Somewhat surprisingly, there are quite large differences between providers. For literacy, Novus has 10 percentage points more L1 assessments than PeoplePlus and Weston, while

Weston has 5 percentage points more L2 assessments than Novus. EL1 assessments from Milton Keynes College are almost double those for Manchester (Novus).

There is some disparity when we look at the numeracy assessments, with PeoplePlus’s L1 being markedly lower than those of other providers, while its EL3 is that much higher (see Figure 10).

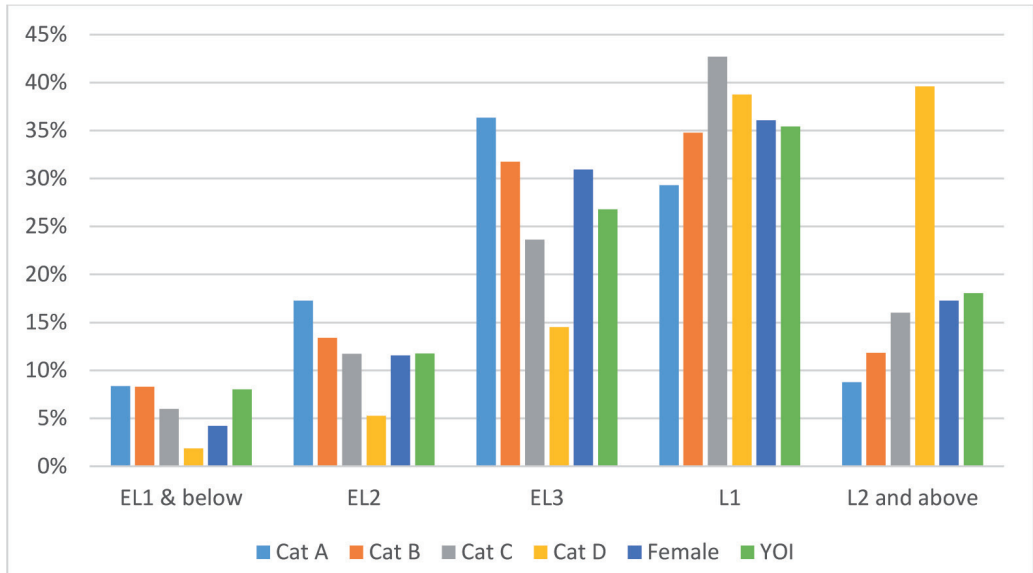


Figure 7: Prisoners’ literacy levels by prison category

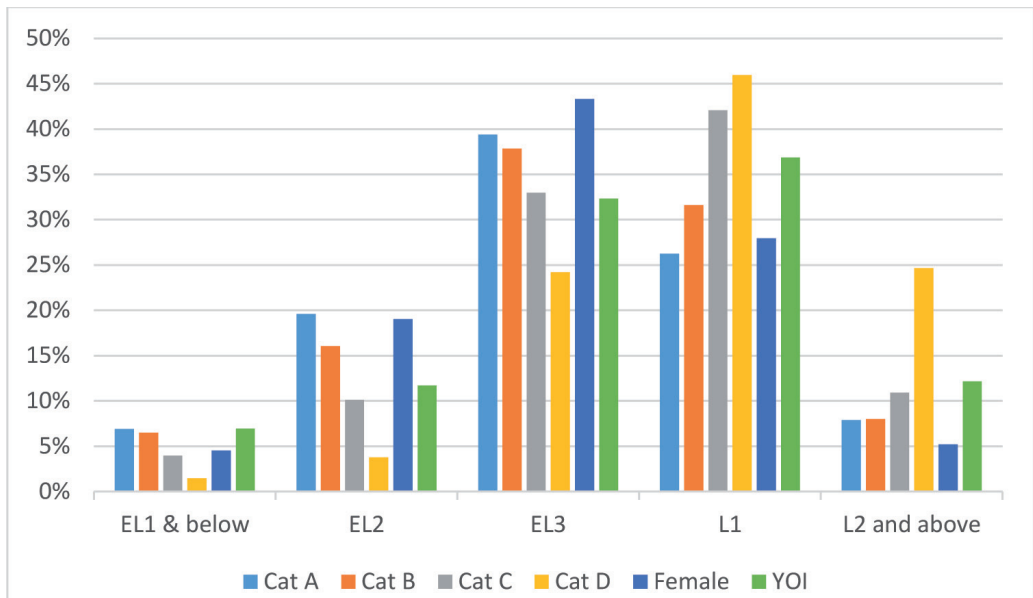


Figure 8: Prisoners’ numeracy levels by prison category

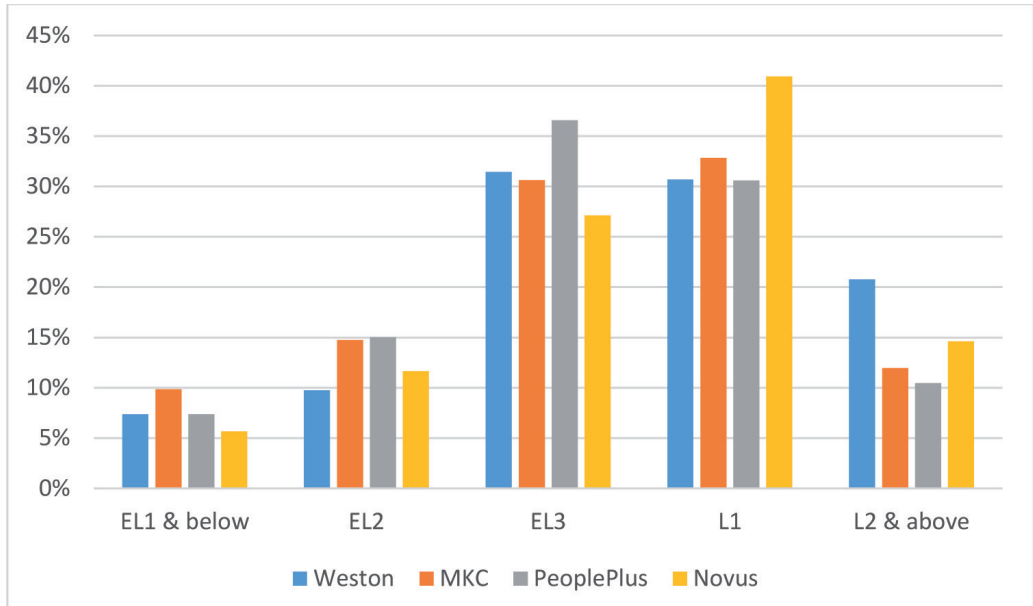


Figure 9: Prisoners' literacy levels by provider

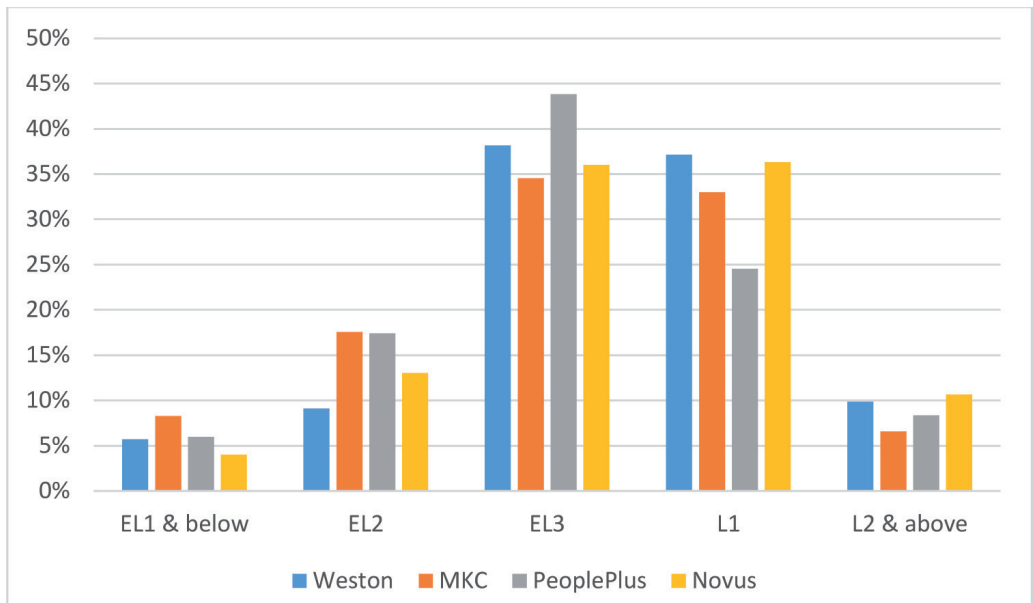


Figure 10: Prisoners' numeracy levels by provider

This inconsistency could be caused by the providers having a different range of prisons to work with, or it could reflect different approaches to conducting the assessments. Further research would need to be done to provide greater understanding of this.

MA data on LDD

As noted above, prisoners self-declare their LDD status. Exactly how this is done, and what advice and support is given, will inevitably be different in each prison, but we may be able to detect any bias in the way providers do this by comparing the percentages of LDD declaration by provider.

Figure 11 shows a difference of almost 13 percentage points between LDD assessments made by Weston College and PeoplePlus.

While the overall rate of LDD for all prisons is 32 per cent, the rate of LDD in female prisons is 50 per cent, a significantly higher figure than for the male estate.

Although the providers have provided some figures for type of LDD declared, these are not easily compared. However, it is clear that dyslexia represents around 60 per cent of declared LDD, with 20 per cent consisting of moderate learning difficulties, the next largest category. Unsurprisingly, evidence suggests that mental health issues are also a significant factor in the prison population.

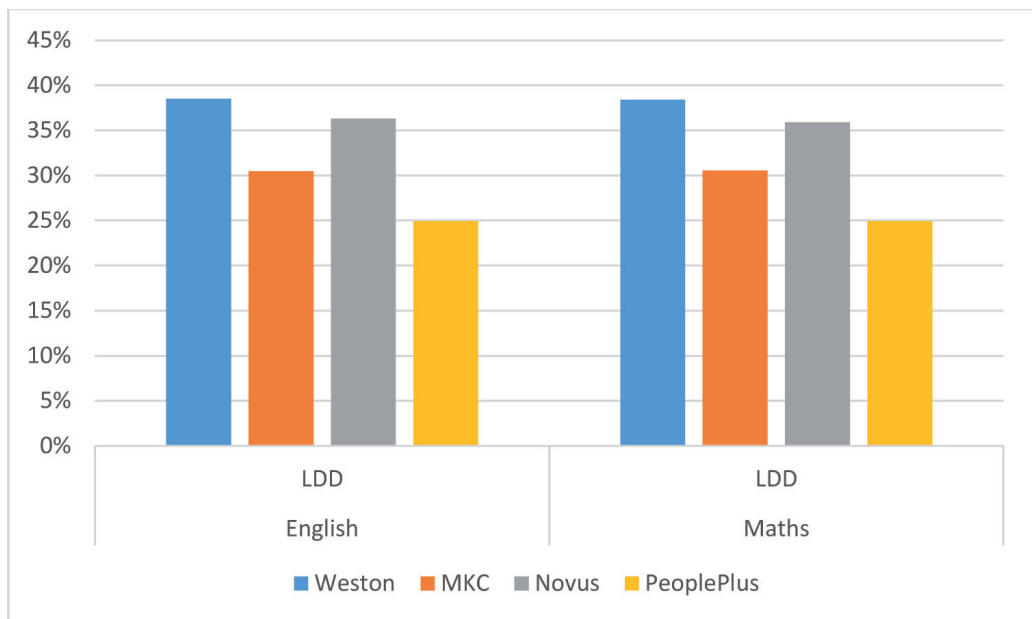


Figure 11: LDD self-assessments by provider

Government data on MAs

The official MA figures were released by BIS in November 2015 (BIS, 2015). These look at the entire prisoner cohort and, excluding unknowns, are almost identical to the provisional results we have used in this report, although some deviation is to be expected given the slightly different presentation of the data; in the official data a very small number of prisoners who have participated in more than one English and/or maths assessment over the year were assessed at a different outcome level for each assessment.

Table 5: Differences between official data and provisional data

English/literacy	EL1 & below (%)	EL2 (%)	EL3 (%)	L1 (%)	L2 & above (%)
Official data	7	13	30	37	13
Provisional data	7	13	30	36	14
Maths/numeracy	EL1 & below (%)	EL2 (%)	EL3 (%)	L1 (%)	L2 & above (%)
Official data	6	15	37	34	9
Provisional data	6	15	37	34	9

The official data provide further details of age and ethnicity. The results are broken down into three age bands: 18–24, 25–49, and 50+. For both literacy and numeracy, the 50+ age group has a greater proportion of very low skills levels and more of the highest level than the other ages. This perhaps shows how mixed this age band is in terms of types of prisoner. However, we should also note that this age group accounts for only 8 per cent of all prisoners.

Table 6: Prisoners' literacy and numeracy by age

English/literacy	EL1 & below (%)	EL2 (%)	EL3 (%)	L1 (%)	L2 & above (%)
18–24	6	12	32	38	12
25–49	8	13	30	37	13
50+	9	15	26	35	16
Maths/numeracy	EL1 & below (%)	EL2 (%)	EL3 (%)	L1 (%)	L2 & above (%)
18–24	5	14	37	36	9
25–49	6	15	37	34	9
50+	7	16	34	31	12

Weaknesses

For the year 2014/15 all four OLASS providers have used the BKSB IA tool, so the results from the different prisons are comparable. This situation may not last, however, as several of the providers are looking to change the IA tool used in January 2016.

Despite using the same tool, it should be stressed that the ways in which MAs are conducted may well have an impact on the resultant data. Local practices that might affect the MA results include how soon MAs are conducted after entry to prison, who administers the assessments, and what format they are delivered in; from the limited research conducted so far it seems that most MAs have been delivered using the Virtual Campus, while others were delivered on a 'pencil and paper' system.

Prison policy may also have an unintended impact on the MA data; an example can be seen in the report from the prison mentioned above where the prison policy was that those who did not have at least L1 English and maths skills at their assessment were not allowed to do prison work. The staff involved believed that this had led to a significant increase in the number of prisoners gaining L1 in their MA, presumably through being more motivated to do well. In every prison there may be similar local policies that might affect the motivation of prisoners doing the MAs. For a full discussion on the issues surrounding delivery of IAs see Brooks *et al.* (2005).

The current sample is only really robust for male prisoners. Of the assessments, 88 per cent were for the male estate, so while the female and YOI figures are included, they should be seen as indicative only.

Discussion

The data outlined above represent the most authoritative account of the skills of prisoners in English and maths for over a decade. They also show where the biggest weaknesses are and how they differ by gender and prison type. The data also suggest some possible issues arising between the procedures of different OLASS 4 providers.

Firstly, it is clear that the high percentages of prisoners with Entry-level English skills are a major barrier for those wishing to enter employment on release. Policymakers need to be aware that adults with these low levels of literacy skill are by far the hardest to address, and that sustained educational effort is required for them to achieve functional levels of literacy and numeracy. Such learners would typically require a very thorough and personalized one-to-one assessment designed to ascertain to what extent the weaknesses are based around an individual's literacy or language abilities, writing or reading skills, and any other related learning difficulties or mental health problems. A great deal of work is required to build up a learner's self-confidence and self-esteem, and resultant learning plans are likely to be highly individualized. Prisoners with these skills cannot simply be assigned to a regular programme of study in a classroom and expected to progress without additional support.

Despite most policymakers' assumptions that prisoners' numeracy levels are extremely poor it was a major surprise that the cohort displayed relatively robust levels of numeracy. While L2 skills were far less in evidence than in the general population, overall the proportion of prisoners with numeracy skills at EL3 or above was higher. We can only surmise at this point, but it may be that many inside prison have had more cause to use their maths skills than those outside, and there is an incentive to keep their numeracy skills sharp. This is largely the picture of male prisoners; more work needs to be done with the female estate in maths across all Entry levels.

Perhaps less surprisingly, the profile of YOI inmates is closer to that of the general population, with the exception of L2 and above skills. This might suggest that only the later years of education have been a problem for this cohort and that they retain most of their school learning in these basic skills.

As explained, unless and until we can tie the MA data with individual prisoners' records, we cannot provide an accurate account of how basic skills levels vary across the different categories of prisoner or sentence duration. What we have is an indication that prisoners assigned to Category A and Category B prisons are particularly weak in their basic skills and in need of specialist help.

Although there is a uniformly high level of LDD reported by all categories of prisoner, around 32 per cent, this is far higher for the female estate. Once again, the reasons for this are not apparent at this stage and further investigation is required.

That the prison population is not homogeneous is shown by a brief look at the impact of age on basic skills levels. The oldest group, the over-50s, have the highest percentage of EL1 and below skills for both literacy and numeracy. They also have the highest percentage of L2 and above skills for both literacy and numeracy. In both cases these are significant differences. It seems likely that these skills deficiencies (or the opposite) are not the product of age but of prisoners' life experiences. We should be wary of stereotyping prisoners in any lazy way.

As explained above, the OLASS contracts give providers considerable freedom in how they deliver the MAs. When the results across providers were compared it was not expected

that there would be any great differences between them. This was not the case. There were clear differences in the percentages of prisoners at each level in both literacy and numeracy, the number of cases of LDD recorded, and the mean number of assessments recorded per prison. This may well be caused by the providers having different sizes and categories of prison, but could also be caused by providers taking different approaches to the collection of data. If practice becomes more diverse in the future, for instance through using different IAs, then these differences will increase and comparisons become even more problematic.

Another area where we have been unable to produce any conclusions is for prisoners for whom English is not their first language (ESOL learners). This information is not currently collected in the MA data, but some indicators may be gained when the ILR data are released by cross-referencing with ESOL qualifications enrolments.

This data collection and analysis needs to be repeated over a number of consecutive years in order to build up a solid set of data on prisoners' literacy and numeracy levels. Further work needs to be carried out to understand better the language and literacy implications of the skills profiles, the impact of different procedures between providers and between prisons, and how prisoners self-declare their LDD status. Ideally we would like to find ways of linking these education data with the prison data about prison sentences and category.

The current data have given us some important insights into prisoners' basic skills levels in the round. Subsequent work needs to unpick these data and so gain a greater understanding of the groups and individuals who make up the prisoner population. Only then will discussion on the merits or otherwise of the level and challenge of prison education provision start to have some basis in evidence.

Notes

1. Private sector prisons are responsible for arranging their own education services and are not dealt with in this paper.
2. Much of the information in this section is drawn from Brooks (2013a), with permission.
3. See Maths and English Levels chart: www.excellencegateway.org.uk/content/etf2105
4. See www.bksb.co.uk/products/initial-assessment
5. There are 107 sets of data as there are two returns for HMPs Lincoln, Olney, and North Sea Camp, which transferred from MKC to Novus on 31 January 2015.

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