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

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Introduction

The Centre for Education in the Criminal Justice System (CECJS) recognise that in order to design a coherent education system, it is necessary to have an informed understanding of the current educational levels of the cohort. Current information of the levels of literacy and numeracy of the prison population is both out of date and misleading[1] which means that the education budget may not be being used to its best advantage.

Our overall aim is to set up a project to systematically collect data both nationally and at prison level and analyse it to gain an understanding of how the education levels of the prisoner cohort differs according to age, gender and prisoner category. This initial report is the start of that process and provides the first analysis of the mandatory assessment data collected by the education providers between August 2014 and July 2015.

The report outlines the methodology used to collect data, presents the data collected and discusses the findings together with an outline of how the project might develop. There is also an appendix providing further information about offender learning and adult basic skills education for the non-specialist reader.

This report has been conducted with the assistance and cooperation of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) and the four OLASS 4 providers.

Methodology

From August 2014 it has been a mandatory requirement that the OLASS 4 providers conduct English and maths initial assessments (IAs) on all new prisoners entering the system. These assessments are termed 'mandatory assessments' (MAs) and denote IAs which are funded by the SFA. All providers have agreed that a prisoner arriving in a prison who has had a MA within the previous six months should not be given another, to avoid prisoners doing the same test repeatedly and possible practice effects. The details of the MAs will be added to the Individual Learning Record (ILR) database. Prisoners self-declare any learning difficulties or disabilities (LDD), and the ways in which providers ascertain this status is left to their discretion. The analysis we have conducted has been with the provisional data provided by each of the OLASS providers, though we do not expect this data to vary significantly from that which will be published on the ILR next year. The official mandatory assessment data has now been released by BIS (see below), but we have used the provisional data supplied by the OLASS providers throughout this report.

For the year 2014-15 all four providers have used the BKSB IA tool, so the results from the different prisons are comparable. The way in which providers conduct the MAs is, however, not subject to guidance. In order to gain an insight as to how the MAs are conducted I visited two prisons to speak to the staff who conduct the tests, and also received email responses from two other prisons. These are reported with the quantitative data below.

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 basic skills for the country as a whole. We

[1] For a full discussion on these misunderstandings see Brooks, 2013a

have used the national survey conducted by BIS during 2011 and published in 2012 (BIS, 2012). This is the most recent major survey of the English and maths skills of the whole population, and in all the following tables data from that survey are used as the key benchmark with which to compare prisoners' skills levels.

As well as comparing prisoners' literacy and numeracy levels with those of the general population, we have also been able to look as the skills profiles according to gender and prison type.

Data

Qualitative data on conduct of MAs

I was able to visit two prisons and spend some time talking to those responsible for conducting the MAs. I have also received information from prison education staff about the process of conducting the MAs from two other prisons (3 and 4) which is included below. These accounts are presented here to illustrate how processes and procedures vary between prisons which may have an impact on the MA scores and so make comparisons problematic.

*Prison 1 (*OLASS provider: Milton Keynes College)
This is a large Category B local prison with a high rate of churn and around 180 new prisoners arriving each week. Prisoners stay for around 7 weeks on average.

The Mandatory Assessments (MAs), currently BKSB, are generally delivered using the Virtual Campus (the secure on-line computer system), though other options, including paper, are available. MA results are entered on three databases: The Learning Records System (LRS) which collects data relating to learners registering for relevant post-14 qualifications, the ILR and PNomis (NOMS database).

At the time of the visit the prison was very short-staffed and there were problems accessing the prisoners for education. Prisoners were only allowed out of their cells either in the mornings or the afternoons, so education provision had to be available at both times if they were to give everyone an opportunity to participate.

The main group doing Induction arrive in Education at 8.45 and are given the MKC enrolment form and a presentation from the teacher in charge. The teacher will have checked both the internal database to check if the prisoner is already on the MKC records and the ILR to see if they have done an MA anywhere else within the past 6 months. If they have, they will not be required to do another one. There is also a member of the additional learning support team (ALS) at that session. The groups then do their BKSB assessments, which takes around 90 minutes for both English and maths. They are then given the option of enrolling for classes. If they have not assessed at Level 1 (L1) they are expected to sign up for the appropriate English or maths class.

While doing an exercise based on the presentation the staff will have an opportunity to see if any of the prisoners are struggling more than expected. As a result of these interventions some of the prisoners will be registered as having a learning difficulty or disability.

The prison has a policy of not allowing prisoners to go into the workplace unless they assess as L1 English and maths. Staff felt that this had proved an important incentive for prisoners to try and maximise their MA scores.

After conducting their MA there are a number of routes a prisoner might take. For instance if a prisoner is assessed as operating at EL3 they will be assigned to a L1 Functional skills course. However, if the prisoner has problems with certain areas, they may do some 'Units' of Functional Skills at EL3 before re-joining the main L1 group. If a prisoner is likely to only be in prison for a short sentence, not long enough to do a full Functional Skill, they may just do some units so they have the possibility of leaving with some achievement.

*Prison 2 (*OLASS provider: Milton Keynes College)
This is a YOI facility which is currently holding around 600 though it has capacity for 800. Around 50% of prisoners stay for less than 3 months.

The MAs are conducted on Day 3, after the cohort has met the ALS staff on Day 2. The ILR is checked to see if any have already completed their MA within the past 6 months. At the time of the visit the YOI was suffering from very low staffing on the prison side, and they have lost several MA sessions which has led to a backlog and further opportunities for prisoners to avoid doing the assessments.

The assessment is BKSB and it is delivered through the Virtual Campus. The ALS staff talk to the prisoners and help them to decide if they need any additional support. The data is passed to the National Careers Service (NCS) who assist the prisoner in creating a Skills Action Plan and then an education plan.

Prisoners can study English and maths whilst being in the workshops. They are offered an incentive of £10 to pass English and maths which helps motivation. Most prisoners take a full Functional Skills course, though many do some individual Units as well. They try and get prisoners through Functional Skills in 6 weeks.

*Prison 3 (*OLASS provider: Novus
This is a category C prison holding around 1300 inmates. The MA is done once a prisoner has applied to come to Education for any class. If results from previous prisons are available they are not asked to repeat the tests, except occasionally if they were undertaken many years ago. The result is recorded in the prisoner's personal buff folder (held by Education Department only). This result is also recorded on the computer system and probably on PNomis. If a prisoner refuses to cooperate, staff go to great lengths to try to persuade him; however if all fails he may be deemed not suitable for education.

A brief "interview" is conducted at the same time as all the MA and initial paperwork. The prisoner is asked for his self-diagnosis of learning difficulties at this stage. The effectiveness of this tends to depend on the interviewer. If a prisoner identifies himself as having difficulties various other specific forms/plans and daily target forms are produced. These daily forms are expected to be completed by the teacher at the end of every session. Anyone at EL3 or below in any aspect of education also has a daily target form. A prisoner can add problems at any time during his courses. The forms are quite time-consuming.

Prisoners are placed on courses where there are vacancies, irrespective of whether they are courses they would have chosen or not.

*Prison 4 (*OLASS provider: Novus)
This is a category D prison with around 450 inmates. The Manchester College has a policy that all new learners entering education should have Initial Assessments (MAs) conducted on the Virtual Campus. These assessments are the new BKSB assessments.

All prisoners entering the prison, as part of their induction process, have to attend education and take these assessments, unless they have valid certificates in Maths and English stating they are at L1 or Level 2 (L2). L1 is a minimum requirement and all prisoners must have Level 1 before they can go on the prison's working out scheme.

Quantitative data from MAs
The individualised data has been received from 104 prisons[2]. The data comes 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 we have analysed 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 1) we see that there is a higher percentage of prisoners at every level below L2. The difference between L2 skills inside and out of prison is very stark, a difference of almost 43 percentage points.

Table 1: Prisoners' literacy levels compared with the 2012 Skills for Life survey

English/literacy					
Levels[3]	**EL1 & below**	**EL2**	**EL3**	**L1**	**L2 & above**
All prisons	7.4%	12.9%	29.7%	36.2%	13.8%
SfL 2012	5.0%	2.1%	7.8%	28.5%	56.6%

In the general population 85% have literacy skills at L1 or L2 whereas in prison this is only 50%. If L1 literacy is considered the appropriate skill level for succeeding in most types of employment, then this represents a significant problem for prisoners gaining employment on release.

The numeracy data (Table 2) provides a strikingly different pattern. The lower skills levels are quite even for numeracy and while 11% more prisoners have EL3 skills, 4% more have L1 skills. The shortfall at L2 is neither surprising nor as large as for literacy.

[2] 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.
[3] Educational levels below L1 are termed Entry levels and are Entry level 1 (EL1), Entry level 2 (EL2) and Entry level 3 (EL3).

Table 2: Prisoners' numeracy levels compared with the 2012 Skills for Life survey

Maths/numeracy					
	EL1 & below	**EL2**	**EL3**	**L1**	**L2 & above**
All Prisons	5.8%	14.8%	36.7%	33.7%	9.0%
SfL 2012	6.8%	16.9%	25.4%	29.0%	21.8%

In the case of numeracy, 50% of the general population have L1 or L2 skills whereas 43% of prisoners are assessed at that level.

Looking at the two results graphically (Fig 1 and Fig 2) we can see that the profile of skills is very different for literacy and numeracy.

Fig 1: Prisoners' literacy levels compared with the 2012 Skills for Life survey

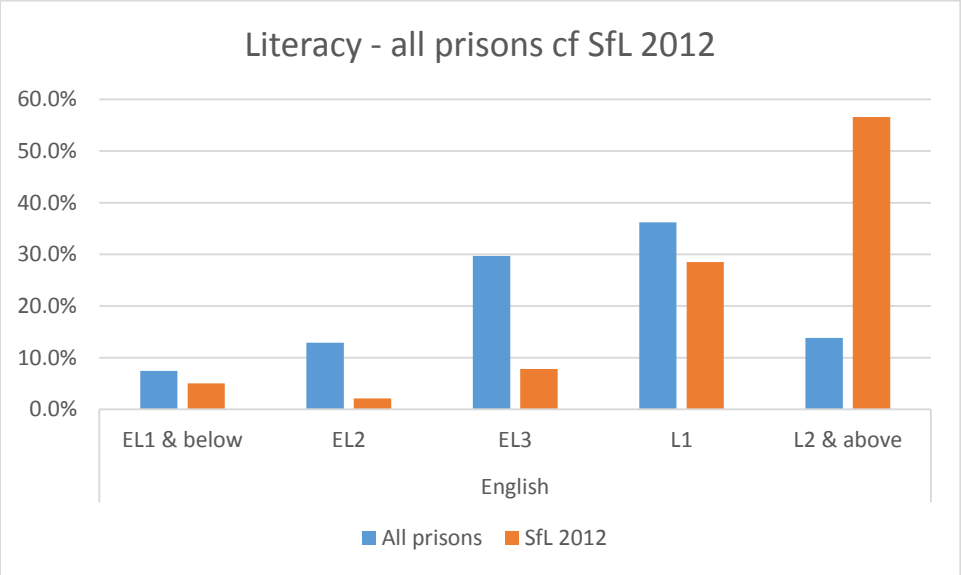
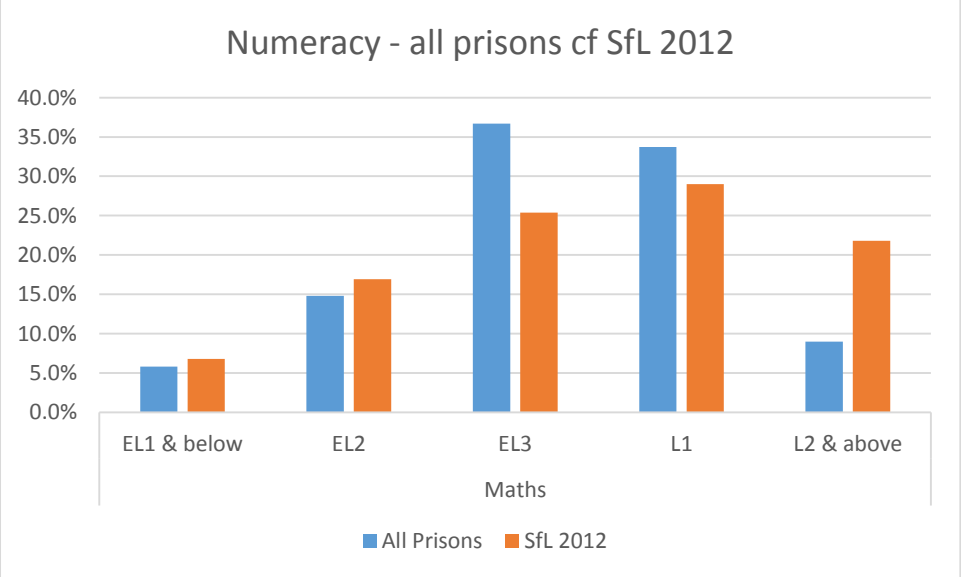


Fig 2: Prisoners' numeracy levels compared with the 2012 Skills for Life survey



The evidence here appears to suggest that a significantly greater proportion of the offender population has poorer literacy than the general population, with the differences at EL3 (30% at this level in prisons compared with 8%) being most marked. The differences between the prison and general population in numeracy skills is much less significant.

MA data by Provider

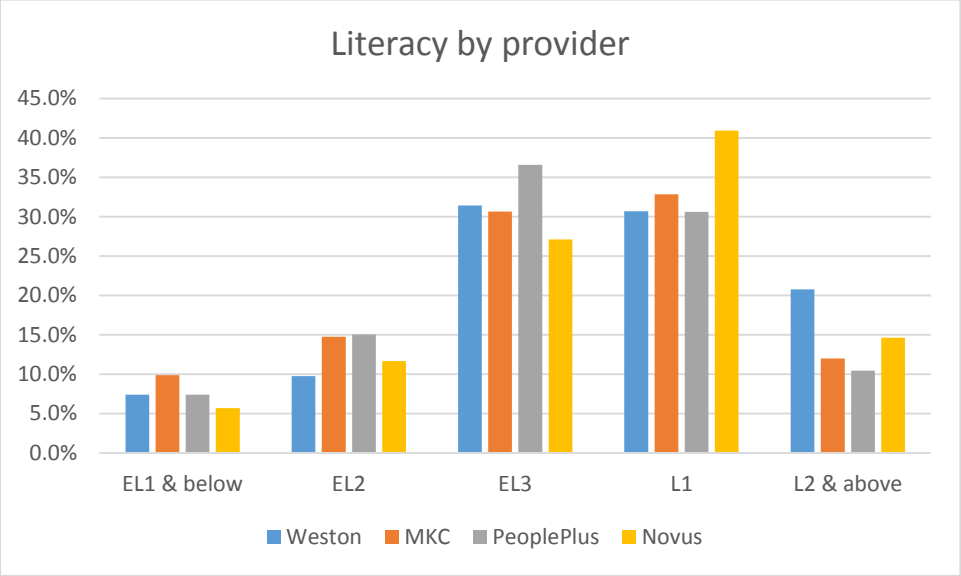
While we received data from all four OLASS 4 providers, the numbers involved were very different. It is also interesting to note the differences in the number of assessments per prison.

Table 3: No. of assessments by provider

Provider	No 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 Fig 3 shows this comparison. Despite the disparity between numbers of assessments, we might expect that the profiles would be very similar to each other.

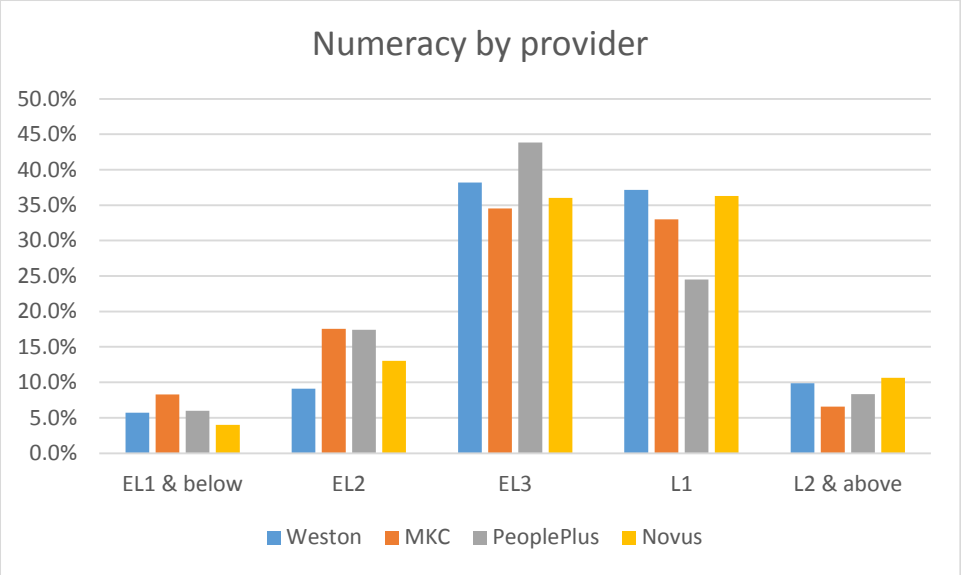
Fig 3: Prisoners' literacy levels by provider



There appear to be quite large differences between providers. For literacy, Novus have 10 percentage points more L1 assessments than PeoplePlus and Weston, while Weston has 5 percentage points more L2 assessments than Novus. EL1 assessments at Milton Keynes College are almost double those for Manchester.

There is some disparity when we look at the numeracy assessments, with PeoplePlus's L1 being markedly lower than other providers, while their EL3 is that much higher.

Fig 4: 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 by Gender

In one sense, comparing prisoners' English and maths levels and those of the general population is not reasonable. The general population has a fairly even gender mix, but the prison population is strongly biased towards males. We can strip out the adult males from the Female estate and the YOIs to see what impact gender has on skills. Fig 5 illustrates that, in general, female prisoners have marginally better English skills than males, and that YOI inmates[4] have similar levels to females in prison. 53% of assessments from the female estate were at L1 or L2 while only 49% of males reached those levels. This is reversed with maths skills. 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% of males assessed at L1 or L2 and only 33% of females.

[4] The YOIs are male YOIs only as the female YOIs are included in the female estate figures.

Fig 5: Prisoners' literacy levels by gender

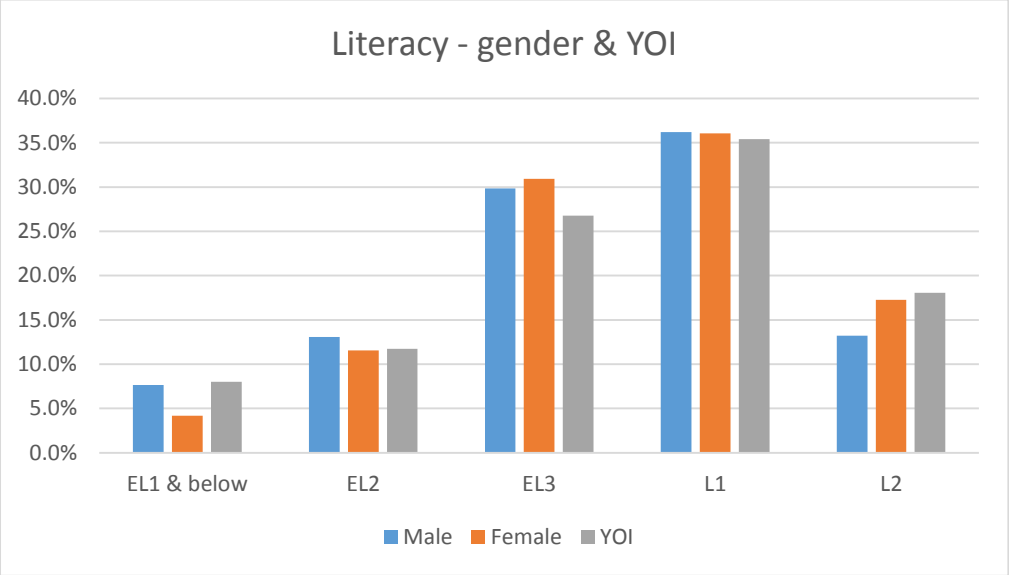
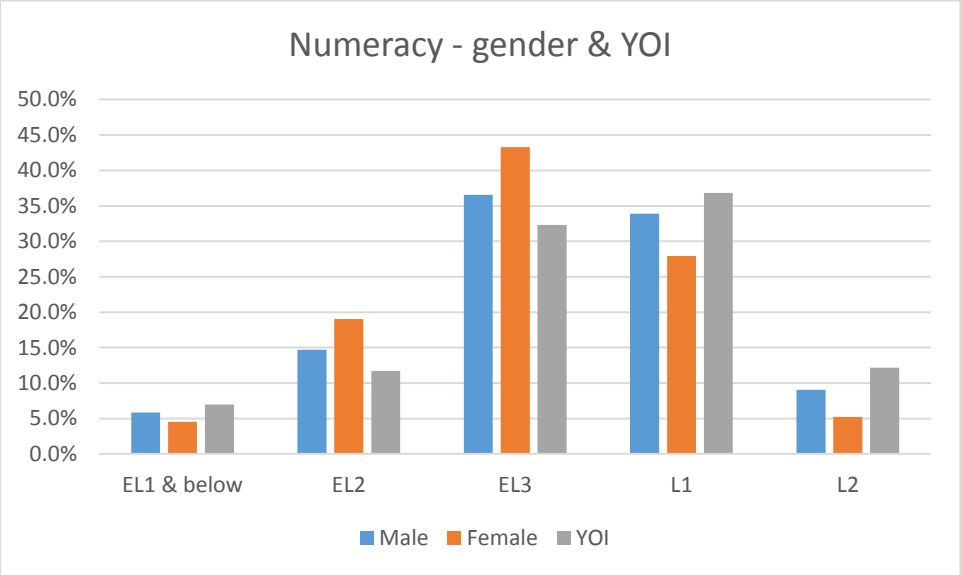


Fig 6: Prisoners' numeracy levels by gender



Figs 7 and 8 directly compare the male and female 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 to outside, but for maths, particularly at L1, the comparison is much closer.

Fig 7: Prisoners' literacy levels cf SfL 2012 by gender

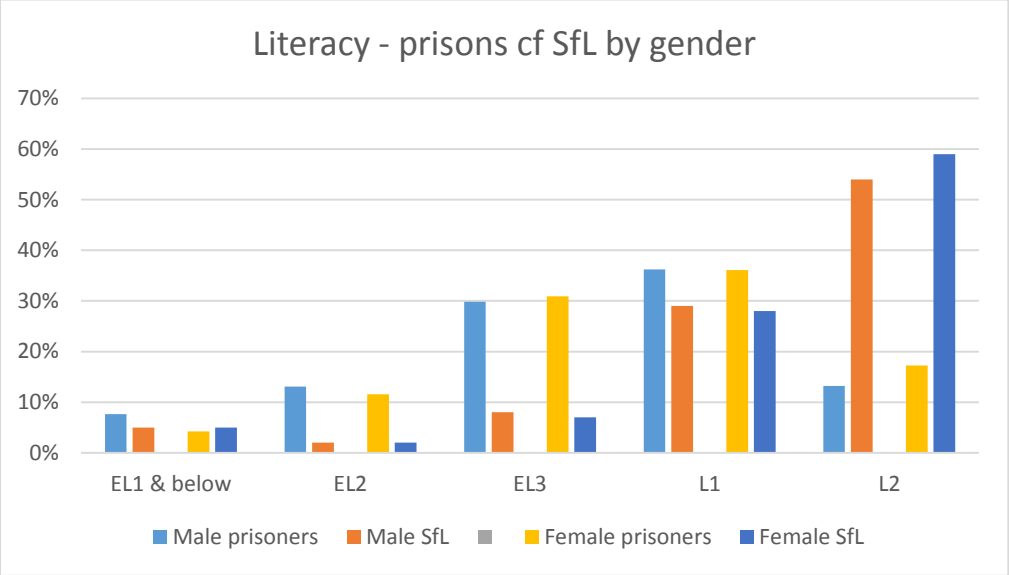
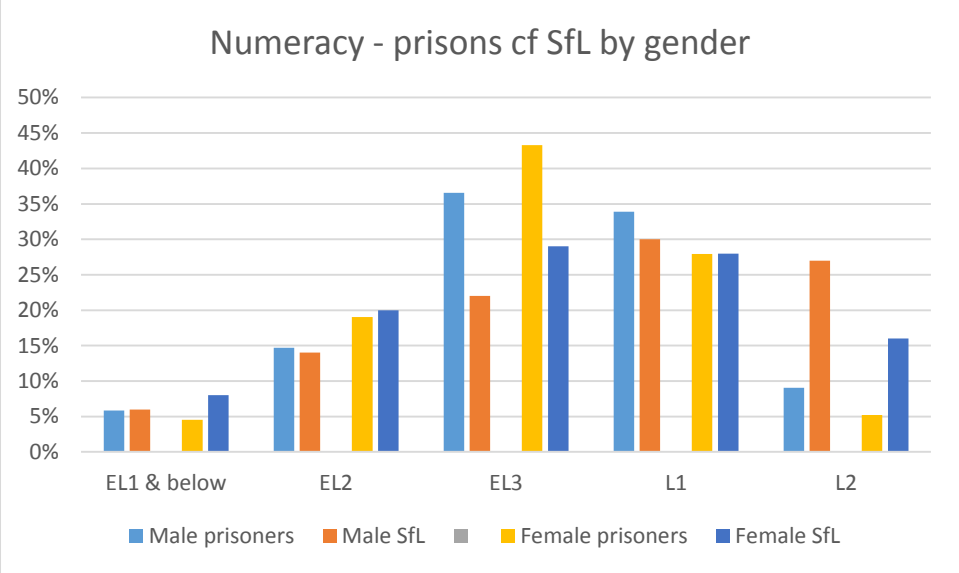


Fig 8: Prisoners' numeracy levels cf SfL 2012 by gender



MA data by prison category

It is impossible to sort the MA results by prisoner category, as many prisons accept prisoners from several different categories. 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 categorised by the highest level of offender, and we have used this categorisation 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 is clearly lower than those in Category C and D prisons. L2 assessments in category D prisons are noticeably closer to those of the general population.

Fig 9: Prisoners' literacy levels by prison category

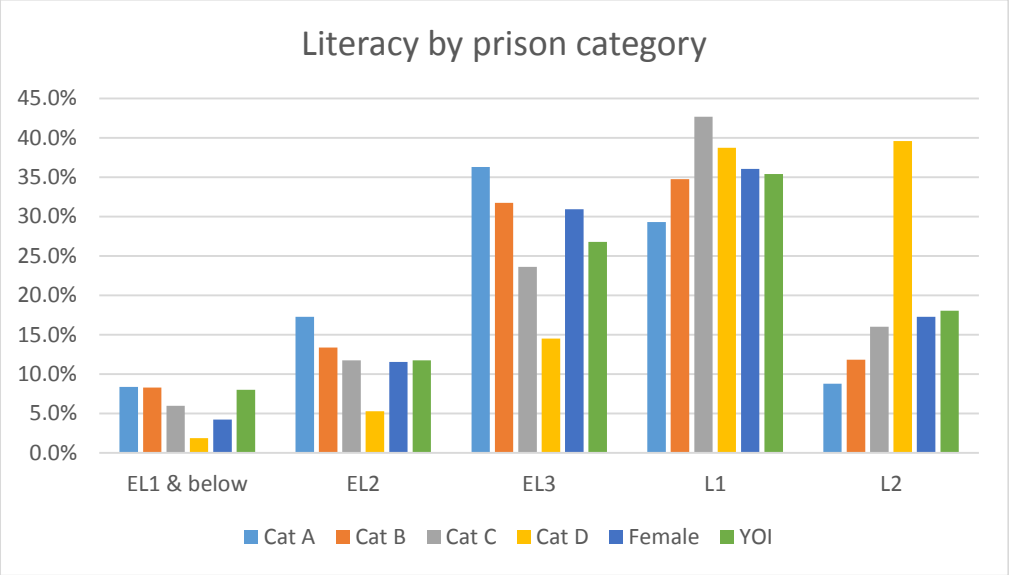
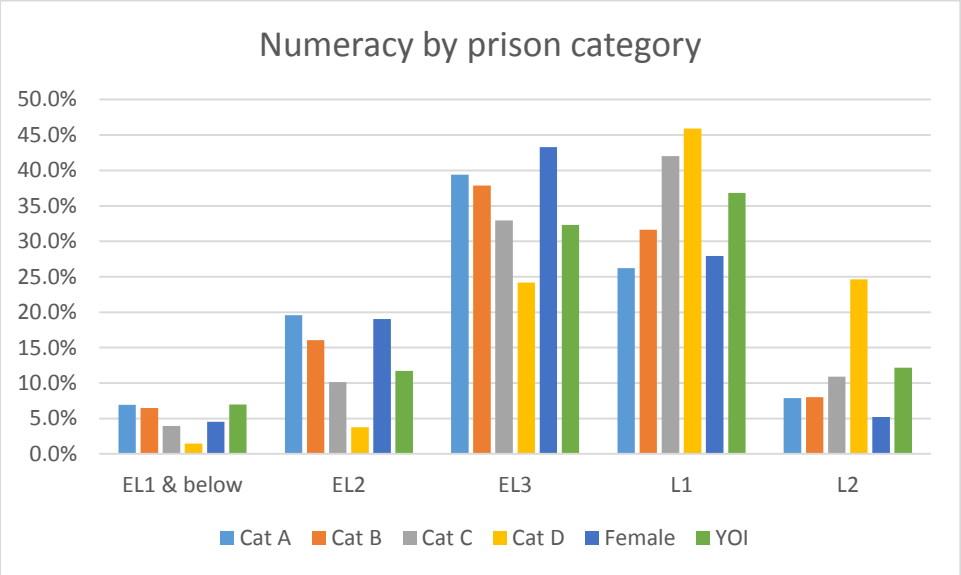


Fig 10: Prisoners' numeracy levels by prison category



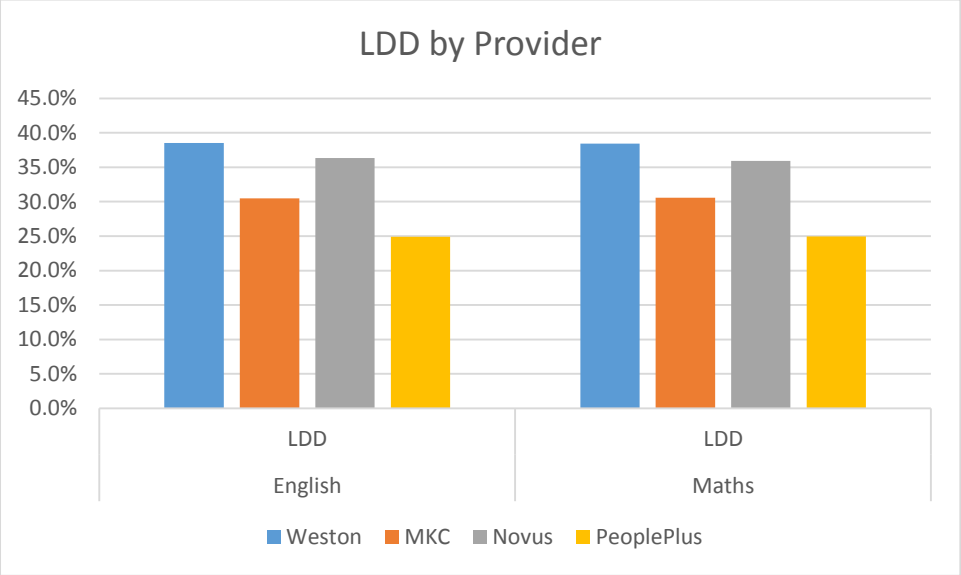
Although it is currently not possible to match MA results with prisoner categorisations, the data nonetheless illustrates that different types of prisons do have prisoners with different profiles of basic skills.

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.

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

Fig 11: LDD self-assessments by provider



While the overall rate of LDD for all prisons is 32% the rate of LDD in female prisons is 50%, 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% of declared LDD, with 20% moderate learning difficulties the next largest category. Evidence suggests that mental health issues are also a significant factor in the prison population.

Government data on mandatory assessments

The official mandatory assessment figures have now been released by BIS (BIS, 2015). The overall results, 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[5].

Table 4: Differences between official data and provisional data

English/literacy	**EL1 & below**	**EL2**	**EL3**	**L1**	**L2 & above**
Official data	7.4%	13.1%	30%	36.9%	13.3%
Provisional data	7.4%	12.9%	29.7%	36.2%	13.8%
Maths/numeracy	**EL1 & below**	**EL2**	**EL3**	**L1**	**L2 & above**
Official data	5.7%	14.6%	36.7%	34.3%	9.4%
Provisional data	5.8%	14.8%	36.7%	33.7%	9.0%

The official data provides 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

[5] The official data does not add to 100% which is largely due to the fact that a very small number of offender learners have participated in more than one maths assessment over the year and a small number were assessed at a different outcome level for each assessment.

numeracy, the 50+ age group has more very low level skills assessments 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% of all prisoners.

Table 5: Prisoners literacy and numeracy by age

English/literacy	**EL1 & below**	**EL2**	**EL3**	**L1**	**L2 & above**
18 - 24	6.3%	12.4%	32.0%	37.8%	12.2%
25 – 49	7.7%	13.3%	29.6%	36.7%	13.4%
50+	8.8%	14.6%	26.4%	34.5%	16.1%
Maths/numeracy	**EL1 & below**	**EL2**	**EL3**	**L1**	**L2 & above**
18 - 24	5.1%	13.5%	37.3%	35.8%	9.1%
25 – 49	5.8%	14.8%	36.8%	34.1%	9.1%
50+	7.2%	16.4%	33.5%	31.0%	12.2%

There is considerably more variance between the ethnic groups than for age, although we need to again recognise that some of these groups are quite small. The white category represents 70% of the total, with Black/African/Caribbean/Black British at 10%, Asian/Asian British 7% and Mixed 5%. It is likely that some of this variation is caused by prisoners who do not speak English as a first language.

Table 6: Prisoners literacy and numeracy by ethnicity

English/literacy	**EL1 & below**	**EL2**	**EL3**	**L1**	**L2 & above**
Asian/ Asian British	10.9%	14.7%	29.6%	33.0%	12.2%
Black/ African/ Caribbean/ Black British	4.7%	12.3%	30.6%	41.1%	12.2%
Mixed/ Multiple Ethnic Group	5.4%	13.2%	29.9%	39.7%	12.7%
White	7.0%	12.8%	30.1%	36.7%	14.1%
Other Ethnic Group	18.0%	19.9%	26.7%	28.0%	8.1%
Maths/numeracy	**EL1 & below**	**EL2**	**EL3**	**L1**	**L2 & above**
Asian/ Asian British	8.1%	16.8%	33.0%	32.4%	10.4%
Black/ African/ Caribbean/ Black British	4.9%	14.8%	37.0%	33.6%	10.2%
Mixed/ Multiple Ethnic Group	5.5%	14.1%	37.1%	33.9%	10.1%
White	5.3%	14.2%	37.2%	34.9%	9.1%
Other Ethnic Group	13.6%	17.3%	34.6%	27.8%	8.0%

Discussion

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

Firstly, it is clear that the high percentages of prisoners with EL1 and EL2 English skills are a major barrier for those people entering employment. It is equally clear that prisoners in category A and B prisons are particularly weak and in need of specialist help. Adults with these low levels are by far the hardest to address, and policy makers need to be aware that sustained educational effort is required to bring adults at these levels up to an acceptable standard.

In maths, the challenge is to move many more prisoners from EL3 to L1 and L2, which would bring the prisoners' profile more closely in line with the national one. More work needs to be done with the female estate in maths across all entry levels.
Perhaps unsurprisingly, the profile of YOI inmates is closer to that of the general population with the exception of L2. This might suggest that only the later years of education have been a problem for this cohort.

Although there is a uniformly high level of LDD reported by all categories of prisoner, around 32%, this is far higher for the female estate. The reasons for this are not apparent at this stage.

We should stress that we cannot use this data without noting that the ways in which MAs are conducted may well have an impact of the resultant data. An example can be seen in the report from Prison 1 (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 which might affect the motivation of prisoners doing the MAs. Similarly we might expect other aspects of the MA delivery to affect results, in particular how soon MAs are conducted after entry to prison.

For the year 2014/15 all four 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.

Next steps

Our view is that this data collection and analysis needs to be repeated over the next few years to allow us to build up a solid set of data on prisoners' literacy and numeracy levels. We very much hope that BIS, the SFA and the OLASS providers will support us in repeating the exercise annually. We also believe it to be important to continue visiting prisons across regions and providers to see for ourselves how the MAs are administered.

The line of inquiry concerning different patterns of literacy and numeracy skills for different categories of prisoner cannot be studied by the current methodology. Any analysis of patterns of educational level with prisoner category requires us to make links with NOMS data. What we have outlined above is purely an indication of the different profiles in different types of prisons which suggests that this is a fruitful line for further enquiry.

Fuller and more accurate data will be released next year through the ILR database; these data need a more comprehensive analysis which can link their MAs to individuals as they move through, or in and out of, the custodial and education system. The process of conducting the mandatory assessments will also bed-in over time, and we need to learn more about the different ways prisons go about conducting the assessments.

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.

The work we have so far carried out has been unfunded and has depended on the good will and helpfulness of the current four prison education providers: Novus (formerly The Manchester College Justice Division), Milton Keynes College, Weston College and PeoplePlus (formerly A4E) without which none of this data would have been available. To undertake the further work required will take greater resource than we currently have, and it is therefore the intention of CECJS to bid for public funds to support this research.

APPENDIX

Background and context of offender learning organisation and adult education

OLASS 4
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 SFA is accountable for funding and is responsible for performance management of the OLASS contract across the unit of procurement. Lead governors will meet regularly with learning and skills providers to discuss and review delivery.

The SFA has contracts with 4 organisations who provide learning and skills training for offenders across 10 areas of England.

OLASS 4 providers

Education Provider	**Region**
Novus	London, North East, North West, Kent & Sussex, Yorkshire & Humber (5 regions)
Milton Keynes College	East Midlands, South Central, West Midlands (3 regions)
Weston College	South West
PeoplePlus	East of England

OLASS funds adults (aged 18 and over) in custody in England, including offenders on remand. Their responsibilities include:

- a mandatory initial assessment of functional English and maths (for all offenders on reception to custody)
- developing skills and routes to employment, especially in the 12 months before offenders are released
- working across a group of prisons, with lead governors co-ordinating activity
- working with lead governors to plan, monitor, review and assess the curriculum, with the OLASS provider, to meet local needs, and considering the offender's needs and the job market offenders are released into. OLASS funding follows the same principles, rules and evidence requirements for provision funded though the adult skills budget unless otherwise specified in this section

Categories of Prison
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.

Youth Offending Institutions (YOIs) are for prisoners aged between18 and 21.

Female prisoners and young offenders are not categorised unless they have been deemed category A. They are only classified as suitable for open conditions or suitable for closed conditions. Prisoners do move between categories, as they have their category reviewed at regular intervals (MoJ, 2011).

Terminology
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. In this paper I have made 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.

Adult English and maths skills levels
In 2001, as part of the national Skills for Life (SfL) initiative, an adult core curriculum was drawn up for literacy and numeracy. This 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, L2 is considered roughly equivalent to a GCSE Grade C or above while adults with L1 literacy can read relatively short digital or print continuous, non-continuous, or mixed texts to locate a single piece of information, which is identical to or synonymous with the information given in the question or directive. Adults performing at this level can complete simple forms, understand basic vocabulary, determine the meaning of sentences, and read continuous texts with a degree of fluency. Below Level 1, individuals can read brief texts on familiar topics and locate a single piece of specific information identical in form to information in the question or directive (ELINET, 2015).

It should be stressed that these equivalences and generalisations are indicative only, and that no one person has English and maths skills at a uniform level. Typically we may have some maths skills at L2, but where we have not used skills for some time they may be much lower. Or indeed, we may have done enough to get a L2 qualification but we know that we had less understanding of some of the areas in the curriculum. So an average person has a mix of skills levels in both English and maths. Educationalists call this having a ‘spikey profile’; to describe anyone as being ‘at L1’ is a crude approximation.

Initial assessments
At an early stage in the SfL project diagnostic tests were designed to give teachers an understanding of students’ skills levels. The first IAs were quite crude, paper-based instruments designed to evaluate performance in different areas. These have become more sophisticated over time and current IAs are usually online and highly interactive, offering

different questions to different students depending on their answers. In recent years IAs 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. Currently there are a large number of competing IAs and providers across the sector are free to choose any IA they like. This is problematic, since each test has its own strengths and weaknesses (Brooks, 2013b).

Mandatory assessments

From August 2014 it has been a mandatory requirement that the OLASS 4 providers conduct English and maths IAs (the mandatory assessments or MAs) on all new prisoners entering the system. Those prisoners moving around the system but who have been in the system for longer than six months may be given an IA, but this would be for educational reasons and there would be no mandatory payment. Re-offenders should be picked up from the ILR and should not receive a MA if they have had one within six months even if they have been out of prison in the interim. The details of the MAs will be added to the Individual Learning Record (ILR) database. All the details on how this is done is then left to the providers. There is no guidance on which IA to use, when the IA is conducted or any other contextualisation of the MAs. Prisoners are left to self-declare any learning difficulties or disabilities, and again the ways in which providers ascertain this status is left to their discretion.

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