DfE Learners and Apprentices Study: Reasons for non-completion

Qualitative research report

February 2019

Kantar Public

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Executive summary

This report presents the findings from **a qualitative study of FE learners and apprentices who did not complete their course or apprenticeship**. The study comprised 36 in-depth interviews with respondents to the 2018 FE Learners and Apprentices Survey. The research aimed to provide a detailed understanding of the reasons for non-completion, the support that learners and apprentices had received, and additional support they thought they would have benefitted from.

Research Design

Technological advances and the changing nature of work could lead to **10-35% of UK jobs being at risk of replacement** in the next 20 years. This means that adults will need to be able to reskill throughout their working lives. This, combined with a decline in adult participation rates in formal learning, means that need for growth in the Further Education sector is now greater than ever [1].

Previous research has shown that adult learners commonly face a range of challenges when learning[2]. The 2018 Learners and Apprentices Survey found that there were **three categories of reasons why learners did not complete their courses**; personal or domestic issues, issues with course quality, and finding work or an apprenticeship. This research aimed to understand the reasons why non-completers dropped out in more detail; the types of support they did and did not receive; and what extra support might have helped them complete. The methodology comprised of 36 telephone depth interviews with non-completers (18 with FE learners and 18 with apprentices) which were based around a journey mapping exercise. Each interview lasted 45-60 minutes and all fieldwork took place in August 2018. The sample included a spread of participants across the three non-completion categories.

Becoming learners

Overall, whilst motivated, non-completers **commonly lacked information about the content of their course and how it would be delivered before they began**. Non-completers' motivations were broadly extrinsic rather than intrinsic and focused on job acquisition, career progression, and pay rises. They saw their course as a way to move their life forward within their local area and without making significant changes to their circumstances. Whilst motivated, a lack of upfront information before they started the

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[1] https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/future-of-skills-and-lifelong-learning

[2] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/742108/DfE_Decisions_of_adult_learners.pdf

course meant that expectations tended to be limited to an expectation that the course would be organised, run smoothly, and enable them to work to pass. Some non-completers had expectations related to their personal circumstances, such as disability support and childcare needs, but there was little expectation of other forms of support.

Non-completers experiences of FE courses and apprenticeships

Non-completers reported **mixed experiences of their courses and apprenticeships**. They commonly enjoyed the content of their course, support received from their tutor where felt to be at an appropriate level, and support gained from their peer group. However, they had commonly experienced challenges such as a lack of sufficient flexibility, loss of child care, and employers not allowing them enough time to do their coursework. Some learners had managed to address the challenges they faced – in cases where they had been able to negotiate effectively with tutors, family, and employers for additional support to help them.

Reasons for non-completion

Figure 1.1: Completion requirement model
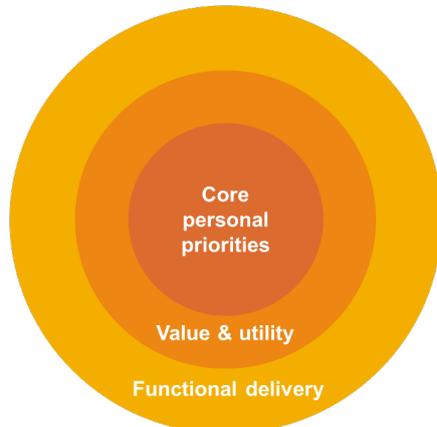
Non-completers dropped out when one or more of three key areas were not satisfied. They dropped out when **core personal issues** took priority over learning; with family, health, and finances commonly taking priority. Drop out occurred when learners **did not see their course as valuable**, meaning the content and level were not appropriate to enable them to pursue their career goals. Finally, learners dropped out when their course or apprenticeship **failed to meet their expectations for functional delivery** – when delivery quality was not seen as sufficient enough to enable them to work to pass. Although learners were generally tipped into non-completion by an issue aligned to one of these areas, they tended to be facing multifaceted issues which overlapped across two or more layers.

Support needs

Levels of **support received by non-completers varied** and while some were positive about the support provided by their course, some common issues emerged. Non-completers widely reported not receiving enough information upfront about their course,

enough flexibility around other priorities, or sufficient support from tutors. The role of tutors was an integral part of course experiences and whether learners felt able to continue. Though participants expressed a strong preference for face to face learning, they identified ways in which online support could be helpful as a supplement.

Recommendations

Within each of the three requirement areas, there were common reasons for drop out that provide insight into the extent to which additional support could have helped learners to continue their course or apprenticeship.

- **Personal priorities:** key variables affecting dropout were emotional bandwidth (meaning capacity to deal with tasks and priorities before becoming overwhelmed) and whether an issue was acute or chronic. Those with chronic issues and low emotional bandwidth were most likely to drop out.

- **Value and utility:** three key categories emerged: non-completion caused by misunderstanding about the purpose or content of the course; how the course would be delivered; or due to a change in job leading to the course being seen to lack relevance.

- **Functional delivery:** some learners said they dropped out due to experiencing poor delivery whereas others had expectations beyond what the provider could deliver.

The findings suggest that learners and apprentices need **a holistic suite of support** throughout their learning journey to help maximise chances of completion, including:

- **More comprehensive and accurate information up front** about the content, structure and expectations for a course - to assess whether it meets their needs and circumstances.

- **Proactive and holistic support and flexibility** to ensure they can continue to manage their course alongside their personal priorities and information up front about where and how to access services - for example access to health, mental health, and disability support, childcare, and careers and financial advice as well as flexibility to extend deadlines, save credits, and alter assessment modes when necessary.

- **Improvements to course delivery** so that courses and apprenticeships are more consistently delivered across the country.

Whilst non-completers left for a variety of reasons, it is important to acknowledge that a significant number were driven to drop out by poor quality provision. It may be helpful to reflect on how providers can be incentivised to improve course delivery to ensure a more consistent standard across the country.

2. Research Design

This report presents the findings from a qualitative study of FE Learners and Apprentices who did not complete their course or apprenticeship. The study comprised 36 in-depth interviews with respondents to the 2018 FE Learners and Apprentices Survey. The research aimed to provide a detailed understanding of the reasons for non-completion, and the support that learners and apprentices had received, and additional support they said they would have benefitted from.

This chapter outlines the research design and then Chapter 3 explores journeys to becoming a learner; Chapter 4 explores non-completers' experiences of their courses; Chapter 5 reports on the reasons for non-completion; Chapter 6 examines the types of support non-completers did and did not receive; and Chapter 7 provides some recommendations on supporting learners in the future.

2.1 Background

Technological advances and the changing nature of work could lead to **10-35% of UK jobs being at high risk of replacement** in the next 20 years[3]. This means that adults will need to be able to reskill throughout their extended working lives. This, combined with a decline in adult participation rates in formal learning, means that there is now a need for the Further Education sector to grow.

The Department for Education (DfE) has already begun to take steps to achieve this through the upcoming introduction of T-levels, a key part of the DfE approach to ensure technical education is seen as an equivalent to alternative post-16 study. Additionally, the National Retraining Scheme will give individuals the skills they need to progress in work, redirect their careers and secure the higher-paid, higher-skilled jobs of the future, focusing on those individuals who need it most. This is being driven by a key partnership between Government, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and the Trades Unions Congress (TUC), which sets the strategic direction of the Scheme and oversees its implementation. Furthermore, the government's industrial strategy has outlined apprenticeships as key to improving both productivity and social mobility. As a result of this, the government has pledged to enable 3 million apprenticeship starts by 2020 and have required schools to promote apprenticeships on par with university education. Finally, an apprenticeship levy was introduced for employers with a pay bill of over £3 million per year. The funds from this levy are being used to invest in apprenticeships by allowing employers that receive these funds to spend them on further training for the apprentices. There is now a need to understand how to encourage adults into learning

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[3] https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/future-of-skills-and-lifelong-learning

and to help them complete courses to counterbalance the changing nature of the job market.

Previous research carried out by Kantar Public on the 'Decisions of Adult Learners' found that when adults were deciding whether to undertake learning, there was **a complex relationship between course value and the barriers** they faced[4]. Adult learners weighed up course value against challenges faced and undertook learning at the 'tipping point' at which the value outweighed the challenges present. One of the most important determinants was whether a learner was in a financial position to enrol. Before they were able to see the value of education, participants first needed to feel they could sustain their personal lives and overcome any practical barriers they faced. When they began to consider learning, participants focussed on their personal betterment, usually looking at whether learning could benefit their work and career.

The research identified **practical challenges** adults faced to continued engagement with learning. Learners struggled to cope with the exhaustion they faced, particularly due to their other commitments, and felt unprepared for the 'uphill battle' associated with redeveloping study skills. Finally, any shift in practical arrangements, such as childcare and employment, could lead an adult to reappraise the feasibility of learning. Learners said they required three main kinds of support to overcome these challenges: peer support; a sense of achievement from early successes; and online infrastructure to enable remote peer interaction and study. This report builds on these findings in more detail.

In 2018, Kantar Public carried out a **survey of 12,872 FE Learners and apprentices** to explore their experiences and outcomes, including reasons for non-completion among those who withdrew from their course. The target population was all learners and apprentices aged 19-64 who completed or were due to complete a FE course or apprenticeship between 1 April and 31 December 2017 (this included learners who did not complete their learning or apprenticeship). Self-reported non completion was around one in ten for both FE learners and apprentices, (differing from the DfE estimates/Individualised Learner Record (ILR) final completion status). The survey found non completion was more prevalent among certain groups including; those in the most deprived index of multiple deprivation (IMD) quintile (43%), those with disabilities (25%), those who didn't speak English as their first language (12%) and those aged over 35 (11%). Non-completion rates were similar for funded and self-funded learners, showing there was no significant link between self-funding and non-completion.

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[4] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/adult-education-why-adults-decide-to-study

Figure 2.1 shows the reasons that learners and apprentices gave for non-completion. There were **three key categories**; personal or domestic issues, issues with course quality, and finding work or an apprenticeship. Personal and domestic issues were most likely to be the cause of non-completion, with ill health (13%) and family/childcare issues (13%) being the most prevalent issues. Those who had issues with the course were likely to state that it was not of interest (7%), poorly run (5%) or not suitable for the intended outcome. These survey findings informed the objectives and scope for the qualitative follow up research.

Figure 2.1: Reasons for drop out
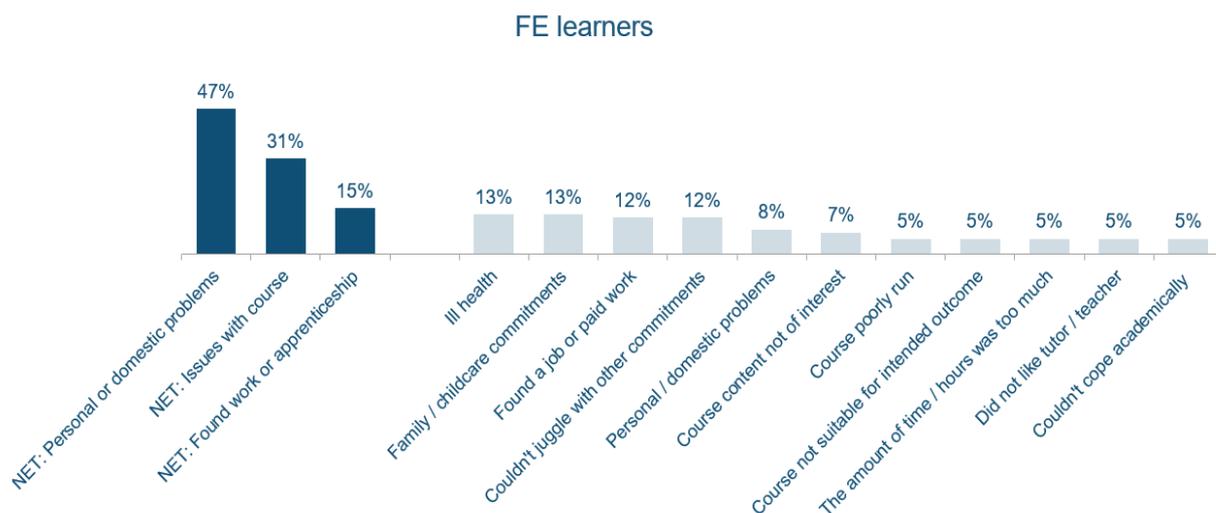
FE learners

Base: all FE learners who did not complete (768).
Survey Question: What were the main reasons you didn't complete your course?
Source: DfE Learners and Apprentices Survey
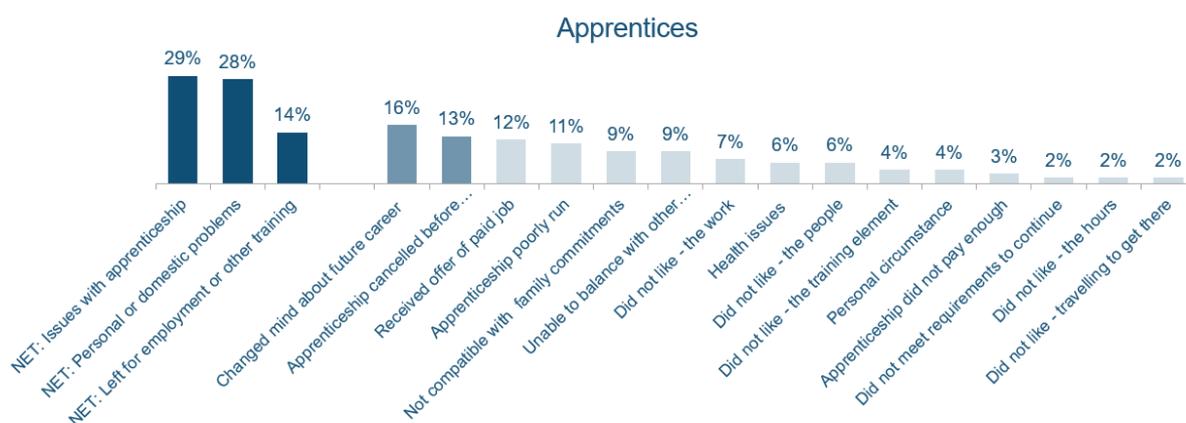
Apprentices

Base: all apprentices who did not complete (775)
Survey Question: What were the main reasons for not completing the full period of your apprenticeship?
Source: DfE Learners and Apprentices Survey

2.2 Research Objectives

This research aimed to provide greater detail behind the drivers of non-completion of apprenticeships and FE courses. The research objectives were to:

- Explore the **reasons** why non completers dropped out of their apprenticeship / FE course across the three categories identified in the 2018 Learners and Apprentices Survey:

  - Personal and domestic issues

  - Issues with course quality

  - The circumstances through which and motivations for why some participants got a new job

- Understand the **types of support** learners who did not complete did/did not receive

- Identify **what support might have helped them to complete** their learning (beyond increased direct financial support to the learner).

2.3 Methodology

We conducted thirty-six follow-up qualitative telephone interviews with individuals who had taken part in the Learners and Apprentices Survey and self-reported as non-completers: 18 with FE Learners and 18 with apprentices. Each interview lasted 45-60 minutes and all fieldwork took place in August 2018. The interviews were based around a journey mapping exercise, which enabled non-completers to chronologically talk through their experience of their course and the reasons they did not complete within this context. The discussion flow was as follows:

- Introduction and course overview
- Expectations – of course content, assessment, logistics, and support
- Journey Mapping Exercise – motivations, access path, initial impressions, experiences, and tipping point
- Support – received, missing, and suggestions
- Future Plans

The full topic guide can be found in the appendix.

2.4 Sampling

The sample was structured to ensure the inclusion of a range of non-completers' views and experiences. The sample included an even balance of apprentices and FE learners

spread across the three key non-completion categories. Secondary quotas were included for ethnicity, disabilities, and Free School Meals (FSM), as these groups were more likely to drop out. The sample also included a range of ages, genders, and course levels. All participants were recruited from the survey re-contact sample. Figure 2.2 below provides an overview of the sample, with full details available in the appendix.

Figure 2.2: Achieved Sample

		FE Learners	Apprentices
Total		**18**	**18**
Course 3+ months long (FE Learners only)		17	n/a
Reasons for non-completion	Personal and domestic issues	8	7
	Issue with course quality	6	7
	Got a job	4	4
BAME		5	4
Disability		7	5
Eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) while at school		7	7

2.5 Analysis

An iterative analysis process was used across the course of the research, building on emerging findings throughout to develop our understanding of participant experiences, priorities and concerns, uncover the drivers of views, and explore any implications for the adult learning sector.

Matrix mapping was used to ensure a robust analysis of the large volumes of qualitative data. This is a thorough and robust approach to qualitative data analysis whereby structured pro-formas and charts are used to map data against the research objectives and emergent key themes. We systemically analysed the data to look for themes and explore variation across sub-groups. We held formal analysis brainstorm sessions where researchers explored findings against each of the key themes in detail, as well as against the overarching objectives. Sub group analysis has been conducted throughout, with meaningful variations noted throughout the report.

Verbatim quotes are used throughout this report to illuminate findings and are attributed as follows:

"Quote." (Learner type, Level, reason for non-completion).

3. Becoming Learners

This chapter looks at non-completers' attitudes toward education before exploring their motivations for undertaking adult learning and the triggers for becoming learners. It then reports on their expectations for their courses prior to becoming learners.

Overall, whilst motivated, **non-completers commonly lacked information about the content of their course and how it would be delivered before they began**. Learners had had mixed experiences of school but were now more focused on their learning than in the past. Although FE learners were more likely to be positive about education in general, apprentices were more positive about the more practical education they were now receiving. Non-completers' motivations were broadly extrinsic and focused on job acquisition, career progression, and pay rises. They saw their course as a way to move their life forward within their local area and without making significant changes to their circumstances. Whilst motivated, non-completers commonly lacked information and their expectations tended to be limited to an expectation that the course would be organised, run smoothly, and enable them to work to pass it.

3.1 Attitudes to Learning

Participant **experiences of school were mixed** but they were now more focused on their learning than they had been in the past. FE Learners were more positive about learning in general, though apprentices spoke positively about having a practical side to their education where they could apply what they were learning in the work place.

> *"Education is useful and can be interesting, but it can also be hard." (FE Learner, Level 2, personal and domestic issues)*

FE learners were more positive about education in general. They tended to think back to previous learning and talk about the enjoyment of learning with peers who were interested in bettering themselves and had the same passion for learning as they did. They also spoke widely about the benefits of learning for themselves, children, and society as a whole. FE Learners spoke positively about the impact of education on their careers, future income, and personal development.

> *"You can always improve on what you already know." (Further education, level 2, course issues)*

Apprentices were more cynical about their previous experiences of learning, and saw it as a necessity rather than something they actively enjoyed. They spoke about how learning at school had involved subjects that they had no interest in, and felt did not benefit them. However, they were more positive about learning about something that they enjoyed, and the practical applications of learning. They preferred an education where

they were learning by doing, rather than learning in a classroom. They were more positive about the kind of education they received as part of their apprenticeship.

> *"I prefer to learn by doing rather than studying. Sitting in a classroom isn't my cup of tea." (Apprentice, Level 3, new job).*

3.2 Motivations for undertaking learning

Motivations were largely extrinsic rather than intrinsic – meaning participants focussed on what they could achieve rather than learning for pleasure. Motivations focussed on job acquisition, career progression and pay rises. The apprenticeship or course was seen as a way to further themselves professionally within their local context.

FE learners' and apprentices' motivations focussed on their learning having a positive impact on their future career. Participants were motivated by the idea of a job that was better than the one they currently had, career progression in their current field, and an increase in pay. There was no mention of being motivated by enjoyment of learning or passion for the subject.

> *"Something needed to change in my life. I wanted to get a normal job with normal money." (FE learner, Level 2, personal and domestic issues)*

FE learners were motivated by expanding their knowledge in a familiar area, as opposed to learning something new entirely. These participants fell into two groups. The first were FE learners that decided to learn in an area related to the industry they were working in as they attempted to progress in their current position. The second group were those who decided to learn in an area that they were interested in generally, in order to begin a career in that area of interest.

> *"I did it as I wanted to feel like I'd achieved something in the role I was working in." (FE learner, level 3, new job)*

Apprentices were motivated by receiving a nationally recognised qualification, as they thought this was something that would improve their future career prospects and make them seem more attractive to prospective future employers. They were more motivated by doing this through an apprenticeship as it gave them the opportunity to learn whilst doing something practical, and earning money whilst they learnt.

> *"I wanted the experience of the job, whilst learning more about it at the same time. I wanted to get the best of both worlds, whilst expanding my horizons and skillset." (Apprenticeship, level 2, new job)*

Courses and apprenticeships were seen as an opportunity for learners to make changes to their lives **within their current life context**. They chose their provider based on

geographic convenience, as it meant there was minimal disruption to their personal circumstances. FE learners and apprentices were not prioritising education over their personal life, and expected their education to fit around their other priorities. This differs from higher education, where students are willing to move across the country and change their personal circumstances to prioritise their education.

3.3 Triggers for becoming learners

With regards to triggers, participants could be broken into two groups: **those triggered by their employer and those who were self-triggered**. Employer-triggered participants experienced a less intensive application process and therefore developed less emotional commitment to their course at this stage. For self-triggered learners, a more intensive application process meant greater emotional commitment. However, neither group typically actively sought detailed information about their course or apprenticeship during the application process.

Figure 3.1 Impacts of different triggers
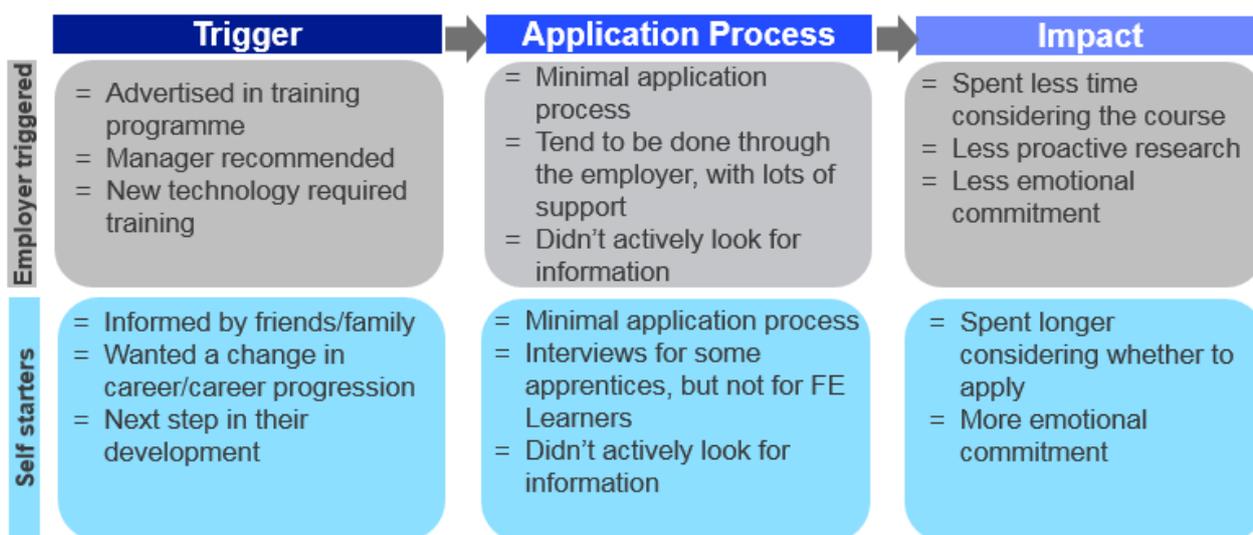
3.3.1 Employer-triggered learners and apprentices

Apprentices were more likely to have been triggered by their employer, and these employers saw the apprenticeship as a training opportunity. FE learners were triggered by employers who were adopting new technology that required further training. As Figure 3.1 shows, employer-triggered learners were either recommended by their manager, or saw the opportunity advertised within the workplace. There was a minimal application process as the employer managed most of it. These non-completers did not have to seek out much information about the course or apprenticeship themselves. This meant that they spent less time researching and considering the costs and benefits of the course.

"After completing the probation with my employer they offered the apprenticeship to me. My manager went through the details with me and we just went from there."
(Apprentice, Level 3, new job)

3.3.2 Self-triggered learners and apprentices

These non-completers were **triggered by the idea that their course was the next step in their career or professional development**. For some, this meant a change in their career or the idea of learning helping their career progression. For others, finding out about the course from friends or family raised their awareness of the opportunity. As these learners and apprentices did not have an employer supporting them through the application process, they completed applications on their own, which required more research on their part. For apprentices, this also meant that they had to go through a more formal interview process. This made the application process more intensive for this group, and meant they developed more of an emotional commitment to their course.

3.4 Expectations of the course or apprenticeship

Non-completer expectations of their course or apprenticeship tended to be **functional**. Their expectations were limited to expecting an organised course that ran smoothly so that they would be able to pass.

3.4.1 Information

Prior to enrolment, non-completers **generally lacked detailed information about their course or apprenticeship**. This included but was not limited to the content they would be learning, the way the course was structured, the support they could expect and how assessments would be conducted. This was more common among employer-triggered learners. There were no other meaningful differences between subgroups.

This lack of upfront understanding meant that non-completers sometimes misunderstood the outcomes, level, and purpose of their course, which led to them experiencing issues with the course. For apprentices, lack of expectation about course content was compounded with a lack of informed expectations about the type of work they would be doing. This could lead to them finding that the course content and work they were doing on their placement were not seen to complement one another, taking away from the holistic learning experience they were looking to enjoy.

"I expected (the course) would be cool and land me a job in industry instantly."
(FE learner, Level 3, changed mind about career)

Though participants stated they were motivated by the impact that their course would have on their career prospects, there was sometimes a lack of understanding of how

completion could help to advance their career, most notably among the self-triggered group. For example, some, particularly apprentices, expected to immediately find a job following completion of their course and there was a lack of understanding of the steps needed to achieve this.

3.4.2 Expectations

Expectations of courses and apprenticeships tended to be functional. As Figure 3.2 shows, expectations focused on the content of the course or the role of the tutor, and for apprentices, the employer. Participants expected their tutors to be in contact regularly and provide feedback in a timely manner. They expected to be learning new things, but did not expect the content to be too complicated. They expected a workload that was feasible around their personal priorities, and access to materials needed to complete the course. Apprentices expected the course content to complement the work they were doing on their placement so they could apply their learning. Additionally, they expected their workplace to be aware of the course requirements, and support them with that.

> *"I expected that the quality of teaching would be very high, and that the course would be demanding for me, but I was ready and prepared for that." (FE learner, level 3, personal & domestic issues)*

Figure 3.2: Expectations for courses and apprenticeships
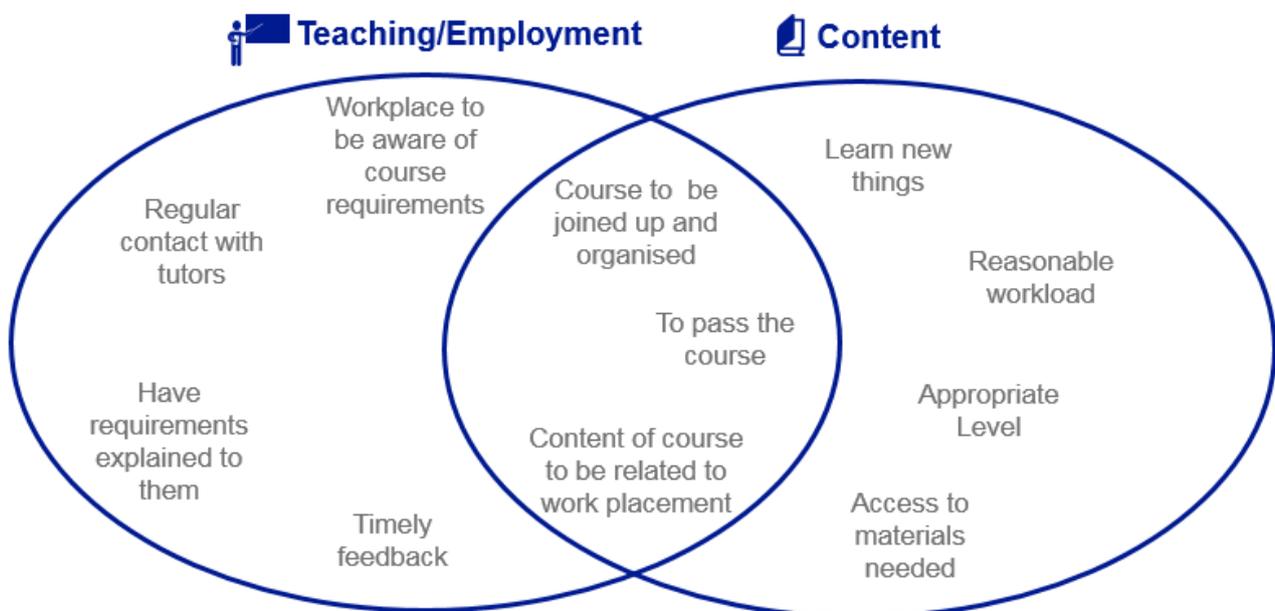
Other expectations non-completers had centred around their particular personal circumstances. Disabled learners expected extra support to ensure they could participate fully in the course. This included extra time for assessments, tutor support

when they were struggling, and generally having the tutor available when they needed them. Those who spoke English as a second language said they required extra classes to support them with reading and writing, especially when they were undertaking courses and apprenticeships with large written assessments. Learners who had childcare commitments tended to put support in place to ensure that this would not be a barrier to their learning, from both inside and outside their social network. As they saw this as a priority above education, this was something they had considered before beginning enrolment. They did not expect this to be provided by the learning institution.

Beyond this there was **little expectation of pastoral care** from their tutors, and they did not ask about any other kinds of support services they could access. When FE learners and apprentices identified the need for support in other areas, they attempted to put their own support structures into place to ensure that they did not affect learning.

Figure 3.3 Expectations related to personal circumstances

Personal circumstances	• **English as 2nd language** – checked there was support (e.g. extra sessions with tutors, dedicated classes) • **Disabled learners** - expected support (e.g. extra time for assessments and tutor support)
Support sought and arranged	• **Those with childcare commitments** – put support in place to ensure this wasn't a barrier to learning • **Learners did not put many support structures in place** beyond this
Low expectations of support	• **No expectations of pastoral care from their tutors** – were very grateful when they did receive this • **Little signposting to support offered by providers beyond this** – nor was there signposting to other support services

4. Non-completer experiences of FE courses and apprenticeships

This chapter looks at the positive experiences learners had on the course or apprenticeship and the challenges they overcame prior to deciding not to complete. It explores the strategies learners and apprentices used to overcome challenges.

Non-completers had a **mixed range of experiences** of their courses, but most enjoyed some aspects, including the course content, support received from their tutor where at an appropriate level, and support gained from their peer group. However, most had commonly experienced challenges such as insufficient flexibility, loss of child care, and their employer not allowing them enough time to do their coursework. Some learners had managed to address challenges through a range of strategies – where they were able to negotiate effectively with tutors, family, and employers for more support.

4.1 Positive experiences of learning

Overall, non-completers reported that they had **enjoyed the reward of learning and the sense of achievement that came with it**. This was particularly common among those who had previously enjoyed their education as it reminded them of taking part in the learning they had enjoyed. For those who were less positive about their school experience, adult learning differed because they were learning about something they had chosen, and were interested in, and therefore were more enthusiastic about. They also enjoyed the camaraderie when learning and working with peers who were in similar situations to themselves and had a similarly engaged attitude to their course.

> *"I liked my class, my teachers, the college, the system, it felt like I was 20 again! I have really nice memories of my time in the classroom and college." (FE learner, Level 2, personal and domestic issues)*

FE learners commonly enjoyed the independence they had when learning, which differed to the more supervised learning they had received in school. They did, however, still like having regular contact with tutors as it reaffirmed their sense of achievement and reassured them that the work they were doing was correct. When the content was at the appropriate level, FE Learners tended to enjoy it.

> *"I enjoyed all of it. I love music. It was actually a good experience when I was there. I'm glad I tried it." (FE Learner, Level 2, Health issues)*

Apprentices enjoyed their course when the content in college could be transferred into the workplace. This is because it meant that their learning could be applied practically, something they felt was key to their development. Those who were working for

employers that had hired multiple apprentices enjoyed having a peer group to share their experience with. This was because they felt a sense of camaraderie, and they could work together to solve problems. Furthermore, apprentices enjoyed the feeling of working out their weaknesses, and how this self-reflection supported their development.

4.2 Common challenges and strategies to overcome these

Non-completers had **commonly experienced challenges** during their learning journey. Figure 4.1 shows the challenges faced and strategies learners and apprentices in the sample used to overcome these.

Figure 4.1 Common challenges and coping strategies
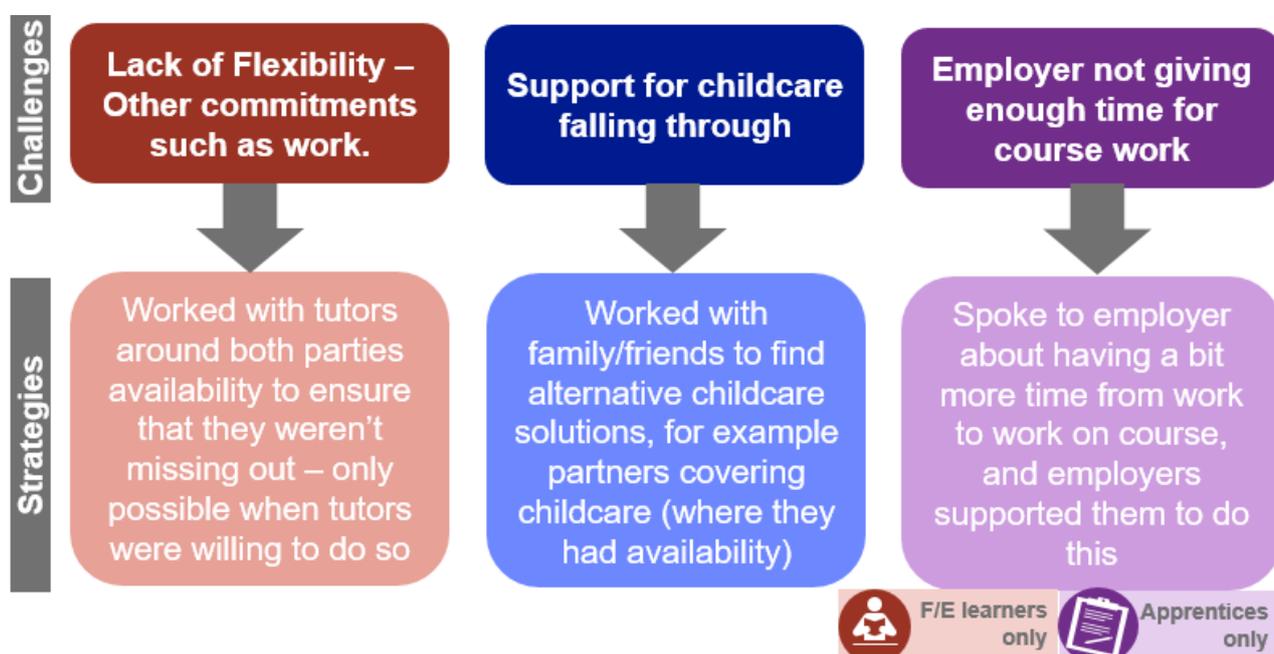
The **most common challenges** faced overall were centred around support for personal priorities falling through. This generally regarded childcare, but also included other family commitments. As these situations took priority over learning, non-completers required support to ensure that they did not fall behind with their coursework. This issue was addressed when the learner's partner or wider social network could offer temporary support, until a more permanent solution to the issue was found. These issues tended to affect female non-completers more.

For **FE learners**, the greatest challenges they faced were when other priorities, such as work took precedence over their course. This was generally because the learner would have to work at the times their tutor was available, or they did not have time to do their coursework due to the amount of time they were spending at work. When learners sought help, and when tutors were able to be flexible, they could fit their learning around work.

The greatest challenges **apprentices** faced centred around the interaction between their employment and their course. Employers would commonly ask apprentices to prioritise their employment over their coursework if there was a busy period. This led to apprentices falling behind on their coursework. Though some attempted to complete the coursework in their own time, this was only viable in the short term as it left them feeling as though they did not have any time for themselves, which could affect their stress levels and mental health. This was generally overcome when apprentices spoke to employers and were able to create some flexibility. Where this was possible, apprentices were allowed to work from home, or given extra time during the day. This was most helpful for those who faced challenges that could be solved with greater flexibility. For those with problems such as health issues, greater flexibility was not enough to continue.

5. Reasons for non-completion of FE courses and apprenticeships

This chapter summarises the non-completion landscape then outlines the completion requirement model before exploring the ways in which learners and apprentices were experiencing multifaceted challenges.

FE learners and apprentices dropped out when one or more of three key requirement areas were not satisfied. Firstly, they dropped out when **core personal issues** arose that took priority over their learning. Drop out also occurred when learners **did not see their course as valuable**, meaning the content and level were not seen to be appropriate to enable them to pursue their goals. Finally, learners dropped out when their course **failed to meet their expectations for functional delivery** – where delivery quality was not seen as high enough to enable them to work to pass and achieve their motivations. Whilst learners were typically tipped into non-completion by an issue aligned to one of these requirement layers, individuals tended to be facing complex and multifaceted issues which overlapped across the requirement layers.

5.1 The non-completion landscape

The **non-completion landscape** was made up of a wide range of issues, with overlap in reported reasons for drop out across the three key sample groups. Some issues were only reported by FE learners or apprentices whereas others were experienced by both groups (see Figure 5.1 for a summary).

Figure 5.1: Summary of the non-completion landscape

Personal and domestic issues	Issues with course quality		Got a new job
Tutors – poor quality, support, contact			
Poor disability support		Course content not relevant or misunderstood course level, structure, requirements	
Poor support for mental health issues		Poor course organisation/change to logistics	
Health issues	No placement arranged	Workload	Moved abroad
Relationship / family break up	Poor equipment	Placement/job not appropriate for course	
Financial security (funding and redundancy)		Placement/job not giving enough time, opportunities, training/feedback	
Childcare		College and placement not joined up	New employer not supportive
			Provider stops responding

Apprentices only   F/E learners only

Dissatisfaction with tutors was an issue commonly reported across the sample groups. Tutors were seen to provide a poor quality service when they were not seen to have an appropriate grasp of the material and when provision was inconsistent. Non-completers often challenged the level of support they received and how responsive tutors were.

Four challenges were commonly reported by those who dropped out due to **personal and domestic issues**; physical and mental health issues, family and relationship break down, childcare needs, and financial insecurity.

A significant set of issues were raised regarding **course quality**. Non-completers were dissatisfied with their courses when they found the content was not relevant to their motivations, or they had struggled because they had found the level, structure, or requirements inappropriate. Other issues commonly contributing to drop out were high workload, disorganisation, and logistical challenges. Two further issues overlapped with personal and domestic issues which were poor disability and mental health support. FE learners reported issues with poor access to equipment and colleges being unable to arrange required work placements. Meanwhile, apprentices commonly dropped out when their course was not joined up, poor disorganisation meant their workload became unmanageable, and/or when their work placement was inappropriate or not providing them with enough time to do their coursework.

Non-completers who had found **a new job** had commonly also experienced course quality issues. In addition, they had typically found their new employer to be less supportive and unwilling to give them the flexibility needed to pursue their course. A minority had found they were unable to re-join their course because the provider did not respond to them. One FE learner moved to Egypt and was therefore unable to complete.

5.2 Completion requirement model

Figure 5.2: Completion requirement model
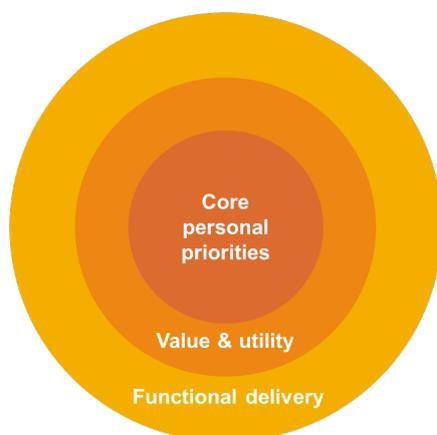
Overall, learners dropped out of when **one or more of three key requirement areas were not satisfied** (Figure 5.2). Firstly, core personal priorities were the foundation, and, as was found in the *Decisions of Adult Learners* study[5], needed to be addressed before learners could continue their course. The course needed to be seen to provide value and utility - meaning the content and level were appropriate to deliver against their motivations. The course then needed to meet learners' expectations for functional delivery – meaning course delivery was of sufficient quality to enable them to work to pass.

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[5] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/adult-education-why-adults-decide-to-study

5.2.1 Core personal priorities

The first key requirement area relates to learners' core personal priorities. As covered in section 4.2, learners and apprentices had chosen their course because it enabled them to pursue their motivations within their local area without making significant changes to their lives. Courses were undertaken with the understanding they would fit around learners' priorities. There were **three key core personal priority areas**; family, health, and wealth.

When issues arose regarding learners' **families**, they consistently prioritised time to dealing with these. Learners had experienced relationship and family break downs which meant that they no longer had the emotional bandwidth (meaning capacity to deal with tasks and priorities before becoming overwhelmed) to attend their course and engage with the material. These were commonly relationship break ups, but also included a grandparent who became involved with helping to manage her daughter's marriage breakdown. For one learner, her marriage breakdown involved taking out a restraining order against her husband – the stress of which meant she did not have the time or energy for her course. Meanwhile, another learner was involved with helping to manage her partner's substance abuse issues which meant she could not fully commit to her course.

Childcare needs were a common reason why learners did not complete. This was generally due to changes during the course, either to course timings or personal circumstances regarding childcare arrangements. This issue particularly affected young and middle aged women, although also included a grandparent who became a full time carer for her grandchildren. Learners either could not afford childcare or could not make appropriate arrangements.

> *"We had a family breakup and I had to care for my grandkids. At the same time work was becoming quite stressful and time consuming … I was struggling to get the work done. It's headspace, not time, the emotional space to do it." (Apprentice, Level 3, Personal issues)*

> *"I just couldn't manage the time, or the money, and Christmas was coming. My tutor was very helpful finding courses at different times for me, but that didn't take away the need for childcare. And I can't afford it, when it's £25 per hour." (FE learner, Level 2, personal and domestic issues)*

Health conditions meant some learners could not complete their course, particularly older learners. Conditions meant that learners were unable to attend their college or workplace or affected their ability to carry out their apprenticeship role. Some learners required hospital treatment or an extended time to recover from a condition. Conditions reported by participants included arthritis, bronchitis, back pain, joint replacement, and in

one case the amputation of a leg after an infection. Mental health conditions also impacted on learners' ability to engage with their course. Participants reported experiencing stress, anxiety, depression, and panic attacks. Whilst some tutors tried to help learners struggling with stress, non-completers had generally received little help to manage mental health conditions. One apprentice found that after he had been signed off by a doctor due to panic attacks, the employer was then reticent to allow him to return to the shop floor due to health and safety concerns.

> *"I had two valves with my chest infection, and the bronchitis was acute, it put me in hospital, and I knew that would put me out of education. I'd love to go back, but I'll never get rid of it." (FE learner, Level 2, Health issues)*

> *"It was extremely stressful, you'd complete one thing, and have 2 more things thrown on top. And then be reminded of your NVQ work too. All while trying to maintain an actual job. I started getting panic attacks and anxiety attacks from fear of work build up." (Apprentice, Level 3, Course issues)*

Financial insecurity prevented some learners from completing, particularly those who had received free school meals. Complications with the Student Loan Company (SLC) meant that some learners were financially unable to continue. This was either because their loan payment was not received in time or in one case, because the SLC withdrew an offer previously made due to the learner's immigration status. These situations were extremely stressful and upsetting for participants who had spent a lot of time trying to contact the SLC and work out administrative issues. Redundancy prevented apprentices from completing because this affected their finances and meant that they were no longer able to provide the material required for their assessments.

> *"The Student Loan Company made it all way too complicated. They should have taken all my information at the start, instead of having to stop and start to ask. And made clear what criteria I needed to pass before getting the loan …The Student Loan was affecting me mentally, and the pressure was building up, worrying about the loan." (Apprentice, Level 3, Personal Issues)*

Figure 5.3: Intertwined personal issues
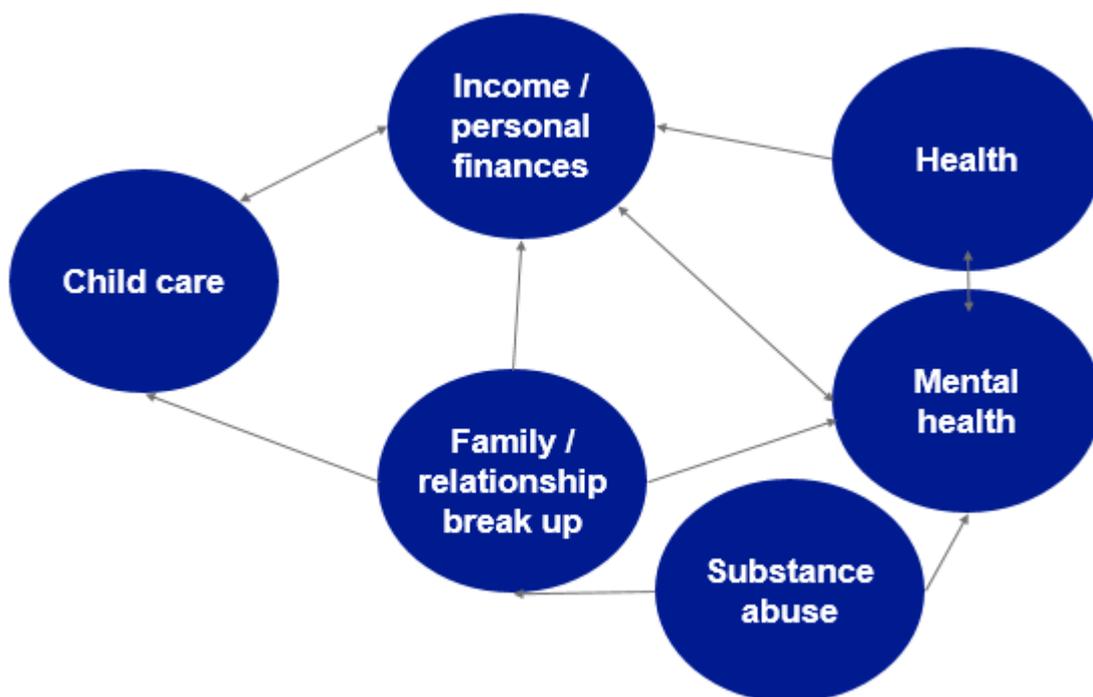
These core **personal priorities were often intertwined and interdependent** (Figure 5.3). These non-completers were generally experiencing knock on impacts across multiple areas – particularly those with childcare responsibilities. For example, for those who had experienced a family break up, the loss of a partner could mean they had greater or more complex childcare arrangements and/or a loss of income which might have meant they had to increase their working hours. Meanwhile health and mental health conditions could lead to a loss of income if this impacted learners' ability to work and it was not uncommon for there to be links between these conditions.

> *"I was very stressed about the <SLC retracting the loan offer> and ended up having to go into hospital … It was very humiliating. <The college> agreed this wasn't my fault. However, unless I could pay my fees moving forwards, I couldn't continue." (FE learner, Level 3, finances)*

> *"Then the tutor was like 'wow, you've got a lot to contend with right now <drug addicted partner, her personal mental health problems>. I don't think you'll be able to do everything that's asked of you here, as well as your home life.'" (FE Learner, Level 2, Health issues)*

Case Study #1: Sharon

Sharon's story illustrates how personal priorities can interact and lead to an apprentice being unable to continue.

Sharon, 31-54, Apprentice, Level 3, Adult Social care, FT, 2 years- placement at a nursing home	
Motivation	• Single mum to 3 boys under 12 (oldest with autism) • Triggered by an offer from her line manager • Aimed to gain a promotion at the care home and use it as a stepping stone study nursing • More focused now than when she was at school
Expectations	• Knew little about the course and had few expectations • Suspected she may have to have to alter her shift patterns • Purchased a laptop and spoke to her employer about shift flexibility in preparation • Access path involved an interview with the tutor
Experience	• Everything was working well – good relationship with the tutor, employer was flexible about shifts for observations, able to work on modules at home • Long shifts due to promotion to Senior Carer • Tutor was flexible to observe required cases
Tipping point	• Change in family situation – partner had to leave after 20 years – given a restraining order. This was an emotionally stressful and traumatic experience • Eldest child was diagnosed with autism, had to become a full-time carer for him • Had to quit job as could not do night shifts without childcare
Support	• Tutor tried to help her continue modules while not working • Tutor kept the course open for a few months

	• Employer kept her on the books to pick up shifts when she was able to get childcare
	• However, she needs more childcare support (particularly for eldest with autism)
Future	• Expects to go back to learning in the future
	• Would like to restart the course
	• Previously she was nervous about being in education – but the course boosted her confidence to return in the future when family circumstances are different
Quotes	*""I wanted to move forward, to get to a higher level. Get a promotion and earn more money. Ultimately I was hoping I could use this to move into further education, to train to become a nurse."* *"We had a change in our family and domestic situation … my partner had to leave, he now has a restraining order. It was an emotionally stressful and traumatic period. I had to give up work, as I did night shifts, to be at home for my family."*

5.2.2 Value and utility

The second key requirement area relates to the value and utility of the course. Non completers dropped out **when courses were not seen to be valuable**. Courses needed to provide value and utility - meaning the content and level were appropriate to deliver against learners' motivations by enabling them to pursue their job acquisition and career progression goals.

The **content of the course** needed to provide the learner with new information which they thought would be useful to their career aspirations. Where this was not the case, courses and apprenticeships were not seen to be a good use of participants' – often limited – time. The course level also needed to be appropriate and stretching but achievable. Learners dropped out when the course was too basic and not teaching them anything useful or – more commonly – when it was too hard and they felt unable to reach the standard that was expected of them. Often these learners had found the course harder than they expected and they were more likely to drop out when they believed they were not receiving enough support from the tutor to catch or keep up.

"The course content had become irrelevant … no longer had anything to do with children or working with parents. When I was interviewed at the start, someone should have told me about the specific units." (Apprentice, Level 4, Course issues)

For apprentices, it was also important that the **work placement was providing them with useful practical skills** for future desired job roles. Where apprentices found themselves doing the same task, disjointed tasks, menial tasks, or tasks they had not expected, then they no longer found the course valuable. Apprenticeships were also seen to be less valuable when they were not joined up and apprentices did not find what they were learning in the classroom to be applicable in the placement.

"The course content wasn't giving me the tools to develop my skillset and had nothing to do with my job role." (Apprenticeship, level 2, new job)

Often issues regarding value had **arisen due to misunderstandings** regarding these content and delivery factors. As has been described, learners often knew little about the detail of their course and how it would be delivered and their assumptions could lead to mismatched expectations. This was more commonly the case among employer-triggered learners where their line manager had not provided sufficient details for them to assess whether the course matched their goals (case study #2).

Case study #2: Kerry

Kerry's story illustrates how not having information upfront about the amount of work required can lead to an apprenticeship not providing the value and utility an apprentice had expected.

Kerry, 31-54, Apprentice, Level 5, Leadership and Management, FT, 18 months – job in disability payment support	
Motivation	• Married, 2 children, works part-time, law degree • Manager approached her a couple of weeks before – would help her career progression • Some information via email from provider
Expectations	• Expected the course to be hard and workload high as she had done level 3 a few years ago • Knew she had an 85 mile round trip to college – travel funded by employer • Partner agreed to support with evening childcare so she could study

Experience	- Teaching was good – 1 day in college every 5 weeks, rest done online, assessor came to her workplace - Tutor responsive to emails and checked essay plans - Line manager supportive and discussed her workload
Tipping point	- 7 months in – could not see how content would benefit her career aspirations - Workload was too high – 8-10 hours per assignment - Mental health suffered due to stress of juggling workload, job, and childcare - Line manager agreed she needed a break and course didn't match her goals
Support	- Employer helped by giving a day at home to help with assignments – but wasn't enough as led to email backlog at work - Needed more information about course content to assess whether it matched career goals - Needed more realistic information about time commitment
Future	- Has not been put off learning – looking to start a nursing qualification to change sector in two years – but this time has done more research into what the course involves and career path expectations
Quotes	*"My line manager and I were discussing the sorts of roles I'd like to do in the future. And considering these against how the course would benefit these roles versus the time and stress involved. We both came to the conclusion it wasn't worth it."* *"The sheer volume of work I had to do, I didn't see how I would be able to manage this alongside my work and home life … It took a lot of thinking to get the assignments done, when really it was just an apprenticeship, it should have been related to stuff I was doing in work already."*

Loss of value due to a new job

Those who had dropped out because they **got a new job** had generally done so because they no longer saw the course as valuable enough to be worth continuing. They prioritised their new job and what this demanded of them, and dropped out when the course was no longer relevant. It was common that these participants had also experienced poor quality delivery to compound these issues. Courses no longer contributed to career aspirations when learners moved to a new role which meant the course content was now irrelevant. This could be the case when learners moved within their sector, between similar sectors, or between more different sectors.

> *"When I moved to the new role, it was more clinical based and if I wanted to continue with the apprenticeship, I would have had to redo some of my units. I'd stopped caring about the apprenticeship, so just gave up." (Apprentice, Level 2, Mental health issues and new job)*

Learners who had found a new job commonly dropped out because their **new employer was not supportive** and would not allow them the time and flexibility they needed or because their new role did not give them appropriate assessment opportunities (e.g. for observation or to gather evidence). Others had found that when they contacted the provider to try to restart the course, their attempts were ignored. In these cases, the new job was the learner's priority and seen as more valuable. Where excessive effort was required on their part to contact the provider or work around their new job, learners did not typically see it as worthwhile pursuing the course (see case study #3).

> *"I wasn't offered any support by my new employer. They were making me work long shifts and more shifts, so I wasn't getting the time I needed to do the study." (Apprentice, Level 2, New job)*

> *"I wanted to continue, but there was no follow up from the tutor … Because I knew I was leaving [the bank], I let the course go, it wasn't worth fighting for to get back on it." (FE, Level 2, Course Issues)*

Case Study #3: David

David's story illustrates how a change in job can mean a course/apprenticeship is no longer suitable for non completers.

David, 18-30, Apprentice, Level 2, Health & Social Care, FT, 18 months – placement in care agency	
Motivation	• Left full-time education at 16 – found a lack of support • Suspects he has dyslexia but never diagnosed • Line manager at care agency told him he needed a Level 2 qualification for a pay rise • Wanted it to progress his career elsewhere
Expectations	• Expected to continue the same role 4 days a week • Expected to be guided and supported and given time to do the units (1 day per week) • Expected help from the tutor when he had questions • However, colleagues had warned him of their poor experiences previous year
Experience	• One day a week on coursework and 4 working • Was paid for 4 days per week • Assessor came to his house and gave him units – but lacked advice on how to complete them • Material was too basic initially, but then became too hard to manage with increased hours
Tipping point	• Changed jobs twice • First did not support the apprenticeship and asked him to work extra hours so did not have time for coursework • Second job – course was no longer relevant so could not do assessments • He was diagnosed with depression and lost interest in learning
Support wanted	• Flexibility to defer during his mental health diagnosis • Signposting to mental health support services

	• Responsiveness from tutor to emails and guidance on how to complete modules
	• Needed more interaction and support from his assessor
	• College to reply when he tried to re-join the course
Future	• Has not been put off learning – but would ensure course was relevant to career goals in the future
	• Looking at doing access courses (English and Science GCSEs) to do a nursing degree in the future – feels very nervous about this
Quotes	*"I stopped doing the apprenticeship when I was diagnosed with depression. It was my own decision. I lost the will to do it."*
	""When I moved to the new role, it was more clinical based and if I wanted to continue with the apprenticeship, I would have had to redo some of my units. I'd stopped caring about the apprenticeship, so just gave up."

5.2.3 Functional delivery

The third key requirement area relates to functional delivery. Non-completers dropped out **when courses did not meet their expectations for functional delivery**, when they felt that poor quality provision was affecting their likelihood of successfully passing the course. In some cases, this was because colleges and employers were providing poor quality services. However, in other cases this was because a lack of upfront information and dialogue - about what the course would involve and what support was available - had led to mismatched expectations.

Common course quality issues

The most common challenge reported was **dissatisfaction with the performance of tutors**. Learners had experienced tutors who did not have an appropriate enough grasp of the material they were teaching. For example, a Level 5 Computing learner described how he had multiple temporary tutors in his first term, some of whom he and the other students were teaching the material to. Another learner described how a tutor taught them the same lesson plan multiple times without seemingly noticing. Teaching quality was also seen to be poor where it was inconsistent, when tutors did not turn up to lessons or when tutors were replaced multiple times throughout the year. Non-completers reported that they had had tutors who were unsupportive and uninterested in their development, particularly where they were struggling and felt they needed more one-on-

one support. Contact was a further common area of complaint, with learners finding that tutors either did not answer emails or did not respond in an appropriate time. Whilst there were examples of poor quality tuition, there were cases where learners expected one-on-one support which was likely unrealistic for colleges to be providing.

> *"There were a few lessons where we were teaching the teachers. The college did say sorry, but that just wasn't good enough."* (FE learner, Level 5, course issues)

> *"I expected more help from the course provider. 1 hour wasn't enough every 6 weeks or so. And even though I could email in between, it would usually take a few days to a week to reply."* (Apprentice, level 2, health issues)

Non-completers often found the **workload too high** for them to manage around their other priorities and tended to see this as an issue with course quality, associating it with poor course organisation. This was typically driven by a lack of upfront information about the course and a subsequent mismatch between expectations and the reality. Experiencing a high workload was often very stressful and upsetting for learners, and for some contributed to triggering or worsening mental health conditions (e.g. anxiety).

Poor organisation was also seen as an issue by some. This could be due to the staging of courses leading to an unmanageable build-up of work at certain times or a feeling that elements of the course were not joined up. One apprentice started his course three months late due to issues with finalising the placement which meant he was constantly playing catch up. For others this related to sudden or unexpected changes to logistics such as course times and locations, which was particularly problematic for those with childcare needs. For example, one FE learner found she had to start travelling at rush hour which meant she was unable to drive to her childcare provider in time.

Poor quality or lack of **disability and mental health support** proved too challenging for some non-completers. Disability support was inconsistent. Some participants reported experiencing good disability support, particularly for dyslexia. However, for others poor provision meant they were unable to complete the work required. This was an issue for some dyslexia suffers and a learner with ADHD. Whilst one college initially went out of their way to support a deaf learner, he was ultimately unable to complete due to feeling completely unsupported on a more practical module. Disabled learners did expect to receive disability support from providers.

Support for mental health was widely absent. A number of non-completers attributed stress, anxiety, depression, or panic attacks to their experiences. Some received support from tutors but this was dependent on individuals. In these cases, learners felt overwhelmed and unable to manage course demands. Some learners with more severe symptoms sought advice from GPs, but this was not signposted by providers. Learners did not necessarily expect mental health support from providers, but did expect good

course organisation that reduces the risk of excessive stress, signposting to support services, and flexibility when facing more severe symptoms.

Issues experienced by FE learners

Two further issues were reported by **FE learners**. One was forced to drop out of his Teaching course because the college was unable to organise a teaching placement, a requirement to pass. He felt strongly that he should not have been able to sign up without this being in place. Poor access to equipment contributed to dissatisfaction – although this was not reported to be what tipped learners into dropping out. Access to IT equipment was a particular concern, with one FE learner describing how she had to share a small space with a mother and baby group and was thus unable to concentrate.

Case Study #4: Liam

Liam's story illustrates how providers failing to support work placements can lead to an FE learner deciding not to complete their course.

Liam, 31-54, FE Learner, Level 4, Education and Training, PT, 6 months	
Motivation	• Was working as a police psychologist and wanted to move into teaching psychology and criminology in college • Already had an adult lecturing position • Wanted to gain insight into his new career sector
Expectations	• Expected the college to arrange the teaching placement • Expected high quality delivery, a moderate workload, access to appropriate equipment and materials • To take annual leave from work for the days in college • New employer to pay for the course
Experience	• 1 day per week in college • Initially disjointed as tutor was on sick leave • Teaching and workload adequate – but materials were limted • Some independent learning which he was not expecting • Liked his course peers
Tipping point	• Dropped out after 4 months

	• Course required a teaching placement – college said they would organise this – then they were unable to. This meant he could not complete the course • College tried to arrange for him to teach on their course but it was cancelled
Support	• Colleges should not offer courses if they are unable to organise the required placements • Direction to other organisations who could have helped him organise the placement • Support from his new employer would have helped
Future	• Was not put off – is not studying for PostGrad Diploma in education (Level 6)
Quotes	*"It was really frustrating to have taken 4 months to study, and have to take that annual leave, and not to get it back again. There was no reward for what I had done."* *"I was told in the interview that I would get the teaching hours. But as I worked full time, I could only teach evening hours. Numerous times I spoke to the provider about getting the teaching hours and they assured me numerous times that would happen."*

Issues experienced by apprentices

A common concern among apprentices was that **courses and work placements were not joined up**. This could mean that they felt college days were not useful or that work placements weren't providing useful skills, depending on the learner's priorities. The two elements not being joined up could negatively impact on apprentices when the two organisations were not aware of the workload from the other, meaning apprentices could become overwhelmed. Some apprentices dropped out because they found there was a mismatch between their course and placement, meaning that that their job was unable to provide them with any/enough opportunities to complete their assessments. This was particularly the case where apprentices undertook a course within their current workplace and lacked information about the assessment requirements before they started.

> *"The college, work and NVQ should all have worked better together and been more connected, to have a meeting together every 6 months isn't much to ask, but would give them the chance to ask 'what is going on here, how will this all work*

together based on the days in college, start and finish times at work, how does the study fit in?" (Apprentice, Level 3, Course issues)

A common issue was that **employers were not giving apprentices enough time** to do their coursework. In some cases, this was because they were being asked to work either extra shifts or unexpected night shifts. In other cases extra days were not asked for, but time was not protected during the working day for them to do their coursework as was expected. This affected those starting new jobs and those taking up apprenticeships within their current workplace. Apprentices generally felt it was difficult to voice concerns to their employers and to ask for extra time – particularly in busy work places.

> *"I wasn't offered any support by my new employer. They were making me work long shifts and more shifts, so I wasn't getting the time I needed to do the study." (Apprentice, Level 2, Mental health issues and new job)*

Some apprentices struggled because their **employer was not allowing them appropriate opportunities** to collect the evidence needed to complete their course, such as observations or portfolio development. This was particularly the case where learners had changed jobs during the scheme. In other cases apprentices complained that the work placement did not meet their expectations due to a lack of organisation, leaving them unclear about their role or in some cases lacking access to a regular line manager. Placements were seen to be poor quality where apprentices were asked to do menial tasks repeatedly, or where they did not get adequate instructions and/or feedback. These latter issues were more common among younger apprentices and those starting new roles for their course.

> *"I was never with the same one engineer, but constantly getting moved from one to another. I often had 6 or 7 different types of job to do in a week, I didn't have time to learn as I was constantly moving and just doing what I was told to do." (Apprentice, Level 3, Course issues)*

Case study #5: Jake

Jake's story illustrates how poor delivery of core course elements and lack of support with mental health issues can lead to drop out.

Jake, 18-30, Apprentice, Level 3, Mechanical engineering, FT, 3 years – placement in yacht manufacturing	
Motivation	- Has ADHD and struggled with school – wanted an apprenticeship to learn on the job, and lead to a job after - Chose this one due to prestigious employer and easy commuting route
Expectations	- Knew little about UK education system - Knew little about how the course and placement would work - Expected little written work to learn skills on the placement to help him get a job - Did not discuss or explore disability support options
Experience	- Placement did not reflect the taster week he did - Started the course 3 months late as placement was not confirmed – meant he was constantly playing catch up with college work - Worked long days and no time for coursework during the placement – employer wanted him to do more days
Tipping point	- Course not joined up and lack of communication between the college and employer led to an unmanageable workload - Placement lacked structure – no manager and too many different tasks - Stress of workload led to panic attacks – then employer wouldn't let him in the workshop
Support	- Should have been deferred rather than starting late - Needed a tutor with an overview of all course elements to provide holistic support and help communications - Needed SEN support for his ADHD

Future	• Employer should have been briefed on expectations of him
	• Does not want to do another apprenticeship due to low wages • Working two jobs to earn more money • Would consider learning again in the future if it supported his career progression – interested in carpentry
Quotes	*"I missed an entire unit. The plan was to take work home and study with another student to help me catch up. Imagine starting a new job, not knowing what you were doing, being a few months behind, so you're catching up and still have to learn all the work that's happening now, on top having to do your job. It was really difficult."* *"It was extremely stressful, you'd complete one thing, and have 2 more things thrown on top. All while trying to maintain an actual job. I started getting panic attacks and anxiety attacks from fear of work build up."*

5.3 Multifaceted issues

Whilst learners were generally tipped into non-completion by issues aligned to one of the requirement layers, discussions revealed that they tended to be **facing multifaceted challenges** which overlapped across the layers. Figure 5.4 below illustrates some of the issues that were commonly overlapping in the sample. For example, amongst non-completers who reported their **workload as too high**, this was often because they had encountered unexpected personal challenges, such as family break up, illness, or mental health issues, which were taking up their cognitive bandwidth. For other learners, perceptions of high workloads were associated with insufficient disability or mental health support and the prioritisation of health issues. For those reporting **poor course quality**, this could be because the provision did not match with their expectations, stemming from a lack of upfront information about the course requirements, due to either a lack of provision by the provider or a lack of proactive research by the learner. The same could be true for apprentices who reported their work **placement as inappropriate**. For other apprentices, dissatisfaction with the work placement could be related to a lack of appropriate learning opportunities from their employer, which in turn could be due to a change of job. The three case studies below further illustrate some of the multiple and multifaceted issues non-completers were facing.

Figure 5.4: Multifaceted issues
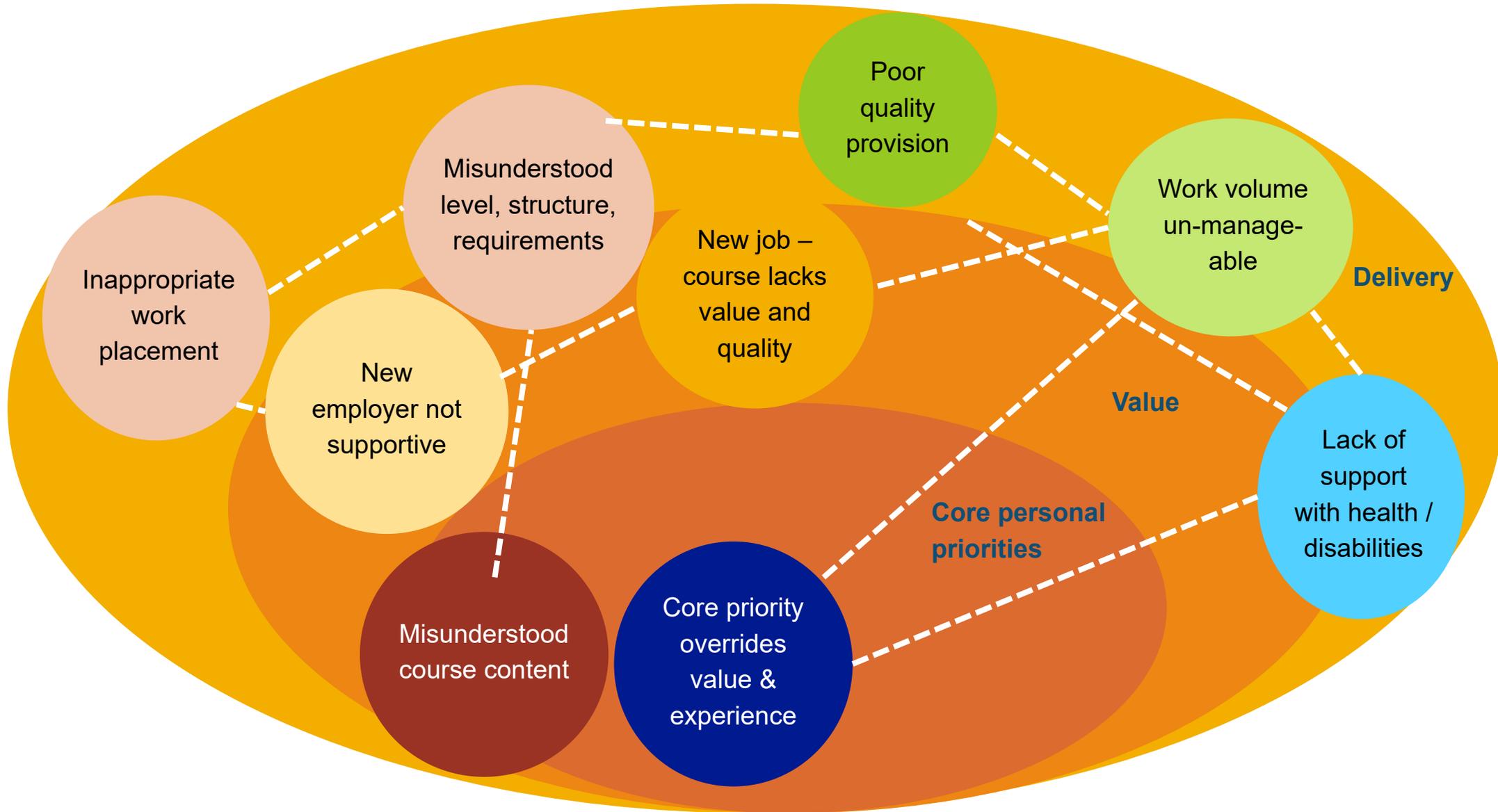
Case study #6: Asif

Asif's story illustrates how poor course delivery and the offer of a new job can interact and lead to FE learners and apprentices not completing.

Asif, 18-30, Apprentice, Level 2, Web development and IT, FT, 2 years – placement in the NHS	
Motivation	• Moved around different sectors after school • Wanted to gain practical skills and experience alongside theory to help with his current role and improve future prospects • Found job on gov.uk and got information from friends
Expectations	• Content would help him in his everyday job • College would be organised and he would meet the tutor once per month • Course fee covered by employer but he paid substantial travel cost
Experience	• College once a month and the rest online • Tutor did not turn up for 3 months which was frustrating • Course was not joined up – projects were not relevant to his work • Line manager was helpful and tried to intervene at the college and colleagues helped with assignments
Tipping point	• Offered a new job – more money, closer to home, course was not valuable enough to continue • Content was not relevant to his job and too theoretical • Tutor absent for 3 months then new tutor lacked knowledge – he taught them assessment material • Taught himself via Youtube
Support	• Better support from the tutor • Tutors who know the course material • Course more joined up – coursework to be more relevant to the placement • Support with travel costs

Future	• Wants to keep learning about data analysis to progress his career • Considering doing a degree in the future • Would not return to the same college
Quotes	*"Due to some personal issues at home, I needed to find something closer. I was looking for a jump in salary and a more secure job. If the content of the course had been more appropriate for the job role, there would have been no need to find something new."* *""I had to create a website for work and didn't know how. So I spent time at home on YouTube to teach myself HMTL."*

Case study #7: Michelle

Michelle's story illustrates how poor quality provision and a lack of support from tutors can lead to non-completion.

Michelle, 31-54, FE Learner, Level 2, English and Maths, PT, 1 year	
Motivation	• Single mum to teenager, out of work for 5+ years • Registered as disabled • Wanted to get English and Maths to improve job prospects • Wanted to be near home and have a short journey
Expectations	• Expected support from the college and there to be a classroom assistant • Had a short interview and assessment to put her at the right level
Experience	• Maths element was much harder than she anticipated
Tipping point	• Found the maths too hard • Felt unsupported by the tutor who she found unapproachable and focused only on those who spoke a lot in class • No support from college when she said she wasn't returning

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Support	- More information about the level upfront would have helped her decide if the course was appropriate - Able to move down a level when found she was struggling - More one-to-one support from the tutor and extra support when she was struggling - Signposting to extra support with study skills - Smaller class size
Future	Not put off learning – will do a media and make up course next year – but would not return to this college

Case Study #8: Sally

Sally's story illustrates how core personal priorities can lead to non-completion, even when the course is being enjoyed.

Sally, 31-54, Apprentice, Level 3, Learning and Development, PT, 1 year – placement in probation service	
Motivation	- Worked for the probation service – organisation was moving to the private sector - Last chance to do this training as new company would not have the budget - Thought it might help her avoid redundancy
Expectations	- Attended a helpful enrolment day with other colleagues during the course – clear expectations - Expected that the coursework would be based on work she was already doing
Experience	- Travelled to an education centre occasionally – otherwise a mentor had witnessed her at work - Course wll organised and mentor responsive and gace good feedback - Good camaraderie between fellow course colleagues – gave advice on a whatsapp group

Tipping point	• Became full-time carer for her 2 young grandchildren after daughter split from partner • Then made redundant from her job • Did not want her employer to know about her personal situation due to redundancy climate • Got behind on coursework due to personal situation
Support	• Mentor tried to help with flexibility and alternative meeting points • Access to or support with childcare for carers/grandparents • Signposting to support services to discuss personal issues • Ability to defer and save credits for longs • Online options and skyping with mentor
Future	• Now works for the NHS – would be interested in learning in the future if relevant to her new sector

5.4 Future plans

Non-completers **had not been put off adult learning by their experiences**. They were generally open to returning to education in the future, normally to a different course which they thought would be more appropriate because they had decided either the course or provider was not right for them. Those who had dropped out due to temporary personal issues were more open to returning to the same course.

Participants were now focused on their current job – or caring responsibilities or recovering from a health issue. However, they were generally open to returning to education in the future to a course that would help them to progress their career. Participants who had dropped out due to temporary personal reasons were particularly keen to return as they were usually disappointed to have had to leave their course.

> *"I'm not opposed to further education, if the opportunity came up and it was related to work. But I'm not looking at anything specifically at present." (Apprentice, Level 3, new job)*

"I wouldn't say I wouldn't do some courses again. I love learning but it would have to be something I really wanted to do, that would benefit my financial life, or quality of life." (FE learner, level 2, personal & domestic)

"I definitely want to return in September. We are saving so that we have enough to put me through it. We should hopefully have enough, God willing." (FE learner, level 3, finances)

Non-completers were **less open to returning to learning in the immediate future** whilst they were settling into a new job or sector where they had a lot of new material to learn through this role. Older non-completers aged 55 and over who were looking forward to retirement and saw learning as less valuable and those who had chronic, deteriorating health conditions (e.g. bronchitis) were less open to returning to learning. Apprentices who were aged 25 and over were less open to returning to apprenticeships because they tended to prefer to look for jobs with a higher salary.

"I don't want to do another apprenticeship now, I feel too old for it. I can't afford to be earning a much lower salary now, I've got my own life I need to pay for and support." (Apprentice, Level 3, Course issues)

6. Support received and missing

This chapter will begin by exploring the support received by non-completers. It will then explore the support they wanted, but did not receive. Finally, it looks at how online support can play a role in keeping learners engaged with their courses.

The **level of support non-completers received varied** across the sample. Whilst some non-completers were positive about the support they had received from a range of people (including tutors, providers, partners, employers, colleagues, and peers), this was ultimately not enough to enable them to continue. Non-completers widely reported not receiving enough information upfront about their course, enough flexibility to manage it alongside their priories, or sufficient support from their tutor. The role of tutors was particularly important in determining course experiences and whether learners felt able to continue.

6.1 Support received

Levels of support non-completers received varied across the sample. Though some non-completers were positive about the support they had received, this was not enough to enable them to continue. Ultimately, this support was only helpful until the non-completers' personal priorities meant it was no longer possible to be flexible enough, or the course was no longer seen as possible for the course to be tailored to their needs.

6.1.1 Overall

Some non-completers reported being granted **flexibility** around their other personal priorities such as childcare, health and family issues – but the granting of this flexibility was at the discretion of individual tutors who were willing to make themselves available outside of their normal hours for learners that could not contact them or participate otherwise. Some employers provided extra flexibility in the form of allowing learners to work from home to ensure they were not falling behind on their course.

Some learners reported receiving additional **support relating to their personal circumstances**. This included extra English lessons outside of normal teaching for FE learners that struggled with English as a second language. There was also support for learners and apprentices who needed additional learning support for conditions such as dyslexia, which tended to come from willing tutors.

> *"Some teachers had words with me when they knew I was thinking of leaving. It was good moral support, encouraging me not to leave." (FE learner, Level 3, changed mind about career)*

Finally, **a strong social network** was key for learners and apprentices with childcare issues. When learners and apprentices had a support network that was willing to support them with childcare and provide emotional support, they were able to keep going through their course, even when new logistical issues arose. This was more likely to occur among older, female non-completers.

6.1.2 Support received by FE Learners

Support for FE learners beyond the aforementioned forms came from two main sources: **tutors and providers**. Tutors sometimes were willing to give extra lessons when learners were struggling with the content of the course, as this would help struggling FE learners keep up when they were at risk of falling behind. This was only successful when the learner was struggling with a specific part of the content, rather than when they were on a course that was the wrong level for them. Tutors also gave additional IT support, particularly to older FE learners who were not as familiar with the software being used on some of their courses.

In one instance, a tutor provided some logistical financial support when issues arose in the short term, in the form of help with claiming expenses and extra time to solve issues that arose with the Student Loans Company. This support was appreciated as finances were a source of stress for this learner. However, where finances became a long term issue, this support was generally no longer feasible.

6.1.3 Support received by apprentices

Employers were a key source of formal support for some struggling apprentices. Support from employers was generally centred around attempting to ensure that apprentices were maximising their learning ability. This was done through organising extra shadowing opportunities and making sure the standard of learning they were receiving from the provider was high. This only occurred when line managers were willing to be proactive and took an interest in the apprentice's learning experience.

Apprentices also reported **colleagues** as a source of more informal support for two reasons. The first of these was coursework support. As apprentices tended to spend long periods of time without contact with their provider, they sometimes went to colleagues for support when they had questions with their coursework. Colleagues also provided support when apprentices were suffering with mental health difficulties. When apprentices had colleagues they were comfortable with, or a mentor that they felt comfortable speaking to about these issues, they were willing to confide in their colleagues.

6.2 Support Not Received

Non-completers felt they did not receive enough **information** upfront about their course, enough **flexibility** around core priorities in some cases, or support from their **tutors**. This support could be divided between support to ensure the course was delivered properly, and support beyond the core offer.

6.2.1 Support to ensure adequate delivery

Non-completers commonly reported a **lack of support from tutors** once they had begun struggling, with a focus on those answering questions in class. Furthermore, some non-completers complained about tutors being hard to access. For apprentices, this was particularly key as they had limited opportunities for face-to-face contact, and therefore needed tutors to reply to e-mails in a timely manner. This was also an issues for those unable to attend classes due to personal issues. When a tutor took a long time to reply to e-mails in this scenario, learners could fall further behind and eventually reach a point where continuing became untenable.

> "It felt like empty words, I was struggling, but the tutor would say we can work through it all to get the credits. But other pupils took his time away from me and we couldn't always get it sorted." (Apprentice, Level 3, course issues)

> "You want someone to make you feel like they care for you, and to give you some encouragement. I didn't get anything like that from the tutor." (FE, Level 2, course issues)

6.2.2 Support beyond the core offer

Looking beyond the core course offer, some non-completers felt that there was not enough **flexibility** from providers when personal issues arose. Older non completers said they did not receive advice about how to effectively manage their time and workload. This was particularly prevalent among those who had spent a long time away from learning. Additionally, learners and apprentices suffering with mental health issues said they did not receive enough support for this. They felt as though they did not receive enough guidance on where to go when they were struggling. Some non-completers with disabilities said additional learning support and extra lessons were missing, and would have helped to manage challenges they were facing. Those that had faced financial issues during their course believed that they would have benefitted from advice regarding these matters.

> "Getting access to professional childcare was my only real struggle." (FE learner, Level 2, personal and domestic issues)

"I had to miss meetings as I couldn't physically get there, that was down to my restrictions of caring for 3 and 7-year-old grandkids. had to give my attention to my grandchildren." (Apprentice, Level 3, personal and domestic issues)

6.2.3 Support not received by FE Learners

The additional types of support FE learners said they had not received which would have helped them were:

- **Access to computer rooms and appropriate study spaces at the college** - if they were in a position where they could use these study spaces in between lessons, and access computer programmes that they may not be able to access on computers at home, they would find it easier to catch up on their work.

- **The ability to complete assessments online -** this was particularly useful for learners who had to move abroad or faced challenges which prevented travel.

- **Greater support in organising work placements -** this was missing for courses where a work placement was a requirement in particular.

6.2.4 Support not received by apprentices

Additional support apprentices said they did not receive particularly centred around the notion that they were missing a holistic learning experience where their learning and employment complimented each other. They reported missing:

- **Flexibility at work** - more flexible shift patterns and the ability to work from home to concentrate on coursework or to accommodate health conditions would have made learning easier for those whose personal priorities made learning difficult.

- **Opportunities to develop skills at work that were required for assessments -** this would be helpful in ensuring that the skills apprentices were developing in the workplace would complement what they were learning in the classroom.

- **A single line manager or mentor** – this would be an individual that oversaw both the work and study elements of the apprenticeship, working with providers to ensure a holistic learning experience was being provided.

6.3 Online Support

FE learners and apprentices widely reported **enjoying the face to face element** of their learning. They enjoyed being in the classroom and learning with peers. Because of this, they did not want online to be their only mode of learning. They stated that if they had wanted this, they would have chosen an online course. However, they did think that online options provided added value and were a good alternative in emergency

situations, and a good source of support to supplement face to face learning. There were no meaningful effects of mode on non-completion across the sample – no particular mode drove non-completion more than another.

Non-completers said the following forms of online support could have been helpful:

- **An instant Skype/chat function to get a faster response from tutors**- non-completers believed that this would be an effective way of getting in touch with tutors for small queries, instead of e-mailing them and waiting.

  "It would be great to go on a chat and have your questions answered instantly." (FE, Level 2, Course Issues)

  "A website dedicated to the course would have been useful. ... It could have access to tutors, with an email thing to ensure you get a response back within 24 hours." (Apprentice, Level 2, personal and domestic issues)

- **Chat room for advice from course colleagues -** as learners and apprentices said a forum that they could use to work through coursework with other learners would have been an effective form of peer support.

- **Online materials -** for the non-completers who had personal issues that had led to them falling behind on their coursework, access to online materials that would support them in catching up would allow them to work flexibly.

- **Study skills tuition -** for older learners who were worried about going back into education, support with study skills such as essay writing would have helped to make them feel comfortable and able to continue.

- **Disability support** - non-completers that struggled with disabilities or mental health issues would use online support tailored to supporting these issues.

- **An online preview of the course content** - would have helped them to gauge whether or not the course was suitable for them – with regards to the level and whether the content was aligned with their career goals.

7. Discussion and recommendations

The findings of this research suggest **a range of opportunities to support learners** and apprentices throughout their journey. Before starting, learners would benefit from more comprehensive and realistic information about course content, structure, and requirements as well as the expected workload. During the course, they would benefit from more proactive support and flexibility to ensure they can manage their course alongside their personal priorities. A greater consistency of delivery across courses and apprenticeships would also help to address issues with course quality.

7.1 Types of reasons for non-completion

As explored in Section 5, non-completers had typically been facing multi-faceted issues that cut across the three identified requirement areas: personal priorities, value, and delivery. Given the complexity of issues faced, distinct typologies of learners did not emerge from this research. However, within each requirement area, there were common reasons for non-completion that suggest how support could be delivered to enable completion, which we explore below.

7.1.3 Core personal priorities: issue nature and emotional bandwidth

Emotional bandwidth (meaning capacity to deal with tasks and priorities before becoming overwhelmed) and whether an issue was acute or chronic were key variables among those reporting issues relating to their personal priorities.

Individuals had varying levels of **emotional bandwidth** to deal with their personal issues – some felt more able to continue than others facing similar situations. This interacted with the **nature of the issue**. For those facing an acute issue with more emotional bandwidth, immediate support could have helped; e.g. help contacting the Student Loan Company. Those facing chronic issues with more bandwidth could have been supported by being able to discuss and arrange more holistic support with their tutor; e.g. for disabilities. Learners facing acute issues which dominated their emotional bandwidth could have been supported, but this is likely to have required flexibility and the ability to defer; e.g. those facing acute family crises. However, there was a group of learners who faced chronic issues which took up much of their emotional bandwidth for whom support providers were able to provide was unlikely to have been enough to help them complete; e.g. deteriorating health conditions or chronic loss of household income.

Figure 7.1 Types of reasons those with core personal priority issues dropped out

More emotional
bandwidth

Acute personal issues requiring

Chronic personal issues where

Acute ← → Chronic

Acute personal issues limiting

Chronic personal issues

Less emotional
bandwidth
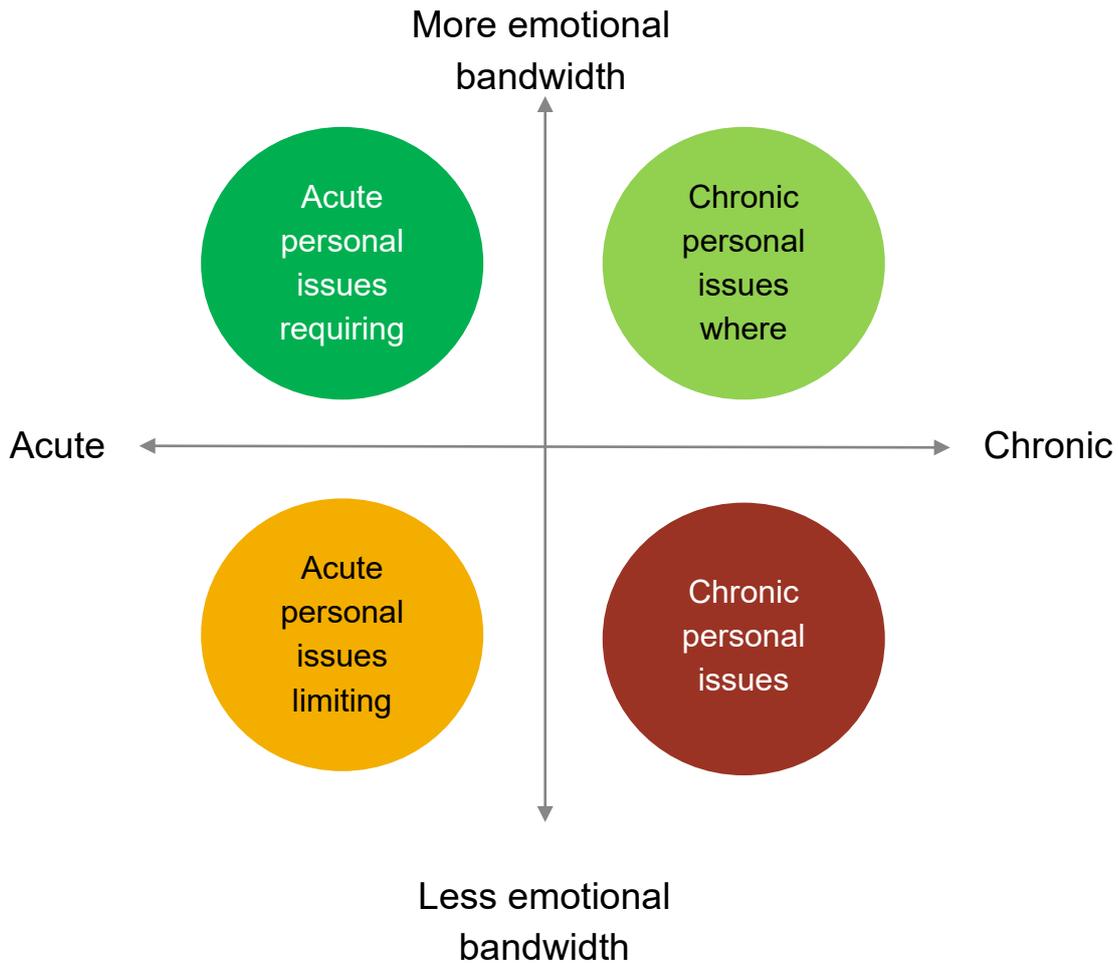
7.1.2 Value and utility: degree of misunderstanding

There were **three types of reasons why those reporting lack of value dropped out**. A first was because non-completers had misunderstood the purpose or content of their course. Increased upfront information would have helped them to choose a more appropriate course for themselves before signing up to reduce overall dropout rates. A second reason was because they had misunderstood elements of the course such as the level, time required, or focus of their placement. Increased upfront information could have helped them make better choices and/or put appropriate support measures in place. The third reason was because they had changed job and the course was no longer relevant to their new role - it is unlikely providers could have retained these non-completers.

Figure 7.2: Types of reasons why lack of course value contributed to drop out

Changed job and course was no longer relevant

Misunderstood the purpose and content of the course

Misunderstood elements of the course (level, time required, placement focus)

Increased up front information is unlikely to be able to retain these learners

Increased up front information would have enabled learners to choose a more appropriate course up front

Increased up front information would have helped learners assess whether the course was appropriate and to put extra support measures in place for themselves

7.1.3 Course delivery: level of quality of provision

There was variation in course quality among those who reported this as part of their reason for non-completion. Some learners had **experienced poor delivery whereas others had expectations beyond what the provider was realistically able to deliver**. Some learners had experienced a failure of provision which meant they were unable to progress; e.g. failure to arrange their required work placement. Others had experienced poor provision which made it more difficult for them to manage their course than they had expected; e.g. poor organisation or tutor absence. For some, the provider had not delivered adequate disability or mental health support to enable them to manage their coursework. Better delivery of these courses and signposting to services could have helped these non-completers to continue. However, some learners reported needing support that may have been beyond the provider's capacity to offer; e.g. extra one-on-one tuition and support with study skills. Although some tutors were willing to go the extra mile, this was at the discretion of individuals. It may be unrealistic for providers to give this kind of support consistently, and therefore it may not have been possible to support these non-completers. However, again, better upfront information could have helped them to make a more informed course choice.

Figure 7.3: Types of reasons why for non-completion related to course delivery

| Failure of provision of core elements of the course which enable learners to work to pass | Poor provision of key elements of the course making it difficult for learners to manage | Poor provision of mental health and disability support | Extra support needed / desired by learners beyond core offer |

Lower   Level of quality of provision   Higher

7.2 Recommendations for forms of support that could help learners to complete in the future

The level of support non-completers had experienced varied across the sample, as has been described in Chapter 6. What has emerged from this research is that **more support for non-completers was required across the three requirements layers** – to support them to manage their core priorities, ensure value, and enable them to work effectively (see Figure 7.4).

Figure 7.4: Forms of support which might have helped learners complete

- **More proactive and holistic support and greater flexibility -** to ensure learners can manage their core personal priorities

- **Better and more realistic information up front -** to enable learners to assess whether a course meets their needs and is manageable

- **Improvements to course delivery -** to ensure that the course delivers against their motivations and enables them to work to pass the course

Core personal priorities

Value & utility

Functional delivery

Supporting core personal priorities	• A more proactive, holistic support offer from providers • Allocation of a personal tutor • Signposting to relevant support services • Greater flexibility – to deal with the personal challenges they were facing • 'What to expect' leaflets – for friends and family
Providing value: ensuring courses match learners' needs	• More upfront information about course content, level, and structure • More information about what apprenticeships will involve on a day to day basis • More realistic information upfront about the amount of time that will be required • Course alumni case studies • Access to upfront careers advice
Improving the quality of course delivery	• Improvements to key elements of delivery; performance of tutors; organisation and communication; and access to appropriate study spaces and equipment. • The establishment of accountability mechanisms to listen and respond to learners' feedback and complaints. • Provision of online spaces to encourage camaraderie and facilitate peer support • Ensuring apprenticeship placements and courses are more joined up and employers are bought into the wider apprenticeship scheme.

7.2.1 Supporting core personal priorities

A more **proactive, holistic support offer from providers** could help learners complete. Learners experiencing personal issues needed more support to manage their course alongside their other priorities. Support for managing personal issues for adult learners needs to be proactively offered because some non-completers were proud, embarrassed by their circumstances, or lacked the self-esteem or confidence to ask for support.

A key part of this offer could be allocating **a personal tutor** who has a more holistic role in supporting the learning journey. Periodic meetings would provide a space for learners to discuss issues like time management and study skills. Tutors could also be supported to provide wellbeing guidance in these sessions for issues such as stress. They could also help to ensure that apprenticeships are joined up and monitor how time is being

spent across the two elements. They would be able to credibly intervene on behalf of apprentices where issues arise in the work placement.

In other cases, non-completers needed services beyond the remit of the provider – but it would have helped if they had **signposted them to relevant services**. It is important that adult learners have access to age-appropriate services (rather than designed for teenagers) which are open out of hours. In some cases these were available but non-completers lacked awareness which is why proactivity is important – for example, a guide to services being provided at the start of the course. Non-completers needed access to free or subsidised childcare (for parents, grandparents and carers); more consistent SEN and disability support; and health, mental health, careers, and financial advice services.

Commonly what learners who were experiencing acute personal issues needed was **greater flexibility**. They needed time and space to focus on the challenges they were facing so that they could return to their course later. Extensions, deferrals, and the ability to save credits for longer (over two years) could go a long way to help some learners. Providing online and other types of alternative assessment arrangements (e.g. home visits) would also be helpful to those experiencing debilitating health conditions.

Some learners dropped out due to childcare issues, notably young and middle aged women. It could be helpful to provide '**what to expect' leaflets** designed for friends and family, to inform them about what their loved one will be experiencing. These kinds of tools could help to trigger and facilitate discussions about how childcare and household duties are shared during the learning journey.

7.2.2 Providing value: ensuring courses match learners' needs

Providing more information up front could help learners to make more informed choices before they undertake a learning journey. More **information about course content, level, and structure** could enable learners to better choose the course most appropriate for them. For apprentices, a clearer idea of what their work placement will involve on a day to day basis could also help to avoid mismatched expectations. This should also be supplied to employers who are recommending employees undertake courses so that they can pass this on.

More **realistic information upfront about the amount of time** that will be required could help learners assess whether a course is manageable alongside their other priorities. More information was particularly required by employer-triggered learners – and approached their course as a training opportunity with little proactive consideration of the requirements. Case studies created with course alumni could illustrate strategies others have used to manage their workload and achieve work-course-life balance.

It may also help to give those considering adult learning access to **careers advice up front**. This could help them to assess which course will provide them with the greatest value. Advisors could inform learners about what the expected outcomes are and recommend next steps to help them achieve their goals. Information about what course alumni have gone on to do could also be helpful.

7.2.3 Improving the quality of course delivery

Improving course delivery so that there is higher quality delivery more consistently across providers could help to improve completion rates. Achieving a minimum standard of delivery could help to ensure that learners are able to work to complete their courses.

Non-completers wanted to see **improvements regarding the following key elements of delivery**; the performance of tutors (the amount and quality of access to them and their responsiveness to emails); organisation and communication; and access to appropriate study spaces and equipment. There was also a need for better responsiveness from colleges when learners tried to re-join their course.

It could help if **accountability mechanisms** were set up to listen and respond to learners' feedback and complaints. Introducing mechanisms such as regular feedback processes (e.g. course evaluation forms); clear complaints processes and points (formal and informal); and learner representative systems could help to ensure that there are systematic ways in which providers can identify and respond to issues before these drive learners to drop out.

Providing **online spaces to encourage camaraderie and facilitate peer support** between adult learners could also help to support those who are experiencing challenges. Non-completers were overwhelming positive about the experience of learning with peers who are committed to and take their education seriously. Options such as online forums, communities, and social media pages could be helpful. Non-completers also suggested online chat spaces with tutors and were positive about course WhatsApp groups where these had been created.

In addition, apprentices wanted their placement and course to be more joined up and employers to be more bought into apprenticeship schemes as whole. Ensuring that appropriate placements are organised that provide relevant skills and experiences is a key way to ensure **apprenticeships are more joined up**. This could also be achieved by information being shared by colleges with placement line managers/ mentors about the course content and requirements so that they are more aware of what apprentices are learning and their assessment cycle and workload. Meetings between tutors and line managers – at least via phone – could also help to ensure coherence of content and alignment of workloads.

Providers should also work to ensure that **employers are bought into the apprenticeship scheme**. This could include information packs and evenings for employers so that they can meet and learn from each other, as well as gain an understanding of the purpose of the course for learners. Case studies could be put together for employers that illustrate what a good apprenticeship experience looks like. Employers who have demonstrated best practice can be used for these, as well as to act as ambassadors for the scheme locally and advise other employers considering offering placements. Meanwhile, understanding what apprentices are learning may help employers to consider what new skills and knowledge apprentices could bring to the workplace as well as vice versa. This could lead to opportunities for apprentices to present and give training in their work placements.

Overall, working towards some of these recommendations could help to ensure that learners' and apprentices needs are sufficiently addressed so that they can sign up to an appropriate course, work to achieve their aspirations, and continue with a positive view of what adult learning can contribute to their professional lives.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Achieved sample

Participants were recruited through the in-house recruitment team via telephone recruitment methods. A screening questionnaire was used to ensure robust recruitment. Participants received a £40 incentive to thank them for their time.

	TOTAL TARGET	TOTAL RECRUITED	TOTAL TARGET APPRENTICES	TOTAL RECRUITED APPRENTICES	TOTAL TARGET FE LEARNERS	TOTAL RECRUITED FE LEARNERS
TOTALS OVERALL						
Tele depths	**36**	36	**18**	18	**18**	18
PRIMARY QUOTAS (ALL)						
Reason for non-completion						
Personal and domestic Issues	**14**	15	**MIN 4**	7	**MIN 4**	8
Issue with course quality	**14**	13	**MIN 4**	7	**MIN 4**	6
Got a job	**8**	8	**MIN 2**	4	**MIN 2**	4
QUOTA B						
BAME		9	**MIN 4**	4		5
Disability		12	**MIN 5**	5		7
Eligible for FSM		14	**MIN 5**	7	**MIN 5**	7
SECONDARY QUOTAS						
QUOTA A						
Age	MIX		MIX		MIX	
Level	MIX		MIX		MIX	
Gender						
Age	Under 19	2	Under 19	1	Under 19	1
	19 - 24	6	**19 - 24**	4	**19 - 24**	2
	25 - 34	8	**25 - 34**	5	**25 - 34**	3
	35 - 44	11	**35 - 44**	5	**35 - 44**	6
	45 - 54	5	**45 - 54**	1	**45 - 54**	4
	55 +	4	**55 +**	2	**55 +**	2
Level	**Level 2**	17	**Level 2**	8	**Level 2**	9
	Level 3	11	**Level 3**	8	**Level 3**	3
	Level 4	4	**Level 4**	1	**Level 4**	3
	Level 5	4	**Level 5**	1	**Level 5**	3
Gender	**Male**	16	**Male**	6	**Male**	10
	Female	20	**Female**	12	**Female**	8

Appendix 2 - Topic Guide

1. Introduction (3 minutes)

- **Warm up and introduction**
    - Introduce moderator and Kantar Public – an independent research agency
    - Research on behalf of the Department for Education
    - You recently took part in a [telephone/online] survey with one of our colleagues for the Department for Education regarding your [apprenticeship / further education course]. You agreed to be re-contacted and we are now following up with a small number of participants to discuss their experiences in more detail.
    - You told us that you did not complete your [apprenticeship / FE course]. We would like to explore your experiences further and why you did not complete your course, and explore what kinds of support might have helped you to complete it.
    - This research will be used by the DfE to consider how support to learners and apprentices can be improved to help them complete their courses in the future.
    - Interview length – 60 mins
    - No right or wrong answers
    - Research is voluntary, confidential and anonymous – your personal details will not be shared with the DfE and participation will not affect your current or future relationship with the DfE. The information will be used for research purposes only.
    - Any questions?

- **Recording**
    - Ask participant for permission to record, then start recording and confirm consent

2. Introduction and Course Overview (5 minutes)

INTRODUCTION

- **Participant introduction**
    - Name, age, where they live
    - Job/hobbies, family / who they live with
    -

- **Briefly explore their education and learning history / journey**
    - When they left full time education *(last leaving date for those with gaps – but explore where this is relevant)*

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- Highest level of qualification achieved and subject area
- Overall attitude to education / learning – and why
  - Whether there is a difference between school and adult/FE learning

<u>COURSE OVERVIEW</u>

Moderator to reiterate that they took part in the DfE Learners and Apprentices survey earlier this year and that they told us that they did not complete their [apprenticeship/FE course]. Please note that if they have begun/completed another course subsequently that today we want to discuss the course they reported that they did NOT complete in the survey.

- **Overview of FE course / apprenticeship**
  - Level and course name
  - Provider / where they did it (and employer for apprenticeships)
  - Full or part time
  - Intended length
    - When they started and when they dropped out

3. Expectations (10 minutes)

FE learners

- **Explore their expectations for the course**
  - Level and quality of the course and teaching
  - Equipment and materials (if relevant)
  - Workload and assessment
  - Logistics (e.g. travel, times, location)
  - Course costs (including travel, childcare, loss of wages etc)

- **Explore their expectations for support throughout the course – and any plans they put in place to deal with challenges (including logistical arrangements) and any concerns they had about shortfall**
  - From the providers
  - From their employer
  - From partners / family / friends / wider social and cultural network
  - Financial support and arrangements (including to meet logistical arrangements)
  - Any others

Apprentices

- **Explore their expectations for the apprenticeship**
    - For the balance between the classroom and work placement elements
    - For the work placement
        - Role of advisor
        - Support, learning and feedback
        - Apprentice pay
    - For the classroom element
        - Level and quality of the course and teaching
        - Equipment and materials (if relevant)
        - Workload and assessment
        - Logistics (e.g. travel, times, location)
        - Course costs - including travel, childcare, loss of wages (and why this was the case for wages)

- **Explore their expectations for support throughout the apprenticeship – and any plans they put in place to deal with challenges (including logistical arrangements) and any concerns they had about shortfall**
    - From the providers
    - From the employer
    - From partners / family / friends / wider social and cultural network
    - Financial support and arrangements (including to meet logistical arrangements)
    - Any others

4. Journey Mapping Exercise (20-25 minutes)

*Note to moderators: in this section you will complete a journey map charting the participant's initial impressions, experience of their FE course / apprenticeship, challenges faced and how they addressed these, forms of support utilised, and the tipping point when they decided not to continue and why. You will also probe as to **how they were feeling throughout** the course/apprenticeship.*

JOURNEY MAP

Moderator to explain to participant that they would now like them to talk them chronologically through their experience of their FE course / apprenticeship in more detail. In particular, we are interested in any forms of support they utilised and why they subsequently decided not to continue the course.

- **Explore their motivations for undertaking the FE course / apprenticeship**

 – What they were seeking to achieve and why

Researcher note: researcher to check motivation against survey response to check for consistency

- **Briefly explore whether there was any event/moment that triggered them to take up the course – a moment when the scale tipped in favour of learning**
For example

 – Disruptive event, destabilising life event
 – Entering a new life phase
 – Change in health (better or worse)
 – Work place trigger (desire for promotion or better job opportunities, redundancy, lack of progress)
 – Seeing friends/family/colleagues undertake training
 – Encouragement from social circle (friends, family, colleagues)
 – Enjoying other training (e.g. management training)

- **Briefly explore their access path to the course / apprenticeship**
 – How long they had been considering undertaking the FE course / apprenticeship
 – If they undertook any other qualifications to gain access
 – How much information about the course / apprenticeship they had access to during application
  ▪ What information they made the most use of
 – Any barriers they faced to access
  ▪ How they addressed these

- **Explore their initial impressions of the FE course / apprenticeship and the extent to which these met their expectations**
 – Extent to which the course / apprenticeship matched the information they had access to during application
 – FE course / apprenticeship classroom element
  ▪ Level and quality of the course and teaching
  ▪ Equipment and materials (if relevant)
  ▪ Workload and assessment
  ▪ Logistics (e.g. travel, times, location)
 – Apprentices - work placement element
  ▪ Quality of placement
  ▪ Role of advisor
  ▪ Support, learning and feedback

- **Explore their experience of the FE course / apprenticeship <u>before</u> they decided to not complete**
  - How manageable they found the time commitment and fitting this around other pressures / commitments
  - How course/apprenticeship compared with previous work and prior highest level of learning experiences
    - Notably apprentices working before their apprenticeship
  - Elements they liked / enjoyed
  - Any challenges and barriers they faced that they **DID** overcome – and how they addressed these *[focus on those which were not the reason they did not complete]*
    - **Personal and domestic issues** (including health, mental health, disabilities, child care, caring responsibilities, and personal finances)
    - **Issues with the course** (including quality of course and materials, workload and assessment, contact and support from tutors, logistical issues such as times and location) – particularly explore how they found the level of the course and how easy/difficult this was for them
    - **Issues with the work placement** [apprentices] (quality of placement; role of supervisor; support, learning and feedback
  - Any forms of support they received and **how** these helped them to continue initially – and which were most and least useful
    For example

    - From the provider (teacher, support/admin staff, guidance staff)
    - From their employer
    - Friends, family, social network (including child care)
    - Careers advice services
    - Health and mental health and disability services
    - Financial advice services
    - Transport and logistics
    - Online support
    - Other

<u>TIPPING POINT</u>

Moderator to check profile sheet for which non-completion group the participant belongs to (personal and domestic issues, issues with the course, or got a new job) but also consider how this may interrelate with other factors.

- **Explore the tipping point reached when the participant decided not to complete the course and the reason or combination of reasons which triggered this decision.**
  - Personal and domestic issues
    - Health and mental health issues and issues related to disabilities

- Child care and caring responsibilities
- Personal finances and welfare provision
- Issues with the FE course / apprenticeship
  - Enjoyment of the course / apprenticeship
  - Quality of course and course materials
  - Level of the course / workload and assessment requirements – *explore whether they dropped out because it was too difficult / they assumed they would fail*
  - Contact and support from tutors
  - Logistics (time and location)
- Apprentices:

  - Issues with their supervisor
  - Issues with the training and feedback
  - Issues with the onsite role and tasks given
- Got a new job
  - Check when they got the job offer and how long was left on the course
  - Explore the circumstances through which they got a new job – *differentiate between the new job as the cause for dropping out and new job as a result of dropping out*
  - Motivations for seeking the new job
  - Reasons for taking the new job
  - Why they did not complete the course in addition to the new job

5. Support (10-15 minutes)

Moderator please note that DfE is interested in forms of support beyond direct to learner financial support.

SUPPORT NOT RECEIVED

- **Explore any forms of support they felt they were missing**
  - From the provider
    - Level of initial information and advice about the course
    - Support with workload and assessments, contact and advice from tutors, information about the course)
    - Careers advice
  - From their employer
    - Flexibility
  - From other organisations (including government and public sector organisations) / charities
    - Health, mental health and disability support
    - Financial and welfare advice
    - Financial support

- From their friends, family, wider social network
  - Child care and caring support
  - Emotional support
  - Financial support
  - Transport assistance
- Anything they wish they had done differently for themselves

Moderator to explore:

- Whether they had identified this support need before undertaking the course or not
- Whether they requested the support (and this was declined) or not

SUPPORT SUGGESTIONS

- **Explore whether they think any forms of additional support could have helped them complete their FE course / apprenticeship**
  - From the provider
    - Information and advice about the course
    - Support with workload and assessments, contact and advice from tutors, information about the course)
    - Careers advice
  - From their employer
    - Flexibility
  - From other organisations (including government and public sector organisations) / charities
    - Health, mental health and disability support
    - Financial and welfare advice
  - From their friends, family, wider social network
    - Child care and caring support
    - Emotional support
    - Financial support
    - Transport assistance
  - Anything they wish they had done differently for themselves

- **Whether they think any form of online support could have helped them complete – and why/how (e.g. flexibility, timings etc)**
  - Online provision/delivery of any elements of the course
  - Online careers advice
  - Online health / mental health / financial advice

6. Future Plans (5 minutes)

- **Explore their careers and learning plans for the future**
  - Whether they would return to this course / apprenticeship in the future – why / why not – and how they would feel about this
  - How they would feel about returning to other forms of education and learning in the future after this experience
    - Any forms of support and information they would like to enable this

7. Close (2 minutes)

- **Anything else they would like to discuss/share**
- **Any questions**
- **Confirm incentive process - £40 either as an online (PERKS) voucher or as a PayPal payment as arranged with recruiter**
- **Thank and close**

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