Decision making of adult learners below Level 2

Research report

February 2021

Learning and Work Institute

Contents

Executive summary

Learning and Work Institute (L&W) was commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) to undertake research to better understand how adults with qualifications below Level 2 make decisions about whether or not to take up learning. The research took a qualitative approach involving in-depth interviews with adult learners and focus groups with adults who are currently not engaged in learning. As a qualitative study, the research offers a diverse range of in-depth insights about individuals' experiences and decision making. However, the findings cannot be generalised for the wider population of learners. The research builds on a previous study conducted by L&W and Kantar Public, which explored adult learners' decision-making at Levels 2-5[1]. This report presents the findings from the study and recommendations for the development of the government's National Retraining Scheme, particularly in relation to how best to engage adults qualified below Level 2 in learning.

Comparison to previous study

Key similarities emerged between the current study and the previous study. The main factors that influence adults' decisions to learn were consistent across both studies. However, the evidence suggests important differences between adults learning below Level 2 and their peers learning at higher levels:

- Learners who took part in this study often enrolled on free courses funded by the Adult Education Budget. Therefore, in contrast to learners interviewed for the previous study, course fees were rarely cited as a barrier to learning.

- Participants were particularly influenced by their previous negative experiences of compulsory full-time education and tended not to come from families where lifelong learning was the norm. It was less common for participants to proactively look for learning opportunities, and more common for them to be triggered to consider learning through a change of circumstance or receiving timely communications about free courses.

- Fears about feeling too old to learn, not being able to cope with a course, being made to feel stupid and feeling unsupported were more commonly reported by adult learners interviewed for this research. These fears often arose from participants' assumptions that adult learning would be 'just like school'. When tutors provided accurate information about what adult learning is like at the pre-enrolment phase, it challenged participants' assumptions and gave them the confidence to enrol.

- A positive and supportive learning environment was particularly important as it helped participants to stay on their courses. This was especially the case for the

---

[1] Kantar Public and Learning and Work Institute (2018) Decisions of adult learners

large proportion of learners with dyslexia or additional needs who required specialist support. A positive learning experience increased the likelihood of individuals engaging in further courses, whilst a negative experience put some adults off learning altogether.

Motivations for learning

Most adult learners interviewed for this study were motivated to enrol on courses for career-related reasons. They wanted to get more job security, earn more money, have more autonomy in their job, get a more stimulating or stretching job, or live closer to their workplace. Family motivations were also prevalent, particularly for women. Learners wanted to be a role model for children or attain a different job to be able to better provide for their families. Some adults were motivated to learn to preserve or improve their mental health, sense of self-worth and confidence. These findings reflect those from the previous study.

Barriers to learning

Situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers to learning emerged through interviews and focus groups with participants. The main barriers were:

- The financial costs of learning (with the exception of course fees), for example for childcare, transport, and learning materials

- Non-financial costs of learning, including personal time and energy

- Dispositional fears, including feeling too old to learn, concerns about class sizes, and feeling stupid or unsupported in the classroom

- Employer attitudes and behaviour

- Institutional factors, such as a lack of support for dyslexia, ineffective teaching styles, inflexible provision, unrepresentative marketing materials and a lack of information online about practical support available for adults.

In comparison to the previous study, many more participants experienced dispositional barriers in the pre-enrolment phase. This often stemmed from negative experiences from compulsory full-time education. They worried that adult learning would be 'just like school'.

Facilitators and triggers for learning

Interview participants described that the following facilitators made entering or continuing learning feasible or easier:

- Practical factors including not having to pay a course fee, free childcare and living near a learning provider

- Employer attitudes and behaviour, including communicating the benefits of learning for in-work progression and offering flexible working hours

- Receiving information, advice and encouragement from tutors, relatives, or partners to alleviate fears about entering learning

- Being immersed in a positive and supportive learning environment

- Having a range of diverse learning options to choose from.

Learners interviewed for this study were less likely than learners at Levels 2-5 to proactively seek learning opportunities. They were more likely to consider learning as a result of a change of circumstances or life event that triggered them to enter learning. Triggers included children entering school; getting out of a negative relationship; unplanned and unwanted changes to work patterns or duties; and receiving communications about free or affordable learning courses. This contrasts with the previous study, where some learners viewed learning as a natural part of life or were determined to learn because they already had a strong understanding of the value of learning to them.

Many of the factors identified as barriers to learning were cited by others as facilitators, such as finance, quality of provision and employers. There were examples of learners who overcame their fear of learning due to support from their provider, but for others, who said they received inadequate support, their provider became a barrier to learning. While some learners said they were encouraged by their employer to learn, the accounts of other learners suggest that employers' willingness to be flexible and supportive of their staff in accessing learning should not be assumed, particularly for those who are seeking to retrain for new roles.

Attitudes towards different learning modes

Many participants said they would prefer to attend a face-to-face class rather than undertake a fully online or blended learning course. The most common reasons cited were immediate access to tutor and peer support, and specialist support for learning difficulties and disabilities.

Participants' attitudes towards online and technology-based learning were divided. For some, learning online was the most attractive option because it is flexible. Others said they would be unwilling to consider online learning because they fear technology or have limited IT capability. Some others were willing to consider online learning if tutors provided high-quality support.

Blended learning emerged as an attractive option. Participants described it as a 'best of both worlds' option combining the flexibility of online learning with the personal interaction of face-to-face learning.

Learners in the previous study (who were at Levels 2-5) were more likely to communicate a preference for online delivery, citing the benefits of flexibility and convenience.

Engaging more adults in learning

Participants stressed that marketing materials should be visually appealing, and information should be presented in a clear and accessible manner. They wanted messaging about the challenges and benefits of learning to be honest and accurate and include real life examples.

Participants wanted a high-quality learning offer that represents a good return for their time and money. Participants believed that support from employers, tutors and peers, a flexible delivery model, work placements and taster courses would make provision high-quality. Support for adults with additional learning needs, particularly dyslexia, was important for this group.

Participants emphasised that financial support for course fees and additional costs would help adults engage with learning, particularly if adults are in low paid work or have childcare responsibilities.

Implications for the National Retraining Scheme

The evidence gathered highlights a number of considerations for the design and implementation of the National Retraining Scheme, to ensure it meets the needs of adults qualified below Level 2:

- To address dispositional barriers experienced by this cohort, communications and learning provision should be designed to build confidence and address negative perceptions.

- In comparison to the previous study, learners qualified below Level 2 were more likely to be triggered to consider learning through a change of circumstance and timely information about learning. Careers advice and learning opportunities should be communicated frequently in a variety of ways so that people come across them incidentally in everyday life.

- Entitlements to free or discounted courses should be proactively promoted at the pre-contemplation and contemplation stages of decision-making.[2] Where it is

---

[2] The four stages of decision-making are: (1) Pre-contemplation - Adults are not thinking about the possibility of learning; (2) Contemplation - Adults are actively considering whether and how learning will help them to fulfil their goals; (3) Determination - Enrolment occurs when an adult perceives that the personal benefits of learning outweigh the personal costs; (4) Maintenance - Adults have started learning but are at risk of withdrawing if the personal costs outweigh the benefits of learning.

necessary for courses to be self-funded (in part or in full), consideration should be given to whether costs can be paid in regular instalments rather than upfront.

- To increase the perceived value of learning, evidence on the positive outcomes and potential impact of learning as an adult should be widely communicated. This could include high-profile awareness raising campaigns and/or better availability of information about the potential returns on learning.

- Adults engaged in the National Retraining Scheme require learning provision that accommodates adults' competing priorities and offers flexibility in relation to the timing and mode of learning. While current plans to address this involve offering learning online, the evidence from this study indicates that adults qualified below Level 2 prefer face-to-face delivery. Where learning is delivered online, proactive, and substantial tutor support should be embedded, in part to ensure that learners stay motivated.

- Adults engaged through the National Retraining Scheme will need to be able to access high-quality learning support, including for dyslexia, to ensure they complete their programme. Training should be made available to FE teaching and support staff, potentially through the Education and Training Foundation, to ensure they can confidently support adults.

Introduction

The UK Government has committed to the creation of a National Retraining Scheme, which will aim to prepare workers for future changes to the economy, including through automation, to retrain into better jobs. This will help to address challenges to the economy,[3] including automation and advances in technology that are changing the nature of work; an ageing population and extended working lives; an entrenched productivity gap relative to other advanced economies; and low social mobility by international standards that does not appear to be improving.

Despite the evidence on the benefits of learning,[4] the UK has seen a recent decline in the number of adults participating in learning and skills training.[5] In addition, studies have consistently demonstrated persistent patterns of inequality in participation.[6] For the National Retraining Scheme to be effective, these entrenched inequalities in participation in learning need to be addressed. Doing this requires a better understanding of how adults can be successfully engaged in learning.

Learning and Work Institute (L&W) was commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) to undertake research to better understand how adults with qualifications below Level 2 make decisions about whether or not to take up learning. The research took a qualitative approach involving in-depth interviews with adult learners and focus groups with adults who are currently not engaged in learning. The research builds on a previous study conducted by L&W and Kantar Public, which explored the decision-making of adults learning at Levels 2-5[7].

This report presents the findings from the study and recommendations for the development of the Government's National Retraining Scheme, particularly in relation to how best to engage adults in learning.

---

[3] [Foresight Review into the Future of Skills and Lifelong Learning](#)
[4] Ibid
[5] [Further Education and Skills: January 2020](#)
[6] Learning and Work Institute (2020) [Adult Participation in Learning Survey 2019](#)
[7] Kantar Public and Learning and Work Institute (2018) [Decisions of adult learners](#)

Methodology

This qualitative study took a mixed methods approach involving:

- semi-structured telephone interviews with 48 working adults who recently enrolled on an Entry Level or Level 1 course; and

- focus groups with 39 working adults who have not engaged in learning since leaving full-time education, the majority of which hold qualifications below Level 2.

Entry Level and Level 1 learners were purposively sampled to achieve a mix of characteristics, with quotas on: previous education attainment; caring responsibilities; full-time and part-time work; socioeconomic group; age; and gender. Most learners interviewed had dyslexia or other learning difficulties, but interviewees were not sampled based on these characteristics. Just over two-thirds of interviewees were women, and most interviewees were between 24 and 44 years old. Interviewee characteristics are summarised in Appendix 1. Learners were sampled and recruited using the Education and Skills Funding Agency's (EFSA) Individualised Learner Record (ILR) database. Interview participants received £50 as a 'thank you' for their time.

Interviews with learners explored the following topics:

- Experiences of formal/informal education

- Parental education and employment

- Job/career plans

- Attitudes towards learning and skills development

- Motivation and expectations of returning to education

- Triggers to returning to education

- Attitudes towards learning with technology

- Employer attitudes towards learning, and any support provided

- Barriers and facilitators expected and/or experienced

- Key sources of support and/or information

- Recommendations for encouraging other adults to return to education.

Four focus groups took place towards the end of the study, in London, Sheffield, Leicester and Bristol. These were each attended by 8 to 10 people. Participants were recruited by a specialist agency with quotas on caring responsibilities; work pattern; socioeconomic group; age; and gender. Focus group participants' characteristics are summarised in Appendix 1. Participants received £60 as a 'thank you' for their time.

The focus groups built on insights gained from interviews with Entry Level and Level 1 learners. They provided the opportunity to test ways of presenting information about

learning opportunities to adults that would most likely influence their decision to take up learning. A mock prospectus was provided to participants as a stimulus for discussion to ascertain what sort of information may help support adults into learning. The themes covered in focus groups with non-learners included:

- Attitudes towards learning and skills development

- Approaches to considering a learning opportunity

- Barriers to learning

- Opportunities to get adults into learning by concept testing a mock prospectus

Interviews typically lasted between 45 minutes to one hour and focus groups typically lasted one hour and 45 minutes; all were digitally audio recorded and professionally transcribed. The data were analysed using a framework approach to draw out themes and patterns in the evidence.

As a qualitative study, the research does not seek to quantify or generalise the overall population. Rather, the findings reflect a diverse range of perceptions, attitudes and behaviours that influence whether and how adults decide to learn and their experiences of learning.

Summary of findings from previous study

This qualitative study builds on a study commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) and undertaken by Kantar Public and Learning and Work Institute (L&W) in 2018.[8] The focus of the research was on the decision-making of adults learning at Levels 2-5 and was based on 70 in-depth interviews with learners and focus groups with 16 adults who did not have recent experience of learning. This chapter outlines the key findings from the original study and reflects on the key differences between the experiences of adult learners at Levels 2-5 to adult learners on courses below Level 2.

The previous study was underpinned by the 'tipping point' argument. That is, for each adult, the decision to enter learning is highly personal, complex, and unique, and is dependent on their personal perceptions of the costs and benefits of learning. The trigger to participate in learning comes at a tipping point where the personal benefits of learning are perceived by an individual to outweigh the personal costs of learning (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The tipping point[9]
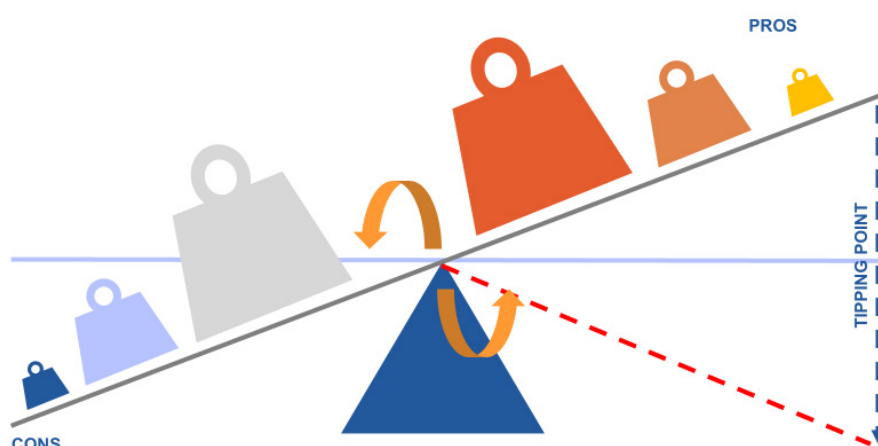
Adults weigh up a wide range of factors as they consider whether or not to engage in learning. The main factors that influence adults' decisions are listed below. These factors can act as motivators, facilitators and barriers dependent on the individual adult and the stage they are at in their learning journey.

- Perceptions of psychological capability and control

- Social and cultural norms

- Previous experiences of education

- Physical capability and a diverse set of practical and circumstantial issues

---

[8] Kantar Public and Learning and Work Institute (2018) Decisions of adult learners
[9] Ibid, p7

- A desire for personal betterment

- Encouragement from influential people

- Financial position

- Flexibility of provision

- Quality of provision

- Having clear goals for learning

The study found that adults go through four stages of decision-making in a cycle (see Figure 2):

- Pre-contemplation: Adults are not thinking about the possibility of learning

- Contemplation: Adults are actively considering whether and how learning will help them to fulfil their goals

- Determination: Enrolment occurs when an adult perceives that the personal benefits of learning outweigh the personal costs

- Maintenance: Adults have started learning but are at risk of withdrawing if the personal costs outweigh the benefits of learning.

At every stage, an adult weighs up the personal costs of learning against the personal benefits. If the benefits are perceived to outweigh the costs, they will be tipped into the next stage of the decision-making cycle.

Figure 2: Decision-making stages[10]

---
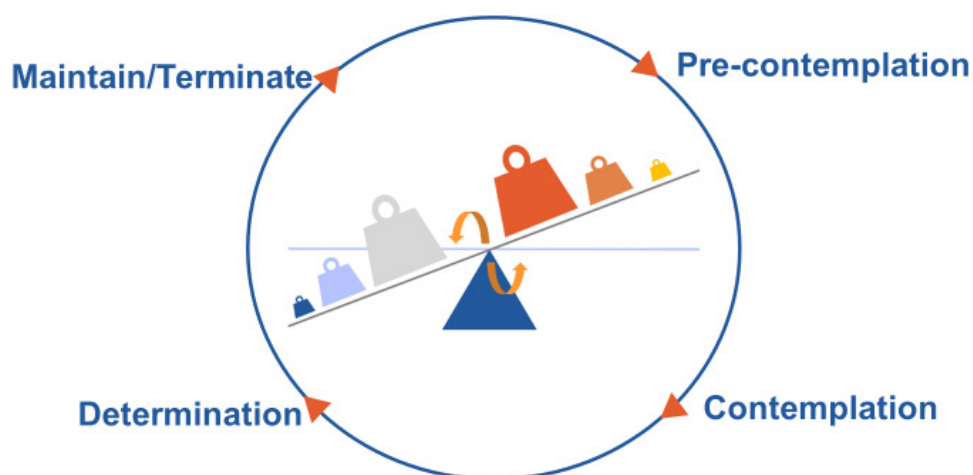
[10] Kantar Public and Learning and Work Institute (2018) Decisions of adult learners, p8

As an adult journeys between these four stages, the type of factors and the degree to which they influence an adult's decision-making changes. Table 1 below outlines the key factors of influence at each stage of the decision-making process.

Table 1: Key factors of influence at each decision-making stage[11]

Decision making stage	Key factors of influence
Pre-contemplation	• Perceptions of psychological capability and control • Social and cultural norms • Previous experiences of education • Physical capability and a diverse set of practical and circumstantial issues
Contemplation	• Perceptions of psychological capability and control • A desire for personal betterment • Encouragement from influential people • Physical capability and a diverse set of practical and circumstantial issues
Determination	• Financial position • Perceptions of psychological capability and control
Maintenance	• Physical capability and a diverse set of practical and circumstantial issues • Flexibility of provision • Quality of provision • Perceptions of psychological capability and control • Having clear goals for learning

How Entry Level and Level 1 learners compare to Level 2-5 learners

The findings of this new study corroborate the findings of the previous study. The evidence shows that the tipping point argument and four stages of decision-making stand. Additionally, all the main factors of influence presented in Table 1 emerged through analysis, and no additional factors emerged. However, the analysis revealed that certain factors were particularly influential for this group of learners, and there was commonality in learners' narratives about how and why these different factors were

---

[11] Kantar Public and Learning and Work Institute (2018) Decisions of adult learners, p8-11

influential. Policymakers should bear these nuances in mind when designing interventions to engage this group of adults in learning.

The research findings indicate that, at the pre-contemplation stage, adults learning below Level 2 are particularly influenced by their previous experiences of learning and social norms. Most adults interviewed for the research said that they had negative experiences of compulsory education, have not engaged in learning since leaving school or college, and come from families where lifelong learning is not the cultural norm. Consequently, adult learners who took part in the study tended not to express deeply rooted beliefs about the value of education and were not predisposed to naturally contemplate learning as a possibility. Rather, they explained that disruptive or life changing events motivated them to reappraise their personal circumstances, which made them more receptive to considering learning. Incidental and 'push' communications also emerged as important facilitators at this stage, since they implanted learning into an adult's consciousness.

The research findings also indicate that in the pre-contemplation stage, adults learning below Level 2 are particularly influenced by physical capability and psychological capability factors[12]. Adult learners interviewed for the study described their personal circumstances – such as having children, being in full-time work or being in a negative relationship – as fundamentally incompatible with learning. Individuals commonly perceived their circumstances as insurmountable barriers to learning. They did not consider learning until these barriers were no longer present.

At the contemplation and determination stages, dispositional fears about feeling too old to learn, not being able to cope with a course, being made to feel stupid, failing and feeling unsupported were commonly reported by learners. Support from others, such as tutors, was often described as influential in these stages. For example, by providing information and advice about what adult learning is like and the support systems available, tutors addressed adults' fears, enabling them to enrol.

Financial cost was a substantial consideration for adults interviewed for both studies. However, in contrast to the previous study, some adults interviewed for this study were entitled to access free courses funded through the Adult Education Budget, including English and maths courses up to Level 2. Once these adults had a better understanding of the potential benefits of learning, becoming aware of free courses often accelerated the decision-making process. Learners explained that the availability of free courses

---

[12] The previous study argued that, where adults do not see themselves as in control, this creates a psychological barrier to learning. They are more likely to be preoccupied with the constant challenges of everyday life. Physical capability refers to practical barriers that prevented them from contemplating learning, such as a lack of employer flexibility, a lack of money, difficulties arranging childcare or their health/mobility issues preventing them attending classes.

mitigated the risk that they would lose out financially if they enrolled and then subsequently withdrew due to not being able to cope or keep up with the course.

In the maintenance stage, being in a positive and supportive learning environment was important to learners interviewed for this study. Learners frequently relied on provider support to maintain motivation and confidence in their ability to learn. A high proportion of learners also reported having dyslexia or other learning support needs. If learners did not feel supported enough with the academic, practical, and emotional demands of the course, they said this increased the likelihood of withdrawal from their programme.

The research findings suggest that for adults learning below Level 2, their first experience of adult learning is particularly influential. For many adult learners interviewed, a positive experience challenged assumptions and fears that adult learning would be 'just like school' and increased the likelihood of these individuals completing their course and engaging in further courses. Meanwhile, the evidence collected suggests that a negative experience can have long lasting consequences. For some adult learners who took part in this study, a negative experience confirmed their assumptions about adult learning, and reinforced their belief that they were right to avoid learning.

Motivations for learning

This chapter sets out the main motivations to learn that learners discussed during interviews. These included career development; family; mental wellbeing; and personal development. By embedding messages that tap into these motivations in communications and interventions, policymakers can increase the number of adults engaged in learning.

Career development

Most participants were motivated to enrol on courses for career-related reasons. Two main groups emerged from the data: those who wanted to upskill to improve their performance in their current role or to gain a promotion in their current workplace ("upskillers"); and those who wanted to retrain to change career ("career changers"). Adults across all 3 groups said that their Entry Level or Level 1 course was necessary to help them towards their career aims. Participant accounts revealed the main reasons they are pursuing career-related changes:

- To get more job security

- To earn more money

- To get more autonomy in their job, including more devolved responsibility and independent judgement in how duties are carried out

- To get a job that is more stimulating or challenging

- To work somewhere closer to home.

Participants believed that the qualifications they gain will enhance their skills, improve their employability, and increase the number, type, and level of jobs they are eligible to apply for.

> I just thought, 'I need to get out, I need to do something that I want to do [like carpentry],' rather than spend the next 20 years like the last 20 years, doing stuff that I don't particularly want to do. *- Learner*

Some individuals, who felt that there are a lack of local opportunities within their current sector, hoped that gaining qualifications would allow them to switch sectors and take advantage of job opportunities that do exist in their local area.

> I thought, 'If I do this [course] then maybe I can better myself and maybe get a job just outside the door,' instead of travelling all the time… I was thinking, 'Oh, my God, my [train] ticket's like £2,300.' - *Learner*

Both career changers and upskillers frequently expressed an awareness that many employers require a minimum of Level 2 in English and maths. They described that not having these qualifications has previously acted as a barrier preventing them from changing careers or progressing to a more highly skilled role with their current employer. Participants enrolled on a Level 1 course as the first step towards achieving a Level 2 qualification; they felt confident that this would expand the number and type of jobs they are eligible to apply for now and in the future.

> I was just thinking, 'I need more money, and I need some qualifications with it, if I'm going to get the job that I want.' I either wanted to do the teaching assistant job or go into the admin side of things. I was just thinking, either way, I'm going to need these [English and maths] qualifications to look more desirable to employers. – *Learner*

Several other career changers described their Level 1 course as a necessary stepping-stone towards university qualifications. These learners enrolled on Level 1 courses as the first step towards completing English and maths at Level 2, which is a requirement for entrance to Access to HE courses.

Upskillers said that Level 1 courses would help them to attain a promotion or take on more responsibilities at work. Often, a conversation with an employer or colleague helped them to make the link between learning and in-work progression. For example, one interviewee who has recently started work as a learning support assistant in a school was told that if she obtains Level 1 English, she had the potential to increase her responsibilities at work, including writing children's reports. Another learner who works in administration undertook a Level 1 English course to improve her verbal and written communication skills, after her employer indicated that this was a condition for promotion into a supervisory position:

> If I want to progress in my job, I must show my qualification… I don't want to be stuck in one place. I want to have progress. So, I did this course because was thinking about my future. – *Learner*

Upskillers who wanted to upskill to improve their performance in their current job included learners who enrolled on functional skills courses because they wanted to improve their maths skills to help them to use the cash till in their retail job or develop IT skills so they can use a computer at work.

Family

Many participants were motivated to learn because they felt that learning would improve not only their own lives, but directly benefit their family's lives. For example, in order to be

able to help their children with their homework, participants enrolled on English and maths courses to improve their own literacy and numeracy skills.

> I was looking at some of their homework and I was thinking, like maths for example, and I was thinking, 'Don't even understand that', and I thought I really should, this is primary school stuff, and I really should be able to understand it. So, that sort of pushed me as well, to make a move. – *Learner*

Some participants wanted to achieve a better work/life balance and spend more time with their families. Others wanted to increase their overall disposable income and be able to provide for their family without relying on benefits. Towards these aims, participants enrolled on vocational courses that they hoped would lead to better-paying jobs enabling them to earn more money whilst working fewer hours.

> I just want to be able to get by without depending on benefits. And obviously I want to be able to take [my baby] places and get her presents when the time comes… I need to be able to do things with her, instead of just struggling all the time. - *Learner*

The desire to be a good role model and to inspire children about the importance of education was also cited as a key motivator, particularly by those who felt that their own parents had failed to instil in them the value of education at a young age.

Women were more likely than men to identify family as a primary motivator with only a small number of men describing family as a secondary motivator. Although it should be noted that more women than men took part in the interviews.

Mental wellbeing

Several participants wanted to improve their mental wellbeing through learning and described this as a key motivator for enrolling on a course. Learning was described as a way for participants to keep their minds healthy and productively engaged, particularly during difficult personal circumstances such as a relationship breakdown or illness. Attending a face-to-face class was also perceived to be a good way to meet new people and to prevent feelings of social isolation. One learner explained that she thought learning would stop her from feeling anxious:

> For me, [the motivation to learn] was about mental health, I think. My partner had moved away and I found myself constantly overthinking. I overthink anyway. For me, it was something to keep my mind occupied, for my own wellbeing. [I wanted to] keep myself occupied so I didn't fall into the trap of becoming depressed. – *Learner*

Several learners said that they suffered from depression. These participants anticipated that through learning, they could change negative circumstances that were making their depression worse, such as being in a job they did not enjoy. Learning was a means through which they could feel more in control of their circumstances, and therefore feel more hopeful and positive about life.

> To tell you the truth, if I didn't do something I think I would have not carried on because it was horrendous… I thought, 'Right, it's no good being here. You've got to do something.' I thought, well, I'm not going to go back to [name of supermarket]. - *Learner*

Personal development

Some participants were motivated to learn not simply to achieve a qualification, but to attain other valuable outcomes including an improved sense of self-worth and confidence. These participants often described being motivated to learn because they wanted to demonstrate to themselves and to others – including family, friends, employers, and society as a whole – that they were capable of learning and achieving qualifications. People in the past had told them that they would not amount to much and learners wanted to prove them wrong.

> Because I wanted to better myself if that makes sense. I hate it when people look at you and think, god. You've got no qualifications whatsoever… [I thought] do you know what? Sod it. I am doing this [qualification] to prove people wrong. – *Learner*

> I wanted to prove myself that I wasn't the thick idiot joke, clown of the family. I just wanted to do it for myself. I wanted to prove to myself that all those years that I'd been classed as thick, I'm not thick. I wanted to prove to myself that I was good enough. So, I did it for myself. – *Learner*

Barriers to learning

This chapter presents the main barriers to learning that emerged through interviews and focus groups with participants. A wide range of dispositional, institutional, and situational[13] factors were reported, which impacted participants' decisions to enter learning and, for learners, their experiences of learning after enrolment. Barriers included financial cost; time and energy; feeling too old to learn; lack of self-belief and confidence; lack of employer support; lack of provider support; and inflexible learning provision.

Financial cost

For learners, financial cost was rarely described as a barrier[14] because most had enrolled on free courses[15]. This is a key difference to many of the learners who took part in the previous study, who may have needed to personally fund their learning. The small number of learners who did report financial barriers were able to overcome these prior to enrolment. For example, some learners said that they earned too much to get financial help with course fees but received financial help from family members instead.

Focus group participants without recent experience of learning, reported financial cost as the biggest barrier preventing them from entering learning. These participants expressed concerns about being able to afford course fees as well as additional costs like childcare, parking, and learning materials because they are in low-paying jobs and their disposable income is already accounted for. To engage this group of adults, communications about free courses and other financial support available early in the decision-making process is therefore important. These communications could help to dispel myths about the costs of learning that may prevent potential learners from enrolling on courses.

Some focus group participants expected that learning would require them to take a pay cut, further increasing the financial cost of learning. They assumed they would need to reduce their hours from full-time to part-time to enable them to attend courses. Those who are self-employed were anxious about learning having a negative impact on their

---

[13] Cross, K. P. (1981) *Adults as learners*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. Situational barriers arise from an adult's personal and family situation. Institutional barriers arise from the unresponsiveness of educational institutions or a lack of flexibility in the provision on offer. Dispositional barriers arise from an adult's attitudes, perceptions, and expectations.

[14] This study presents the experiences of learners who, in the main, have successfully continued with learning. The findings therefore do not represent the experiences of individuals who may have withdrawn from their courses as a result of financial costs.

[15] Some participants would have been eligible to access fully-funded learning through the Adult Education Budget (AEB). AEB funding supports three legal entitlements to full funding for eligible adult learners: English and maths up to Level 2 for adults aged 19+ who have not previously achieved a Level 2 in these subjects; first full Level 2 qualification for adults aged 19-23; and first full qualification at Level 3 for adults aged 19-23.

income because they could not take paid time off to learn and were already under financial pressure.

Focus group participants were concerned they might waste money on courses that do not benefit them financially. Without a guarantee that the upfront costs of learning would be offset by a larger financial return in the future – that is, a better paying job – participants were unwilling to invest their own money or take-out loans to cover debts.

> The time you spend, you're going to make less money and you'll possibly put yourself in debt… [it's the] fear of just starting and risking everything you have for possibly gaining more, which may not be guaranteed. – *Non-learner*

Time and energy

Learning was perceived to cost both time and energy – emotionally and mentally – and individuals explained that they could not afford to invest in learning as a result. Many participants said that caring for their children or parents reduced their availability for learning. Even when individuals expressed a desire to learn, this was outweighed by the perception that it is impossible for them to manage the demands of learning around their caring responsibilities.

> Oh, I knew about [learning] ages ago, and I wish I'd gone back when I wanted to go back, but obviously family comes first, and I had to look after my dying dad. My dad that's no longer with us, so I had to support him, so [returning to learning] was put to one side while I supported and helped him. - *Learner*

> I've come to a point in life where [I] just can't [think about learning]. I'm trying to raise three children. - *Non-learner*

Participants described that full-time working patterns reduced the time and energy they had available to invest in learning. One learner said that whilst he was a full-time bus driver for 20 years, the thought of learning never entered his mind because there was no time in the day to learn. It was only when he changed to part-time work as an Uber driver that learning became possible.

> Being a bus driver, for me personally, I couldn't do anything. Because when your job is the buses, you have no use. You're so tired, you can't even sleep… it would not be possible [to engage in learning] because when you drive a bus you have to have at least nine hours' rest before you can [start a new shift]. So when you get off, you just have to sit and rest, then back to work. – *Learner*

Focus group participants without recent experience of learning noted that standard full-time working hours would limit the possibilities for learning as they would not be able to attend daytime classes. However, increasing the availability of weekend and evening courses would not necessarily increase the likelihood of them considering learning. A greater concern for many was that taking up learning would require them to give up valuable free time – time which they said is necessary to recuperate after working long and stressful hours during the week. This highlights the importance of communicating the potential benefits of learning to adults in this group, to help increase the perceived value of opportunities. It also highlights the importance of employer support and flexibility, to create time and space for individuals to engage in learning.

Age

Participants, regardless of their learning status, described age as a barrier to learning. Some perceived that with age, learning becomes harder as you have an "older brain" that is slower to grasp new concepts. Others said they viewed learning as something that is 'completed' or 'ticked off' when people are younger rather than something that is relevant and important at any age. As a result, they did not even think to consider learning as an option:

> I don't think it was because I was lazy, I just didn't see a purpose for learning more. To my mind, I knew what I knew, and I was getting by on what I knew. - *Learner*

Many participants said that the thought of being an older person in a classroom full of younger people put them off learning. Many predicted that it would be hard for them to fit in with younger people and they would not feel like they belonged. For some, it also triggered emotions like fear, self-consciousness, and shame. A focus group participant said that being surrounded by younger people in a classroom would make him feel as though he had not achieved 'normal' life goals:

> [It would make me feel] like a bit of an idiot. You know, a bit embarrassed really, on a course… It'd be like getting to your last year in school and saying, 'You've not qualified to pass that this year,' and them holding you back, and then all the other kids coming up from the class below and you're older than them all… kind of, like you're starting your life at the same time as these 16, 17-year-old kids. – *Non-learner*

Participants voiced assumptions that 16- to 18-year-olds who attend college compulsorily rather than out of choice would lack motivation and drive and be disruptive. Participants worried that this would threaten their return on investment and prevent them from engaging fully in learning.

24

I had visions of these kids running riot, not listening to what the tutor was saying and things like that…and that's what I was worried about, going back into college. - *Learner*

Some focus group participants said that colleges target courses and opportunities at younger cohorts, which reinforces fears they have about being the oldest person in a class full of younger people. To engage this group in learning, information about learning being for adults, which could include statistics on the number of older learners enrolled on courses, needs to be communicated in the early stages of decision-making.

Self-belief and confidence

Many learners were anxious about returning to learning because they assumed that adult education would be "just like school", where they said, they did not receive enough individual support or were bullied by teachers. As participants contemplated the possibility of returning to learning, they expressed anxiety about history repeating itself in an adult learning context.

At school I felt like I wasn't getting any one-to-one or anybody working with me to try and catch me up with the other children that were in front. I was kind of just left to copy off the blackboard, so basically when I was at school, I felt like I wasn't learning anything… So I felt like, you know, am I going to be the thick one in the class, completely, and things like that. - *Learner*

Learners reported that their negative beliefs about their ability to learn stemmed from teachers' or parents' negative comments about them when they were younger. One learner recounted that she had been told that she "give[s] up on things easily", leading her to worry that she will one day stop doing her homework and quit the course. Others described that achieving poorly at school has led to low self-confidence. Participants said they feel as though they are "thick", "not academic", and "not brainy enough" to do an adult learning course.

Lack of employer support

In some cases, learners felt that their employers had been unsupportive and acted as a barrier, despite individuals asking for support. These learners explained that their employers offered little to no flexibility with shift work. One individual said that her employer initially offered flexibility to allow her to attend her English class, but this flexibility had stopped; her employer consistently puts her on the rota on the same day as her class:

> I've tried many times for my employer, I've talked to my employer.
> Last year they were very kind and then they did it without any
> complaint or any issue, but this year they're just not wanting me to do
> this course… Before they don't even put me Thursdays, but the
> minute I told them I was going to school, they just keep putting me on
> Thursdays now. - *Learner*

This inflexibility led a small number of learners to withdraw from their courses because trying to balance shift patterns with learning and family life became too stressful.

Other learners said that their employers refused their requests to take time off work to attend a learning course. One learner, who has recently completed a shop steward course organised by her trade union, said that her employer made it difficult to get a week off work so she could attend the compulsory residential. The same learner said she felt inspired to pursue further courses as a result of her confidence being boosted through this learning experience. However, although there is a learning centre attached to her workplace, her employer will not release her from work to do any courses:

> I've got loads of things I want to do, I can't do anything. I mean,
> we've got a learning centre at work and we've got, like, maths
> courses, English courses, IT courses, but they won't release me to
> go and do anything. - *Learner*

Individuals affected by a lack of employer support believed that their employers have negative attitudes towards training, because training is not required for the individual to do their current role, or because they are opposed to that staff member progressing within the workplace. Others felt that their requests for support with training for in-work progression were not taken seriously by their employer because they are junior employees with limited or no formal education.

> No, I've been doing my job for three years without [training] so why
> would I need it now? That's what [my employer] said. - *Learner*

> So, you know, when you're the lowest person, you're not a priority
> are you? And that's what I found really, as well, with my lack of
> education. I always tend to be in those sorts of environments, I would
> always never be able to progress because of that. - *Learner*

Focus group participants without recent experience of learning were sceptical about employer support to access learning, particularly if they wanted to train to change jobs or career. Participants reflected that their employers were unlikely to offer time off work for learning because they need to prioritise their financial bottom line.

We'd like to think that we've all got employers that say that to us [that we can take time off work for learning], but in practicality, it doesn't happen. It doesn't work. They've got a business to run, they've got money to make. – *Non-learner*

Lack of provider support

Once on course, some learners described not getting the support they needed from tutors, making it difficult for them to maintain their learning. For example, some learners said that no college support systems existed to support dyslexic learners, or that tutors were ill-equipped to support adults (as opposed to young people) with dyslexia:

I hated every minute of it. To be fair, when you've got a tutor who is, you know, hasn't got lots of experience when they're not dealing with children who are dyslexic. You know, they don't really understand. They just think you're not listening. Or, you know, they try to make you do it with a pen and paper or stuff like that. And they think, 'Well, you know, learning's going to solve the problem,' but I don't think that's the case. - *Learner*

Some learners explained that that they experienced issues with individual tutors which led them to feel unsupported. For example, tutors' teaching styles were considered by some to be ineffective as they were not interactive enough, whilst others felt that their tutors were impatient and unwilling to help when asked. For others, a large class size meant that individual learners did not receive the one-to-one support they needed to engage with the learning material:

You'll call the teacher… and then someone else will call her. I remember sitting in one lesson, I think it's about an hour or something, had gone, before I even got a teacher coming to me, but that's because we were so many in the room, and I think that's probably why a lot of people were walking out at the beginning. - *Learner*

Some learners said they did not have the confidence to ask for help. One learner described that she found it challenging to understand what was being taught in the classroom; although she knew the teacher would have helped her, she found it too difficult to overcome her lack of confidence and ask for support:

But in a place where we are, they expect you to do some things all by yourself, they then expect you to tell them, 'I can't do it.' So, that is a challenge… Maybe pushing myself more [would have helped] and having confidence that I will be able to overcome that challenge even though I'm not. - *Learner*

The evidence suggests that the experience of feeling supported by tutors is paramount for adults learning below Level 2. For some, a negative experience bolstered the idea that that they cannot succeed in learning or that there is too much effort required. In these cases, an issue with provision reinforced dispositional barriers that stemmed from negative experiences of compulsory full-time education. For a small number of learners interviewed, this led them to conclude that learning as an adult is not for them. One learner described that her college did not have sufficient one-to-one support for people with dyslexia. Although she eventually passed her English Level 1, she said she did not enrol on further learning courses because she anticipated that she would not receive enough support at college:

> I tell you now, I couldn't do [the maths Level 1 course]. I really couldn't do it… because I feel that I'd be left on my own. - *Learner*

Some focus group participants without recent experience of learning said that information about support for learners needs to be clear and accessible. They explained that this would help to overcome dispositional barriers, such as the fear of being unsupported, and situational barriers, such as support with childcare or disabilities. If this information were difficult to find or understand, they said they would be unlikely to consider learning.

Inflexible learning provision

Some participants said that inflexible learning provision made it difficult to combine work, family commitments and learning. Learners who attended evening courses after work said that they often felt tired during and after their classes and wanted to catch up with content at the weekend. However, the courses did not have a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), or no content was uploaded on to the VLE. Although they had time and energy to study at the weekend, the teaching content was not fresh in their minds by this point; with no teaching materials easily accessible online, it was difficult to stay engaged with the course.

One learner enrolled on a blended learning[16] course to allow her to balance learning alongside running her business. A funding requirement meant she was required to study in a computer suite at the learning centre for two hours a week, even though no teaching content or tutor support was delivered during this time. The stipulation to attend the learning centre added no value to her learning. It also reduced her motivation to learn and the amount of time she had per week to maintain her business.

> It was just incredibly frustrating a lot of the time. And it was a huge drain on time as well. At least, at home, if the phone goes where if I

---

[16] Blended learning combines online learning with traditional face-to-face teaching.

get an order through, I can stop what I'm doing, and I can go and do that, whereas if I'm in a classroom, I'm stuck there for two hours. I can't stop, I have to commit myself to being there for that entire duration. – *Learner*

Facilitators and triggers for learning

This chapter outlines the key factors that learners described as making it more feasible or easier to enter or continue learning. In many cases, these enabled participants to overcome barriers to learning discussed in the previous chapter. Facilitators and triggers include financial support; free or affordable childcare; a supportive employer; information, advice, and encouragement from influential people; a positive learning environment; diverse learning options; having a learning provider near work or home; and receiving communications about free courses.

Financial support

Financial cost was a significant barrier to learning identified by focus group participants, who do not have recent experience of learning. Many learners – particularly those with caring responsibilities and on low wages – said that when they found out that their course would be free, their decision to enrol became straightforward.[17] One learner explained that she would not have been able to afford her Level 1 otherwise because of struggling to pay the bills and the costs of childcare.

> [Paying for the course] would have been a big barrier for me because I'm struggling, really, to be able to make my bills and then to be able to have enough for the three children at home and then the school needs and then the school wear, clothes, bags and everything, pocket monies and everything, school bus transport. – *Learner*

Some learners reported that the course being free helped to counterbalance the fears they felt about returning to learning at the contemplation stage[18]. One learner said that she was scared that the course would be too hard, and she would have to withdraw, but she also felt she had nothing to lose because she did not need to pay the course fee.

> I made the phone call, booked it in. I thought, 'Do it.' What have you got to lose? It's free, and if it doesn't work out in the first few weeks-, this is what I thought. If it's too hard, and you can't do it, and you

---

[17] Some participants would have been eligible to access fully-funded learning through the Adult Education Budget (AEB). AEB funding supports three legal entitlements to full funding for eligible adult learners: English and maths up to Level 2 for adults aged 19+ who have not previously achieved a Level 2 in these subjects; first full Level 2 qualification for adults aged 19-23; and first full qualification at Level 3 for adults aged 19-23.

[18] The four stages of decision-making are: (1) Pre-contemplation - Adults are not thinking about the possibility of learning; (2) Contemplation - Adults are actively considering whether and how learning will help them to fulfil their goals; (3) Determination - Enrolment occurs when an adult perceives that the personal benefits of learning outweigh the personal costs; (4) Maintenance - Adults have started learning but are at risk of withdrawing if the personal costs outweigh the benefits of learning.

want to give up [then that's ok] and it was, in some stages, hard, but I just stuck with it. – *Learner*

Other learners wanted to enrol on vocational courses that were not subsidised; for these individuals, financial cost remained a barrier. Where costs were covered by an employer or the learner's family, progression into learning was made possible.

Me knowing that my dad was going to pay for it [made the difference]…There was no pay monthly option [for the course fees] which I think is something else people need to look at if they want adults to go back because not everyone can find a grand upfront. – *Learner*

For some learners, receiving financial support through tax credits was a necessary facilitator for learning. One learner explained that receiving tax credits meant she had enough money to live without having to work every day of the week in order to provide for her family. As a result, she had both the time and energy she needed to invest in learning.

If I didn't have that help, I know that I have to work more hours, more days, and then this will stop me, will prevent me from going to school. Definitely it will prevent me from going to school because my body will be too exhausted for working five long days or four long days per week. - *Learner*

In addition to course fees, a small number of learners received help with related costs like travel, including financial support towards the bus fare, which helped them to maintain their learning.

Supportive employers

Several learners reported that it was only after their employer made them aware of the link between learning and progression opportunities that they became interested and motivated to learn. For example, a learner who was working as a warehouse operative enrolled on a Level 1 English course to improve her verbal and written communication skills after a discussion with her employer, who informed her that this was a condition for promotion into a supervisory position.

[My team manager told me that if] I did my English course, I could put my qualification up and I'd get the promotion for that higher position because of English. When I started work, my English wasn't very good but working with the English people and training myself and if I did this course, I could progress at work. They needed [English] qualifications for proof of deserving the [supervisor] position and that

communication with the team and the staff was fluent and easy. - *Learner*

Employers also facilitated learning by allowing learners to work flexible hours, for example, starting or finishing work early, which allowed them to attend classes. Other employers were willing to change learners' shift patterns upon request.

> But, yes, they were quite happy for me on a Thursday to leave at half past nine so that I could get there early. And then whenever I got back, as long as everything was in place for the day, and, like, I could come back and sort out any problems, they were quite happy with any time I was out. They were very helpful. – *Learner*

A small number of employers paid for courses if they were relevant to the learner's job role and would help them to progress at work. For example, one learner said that his employer was happy to pay for his Level 1 IT course because he needed to know how to use a computer in his new role:

> They knew that it was in their best interest. I mean I've been with them, like I say, for fifteen years now, they know they've got someone who's competent and, like, willing to learn and work hard. So yes, they didn't even give it a second thought, they were quite happy to help. - *Learner*

Information, advice, and encouragement from influential people

Low self-esteem, low confidence and fears about adult learning were commonly reported issues for participants. Due to these issues, learners often required information, advice, and encouragement from influential people at the contemplation stage before they felt confident enough to enrol. Tutors were often described by learners as being influential, as they challenged their incorrect assumptions about learning as an adult. For example, one learner said she was concerned she was too old to learn and that the class would be full of disruptive younger people. When she met face-to-face with her tutor, they alleviated her fears and provided reassurance.

> I think one of the main things I asked [the tutor], because I just said to her, 'Look, I'm 38. I'm too old for this.' She was, like, 'Absolutely not.' She went, 'You will be really surprised how many people of your age and even older will be there… Literally, there will be people there the same age, or even older, I mean, it's adult learning.' She was right. – *Learner*

Family members, friends and partners were also described as sources of encouragement and emotional support. Some learners explained that receiving this support was the most important facilitator for them because it gave them a sense of security as they embarked on what felt like a scary new venture. A small number of learners described that at other times in their lives, they felt unsupported at home because of unhealthy relationships with partners; as a result, life felt too turbulent for them to consider learning as a possibility. When their circumstances changed, and they had supportive partners who provided encouragement to learn, learning became possible.

> [Deciding to register was] easy, because I knew my husband would back me. So, it was easy. Just making that call, and [my husband] said, 'Just do it.' So, I did… You've got to have the right support around you to do something like that because it's a big commitment. It's a whole year. – *Learner*

For other learners, trusted people such as a friends, colleagues or partners prompted them to apply for a new job role, which led them to take up learning as a means to achieve their new career goals. For example, one learner described that she was given the confidence to return to learning two years ago when she was working as a cleaner in a school. One of the teachers encouraged her to work in the classroom as she was good with children, and suggested she apply for a learning support assistant post at the school.

> It was as soon as one of my colleagues turned and said that, I should go into doing the job that I currently do, that I was, 'Alright, now I have to benefit myself, I have to step up to the plate,' if you like and yes, so going for the [learning support] position that I'm in now actually pushed me to go for my learning. – *Learner*

Positive learning environment

Given that most learners described negative experiences of compulsory full-time education, a positive adult learning experience emerged as a vital facilitator for adults learning below Level 2. It increased the likelihood of learners completing their courses and enrolling on more courses in the future. Individuals said that they now know that adult learning is fundamentally different from school and they feel confident that they will fit in, be respected, and have the support they need to succeed. One learner who was initially hesitant and anxious about returning to learning described how her positive adult learning experience has given her confidence and enthusiasm to undertake further courses:

> Adult learning is totally different from being at school, totally different. It's brilliant, I love it, I can't tell you how wonderful it is. It's positive feedback from the start. They make sure you understand

every single part of it all the way through the training… Now I'm hoping to do anything else the union can throw at me. I'm like a sponge at the moment. – *Learner*

Learners reported that patient and friendly tutors who explained things well and provided one-to-one support helped them to stay on track with their learning. Learners said they felt confident to ask questions when tutors created an informal atmosphere.

> She provided a social, sort of, atmosphere, as well, which was good because everybody felt confident around each other, and then people were more free to put their suggestions across and ask their questions. – *Learner*

The provision of specialist support allowed learners with dyslexia to stay engaged with the material and keep up with the rest of the class. Learners received one-to-one support from tutors during and after lessons, extra time during exams and dyslexia-friendly resources, such as green or purple paper. Learners with dyslexia spoke about the significant impact this support had for them, not only in a practical sense, but emotionally, particularly after negative experiences of compulsory full-time education where this support was absent. Learners felt invested in and taken seriously, which helped them to maintain momentum and drive:

> Reading on purple paper is much easier for me than reading on white paper with black writing. It's just much easier to read… It made me feel like they're taking me seriously. They care about-, they want me to succeed, so they've made an effort so I should make an effort. – *Learner*

Learners also received pastoral and emotional support from tutors for non-academic issues they were facing in their lives that impacted on their learning. Receiving this support helped some adults to maintain their learning. One learner said that her home life was turbulent whilst she was learning because she was going through a stressful rehousing process, which reduced the time she had available for learning. Her tutor talked through the rehousing situation with her, which made her feel cared about. The tutor also followed up with the learner when she did not attend a class because of feeling under pressure at home. Without this support and encouragement, the learner said she may have withdrawn:

> If you didn't have that support, and that, kind of, egging you on, you probably would be, like, 'Oh, sack this. I can't be bothered.' You know, like, because you do need [encouragement], no matter how old you are, and whatever job you're in…To have that support of a tutor, like that, and actually knowing that she is going to ring you if

you don't turn up [and say]: 'get your bum in next Friday,' you know what I mean? That aspect of it was good. – *Learner*

Flexible learning provision

The availability of a wide range of learning options to suit learners' diverse working patterns and preferences – including daytime, evening, and online courses – was a key facilitator. Many learners spoke about their decision to register being made easier because there happened to be a course available nearby or online that they could fit around their work and childcare responsibilities.

[My course] was a daytime one. I mean evening ones might have been more difficult for me because then I would have had to get a babysitter. – *Learner*

Proximity of learning providers

Living or working close to learning providers was an important facilitator for many learners, since it reduced the time and cost involved in travelling to their courses. In many cases, learners were able to walk to courses from home or after work. Proximity enabled individuals to better balance learning around work and childcare.

Some learners reported that online courses would have been an ideal option due to the time pressures of work and family life. However, they found out that only classroom-based courses were funded in their area. Had there not been a learning provider offering free courses in the vicinity, they would have been prevented from enrolling.

Childcare

Focus group participants cited caring responsibilities as a major barrier that would prevent them from entering learning. Many learners relied on family members providing childcare or waited until their children were older and going to school, to help them into learning.

Triggers for learning

The findings from this study corroborate findings of previous research[19], which found that often, an event or change in circumstance can trigger adults to take up learning. The evidence gathered suggests that triggers are particularly influential for adults with qualifications below Level 2. Many learners said they waited for external circumstances to change around them before considering taking up learning. Participants spoke about the external conditions needing to be "just right" before learning was perceived as possible.

A common example of a trigger in learner narratives, particularly from women, was children entering school, which removed two influential barriers, lack of time and lack of childcare. The dissolution of negative relationships was also a trigger for learning. This event led to an increase in learners' self-confidence and motivation to learn as a way of doing something positive for themselves. Unplanned and unwanted changes to job roles triggered some adults to enrol in learning. Learners said these changes reduced their job satisfaction and increased their motivation to learn as a means of changing career.

Many learners said that receiving communications about free or affordable learning courses was an important trigger. Communications were described as particularly influential when these were received at the 'right time' in an adult's life – that is, when they had already begun to reappraise their life and were considering a change.

> Yes, well, what happened was, we used to get leaflets through the door to do with courses. I kept throwing them away, binning them, and then one day I thought I'd read one, and it was on the back cover that I noticed it. I thought, 'You know what? That's what I would like to do'… [The leaflet said] 'Do you want to improve your English or maths?' I remember that, just reading that bit. – *Learner*

The majority of learners interviewed said they had not engaged in learning since leaving compulsory full-time education and tended to come from families where learning was not a cultural norm. Consequently, they did not proactively seek out information about learning opportunities themselves. Instead, many of them considered learning when they were exposed to 'push' and incidental communications that they came across in their everyday lives. Push communications included leaflets, local council magazines and housing association newsletters that were sent directly to people's homes. Incidental

---

[19]Aldridge, F., Tyers, C., Smeaton, D. and Klenk, H. (2019) Learning at life transitions: supporting learners returning to work or preparing to retire and Pennacchia, J., Jones, E. and Aldridge, F. (2018) Barriers to Learning for Disadvantaged Groups

communications were positioned in public places including the GP surgery, library and county hall.

Attitudes towards different modes of learning

This chapter presents participants' attitudes towards different modes of learning that emerged through interviews and focus groups.

Attitudes towards face-to-face learning

Most learners said they would prefer to attend a face-to-face class rather than undertake a fully online or blended[20] learning course. This is a key difference to the previous study, where some learners at Levels 2-5 communicated a preference for online delivery, citing the benefits of flexibility and convenience.

Overall, focus group participants were also attracted to face to face provision. However, many also saw the benefits of other learning modes.

Immediate tutor and peer support

One of the key reasons for wanting to engage in classroom-based learning was having access to immediate tutor support. This was seen as invaluable to many participants, particularly those with concerns about their capabilities to learn independently.

> [At college] the person that's teaching me is a human being, so if there's something, then I can really ask questions and I believe advantageous to go to the classroom, to learn. Sometimes you need help, the person is there to help you. - *Learner*

An ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) learner identified that immediate tutor support was crucial to mitigate misunderstandings given the language barrier, and therefore would opt for face-to-face provision.

In addition to accessing support from the tutor, participants explained that peer support was an advantage of classroom learning.

> For me to have other people sit in a class and go, 'Well, I struggled as well but I was a bit too scared to say,' and you just feed off each other. - *Learner*

---

[20] Blended learning combines online learning with traditional face-to-face teaching.

Support for learning difficulties and disabilities

Individuals with learning difficulties or disabilities said that classroom-based courses are preferable because they will have access to specialist equipment, for example green paper for those with dyslexia and computer software for those with sight impairments.

> I would think a classroom's better because…I had the ZoomText then on the computer which means that the computer had speech and large print. Yes, because all the equipment's there that you need, you see. Yes, they have Braille there, and then obviously the software on the computers. - *Learner*

For learners with additional learning needs, having immediate one-to-one support from a tutor was one of the most important factors to consider.

> If I ever did struggle, which I did, because I've had a learning difficulty since school, you know, I want to know that I'm doing it right, and if I'm at home, I'm not 100% sure if I'm doing it right. - *Learner*

Social interaction

As well as providing support, some learners identified that learning alongside others provides opportunities for social interaction – a key motivation for some learners. One learner explained that the social element of learning was important for maintaining good mental health.

> It's better in a class, for me, because you can talk to people, you get to know people, you have a cup of tea, and you get really friendly with people, and you can have cake, you get biscuits. So, you get welcomed. - *Learner*

Others were attracted to face to face learning as it provided an opportunity to leave the house and motivated them to break their normal routine. This benefit was commonly noted by parents and those with mental health issues:

> If I'd have done online, I would never have got myself out of my house and I'd have ended up with depression. So, for me, school was the best way forward. - *Learner*

Motivation and concentration

Face-to-face learning was seen as the most suitable format for those concerned about their levels of motivation and concentration. These concerns were sometimes raised by adults who had not taken part in learning for a long time.

> If I'm at home, I know what I'm like, I'll veer off in different directions and get distracted. So, I thought that was the best idea for myself to actually be in a classroom environment. - *Learner*

Attitudes towards online and technology-based learning

Participants' attitudes towards online and technology-based learning were split. Three main groups emerged: those who were eager to engage with online learning; those who would not consider online learning as an option; and those who would consider online learning despite the fact that it is not their first-choice learning format. While the majority of focus group participants preferred face-to-face delivery, they were more likely than current learners to be attracted to online learning.

Positive attitudes towards online learning

Participants in favour of an online learning format were drawn to the flexibility that it can offer. Many parents preferred online learning as it could enable them to juggle family life, work, and learning. Convenience was crucial for these participants: learning must operate around their existing schedules rather than the other way around.

> Oh yes, definitely, I would do online as well. I can do that when the children are in bed or at my break at work. - *Learner*

Other benefits of online learning that participants cited included the ability to track and record progress when work is submitted online and improving IT skills as they learn, which they saw as important given advances in technology.

Negative attitudes towards online learning

Some participants, particularly learners, reported that they would be unwilling to enrol on a course (online or classroom-based) if it required substantial engagement with technology. Participants said they felt fearful of using laptops in case they break them. These participants did not feel confident about their IT skills.

> I totally doubt my IT skills… I avoid anything online if possible. - *Learner*

One learner attributed their aversion to online learning to their age and their lack of experience of learning digitally.

> Maybe it's an age thing… I wasn't really brought up on computers, so, I know that I use them now, but it wasn't something that I was brought up with, and obviously, my version of learning, from being a child, is writing everything down. - *Learner*

Others were keen to avoid time spent in front of a screen. This was particularly significant for those who use a computer at work all day. One learner wanted screen-free time for health reasons, since looking at a screen gives him headaches.

Some participants were dubious about whether online learning options represent high quality provision. One learner felt that the prevalence of current online learning options reduced their legitimacy and heightened the risk of selecting a course that was not good quality. Some focus group participants, who were confident in their ability to conduct an internet search and learn independently, were concerned an online course might not represent value for money. If they were to pay to learn online, the added value would have to be clear.

> I think also if you're paying to do a course, you, kind of, want to get your value. You can Google things and learn how to do them online in your own time without paying for it, can't you? - *Non-learner*

Some focus group participants felt that the lack of tutor support could compromise their ability to do well on the course. Others suggested that the lack of face-to-face interaction and flexible nature of online learning would not give them the push they needed to maintain concentration and motivation, which could also affect their progress.

Willingness to consider online learning

Some participants said that although it is not their first choice, they would be willing to consider online learning or technology-based learning if additional high-quality support was accessible. Retaining some of the benefits of face-to-face classroom learning, including regular access to tutor and peer support, was essential for these participants, particularly for those with dyslexia. Not having the tutor's immediate support during evening hours was highlighted as a main concern. However, they cautioned that as long as tutors replied to messages in good time, this should not be a problem.

> You've only got your tutor at certain times, but as long as you've got long enough to do it, and you know you can email them, and they can respond in a time, like the next day. - *Non-learner*

Some focus group participants suggested that having an online chat function to communicate live with the tutor would be useful. Other learners said that they would be willing to increase the use of technology within the classroom, for example by using laptops instead of paper and pens, as long as they had tutor support to demonstrate how to use the technology.

Attitudes towards blended learning

Blended learning received considerable support, especially from non-learners, as it presents 'a best of both worlds' option. Focus group participants appreciated the flexible nature of this learning format and believed that if used appropriately, it could bring together the key advantages of face-to-face and online learning: flexibility and personal interaction.

Engaging more adults in learning

During the interviews, learners were asked to suggest approaches that might encourage more adults into learning. The focus groups provided the opportunity to test ways of presenting information about learning opportunities to adults, to see what might influence their decision to take up learning. This chapter presents feedback from all participants and includes:

- Communication, messaging, and information

- A high-quality learning offer

- Financial support.

Communication, messaging, and information

To engage more adults in learning, participants identified a range of ways in which information about the learning offer should be presented and communicated. Participants stressed the importance of making marketing materials, such as college prospectuses, visually appealing and ensuring that information is presented in a clear and accessible manner. They also emphasised the effective role that communicating the benefits of learning can play in adults' decision-making. Adults want messaging that is honest, accurate and draws on real life examples.

Making materials attractive to adults

Many participants said they were put off learning because they assumed that colleges were only for younger people and they were too old to learn. Participants made suggestions that they believed would allay their fears and help them to overcome this barrier:

- Learning providers should include phrases such as 'it's never too late to learn' and 'learning for all ages' on marketing materials

- Colleges should rebrand themselves as 'adult education centres' to promote their offer for adults

- Images on marketing materials should show adults of all ages.

In addition, focus group participants made further suggestions about how to make marketing imagery attractive:

- Images should show peer to peer interaction in informal learning environments. Some participants explained that images that reminded them of school were not engaging, for example:

    In the bottom [image], its like a school, you're just looking at a teacher, listening to them. - *Non-learner*

- Images should show learners undertaking practical tasks. Participants said they would find it attractive to see images of learners developing skills for work, for example:

> You could show someone under a car doing a mechanics course.
> Doing the hands-on part of it. - *Non-learner*

Providing practical information about learning

Presenting clear and specific information about learning options was essential for many participants to help them with their decision-making. Given that cost is one of the main barriers cited to taking up learning, information about the financial implications of learning was most crucial for many participants. Focus group participants emphasised the need for information about course fees to be as detailed and precise as possible. To engage this group, it is important that information about free or discounted courses is communicated at the pre-contemplation and contemplation stages.[21]

The majority of participants said that information about subsidised or discounted learning options should be immediately obvious and easy to find. Many participants also suggested that there should be clear explanations of the eligibility criteria for free courses including earning thresholds, age, and benefit status. There should also be clear information about schemes that enable people to pay course fees in instalments.

> Put out leaflets to say, 'This is how much it's going to cost you if you're on benefits or if you're in full-time work. Then what we can do, we can…pay weekly or pay monthly, if you get paid from work monthly then pay a bit off. - *Learner*

Many participants stressed that information about the practicalities of learning should also be clear, easy to find and detailed. For example, focus group participants recommended that providers include information on their websites covering: course length and times; mode of learning; entry requirements; course requirements (including information on exams and coursework); and childcare provision. Participant feedback also reflected the need for technical language or jargon to be avoided or explained. Some non-learners said that they found the term 'level' (i.e., qualification level) confusing.

---

[21]The four stages of decision-making are: (1) Pre-contemplation - Adults are not thinking about the possibility of learning; (2) Contemplation - Adults are actively considering whether and how learning will help them to fulfil their goals; (3) Determination - Enrolment occurs when an adult perceives that the personal benefits of learning outweigh the personal costs; (4) Maintenance - Adults have started learning but are at risk of withdrawing if the personal costs outweigh the benefits of learning.

Communicating the benefits of learning

Overall, participants agreed that communicating the potential benefits of learning was an effective way of encouraging more adults to consider learning. Both learners and non-learners reported that the most important outcomes to communicate are career-related, including learning resulting in higher earnings or securing a dream job.

> If you train as this, you could get this much earnings and have a better career, or if you train as such and such, this would help with that. - *Non-learner*

> Yes, instead of just saying, 'Here is a maths course,' 'If you took this course it opens these doors for you,' so you can go, 'Oh, that could help me in my life.'…I think it's just making people aware of what an actual qualification can do for you in life. - *Learner*

Learners also emphasised the importance of communicating wider personal benefits that they had experienced as a result of learning such as meeting new people and boosting confidence.

> I'd say it can be life-changing. I really, really believe in that, I really do. It's changed my life loads… I've gone from this quiet little crab in this corner to this…woman shouting, 'Come on, come join our learning centre'. - *Learner*

ESOL learners felt it was particularly important to communicate the wider benefits of learning – including social integration, improved wellbeing, and employment opportunities – to other adults with English language needs.

> I'd encourage them [non-learners] to learn English properly, because we are in the UK, we need to learn English properly, and we have to work, and help find a job. If you started to learn English, you can start some conversations… You have a better future. – *Learner*

Some felt the social and wellbeing benefits of learning should be specifically targeted at vulnerable groups, such as adults who are long-term unemployed and adults with learning difficulties.

When presenting factual information about the benefits of learning, participants said that statements about the benefits of learning should be accompanied by data. This would help adults to trust that their time and financial investment could deliver results. Participants stressed that evidence of the benefits of learning used should be detailed, accurate, timely (at the contemplation stage) and reliable. This would help adults weigh up the costs and benefits of learning and make informed decisions.

When you make statements, they should be backed up with facts or sources. - *Non-learner*

Learner voice and testimony

Focus group participants said that learner testimonials were a powerful way to draw adults in and encourage them to find out more. Many learners said they would draw on their own positive experience of learning to encourage friends or family to engage.

It is crucial that testimonies draw on a range of stories, to be as representative as possible, in order to appeal to a wide audience. Focus group participants suggested that providing personal details such as the learner's name, age, and the course they took could also help to engage adults, as it would provide additional information that they could relate to.

Additionally, referencing the barriers to learning and how learners have overcome them would make learner stories even more engaging. Childcare and the financial costs of learning were ranked as the most significant barriers by the majority of focus group participants, so practical examples of how they were overcome in testimonials could ensure these are relatable.

Communication channels

Learners suggested that learning opportunities should be advertised more widely to adults using a range of communication and advertising channels, such as posters, leaflets, online advertising, and newspapers. Some learners highlighted the importance of advertising learning opportunities in a range of places as not all adults use email or social media. Furthermore, online advertising cannot be relied upon to appear in an internet search for local provision. Other suggested communication channels included Jobcentre work coaches; National Careers Service; Citizens' Advice; and community services, such as youth centres and libraries.

Some focus group participants said that they would find it useful to engage with a careers advice service to guide their decision about whether to take up learning. However, they said that based on negative experiences at school and through engagement with the Jobcentre, these services would have to be of higher quality to be beneficial.

A high-quality learning offer for adults

To engage more adults in learning, participants stressed that a range of high-quality learning options need to be available to meet everyone's needs. With most adults citing time and cost as the most significant barrier to learning, participants were adamant that to make them worthwhile, learning options had to represent a good return for their time and money. Participants put forward a range of factors which they feel represent high-

quality provision, including support from employers; tutor and peer support; flexible delivery; additional learning support, work placements; and taster courses

Support from employers and workplace-based learning opportunities

Learners and focus group participants believed that employers have a key role in supporting more adults to learn. They argued that employers should be taking a proactive approach and investing more in their employees.

> I think employers need to invest in their people and until you don't get that, you're never going to get the development you want. - *Non-learner*

Participants suggested that employers could do this in a number of ways, including promoting internal and external learning opportunities; offering shift flexibility to enable staff to fit in time for learning alongside work; allowing staff time off work to learn; offering on-site learning; and financially contributing to course fees. They noted that, where people want to improve in their current job, workplace-based learning would remove time and cost barriers experienced by adults.

> Yes. I mean, if the employer says, once a year, 'In September, does anybody want to do a free English course and we'll pay for you to have half a day off, so you're not going to lose any money.' Or, 'We'll pay two hours of your four-hour thingy.' Well, I'm not at work for two hours, why not?. - *Learner*

> The big thing for us is the learning centre we've got at work. It makes me easily accessible to everybody then, it's our workplace. You don't have to go somewhere, they don't have to do a residential course at a college, they could do it at work. - *Learner*

However, most participants were sceptical about whether employers currently do enough to support employees' learning and skills development, often drawing on their own experiences. Participants suggested that employers might encourage more staff into learning if they were confident that it would lead to increased profits and productivity. Therefore, participants argued that the benefits of learning should be proactively communicated to employers. Others suggested making workplace learning compulsory or incentivising employers would be most effective.

> I think if maybe the government goes to the employers saying, 'We'll give you this money and if your staff want to have education,' because it's a win-win for everybody, then. The college gets the money for teaching them, the employers get the money to send them, and the person gets education. - *Learner*

Others suggested that employers would be better able to proactively support their employees into learning if they had stronger links with providers. One learner suggested that providers should visit employers to highlight the benefits of upskilling their workforce.

Self-employed participants reflected that they do not have the option of employer support, so they have an additional financial barriers to take time off for learning.

> When you are your own boss, the priority is to earn the money. - *Non-learner*

Work placements

During the focus groups, participants were asked for their views on work placements. Most participants were positive about work placements, saying they offered an opportunity to gain relevant, hands on experience outside of the classroom environment, which would allow them to put theory into practice. For adults who saw investing in learning as a risk that may not pay off, work placements presented an attractive option as they were seen as more likely than other learning options to improve employment opportunities.

While the idea of undertaking work placements was broadly supported, several participants raised concerns about the practicalities of placements. In particular, they were concerned about having enough time to complete a placement alongside their other commitments and the knock-on impact on their income. Several mentioned that they would be unable undertake a placement if it resulted in a fall in salary. Given this, some participants suggested that to engage adults most effectively, work placements should be a paid opportunity.

> If you've got a job and commitments, how are you going to fit in placements with everything else. - *Non-learner*

> I couldn't do unpaid work experience. - *Non-learner*

Flexible options

The option of flexible provision was cited as vital to support more adults into learning. Many participants said that if their learning could be flexed around other priorities, it would enable them to engage. As discussed in the previous chapter, blended learning and to a lesser extent online learning, received considerable support for this reason. Participants believed that if delivered well, a blended model could bring together the advantages of face-to-face and online learning (personal interaction and flexibility).

> I think that's why I like the idea of the blended, because you've got the best of both worlds there. - *Non-learner*

Participants also highlighted that learning providers need to offer more flexible face to face provision, for example at weekends and at different times of the day, so that more adults can take up learning. This was particularly important for those adults who, for a variety of personal reasons, felt unable to engage in online learning. As well as flexible timings, ensuring that there are a range of locations to choose from to facilitate more adults, especially those in work, to take up learning.

> There should be a choice if you could do it at home or college or in a training company somewhere nearby that's open late because if some people are working, they can't take time off and they've got to go in after work. - *Learner*

Some participants were also attracted to learning at their own pace, including having flexible deadlines so that work can be submitted at convenient times to them, making the process less stressful. Many felt that flexible deadlines should be an option for face-to-face provision as well as online learning.

Additional support

Some learners argued that more government funding was needed to provide one-to-one support, particularly for learners with additional needs.

> We know now that not everyone fits in a classroom environment and I think trying to solve that would be a good idea. - *Learner*

Linked to this, there was also a suggestion to increase the number of people in special educational needs coordination or equivalent roles, to ensure learning providers have systems in place for identifying and supporting adults with learning difficulties.

Other participants were attracted to having access to one-to-one support from a mentor that could provide pastoral support during the course.

> I think learning mentor, it'd be great to have an individual person you can talk to and get support from. - *Non-learner*

Taster sessions

Some learners suggested that providers should offer free taster sessions to help adults decide whether a course is right for them. This would give adults the opportunity to sample learning without the obligation of committing to a full course.

Financial support

Most participants emphasised the importance of providing financial support to adult learners. While all focus group participants said financial support would be a highly influential factor in supporting them into learning, some learners felt that no extra support was needed. This indicates that there may be enough financial support available for learners on courses below Level 2, but those who are not currently engaged are not aware of it.

Support with additional costs

Support with childcare was welcomed by many participants, regardless of their learning status. One popular idea raised was the possibility of opening creches at colleges, which would remove the need to travel to pick children up before and after classes.

Some learners felt that support with childcare should be targeted at adults who are not in work and do not qualify for 30 hours free childcare.

> If they're not working and they're doing this course so they can get back into work, they're stuck in a situation where they don't have the childcare. In other words, they're in a bit of a Catch-22 situation where they don't qualify for the childcare that would allow them to go to college which would get them a job. - *Learner*

The idea of a free bus pass was tested during focus groups and was popular amongst participants. In addition, participants suggested that free parking, particularly for disabled spaces, should be available. They said this would reduce the wider costs of learning, meaning they would not have to incorporate travel costs into typical weekly expenditure. While support with travel was welcomed, it did not tackle the overriding barriers of time, childcare, and course fees.

Financial support for other costs including "essentials", such as stationery and course revision books, was also identified as important for some participants. One learner suggested that support to cover the cost of internet access would be helpful for some adults, particularly for those who do not live close enough to use the provider's facilities on a regular basis.

Payment plans

Participants suggested that payment plans, or schemes would be an effective way to encourage more adults to engage in learning. Breaking up the cost into manageable chunks was much more attractive to many participants than paying the full amount upfront.

> If you broke it up, it would be so miniscule, you only pay £10 to £30 a
> month. - *Non-learner*

One learner suggested that paying instalments directly from Universal Credit would be an effective way of managing course costs for some adults.

Discounts and incentives

A discount on course fees was concept tested during focus groups and was very attractive to many participants. Learners also suggested during interviews that certain groups of adults should be offered discounts, including those who have not taken part in learning for some time and for adults in low paid employment who are not eligible for free courses, but do not earn enough to pay for a course.

> There is the fact of people work, but also the fact of how many hours
> they do a week. If they don't do enough and can't afford to do these
> courses, there has got to be something in place where these people
> can still have an education. I think everyone should be entitled to an
> education. - *Learner*

One learner suggested offering a tax reduction upon course completion would be an effective way of encouraging more adults into learning. Another proposed reimbursing learners with the amount they would have earned in the time they take out of work to engage in learning.

Conclusion and implications

The aim of this study was to develop an understanding of how adults learning below Level 2 make decisions about whether or not to take up learning. The study sheds light on factors that participants weighed up as they decided whether or not to learn, and their support needs once they had enrolled. The research builds on a previous study conducted by L&W and Kantar Public, which explored adult learners' decisionmaking at Levels 2-5[22].

Motivations for learning

Participants commonly enrolled on courses for career-related reasons: they wanted to improve their performance in their current job, progress at work or change careers. Drivers relating to family, mental wellbeing and personal development were also cited as motivations.

Barriers to learning

A range of barriers to learning emerged through interviews and focus groups with participants:

- The financial cost of learning and the time and energy required to learn emerged as significant barriers.

- Participants also described dispositional barriers: they were scared that they would be the oldest person in the class, be unsupported by tutors, feel stupid or fail.

- Some participants explained that their employers made it harder for them to engage with learning by refusing to offer flexibility with shifts or time off work to learn.

- Learning providers reportedly failed to address barriers to learning for participants through insufficient support systems in place for adults with dyslexia, ineffective teaching styles, and inflexible learning provision.

Facilitators for learning

A number of facilitators to learning emerged through interviews:

---

[22] Kantar Public and Learning and Work Institute (2018) Decisions of adult learners

- Free or funded courses and free childcare helped adults to overcome key situational barriers to learning.

- Some employers facilitated learning by raising awareness of learning opportunities and providing practical support through flexible working hours.

- Information, advice, and encouragement from influential people, such as partners and employers, boosted individuals' confidence and helped them to overcome fears they had about entering learning.

- Experiencing a positive learning environment was a vital facilitator for many learners as it challenged negative assumptions participants had about adult learning and increased the likelihood of them enrolling on further courses.

- High-quality teaching, specialist support for learning difficulties and pastoral support from tutors helped maintain participants' motivation for learning.

Many of the factors identified as barriers to learning were cited by others as facilitators, such as finance, quality of provision and employers. There were examples of learners who overcame their fear of learning due to support from their provider, but for others, who said they received inadequate support, their provider became a barrier to learning. While some learners said they were encouraged by their employer to learn, the accounts of other learners suggest that employers' willingness to be flexible and supportive of their staff in accessing learning should not be assumed, particularly for those who are seeking to retrain for new roles.

Attitudes towards learning modes

Face-to-face learning was the preferred learning mode for some participants because it offers immediate access to tutor and peer support. Some participants would not consider online learning because of fears around the use of technology or low levels of digital capability. Others were willing to consider online learning but required reassurance that they would be sufficiently supported by tutors so that they did not fall behind with their learning. Blended learning was considered by many participants to be an attractive 'best of both worlds' option, combining the flexibility of online learning with the personal interaction of face-to-face learning.

Engaging more adults in learning

Participants were asked to suggest approaches they considered would be effective in engaging more adults in learning.

- To help them to overcome the dispositional barrier of feeling too old to learn, participants said that learning providers should market provision specifically to adults by incorporating the message that learning is for all ages and including images that show adults of all ages. Adults also said they need clear, accurate

and honest information about the benefits and challenges of adult learning to help them to make informed decisions. Participants suggested that flexible provision options, support for learning difficulties, work placements and taster courses would engage more adults in learning.

- They also emphasised the importance of support from employers, tutors, and peers.

- They stressed that adults need financial support with course costs, childcare, and other costs, particularly if they are in low paid work.

- Participants recommended that support could be provided through free or affordable childcare, incentives, bursaries, discounts, and payment plans which break up the initial course fee into manageable payments.

Key differences between Level 2 learners and higher-level learners

The evidence suggests there are key differences between adults learning below Level 2 and their peers learning at higher levels:

- Learners interviewed for this study rarely cited course fees as a barrier because many had enrolled on free courses funded through the Adult Education Budget. This is a key difference to the previous study, where many learners would have needed to self-fund their learning.

- In comparison to the previous study, more participants reported negative experiences of compulsory full-time education, which influenced their expectations of what adult learning would be like.

- Participants rarely researched learning opportunities proactively. It was more common for them to be triggered to consider learning through a change of circumstance or receiving communications about free courses. This contrasts with the previous study, where some learners viewed learning as a natural part of life or were determined to learn because they already had a strong understanding of the value of learning to them.

- In comparison to the previous study, many more participants experienced dispositional barriers in the pre-enrolment phase. They worried that adult learning would be 'just like school'. Accurate information and advice from tutors about what adult learning is like allayed their fears and gave them confidence to enrol.

- The majority of learners interviewed for this study had dyslexia or additional learning needs and required specialist support whilst on their course in order to maintain their learning.

Implications for the National Retraining Scheme

The evidence gathered highlights a number of considerations for the design and implementation of the National Retraining Scheme, to ensure it meets the needs of adults qualified below Level 2:

- Dispositional barriers, such as a fear of learning or feeling too old to learn, can prevent adults from taking steps towards learning. This is particularly the case for adults qualified below Level 2. While this is very personal, communications and learning provision should be designed to build confidence and address negative perceptions. For example, including messages and images that explicitly state or show learning is for adults or offering taster or bite-sized courses that provide a stepping-stone to more formal or substantial learning.

- Learners in this cohort were often triggered to consider learning through a change of circumstance and timely information about learning. They were less likely than learners at Levels 2-5 to proactively seek courses. Careers advice and learning opportunities should be communicated frequently in a variety of ways, including the internet and in public spaces so that people come across them incidentally in everyday life.

- An employer's attitude towards training was a key facilitator and also a barrier for learners and non-learners who took part in this research. When employers were engaged and supportive, they motivated individuals to enrol in learning and provided flex to enable them to stay on their courses. Adults without recent experience were particularly sceptical about their employer being willing to support access to learning, especially if they wanted to retrain into new jobs. This suggests that employer-led proactive signposting to training could have a considerable positive impact on this group. It will therefore be vital for the National Retraining Scheme to successfully engage employers to ensure they understand the benefits of learning for their staff.

- While course fees were not identified as a barrier for most learners, the offer of a free course was a key facilitator as it reduced the perceived risk to individuals of taking up the opportunity. Entitlements to free or discounted courses should be proactively promoted at the pre-contemplation and contemplation stages of decision-making. Where it is necessary for courses to be self-funded (in part or in full), consideration should be given to whether costs can be profiled to adults' income. For example, fees could be paid in monthly instalments rather than upfront at the start of their course. Adults are motivated to learn if the potential outcomes are clear and valued. Evidence on the positive outcomes and potential impact of learning as an adult should therefore be widely communicated. This could include high-profile awareness raising campaigns and/or better availability of information about the potential returns on learning. Raising the perceived value of learning could help to overcome barriers associated with the cost of learning – if

individuals understand the potential benefits of learning, they may be more willing to invest their time and money.

- Many adults experience competing priorities such as work, family, and caring responsibilities. Adults engaged in the National Retraining Scheme therefore require learning provision that accommodates this and offers flexibility in relation to the timing and mode of learning. While current plans to address this involve offering learning online, the evidence from this study indicates that adults qualified below Level 2 prefer face to face delivery. Blended learning was received positively by some participants. Where learning is delivered online, proactive, and substantial tutor support should be embedded, in part to ensure that learners stay motivated.

- The majority of learners interviewed had additional learning needs, including dyslexia. While some reported being well-supported by their provider, others said that the support was inadequate and/or not appropriate for adults. Adults engaged through the National Retraining Scheme will need to be able to access high-quality learning support to ensure they complete their programme. Training should be made available to FE teaching and support staff, potentially through the Education and Training Foundation, to ensure they can confidently support adults.

Appendix 1: Profile of research participants

Table 1: Interviewee characteristics by level of course

Level	Ages 24-34	Ages 35-44	Ages 45-54	Ages 55+	Male	Female	Socioeconomic group: C1	Socioeconomic group: C2DE
Entry Level	8	3	3	4	6	12	6	12
Level 1	7	14	8	1	8	22	8	22
Total	**15**	**17**	**11**	**5**	**14**	**34**	**14**	**34**

Table 2: Interviewee characteristics by level of course

Level	Working status: Part time	Working status: Full time	Caring responsibilities: Yes	Caring responsibilities: No	Previous education attainment: Below Level 1	Previous education attainment: Level 1	Previous education attainment: Level 2	Previous education attainment: Level 3
Entry Level	5	13	6	12	15	1	1	1
Level 1	12	18	18	12	24	2	2	2
Total	**17**	**31**	**24**	**24**	**39**	**3**	**3**	**3**

Table 3: Focus group participant characteristics by location

Focus group location	Ages 24-34	Ages 35-44	Ages 35-44	Ages 55+	Male	Female	Socioeconomic group: C1	Socioeconomic group: C2DE	Socioeconomic group: Not known
Bristol	3	4	1	2	3	7	2	6	2
Leicester	2	4	2	2	4	6	5	5	0
London	5	2	1	1	4	5	3	6	0
Sheffield	5	4	1	0	5	5	4	6	0
Total	**15**	**14**	**5**	**5**	**16**	**23**	**14**	**23**	**2**

Table 4: Focus group participant characteristics by location

Focus group location	Working status: Part time	Working status: Full time	Working status: Not known	Caring responsibilities: Yes	Caring responsibilities: No	Caring responsibilities: Not known	Previous education attainment: Level 1 or below	Previous education attainment: Level 2
Bristol	4	4	2	7	1	2	8	2
Leicester	3	7	0	6	4	0	7	3
London	2	7	0	3	6	0	9	0
Sheffield	3	7	0	8	2	0	10	0
Total	**12**	**25**	**2**	**24**	**13**	**2**	**34**	**5**

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.

For any enquiries regarding this publication, contact us at:
www.education.gov.uk/contactus

This document is available for download at www.gov.uk/government/publications