



Department  
for Education

# **National Skills Fund: Free Courses for Jobs**

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**Emily Jones, Yasmin White, Sophie Hall,  
Abigail Lagou, Trudi Martin, Jubair  
Ahmed**

# Contents

List of figures	3
List of tables	4
Executive summary	5
Introduction	9
Methodology	11
Future learning and training	14
Future intentions	14
Motivations for pursuing learning or training	16
Options for developing skills	20
Interest in the Free Courses for Jobs offer	22
Initial interest	22
Appeal of the offer	24
Barriers to taking up the offer	27
Interest in available subjects	33
Considered interest in offer	36
Encouraging uptake of the Free Courses for Jobs offer	38
Factors that would encourage take-up	38
Factors that would enable take-up	42
Support	48
Learning and training information sources	48
Engaging a diverse group of adults	51
Conclusion and recommendations	54
Policy considerations	56

## List of figures

Figure 1: Learning and work intentions for next 1-2 years .....	14
Figure 2: Options for developing skills .....	21
Figure 3: Interest in taking up the Free Courses for Jobs offer .....	23
Figure 4: What appeals about the Free Courses for Jobs offer .....	25
Figure 5: Likelihood to take up the Free Courses for Jobs offer after seeing the subjects available.....	34
Figure 6: Considered likelihood to take up the Free Courses for Jobs offer .....	37
Figure 7: Factors that would increase likelihood of taking up the Free Courses for Jobs offer .....	39
Figure 8: Sources of information and guidance .....	49

## List of tables

Table 1: Online survey sample .....	11
Table 2: Sample composition.....	13
Table 3: Barriers to taking up the Free Courses for Jobs offer .....	28
Table 4: Barriers to taking up the Free Courses for Jobs offer - by level of interest .....	30
Table 5: Interest in available subjects.....	33

# Executive summary

## Introduction

As part of the Prime Minister's Lifetime Skills Guarantee and the government's Plan for Jobs, all adults in England who do not yet have A levels or equivalent can now take their first Level 3 qualification for free, funded through the National Skills Fund (NSF). The aim of this policy is to upskill people to help them access jobs with better career prospects and prepare for the economy of the future.

Despite the evidence on the benefits of learning,<sup>1</sup> the UK has seen a recent decline in the number of adults participating in learning and skills training<sup>2</sup>. Studies have consistently demonstrated that adults who could most benefit from participating in learning are the least likely to do so.<sup>3</sup> For the NSF to be effective, these entrenched inequalities in participation in learning need to be addressed.

Learning and Work Institute (L&W) has undertaken research on behalf of the Department for Education (DfE) to understand how adults can be effectively engaged in the NSF Free Courses for Jobs offer. The research included an online survey of 1,006 respondents and 50 qualitative in-depth interviews with adults who may be eligible for the NSF Free Courses for Jobs offer. The findings will be used to inform NSF policy development and implementation.

## Key findings

**In the next one to two years, a quarter (25 per cent) plan to take part in learning or training.**

In addition, one third (34 per cent) of survey respondents said they are considering finding a new job; and 15 per cent said they would consider changing sectors or careers. **Just over half (52 per cent) said they were either very or fairly likely to take up learning or training in the next 12 months** to improve their career prospects.

Interview participants listed numerous factors that would **motivate** them to take up learning or training opportunities. These factors include **prospective or current employers; parenting responsibilities; interests; goals; recent learning experiences;** and the coronavirus **pandemic**.

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<sup>1</sup> [Foresight Review into the Future of Skills and Lifelong Learning](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Further Education and Skills: March 2021](#)

<sup>3</sup> Learning and Work Institute (2020) [Adult Participation in Learning Survey 2019](#)

**Six in ten survey respondents (61 per cent) said they would be very or quite interested in taking up the offer.**

Respondents most likely to be interested in taking up the offer include **younger respondents (aged 24-35); full time workers**; those who have been **furloughed**; people who are **interested in taking up learning** in the next 12 months; those who are **currently learning** or have done so in the **last three years**; and adults **with parenting responsibilities**.

**Almost two thirds of survey respondents (64 per cent) are attracted to the opportunity because it is free.**

Over half (57 per cent) said the opportunity to **gain a qualification** appealed to them. Respondents were also attracted to being able to improve their **job prospects** (49 per cent) or the opportunity to **increase their earnings** (37 per cent).

**Survey respondents were most likely to be interested in accounting and finance courses (24 per cent), followed by courses in health and social care (21 per cent).**

Respondents' level of interest in the subjects varied by **gender**, reflecting the **existing representation** of men and women across these sectors more generally.

During the qualitative interviews, the list of subject areas was also discussed. Generally, interviewees felt that the list of subject areas was **comprehensive** and being made aware of the subject areas **did not substantially affect participants' views** about the offer. For those who remained interested in the offer after hearing the subject areas, this was either because one of the subject areas **matched closely** with a course they were **already keen to pursue**; it aligned with their **current employment**; participants were **aware of opportunities** and **good career prospects** in these sectors; or there were one or more courses that they had some **interest** in.

**The most common factor that could prevent respondents from taking up the offer is that they do not want to go back into learning (16 per cent) and 15 per cent said they are not looking to change their job or career – both dispositional barriers<sup>4</sup>.**

Situational barriers<sup>5</sup> identified by respondents relate to **time or work commitments**, with 12 per cent saying they do not have time to study and 12 per cent indicating they would have difficulty continuing with their current paid work. Those who are **not interested** in the offer were generally more likely to identify **dispositional or attitudinal barriers**, whereas those who were **interested** in the offer were more likely to identify **situational barriers**.

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<sup>4</sup> Dispositional barriers relate to the attitudes, perceptions, and expectations of adults, such as believing that they are too old to learn or lacking confidence or interest.

<sup>5</sup> Situational barriers arise from an adult's personal and family situation, such as time pressures and financial constraints.

Given that the interview participants were all interested in learning to some extent, they were more likely to be interested in the offer. As a result, **situational barriers** were most likely to be mentioned throughout the **interviews**. The most common situational barriers raised included **time constraints** and those related to **childcare and transport**.

**Most commonly, survey respondents said that they would be more likely to take up the offer if they had access to information on the jobs they could apply for and potential earnings once they completed the course (23 per cent).**

Other factors frequently selected by respondents related to their employment. For example, 20 per cent of respondents said that they would be more likely to take up the offer if they were **encouraged by their current employer**; and 20 per cent indicated they would be more likely to take up the offer if they were offered a **guaranteed interview** with an employer at the end of the course.

Qualitative interview participants were asked what might encourage them to take up the Free Courses for Jobs offer. The key factors included **encouragement from current and prospective employers** through internal company communications, as well as **job advertisements**; advertisements in the public domain which contain **information about the courses**, and the **jobs** that they could result in; **'word of mouth'**; **'career pathway'** information given on the Government website; and **practical information** on the courses.

Interview participants were also asked how the course would need to be delivered in order for them to take it up. Most importantly, participants noted that the course would need to be **convenient and flexible** to fit round their work and parenting commitments. In addition, the course would need to be local and / or accessible via online learning.

**Over half (55 per cent) of survey respondents indicated they would use a general online search for information or advice about gaining new skills.**

Around a quarter said that they would go to **Jobcentre Plus** (26 per cent); to **family, friends or colleagues** (24 per cent); to **education providers** (23 per cent); or to their **current employer** (23 per cent).

Most interview participants also stated that they would use an internet search engine to search for this information and advice. Online sources mentioned included **GOV.UK and local college websites**. These websites are viewed as being **trustworthy, informative** and in some circumstances, participants were already **familiar** with them.

A number also noted **Jobcentre Plus**, however, most participants said that they would not use it for information and advice around learning or training because they thought it was focused on **employment rather than learning opportunities** or because they had **negative experiences or perceptions** of the Jobcentre Plus.

The survey shows that those who have recent experiences of learning are more likely to be interested in the offer. Despite this, just over two fifths (43 per cent) of respondents who have not taken part in learning since leaving full time education stated that they would be interested in the offer, and 34 per cent of this group said that they are likely to take up the NSF Free Courses for Jobs offer. This indicates that there is some **potential to engage a wider group of adults** in learning through the offer. Subgroup analysis indicates that this group are more likely to be **unemployed, parents and aged 24-45**.

## Policy considerations

The research highlights a number of considerations for the DfE as they develop and implement the National Skills Fund:

1. **Communications** about the offer should:
  - a. focus on **potential benefits** to individuals, especially employment-related outcomes such as the jobs people could apply for and potential earnings.
  - b. encourage people to think about how learning could benefit their prospects in the **future**, as well in the **short-term**.
  - c. aim to **challenge gender stereotypes** across sectors.
  - d. targeted at those who **may not otherwise take up learning** i.e. are unemployed, parents and aged 24-45.
  - e. contain information on the **practical elements** of the course, as well as where they can go to find out more about the offer.
2. **Credible and trustworthy sources** with clear information about the learning offer need to be easy to find online.
3. **Secure employer support** for the courses available as part of the offer, and relay this in communications about the offer.
4. Ensure it is **accessible to those on low incomes** by:
  - a. supporting the wider **financial costs** of learning, for example the cost of childcare and transport, particularly for adults with limited financial resources.
  - b. raise awareness of the offer amongst **Jobcentre Plus work coaches**
5. Learning providers need to ensure their provision is **accessible to adults and can flex to their different circumstances**, for example:
  - a. options for courses to be **completed at work** to support individuals to learn and balance their work and wider commitments.
  - b. deliver courses in the **evenings as well as during the day** and offering a combination of **online and face-to-face delivery**.



## Introduction

As part of the Prime Minister's Lifetime Skills Guarantee and the government's Plan for Jobs, all adults in England who do not yet have A levels or equivalent can now take their first Level 3 qualification for free. An estimated 11 million adults are now eligible to choose from around 400 free courses, helping them to gain new skills and access a better job. Prior to this policy, which launched in April 2021, adults aged 24+ had to take out a loan or self-fund in order to pay for these qualifications.

The qualifications on offer can help adults gain skills in many jobs and sectors, ranging from engineering and agriculture, to digital and health and social care. The courses available offer good wage outcomes or address skills needs in the economy – or a combination of both – empowering adults with the tools they need to secure a better job. Shorter or online course options are available, making it easier to fit learning around work and other commitments.

The courses are being paid for through the National Skills Fund (NSF), which is intended to help people learn new skills and prepare for the economy of the future. The government is investing £2.5 billion through the Fund to help adults to gain the valuable skills they need to improve their job prospects, and to support the immediate economic recovery, and future skills needs by boosting the supply of skills that employers require. A national consultation will be launched in 2021 to ensure the NSF investment is spent in the most effective way.

Despite the evidence on the benefits of learning,<sup>6</sup> the UK has seen a recent decline in the number of adults participating in learning and skills training.<sup>7</sup> In addition, studies have consistently demonstrated persistent patterns of inequality in participation, with the adults who could most benefit from participating in learning being the least likely to do so.<sup>8</sup> Those in lower social grades, those with fewer years of initial education, and those furthest from the labour market remain under-represented in learning. For the NSF 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) has undertaken research on behalf of the Department for Education (DfE) to understand how adults can be effectively engaged in the NSF Free Courses for Jobs offer. The findings from this research will be used to inform NSF policy development and implementation. Specifically, the aim of this research was to explore:

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<sup>6</sup> [Foresight Review into the Future of Skills and Lifelong Learning](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Further Education and Skills: March 2021](#)

<sup>8</sup> Learning and Work Institute (2020) [Adult Participation in Learning Survey 2019](#)

- Characteristics of people who are most likely to take up the NSF Free Courses for Jobs offer, and their motivations for learning
- Learning opportunities adults understand are available to them, and where they go to find information, advice and guidance
- The extent to which the NSF Free Courses for Jobs offer appeals to different groups of adults, and why
- Practical barriers that may prevent adults undertaking courses included in entitlement
- Support needed to enable adults' engagement with the offer, including 'line of sight' to a job.

This research included an online survey of 1,006 respondents and 50 qualitative in-depth interviews with adults who may be eligible for the NSF Free Courses for Jobs offer. This report presents findings from the research and concludes with the implications this research has for policy.

## Methodology

The research took a mixed methods approach, consisting of two strands: a quantitative online survey and qualitative in-depth interviews. These approaches are described below.

### Quantitative research

The quantitative element of this research consisted of an online survey of 1,006 adults. The survey was conducted by Kantar during March 2021.

The online survey respondents were nationally representative of age, gender and region. They were screened to include only those who were aged 24-65, live in England, hold a Level 2 but no Level 3 qualification and were not retired. Respondents were screened in this way to ensure we captured those who may be eligible to access the NSF Free Courses for Jobs offer.

Table 1 outlines the sample composition of the respondents who took part in the survey.

**Table 1: Online survey sample**

Variable		Percentage
Gender	Women	52%
	Men	48%
Age	24-35	19%
	36-45	28%
	46-55	32%
	56-65	21%
Region	East Midlands	10%
	East of England	12%
	London and Greater London	9%
	North East	5%
	North West	12%
	South East	17%
	South West	12%
	West Midlands	13%
Yorkshire and the Humber	10%	
Employment status	Working full time	42%
	Working part time	21%
	Self-employed	7%
	Unemployed and looking for work	10%

Variable		Percentage
	Unemployed and not looking for work	14%
	In education	<1%
	Other	6%
Furlough experience since March 2020	Yes	27%
	No	72%
	Not sure	<1%
Caring responsibilities	Parenting responsibilities	35%
	Caring responsibilities	12%
	None	55%
	Prefer not to say	1%

Base: All survey respondents (1,006)

The survey covered the following topics: participation in learning as an adult; future intentions to learn; perceptions and likelihood of taking up the Free Courses for Jobs offer; and what would encourage them to do so.

The data has been analysed by individual demographics, including gender, age, geography, employment status, furlough experience and childcare or other caring responsibilities. All differences reported in the findings are statistically significant at the five per cent level.

## Qualitative research

The qualitative element consists of 50 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with adults who may be eligible for the NSF Free Courses for Jobs offer.

Participants were sourced by an external recruiter and purposively sampled. All interviewees were aged 24 and above, held a Level 2 but no Level 3 qualification, were in the socioeconomic groups C2DE, lived in England and were either employed, unemployed and looking for work or furloughed. To ensure interviewees could discuss their perceptions, barriers and motivations to learn in depth, participants were also screened to filter out anyone who would not consider any learning or training. It is therefore important to note that the data will be skewed towards people who may be more interested in taking up learning. To some extent, this will be mitigated by the survey data which did not exclude people who wouldn't consider learning or training. Participants were selected on this basis to reflect those who would both be eligible and potentially willing to take up the NSF Free Courses for Jobs offer.

Table 2 outlines the sample composition for the interviews.

**Table 2: Sample composition**

<b>Variable</b>		<b>Sample</b>
Gender	Women	25
	Men	25
Age	24-34	15
	35-44	14
	45-54	15
	55+	6
Employment status	Working full time	18
	Working part time	10
	Unemployed and looking for work	10
	Currently furloughed	12
Caring responsibilities	With caring responsibilities	32
	Without caring responsibilities	18
	<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>

The interviews were carried out during March and April 2021. All interviews were conducted via Zoom or telephone and all participants were offered an incentive for taking part.

Interviews covered the following topics: participants' interest in learning or training; their initial response to the NSF Free Courses for Jobs offer; and what would enable them to take up the offer. Interviews typically lasted 45-60 minutes.

Interviews were digitally audio recorded and professionally transcribed. The qualitative data has been analysed thematically to draw out commonalities and differences in responses across different participant characteristics.

It is important to note that the qualitative findings are not intended to be, and cannot be taken as, representative of wider populations. The use of 'all', 'most' and 'some' in this report illustrate the prevalence of views amongst participants and are not generalisable to the wider population. Nevertheless, the findings do provide insight into the breadth of attitudes and behaviours that exist within the wider population.

## Future learning and training

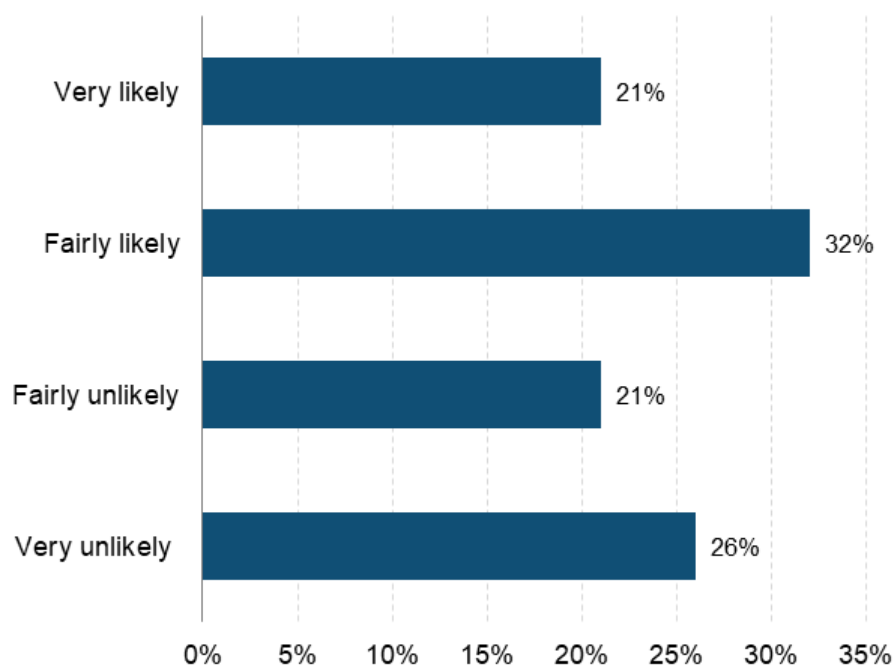
This section of the report explores survey respondents' and interview participants' intentions to progress in their employment and take up learning and training, and how they would expect to achieve this. This chapter also explores the reasons behind these intentions, including both what influences and motivates individuals to learn.

### Future intentions

Survey respondents were asked to indicate whether they intended to find a new job, change careers/sectors and/or participate in training in the **next one to two years**. Around one third (34 per cent) said they are considering finding a new job, a quarter (25 per cent) plan to take part in learning or training, and 15 per cent said they would consider changing sectors or careers. Almost half (47 per cent), however, stated that they would not consider any of these options in the next one to two years.

Respondents were also asked how likely they would be to take up learning or training in the **next 12 months** to improve their career prospects. Just over half (52 per cent) said that they were either very likely (21 per cent) or fairly likely (32 per cent) to do this.<sup>9</sup> Just under half (48 per cent) said that they are either very unlikely (26 per cent) or fairly unlikely (21 per cent) to take up learning or training in the next 12 months (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Likelihood of taking up learning or training in the next 12 months**



Source: Online survey. Base: All respondents (1,006)

<sup>9</sup> Note that some totals equal more than 100 due to rounding.

A demographic breakdown of the data shows the following groups are more likely to change job or take up learning in the future:

- Men are more likely than women to be considering finding a new job in the next one to two years (39 per cent compared to 30 per cent), changing careers or sectors in the next one to two years (18 per cent compared to 12 per cent) or be considering taking up learning or training in the next 12 months (56 per cent compared to 49 per cent).
- The youngest respondents (those aged 24-35), are most likely to want to find a new job (48 per cent) or be considering changing careers / sectors in the next one to two years (30 per cent). The youngest respondents (aged 24-35) are also the most likely to be considering taking up learning or training in the next 12 months (78 per cent compared to the average, 52 per cent).
- Unemployed respondents who are looking for work and those in full time work (both 63 per cent) are more likely than average (52 per cent) to say that they are either very or fairly likely to take up training or learning in the next 12 months.
- Respondents who have been furloughed are more likely to want to find a new job in the next one to two years (42 per cent, compared to those who have not, 32 per cent), change careers/sectors in the next one to two years (24 per cent compared to those who have not 11 per cent) and be more likely to be consider taking up learning or training in the next 12 months (67 per cent compared to those who have not 47 per cent).
- Those with parenting responsibilities are also more likely to be considering finding a new job in the next one to two years (39 per cent, compared to the average, 34 per cent) and be considering taking up learning or training in the next 12 months (65 per cent compared to the average, 52 per cent).

In contrast, the following are less likely to change job or take up learning the future:

- Older respondents aged 56-65 are more likely to say that they are either very or fairly unlikely to take up training or learning in the next 12 months (77 per cent, compared to the average, 48 per cent).
- Respondents that work part time are more likely (54 per cent) than average (47 per cent) to not be interested in finding a new job, changing sectors or careers or participate in learning or training in the next one to two years. The same applies to those who are unemployed and not looking for work (63 per cent).
- Unemployed respondents who are not looking for work are more likely to say that they were either very or fairly unlikely to take up training or learning in the next 12 months (67 per cent, compared to the average, 48 per cent).

- Those who have not completed any learning since full time education are more likely (68 per cent) than average (47 per cent) to not be interested in finding a new job, changing sectors or careers or participate in learning or training in the next one to two years. They are also more likely (74 per cent) than average (48 per cent) to not be considering taking up learning or training in the next 12 months.

These findings illustrate that men, younger respondents, those who are unemployed and looking for work, full time workers, those who have been furloughed and people with parenting responsibilities are all more likely to consider taking up learning in the next 12 months. Whereas older respondents, those who are unemployed and not seeking work, part time workers, and those who have not been in learning since full time education are less likely to consider taking up learning in the next 12 months.

While the adults taking part in qualitative interviews were screened to ensure they had some degree of interest in learning, their level of interest in pursuing opportunities varied. Participants broadly fit into two key categories: those who have a fixed idea about a course or qualification they want to undertake and have taken proactive steps to pursue this; and those who are interested in learning or training but are unsure about what they want to do.

'I've actually had conversations with the trainer, we have a trainer in-house here, about doing it.' – *Male, 26, Employed*

'I am open, at this point, to looking at different career progressions for me. I'm at that point where I want to discover other things.' – *Female, 51, Furloughed*

## Motivations for pursuing learning or training

Interview participants listed numerous factors that would motivate them to take up learning or training opportunities. These factors include prospective or current employers; parenting responsibilities; interests; goals; recent learning experiences; and the coronavirus pandemic.

### Prospective and current employers

Some employed participants, who have proactively considered enrolling on a course, did so within the context of their current employment. This was particularly the case where their employer offers a course internally or their employer has mentioned that they need a specific qualification in order to progress in their career or to be promoted. Hence, for these participants, their employers greatly influenced their engagement with learning. One example of this is a participant who wanted to complete a fire safety



qualification to progress in their current job and had been having discussions with their employer about receiving funding for this.

'I want to leave the operational side of the fire fighting for the fire brigade, go into fire safety and potentially come back. There has been talk of something happening within the fire brigade for me to be able to do that.' – *Male, 37, Employed*

Amongst participants, there was a desire to complete learning to improve their job prospects. This was referenced both in terms of getting a promotion within their current job or being able to find a new job which offered better prospects. Participants who were unemployed were more likely to mention that they hoped that gaining qualifications would help them to find a job that would offer financial security.

'I want to know every bit of the business enough, so I have enough knowledge, so I'm not just blinded when approaching a new job role [that way I] have knowledge to go into [the supervisor] role... It would put me in a good position financially and I'd be able to look after my family and things like that' – *Male, 24, Employed*

'When I apply for other jobs, it makes it difficult because I haven't got the experience. If I go for a retail job, I can always get it, but if I go for other jobs, I struggle because I haven't got the experience' – *Male, 50, Furloughed*

When asked why participants thought certain courses or sectors would offer them better career and pay prospects, many mentioned that they gained this knowledge through looking at different job specifications, either through their current employer or they were advertised by other employers. Some also mentioned that 'word of mouth' played a role, for example, they knew of others who work in a certain sector and they have told them about the career and pay prospects on offer.

## **Parenting responsibilities**

A number of women explained that, once their children start nursery or reach school age, they would feel that they have the time to focus on themselves and their career. One example of this includes a participant who currently works as an office administrator but has plans to train as a nurse once her youngest child starts junior school.

'One will be at secondary school, one will be at junior school, and that's my time to then pick up and do something different' – *Female, 41, Employed*

In addition, some parents, explained that it was their children who motivated them to pursue learning and gain employment in a certain sector. This was particularly common amongst women with young children. These participants said that they wanted to set a good example to their children by studying for a course, and that progressing in their career would mean that they could comfortably provide for their children. This was common amongst those who were unemployed or were employed and hoping to find a new job which offered better prospects.

‘Just showing her [daughter] to push yourself and motivate yourself and be a good role model. I don't want her to have to struggle. I want her to do good when she's old enough and study hard when she can and not leave it until she's my age. I enjoy buying her things, little presents, and when you can't it makes you feel a bit sad. She does, she motivates me to want to do better’ – *Female, 34, Unemployed*

‘It's just proving to my son that I didn't not do anything. I'm doing it all for him to give him the life I had when I was growing up.’ – *Female, 26, Unemployed*

## **An interest in specific subjects or sectors**

Some participants were interested in pursuing courses because they were passionate about a certain subject area or they wanted to move away from the sector they were working in because they did not enjoy it. Examples of areas of interest that were mentioned by these participants include care, design, business management, hospitality, hairdressing, construction, beauty therapy, and psychology.

‘In an ideal world, I'd love to go back to college and study for something. I was looking at things like psychology, I'd love to do that’ – *Male, 50, Furloughed*

Others were interested in continuing working in a certain sector because they were familiar with a particular sector or occupation. This was common amongst those who enjoy the sector they work in, or because they are risk averse towards retraining.

‘I've thought about retraining to do something for a long time but I'm just not really sure what I'd do. So, I think I'd probably stick in care work.’ – *Female, 38, Employed*

## Having a personal goal

Some participants explained that completing a course would enhance their confidence and self-worth, and lead to a general sense of fulfilment and achievement, particularly if they felt that they could have got more out of learning when they were in full time education. This was more common amongst older participants and those who were considering taking up learning due to an interest, rather than to progress in their career.

‘It's something I would do for myself, self-achievement rather than a career move. I'm 60 now, so in 5 years' time I'm not going to be looking for a career.’ – *Male, 62, Employed*

‘A bit of self-worth really [would be a personal benefit to learning]. I'm happy I'm a mum but I haven't really got anything. I had my son at a young age, and I've got some friends that are doing really well, so just something for me’ – *Female, 30, Unemployed*

## Recent learning experiences

Participants' experiences of learning as an adult influenced their intentions to learn in the future. In particular, participants who had recently undertaken learning were more confident to take up learning and training because they already knew what to expect from learning as an adult. These participants felt that they were familiar with applying for a course and understood what it would involve, and thus, they were more confident in their ability to successfully complete another course.

‘It's opened up the avenues in terms of I know what to expect, and knowing that I can pass the Level 2 then hopefully I could pass the Level 3 with the background knowledge, plus now having the experience I think that does help’ – *Female, 30, Unemployed*

‘Having done Level 1, I realise now I probably could have bypassed that and gone straight to Level 2, but I don't regret doing that, because it's given me the foundations of bookkeeping [and] accounting’ – *Female, 37, Furloughed*

## Lockdown

As a result of the Coronavirus pandemic, lockdown interventions were put in place throughout the UK. Being in lockdown has given some participants time to contemplate what they want out of their future career, and what qualifications they would need to get there. This was more common amongst those who have been on furlough or have been working reduced hours as a result of the pandemic.

‘Having the past year [I’ve had] lots of time to oneself to think about things ... I don’t want to be stuck doing this for the rest of my life, but actually I want to expand my horizons and get out there and try different things’ – *Male, 40, Furloughed*

‘I’ve had those thoughts when I was on furlough, if I had to look for a new job now, what ideally would I be looking for? Because it’s not secure at the moment, I could lose my job at any time. So, it made me think further ahead’ – *Female, 32, Employed*

## Options for developing skills

Survey respondents were asked what options they would consider to help them develop new skills if they were considering a change in job or career (Figure 2). Respondents were most likely to consider developing skills on the job (40 per cent), undertaking online or distance learning (38 per cent) or looking for a job with training attached (32 per cent).

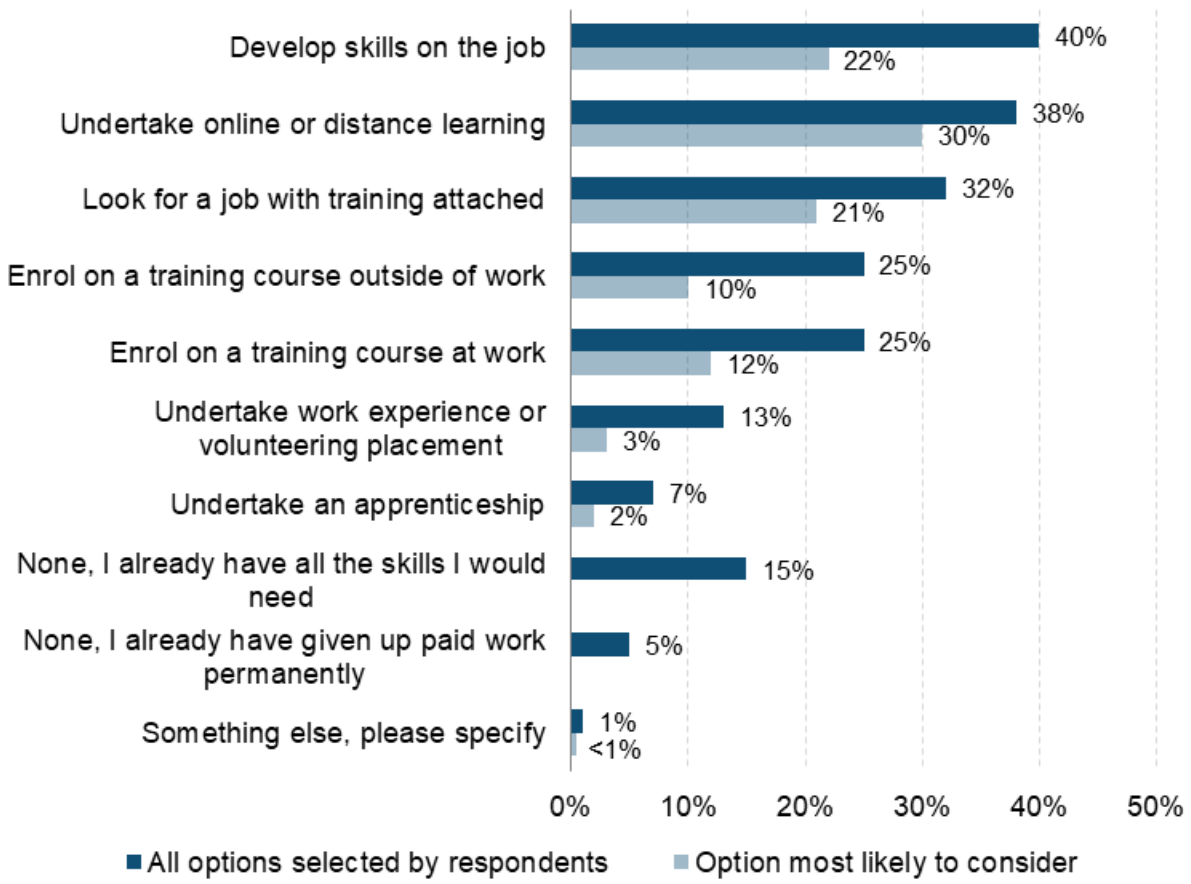
A quarter of respondents said they would develop their skills by enrolling on a training course, either outside of work (25 per cent) or at work (25 per cent). These figures increase significantly for respondents who have recently engaged in learning:

- Four in ten (39 per cent) of those currently undertaking learning and 35 per cent of those who have done so in the past three years said that they would enrol on a training course at work.
- A third (33 per cent) of those currently undertaking learning and 35 per cent of those who have done so in the past three years said that they would enrol on a training course outside of work.

Of the total respondents, 13 per cent indicated that they would undertake a work experience or volunteering placement, and seven per cent would consider an apprenticeship. Fifteen per cent stated that they would not consider any of these options because they already have all the skills they would need to get a new job or change career.

Where respondents had selected more than one option for developing their skills, they were asked to choose which one of these options they would be most likely to consider (Figure 2). The most common response was to undertake online or distance learning (30 per cent), followed by developing skills on the job (22 per cent) and looking for a job with training attached (21 per cent).

**Figure 2: Options for developing skills**



Source: Online survey. Base: All respondents (1,006)

## Interest in the Free Courses for Jobs offer

This section of the report explores whether survey respondents and interview participants are interested in the Free Courses for Jobs offer and outlines both what is appealing about the offer and what could act as a barrier to them taking up the offer. This section of the report also looks at perceptions of the subject areas that are available as part of the offer and how this could impact on their decisions to take up the offer.

### Initial interest

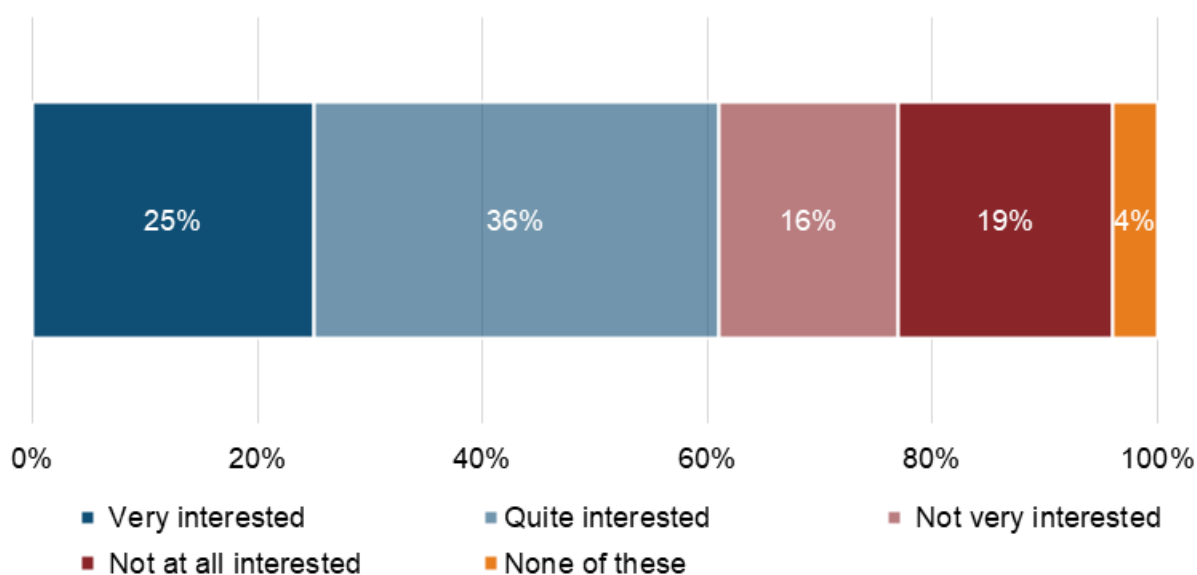
Survey respondents were shown the following description of the Free Courses for Jobs offer, which forms part of the Government's Lifetime Skills Guarantee:

The Government is introducing a Lifetime Skills Guarantee. Adults without two full A-Levels or an equivalent Level 3 qualification will be offered a free, fully funded Level 3 college course. Level 3 is equivalent to A level, AS level, Level 3 award/diploma/NVQ, T level, International Baccalaureate diploma, advanced apprenticeship. These courses will provide adults with skills valued by employers, and the opportunity to study at a range of times and locations, including online courses. The offer will be available from April 2021.

Respondents were then asked to indicate the extent to which they would be interested in taking up this offer (see Figure 3).

Six in ten respondents (61 per cent) said they would be very (25 per cent) or quite (36 per cent) interested in taking up the offer. Sixteen per cent said they would not be very interested in the offer and 19 per cent said that they were not at all interested in taking up the offer.

**Figure 3: Interest in taking up the Free Courses for Jobs offer**



Source: Online survey. Base: All respondents (1,006)

A demographic breakdown of the data indicates that:

- Interest in the offer declines with age, with 81 per cent of respondents aged 24-35 stating that they would be very or quite interested, compared to just 31 per cent of those aged over 55.
- Respondents who are in full time employment (70 per cent) are more likely than average (61 per cent) to be interested in taking up the Free Courses for Jobs offer. Whereas respondents in part time employment (42 per cent) are more likely than average (35 per cent) to *not* be interested in taking up the offer. This mirrors the previous findings that indicate part time workers are less likely than those who work full time to be interested in learning or changing job in the next one to two years.
- Respondents who have been furloughed at any point during the Coronavirus pandemic are more likely to be interested in the offer than those who have not (71 compared to 57 per cent).
- Of the respondents who stated they are likely to take up learning in the next 12 months, 86 per cent were interested in the offer.
- Of the respondents who stated that they were not likely to take up learning in the next 12 months, 34 per cent were interested in the offer.
- Respondents who are currently undertaking learning (87 per cent) or who have done so in the past three years (76 per cent) are more likely to be interested in the offer.

- Regardless of gender, those with parenting responsibilities are more likely to be interested in the offer (76 per cent) than those with other caring (60 per cent) or no parenting or caring (52 per cent) responsibilities.

As in the survey, qualitative interview participants were given a brief description of the offer. Broadly, participants' responses mirrored those in the survey and were overwhelmingly positive about the offer, both from a personal perspective and with regards to the public more generally. Participants felt that it would have a beneficial impact on anyone who may not have had an opportunity to further their education otherwise or may not have considered it.

'Straight away I think it's amazing ... I think it's going to be really, really valuable. [It would be beneficial to those who are] not gifted with family that they get surrounded by, and go down the wrong path and don't have the opportunities, and get themselves dumped in a job or don't find their passion' – *Female, 49, Self-employed*

'I see that there is just a push to get people more educated, which is a good thing because it boosts the economy' – *Male, 28, Unemployed*

## Appeal of the offer

Survey respondents who expressed an initial interest in the NSF Free Courses for Jobs offer were asked to select all the reasons, from a list of options, that they found appealing about it (see Figure 4).

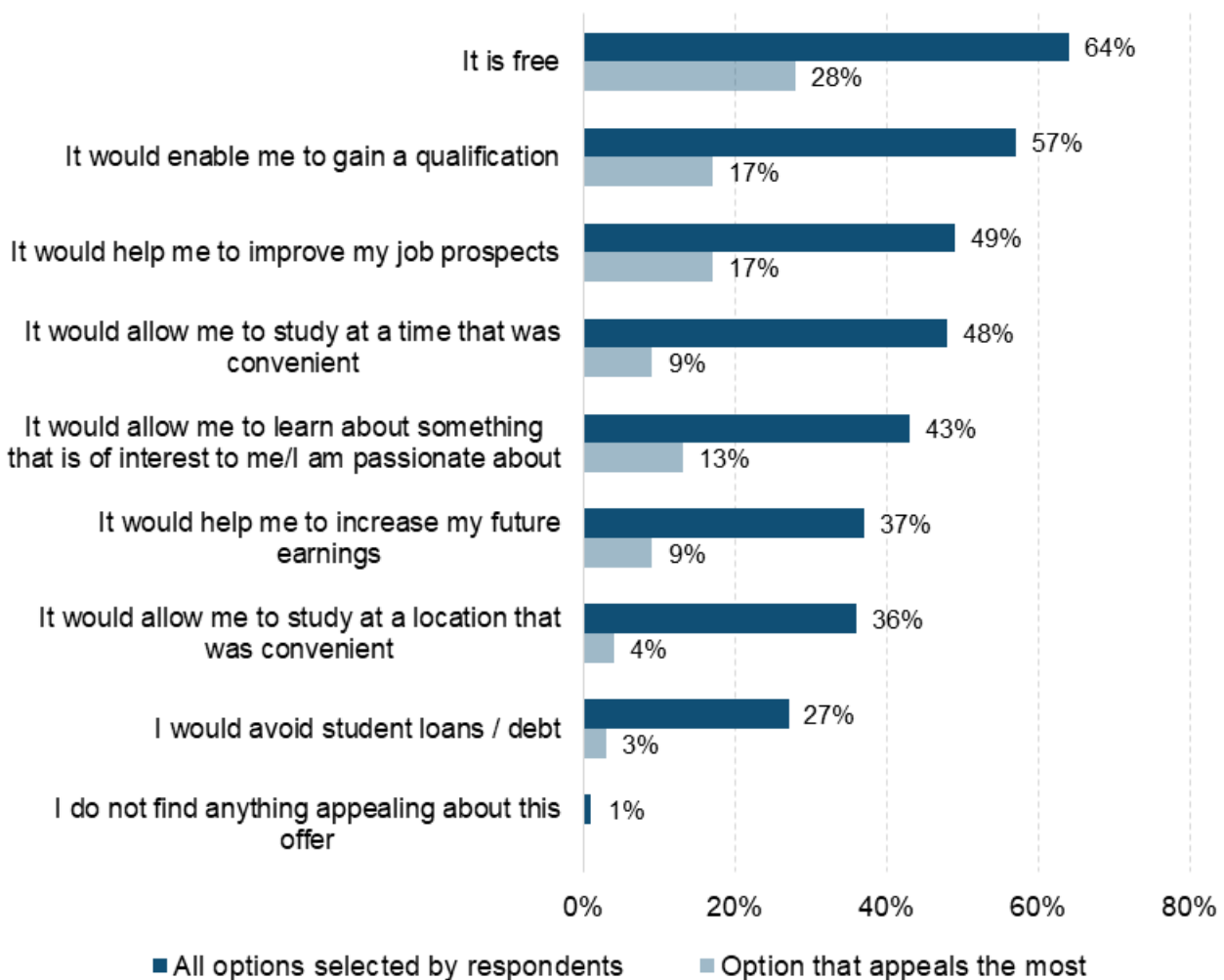
Almost two thirds of respondents (64 per cent) are attracted to the opportunity because it is free. Over half (57 per cent) said the opportunity to gain a qualification appealed to them. Respondents were also attracted to being able to improve their job prospects (49 per cent) or the opportunity to increase their earnings (37 per cent). Some respondents would be motivated by a flexible offer, for example if they could study at a convenient time (48 per cent) or study at a convenient location (36 per cent). The opportunity to learn something that they were interested in or passionate about was appealing to 43 per cent of respondents. Just over a quarter (27 per cent) indicated that avoiding student loans or debt made the Free Courses for Jobs offer attractive to them. Only one per cent of respondents said they did not find anything about the offer attractive.

Respondents who selected more than one option were then asked to say which one made the offer most appealing to them. Most commonly, respondents indicated that the offer of a free course appealed most to them, with 28 per cent selecting this option. Respondents generally prioritised outcomes of learning, such as gaining a qualification (17 per cent) or improving their job prospects (17 per cent), rather than practical



concerns such as being able to study at a convenient time (9 per cent) or location (4 per cent).

**Figure 4: What appeals about the Free Courses for Jobs offer**



Source: Online survey. Base: All respondents interested in NSF Free Courses for Jobs offer (616); Where more than one option selected (491)

Echoing the survey data, the majority of interview participants liked the fact that the offer is fully funded. Participants noted that this element would motivate them to pursue learning and would remove a barrier that was impacting on whether they would enrol on a course. This was particularly the case amongst those who are unemployed or in precarious employment, as they often had financial concerns. This is further exacerbated by the pandemic which has had a substantial impact on participants' financial circumstances.

' ... because it's paid for as well, you haven't got to lay out the money to get your diploma really, it's a really good thing... I'm unemployed, I

haven't got no savings or anything, so it would put a damper on it if I had to pay for it' – *Female, 58, Unemployed*

'Massive, without a doubt. It takes that worry out of your head, if it's fully-funded' – *Male, 45, Employed*

Despite this, some participants noted that they would be willing to pay at least some of the course themselves, however the fully funded nature of the course was still a plus. This was more common amongst those who had not mentioned having financial concerns or if their employment had not been impacted by the pandemic.

'I could probably afford to pay a percentage or the whole cost of it, but it is obviously a positive thing. Saving us that amount of money would be fantastic' – *Male, 50, Furloughed*

The appeal of gaining qualifications was also reiterated by interviewees, particularly amongst those who felt they could have achieved more when they were in full time education.

'It's made me realise actually education and having that as a background is going to definitely see me in the long run, that's what I should have considered ... at a young age' – *Female, 37, Furloughed*

For others, the offer appealed because they felt it would improve their job prospects. This included both getting a promotion or pay rise in their current job and moving to a different sector or employer which offered better career prospects.

'I'd be able to get qualifications and then probably put me in a position to go for different jobs that require those qualifications' – *Male, 24, Employed*

'We've got to be flexible in our learning now and adapt. Those jobs for life, they're not around anymore' – *Male, 54, Employed*

The interview participants noted that the offer appealed because it would help them to improve their confidence, it would be fulfilling, and they could be a good role model for their children.

'... it'd be confidence and stuff like that, and then me doing this for myself and gaining qualifications, I'd be able to ... tell people, 'Look, this is what I did'' – *Male, 24, Employed*

'...it would make me feel like I've achieved something. More career prospects. I'd just be proud of myself, really, at my age to be able to actually go back and do something like that' – *Female, 34, Unemployed*

## Barriers to taking up the offer

All survey respondents, regardless of their level of interest in the Free Courses for Jobs offer, were asked to select, from a list of options, which barriers might prevent them from taking up the offer (see Table 3). Around a quarter (24 per cent) of respondents said that nothing would prevent them from taking up the offer, of which 80 per cent were interested in the Free Courses for Jobs offer.

Barriers can be grouped into those that are dispositional or attitudinal<sup>10</sup>, and those that are situational and relate to individual circumstances<sup>11</sup>. The most common factor that could prevent respondents from taking up the offer is that they **do not want to go back into learning** (16 per cent) – a dispositional barrier. In addition, 11 per cent of respondents cited **not having the confidence or skills** to learn at Level 3, and 10 per cent said they **wouldn't know where to look for courses**. Some dispositional barriers relate to employment. For example, 15 per cent said they are **not looking to change their job or career**; eight per cent **did not think the Free Courses for Jobs offer would help to improve their job prospects**; and seven per cent said it would **not help to increase their future earnings**.

Situational barriers identified by respondents relate to time or work commitments, with 12 per cent saying they **do not have time to study** and 12 per cent indicating they would have **difficulty continuing with their current paid work**. Other practical considerations relate to a **lack of transport** (12 per cent); difficulty covering **travel costs** (11 per cent); getting **childcare cover** while they study (six per cent) and difficulty covering **childcare costs** (five per cent).

Six per cent of respondents indicated that something else would prevent them from taking up the offer. These additional barriers related to having a **disability or long-term health condition**; being a full time **carer**; and being close to **retirement**.

Respondents who selected more than one barrier were then asked which would be the biggest barrier to them taking up the offer. Most commonly, respondents said that they are **not looking to change jobs or career**, with 13 per cent stating this. Twelve per cent

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<sup>10</sup> Dispositional barriers are those relating to the attitudes, perceptions and expectations of adults, such as believing that they are too old to learn or lacking confidence or interest

<sup>11</sup> Situational barriers are those that arise from an adult's personal and family situation, such as time pressures and financial constraints.

of respondents said that they **do not want to go back into learning**, and 11 per cent that they **don't have the skills or confidence** to continue learning at this level.

**Table 3: Barriers to taking up the Free Courses for Jobs offer**

Barrier	All barriers	Main barrier
I do not want to go back into learning	16%	12%
I am not looking to change jobs or career	15%	13%
A lack of transport	12%	9%
It would be hard to continue my paid work	12%	10%
I do not have the time to study for a qualification	12%	7%
It would be hard to cover travel costs	11%	8%
I don't have the skills/confidence to learn at this level	11%	11%
I wouldn't know where to look for information about the courses available / where to do them	10%	3%
It would not help me to improve my career prospects	8%	4%
It would not help me to increase my future earnings	7%	4%
It would be hard to get childcare cover whilst I studied	6%	5%
It would be hard to cover childcare costs	5%	3%
I don't have access to a computer/laptop	4%	3%
I don't have access to the internet	1%	2%
Something else	6%	6%
Nothing would prevent me from taking up this offer	24%	-

Source: Online survey. Base: All respondents (1,006); Where more than one barrier identified (343)

A demographic breakdown of the data indicates that:

- Older respondents were more likely to say that they do not want to go back into learning. Twenty-six per cent of respondents aged over 55 and 20 per cent of respondents aged 46-55 said this, compared to just seven per cent of respondents aged 24-35 and nine per cent of those aged 36-45. Respondents aged over 55 were also more likely to say that they are not looking to change their job or career (28 per cent).

- Unemployed respondents were more likely to cite situational, including financial, barriers. For example, 27 per cent of respondents who are unemployed and seeking work said that a lack of transport is a barrier, and 24 per cent said that it would be difficult for them to cover travel costs. Ten per cent of respondents who are unemployed and not currently seeking work identified childcare costs as a barrier.
- Respondents who have not recently undertaken learning were more likely to say that they do not want to go back into learning. Twenty-two per cent of those who have not undertaken learning since leaving full time education and 19 per cent of those who haven't done so in the past three years cited not wanting to go back into learning as a barrier, compared to just four per cent of respondents currently engaged in learning.

Table 4 shows barriers to taking up the Free Courses for Jobs offer according to whether or not respondents are interested in the offer. Those who are not interested in the offer were generally more likely to identify dispositional or attitudinal barriers, for example:

- Just over a third (34 per cent) said that they do not want to go back into learning, compared to just five per cent of those interested in the offer.
- Three in ten (30 per cent) said they are not looking to change their job or career, compared to six per cent of those interested in the offer.
- Thirteen per cent said that the offer would not improve their job prospects, compared to six per cent of those interested in the offer.
- One in ten (10 per cent) said that the offer would not help to increase their future earnings, compared to six per cent of those interested.

By contrast, those interested in the offer are more likely to identify situational barriers such as lack of transport (15 per cent), difficulties with continuing paid work (14 per cent), travel costs (14 per cent), childcare cover (eight per cent) and childcare costs (seven per cent).

Of the respondents who are likely to take up learning or training in the next 12 months, but are not interested in the offer, the most common barrier preventing them from taking up Free Courses for Jobs offer is respondents not looking to change jobs or career (21 per cent). Other common barriers are respondents not wanting to go back into learning (16 per cent), and a perception that the offer would not help to improve job prospects (15 per cent).

**Table 4: Barriers to taking up the Free Courses for Jobs offer - by level of interest**

	<b>Interested in the Free Courses for Jobs offer</b>	<b>Not interested in the Free Courses for Jobs offer</b>	<b>Total</b>
Nothing would prevent me from taking up this offer	31%	11%	<b>24%</b>
A lack of transport	15%	7%	<b>12%</b>
I wouldn't know where to look for information about the courses available / where to do them	15%	4%	<b>10%</b>
It would be hard to continue my paid work	14%	9%	<b>12%</b>
It would be hard to cover travel costs	14%	6%	<b>11%</b>
I do not have the time to study for a qualification	10%	15%	<b>12%</b>
I don't have the skills/confidence to learn at this level	10%	11%	<b>11%</b>
It would be hard to get childcare cover whilst I studied	8%	3%	<b>6%</b>
It would be hard to cover childcare costs	7%	1%	<b>5%</b>
I am not looking to change jobs or career	6%	30%	<b>15%</b>
It would not help me to improve my job prospects	6%	13%	<b>8%</b>
It would not help me to increase my future earnings	6%	10%	<b>7%</b>
I do not want to go back into learning	5%	34%	<b>16%</b>
I don't have access to a computer/laptop	5%	2%	<b>4%</b>
Something else, please specify	3%	11%	<b>6%</b>
I don't have access to the internet	2%	1%	<b>1%</b>

Source: Online survey. Base: All respondents (1,006); Interested in offer (616); Not interested in offer (349)

These findings were mirrored by the qualitative interview findings in that both dispositional and situational barriers were noted. However, given that the interview participants were all interested in learning to some extent they were more likely to be interested in the offer. As a result, situational barriers were most likely to be mentioned throughout the interviews. The most common situational barriers raised included time constraints and those related to childcare and transport.

Interview participants often expressed concerns about **fitting learning around their work schedules**. This was a primary consideration both for those who are employed and

those who are unemployed and looking for work. These participants are not willing to compromise on paid work to take up learning due to their financial commitments.

'That would be the only thing that I guess would put me off, if it does coincide with a [work' schedule or a new [employer]' – *Female, 26, Furloughed*

'Especially in these times, the uncertainty with jobs and all that, people are not going to risk their job. They've got mortgages and bills to pay. So, we want to learn. We want to better ourselves, but the priority is paying your bills, isn't it? You've got to keep a roof over your head, haven't you?' – *Male, 54, Employed*

Time-related barriers were also discussed in relation to **parenting responsibilities**. Women, in particular, were likely to note the latter, as well as the availability of childcare and how this could impact on their decision to take up the offer.

'Because my daughter has the anxiety, she likes [her dad] or I to take her to school and pick her up at the minute. So, I would like it to fit around family life for me, as busy as I am, so I'd like to drop the girls at school and then go there for 9:00 and then do 9:00 until 12:00, or 9:00 until 1:00' – *Female, 49, Unemployed*

In addition, women also raised concerns about the **cost of childcare**. This was particularly an issue for those who did not have a partner or family who would be able to cover the childcare responsibilities.

'The nursery that my daughter goes to is like £70 a day. I have to work a lot of hours to make that money, so it is a big problem, childcare is.' – *Female, 38, Employed*

To a lesser extent, when compared to the cost of childcare, participants also identified the **cost of transport** as a barrier, including the cost of parking and petrol. Again, this was more of an issue for those who had mentioned that they lack financial security.

'I would hope for a bit of free parking because I know how expensive parking can be. If it was like £5 every time, that would be out of my reach.' – *Female, 54, Employed*

The **availability of public transport** did not feature as a significant issue among participants, however some women raised concerns around whether certain college car parks would be safe, for example, if they were well lit.

Interview participants also noted dispositional barriers. This included a **lack of confidence** in returning to learning, concerns that a Level 3 qualification would be too advanced, having existing opportunities through their employer, and scepticism around what they could gain from the qualification.

Older participants or those who had been out of learning for a long time lacked confidence in going back into learning. This would particularly be the case if they had to go to a college and be amongst younger students.

'I'm probably worried about other younger people there, feeling that I don't fit in. It'd be something like this that'd make me feel, 'I can't be doing this.' I mean, the way I look, the way I dress, do you know what I mean? That would just put me off' – *Female, 51, Unemployed*

Some participants also feel that pursuing a Level 2 or below qualification would be a more appropriate starting point as they could be eased into a subject area, particularly if they don't have prior experience.

'I'd rather start off on the middle ground and work my way up, instead of jumping right in at the deep end' – *Male, 24, Unemployed*

For some, employed participants, they were hesitant to take up the offer because they **already have a plan**, for example, their current employer offers the exact course they want and need.

'[The offer does not appeal] because it's being offered here already, where I am, and it's free and you do it in your own time.' – *Male, 26, Employed*

A small minority were not interested because they were **doubtful that it would help them with their intended career path** or improve their career prospects.

'It's something that right at this moment I probably wouldn't consider because I still want to give [singing] some more time... for what I'm currently doing, I'm in a situation where I've learnt so much through just teaching myself and through tutorials that I don't know how much extra I could learn.' – *Male, 28, Unemployed*

'Obviously, there would be no point in me going back and retraining to get [a Level 3 qualification] if there wasn't... some prospects of a better job for me.' – *Female, 38, Employed*



## Interest in available subjects

### Initial interest in subject areas

Survey respondents were shown a list of subject areas that would be available to take a course in as part of the Free Courses for Jobs offer. They were asked to identify which, if any, they would be interested in (see Table 5). Respondents were most likely to be interested in accounting and finance courses (24 per cent), followed by courses in health and social care (21 per cent). Seventeen percent of respondents said that would be interested in public services, 16 per cent were interested in ICT and/or business management. Agriculture and medicine and dentistry only attracted four per cent of respondents.

**Table 5: Interest in available subjects**

Subject area	% of total
Accounting and finance	24%
Health and social care	21%
Public services	17%
Business management	16%
ICT	16%
Warehousing and distribution	12%
Childcare and early years	10%
Environmental conservation	10%
Engineering	9%
Transportation operations and maintenance	9%
Horticulture and forestry	8%
Science	8%
Building and construction	7%
Teaching and Lecturing	7%
Nursing and subjects and vocations allied to medicine	6%
Manufacturing design and technologies	5%
Mathematics and statistics	5%
Agriculture	4%
Medicine and dentistry	4%

Source: Online survey. Base: All respondents (1,006)

Respondents' level of interest in the subjects varied by gender. Women were more likely than men to be interested in accounting and finance (30 per cent compared to 17 per cent); childcare and early years (16 per cent compared to two per cent); and health and

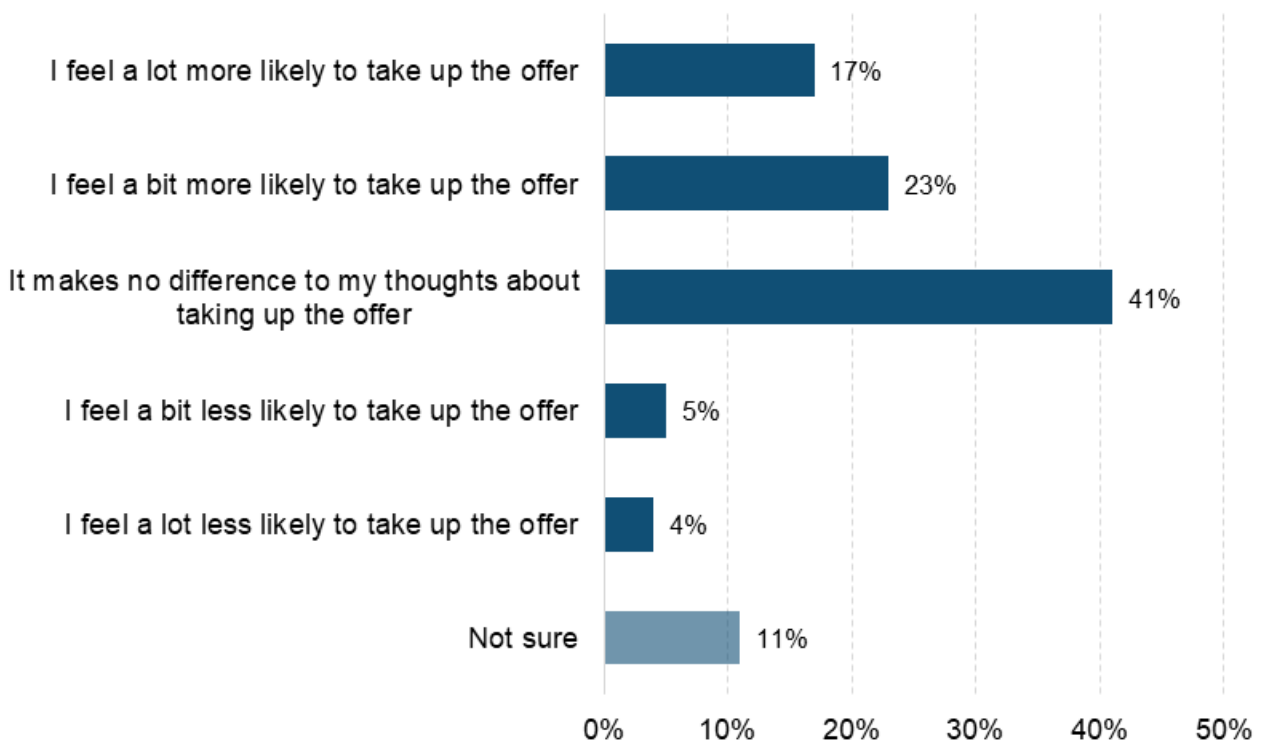
social care (29 per cent compared to 11 per cent). Men, meanwhile, were more likely than women to be interested in building and construction (13 per cent compared to two per cent); engineering (16 per cent compared to two per cent); transport operations and maintenance (17 per cent compared to two per cent); and warehousing and distribution (17 per cent compared to eight per cent). These findings reflect existing representation of men and women across these sectors more generally. Interest in manufacturing design and technologies was low, both for women (three per cent) and men (eight per cent). This was also the case for medicine and dentistry (six per cent and one per cent for women and men, respectively).

### **Impact of subjects available on likelihood to take up offer**

After viewing the list of subject areas available, survey respondents were asked whether they now felt more or less likely to take up the Free Courses for Jobs offer (see Figure 5). Four in ten respondents (40 per cent) said that they feel a lot more (17 per cent) or a bit more likely (23 per cent) to take up the offer after seeing the subjects available. Nine per cent said they feel less likely to take up the offer, while 41 per cent said that it makes no difference.

Sixty per cent of respondents who initially indicated that they were interested in the Free Courses for Jobs offer said that they would be more likely to take it up after seeing the list of available subjects, compared to nine per cent of respondents who were not interested in the offer. This suggests that while the subjects may appeal to those who already feel positively towards the offer, they are less likely to persuade those who are not interested in taking up learning.

#### **Figure 5: Likelihood to take up the Free Courses for Jobs offer after seeing the subjects available**



Source: Online survey. Base: All respondents (1,006)

Once qualitative interview participants had given their initial thoughts on the offer, they were also told which 19 subject areas the offer covers. This also included giving some examples of courses for each of the subject areas<sup>12</sup>. Generally, interviewees felt that the list of subject areas was comprehensive and being made aware of the subject areas did not substantially affect participants' views about the offer.

For those who remained interested in the offer after hearing the subject areas, this was either because one of the subject areas matched closely with a course they were already keen to pursue; it aligned with their current employment; participants were aware of opportunities and good career prospects in these sectors; or there were one or more courses that they had some interest in. Amongst those who were interested in the offer, the subject areas that most appealed included health and social care, business management, childcare and early years, building and construction, nursing and accounting and finance.

'There are also different directions you could go with [childcare and early years], you could work in a nursery or school or start your own business. There are different directions. That's something that stands out to me' – *Female, 34, Unemployed*

<sup>12</sup> [Qualifications in new funded offers - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)

'That'd be good for my current company, if I were able to train as an engineer, because there are a lot of engineering roles in the business' – *Female, 32, Employed*

'... if you just had a general job as well and you want to be some sort of manager, because being a business manager can take you far, and just having that qualification alone, it's there in black and white' – *Male, 30, Employed*

Some participants were very keen on the offer initially, but their interest lessened when they were told of the subjects on this list. This was because the subject areas did not match up with the sector or course they wanted to pursue. Examples of subject areas that were of interest but not on the list included hairdressing, languages, first aid and music.

'The one thing I would want help with isn't on the list which is very disappointing but there again with the government it's probably no surprise. That's really, really frustrating ... I'm just quite disappointed, I really am. That's not going to help me whatsoever. If they could add on hairdressing that would be good' – *Female, 48, Employed*

Lastly, some participants were not interested when they initially heard about the offer and remained disinterested once they had heard about the subject areas available. This was common amongst those who already had a set course they were due to pursue.

## Considered interest in offer

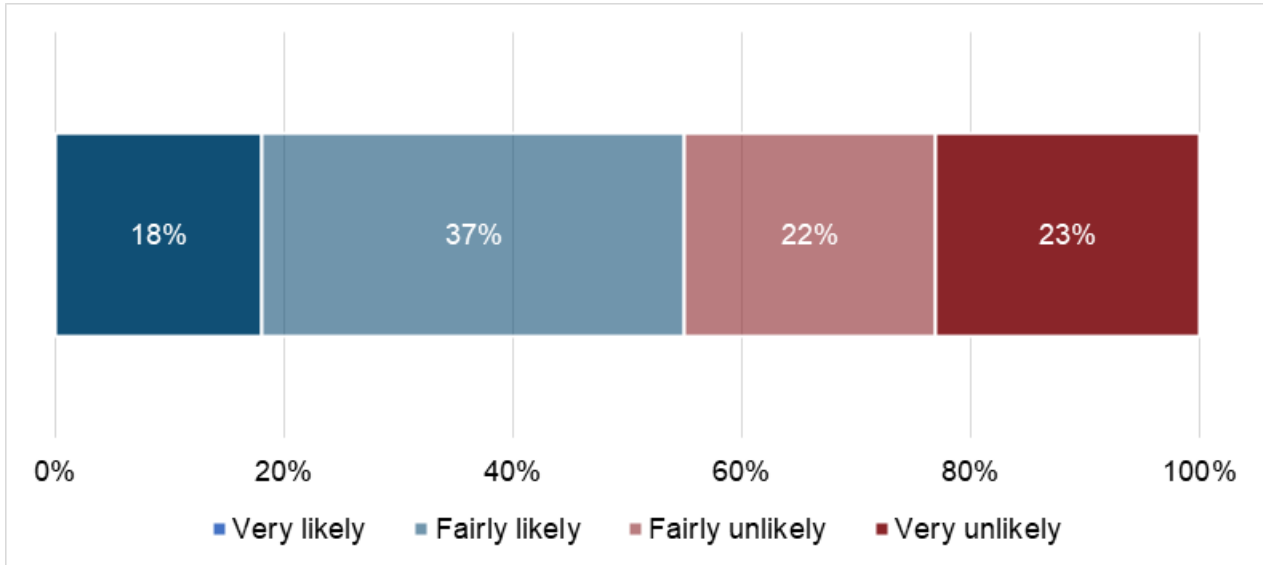
Towards the end of the survey, respondents were asked again whether, all things considered, they would be likely to take up the Free Courses for Jobs offer (see Figure 6).

Over half of respondents (55 per cent) said that they would be very likely (18 per cent) or fairly likely (37 per cent) to consider taking up the offer. Twenty-two per cent said that they would be fairly unlikely and 23 per cent that they would be very unlikely to do so (see Figure 6).

Eighty-four per cent of respondents who initially indicated that they would be interested in the Free Courses for Jobs offer went on to say that they would be either very or fairly likely to take it up. Of those who initially stated that they were not interested in the offer nine per cent went on to say that they would be either very or fairly likely to take it up.

A demographic breakdown indicates that the characteristics of those likely to consider taking up the Free Courses for Jobs offer are consistent with those who previously indicated they were interested in the offer.

**Figure 6: Considered likelihood to take up the Free Courses for Jobs offer**



Source: Online survey. Base: All respondents (1,006)

## Encouraging uptake of the Free Courses for Jobs offer

This section of the report explores how the offer could be made most accessible for individuals, including what information and support would encourage them to take up the offer, as well as what would facilitate and enable them to do this.

### Factors that would encourage take-up

All survey respondents, regardless of interest in the Free Courses for Jobs offer, were asked to select, from a list of options, which would make them more likely to take up the offer (see Figure 7).

Most commonly, respondents said that they would be more likely to take up the offer if they had **access to information on the jobs they could apply for and potential earnings once they completed the course** (23 per cent). There were notable differences between demographic characteristics, with unemployed respondents more likely (34 per cent) to take up the offer if they had information on the jobs they could apply for and potential earnings once they completed the course, compared to those working full time (21 per cent). This was also the case for those who had undertaken learning or training in the last three years (28 per cent) compared to those who hadn't done so since full time education (16 per cent) (see Figure 7).

Other factors frequently selected by respondents related to their employment prospects. For example, 20 per cent of respondents said that they would be more likely to take up the offer if they were **encouraged by their current employer**; and 20 per cent indicated they would be more likely to take up the offer if they were **offered a guaranteed interview** with an employer at the end of the course.

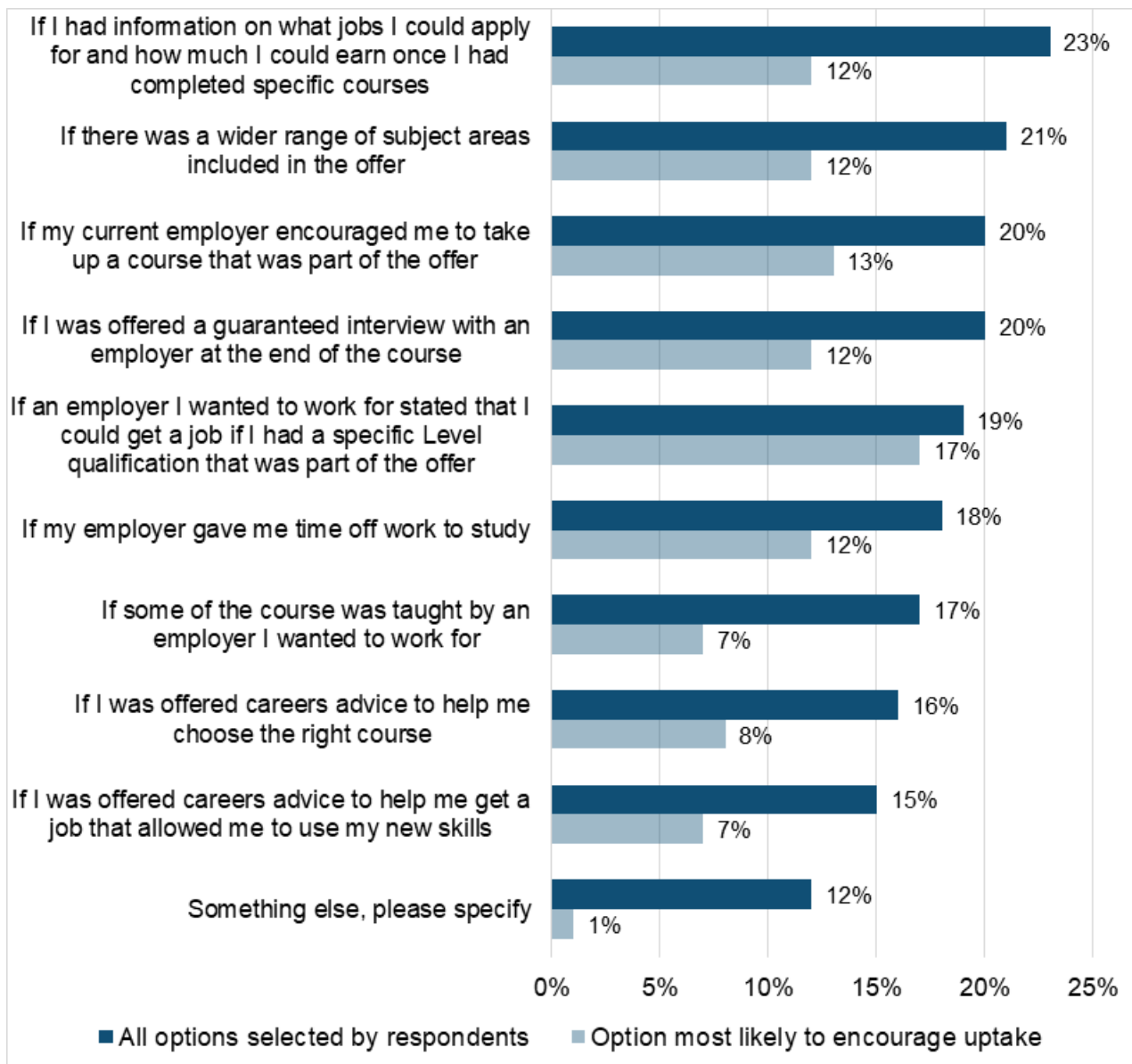
A fifth (21 per cent) of respondents said that they would be more likely to take up the offer if a **wider range of subjects was included in the offer**.

The factors least commonly cited by respondents related to **careers advice**, with 16 per cent saying they would be more likely to take up the offer if they were given advice about the right course for them, and 15 per cent saying they would like advice to **help them get a job that would enable them to use their new skills**.

Twelve per cent of respondents cited wider factors than those listed. The majority of these said that nothing would encourage them to take up the offer, due to being close to retirement, having a long-term health condition or caring responsibilities, for example. Some respondents said that they would be more inclined to take up the offer if appropriate support or flexibility were available, for example, accessibility for someone with disabilities or being able to balance childcare with their studies.

Respondents who selected more than one option were asked to state which would make them most likely to take up the offer. Seventeen per cent said that they would be more likely to take up the offer if an employer that they wanted to work for requested one of the qualifications. This was followed by 13 per cent of respondents who said that being encouraged by their current employer to take up the course would be the most influential. These results reinforce the importance of line of sight to a job or career progression as a key factor in adults' decision making about whether or not to engage in learning.

**Figure 7: Factors that would increase likelihood of taking up the Free Courses for Jobs offer**



Source: Online survey. Base: All respondents (1,006); Where more than one option selected (392)

During the qualitative interviews, participants were asked what might encourage them to take up the Free Courses for Jobs offer. Four key themes emerged:

### **Employers can play a useful role in making the offer visible**

Firstly, participants noted that both current and prospective employers are in a good position to encourage individuals to take up learning or training opportunities. In particular, employed participants felt that their current employer could do this by conveying information on courses related to upskilling, and the internal job opportunities that could arise as a result, through emails and on noticeboards. This would be particularly effective with those who wanted to continue working with their current employer or within the same sector. This information would be easily accessible, and participants felt it would motivate them to consider these opportunities. For instance, one participant mentioned the usefulness of an online training hub that used to be provided by their current employer:

‘Last year they [current employer] did start this scheme where there's an online training hub where you can see which courses are available, but it's been suspended because of lack of funds and the situation at the moment, so I think that would be good if it came back, yes’ – *Male, 58, Employed*

Similarly, participants also felt that prospective employers could provide information on job opportunities that would be available if they enrolled on a certain course. Most participants believed this would encourage them to take up learning.

‘It would give me that push to want to do it even more. To know [I could get] more money and can progress. That would be a push’ – *Female, 34, Unemployed*

### **Employers endorsing the offer is motivational**

Participants noted that having this information from employers would be even more impactful if the employer in question was one that they wanted to work for.

‘I think it would have more of an impact if it was an employer where I wanted to work... because if that's where I want to go and they support that and they're telling you information on it, you just feel a bit more comfortable to do it.’ – *Female, 34, Unemployed*

As well as this, participants mentioned that if they were in a job that they didn't like, having this influence from prospective employers would encourage them to take up the offer so that they would have the opportunity to move into a job that they did enjoy.



'If I was in a job that I didn't enjoy, or if I wasn't working, if someone came up to me and said, 'Are you doing this? We'll take you on. For whatever role, as long as you still do this course.' I think that would be a very positive impact, 100%' – *Female, 26, Furloughed*

## **Some are looking for a guarantee from an employer that the course will lead to employment outcomes**

Participants were also asked how specific they would need this information from employers to be, and this varied. For many participants, it was important that any offers made by employers were guaranteed and employers would need to be clear on what the role would include and what their earnings would be. Participants who were not in work and were less financially secure tended to place more emphasis on this.

'I would have to have it in writing, for them to say that 100%. I think that would really push me to get it going. Say they gave me a timeline of, 'You've got a year to get your level 3,' then, 100%, I wouldn't bother getting a job. I'd go straight to college and get my level 3, knowing full well that my dream job is coming to me' – *Female, 26, Unemployed*

'If you put other jobs on hold while you're doing this course, with the expectation that you're going to have something to go to at the end of it, and then that doesn't materialise, might seem like a bit of a waste of time' – *Male, 50, Furloughed*

For other participants, it was less important that employers had to be specific with the information they were providing and that any offers made were guaranteed.

'[Information from employers] would be nice, but it wouldn't be a deal killer ... I [would be] doing something which would be useful somewhere else' – *Male, 58, Employed*

'At the end of it, they [employers] could say, 'There's this job at the end of it. We're not going to 100% guarantee you're going to get it, because there's going to be multiple people going for it, but if you get this qualification it will definitely give you a better chance'' – *Male, 24, Employed*

Amongst those who are less interested in the offer, having 'line of sight' to a job wasn't necessarily enough to persuade them to engage with the offer.

'It would make me consider it a little bit more but I would probably consider the quickest and most convenient option' – *Male, 24, Unemployed*

## **Advertisements, 'word of mouth', 'career pathways' and practical information would also encourage take up**

More generally, advertisements in the public domain which contain information about the courses, and the jobs that they could result in, could encourage individuals to pursue learning. Similarly, 'word of mouth' also played a key role, for instance, some participants noted that if they knew of someone who had taken part in a certain course and it resulted in a certain job, this would motivate them to consider learning or training. This would be particularly important for those who are less confident about pursuing further learning, including older individuals and those who have not undertaken learning for a long period of time.

'It would be nice if it was actually in the job advert, that they were looking to potentially employ people who had retrained.' – *Female, 51, Employed*

Participants also noted that they would like to see 'career pathway' information clearly given on the Government website, which detailed what careers the Level 3 courses could lead to. Participants feel that the Government website is a credible source that can be trusted.

'You'd want to see [courses that are on offer] and what you could earn... You'd want to see the financial side of it, where it could take you' – *Male, 24, Employed*

Lastly, for participants to consider taking up the Free Courses for Jobs offer, they also noted that they would need practical information. This includes detailed information on the courses available, how long they would take to complete and where they would take place. This was more common amongst those who were intent on pursuing learning or had already started taking proactive steps to do so.

## **Factors that would enable take-up**

Participants were asked during the qualitative interviews what the offer would need to look like for them to take it up.

## Convenience and flexibility

A consistent theme was that in order for take up to be possible, the course must be convenient and flexible so that it can fit in with existing or future employment, and/or parenting responsibilities. This point was often considered a non-negotiable dealbreaker which participants are not willing to compromise on.

‘As long as I [would be able to] drop my son off at nursery, go [to a college], and then my partner could pick him up in the afternoon.’ – Female, 26, Unemployed

‘When you're working somewhere like me, being able to do it in your own time is better than having to have set days where you go to a college or you have an online tutorial and stuff’ – *Female, 26, Employed*

‘If it was too static, too fixed. If it was being at a certain place, at a certain time. Unless it's within my ability to do that but if it wasn't, it would just make it impossible for me. If it was only limited times, limited availability’ – *Male, 50, Furloughed*

Due to many interviewees being in employment and having childcare or caring responsibilities, part time and evening courses were typically preferred. Specific hours per week that participants could dedicate to a course varies, from two to 20 hours. This depends on the intensity and timings of their other commitments, for instance, whether they are in full time or part time work, or whether they would need to learn flexibly around school or nursery hours.

Additionally, specifics surrounding what times would work best for participants, such as part time and evening courses, varied greatly. There was no clear preference for courses to be a certain time or day in the week as this was dependent on circumstances, such as each participant’s working hours. Therefore, it is important that providers can be flexible and tailor courses to suit individual needs.

Participants noted other factors that would enable them to take up the offer, however, all of these would often link back to the course needing to be convenient and flexible, further amplifying the importance of this.

## Childcare

As well as a course needing to fit around school or nursery hours, childcare would need to be provided when they were in learning. This was particularly the case for women who are single parents who do not have a partner to share the parenting responsibilities with.

'Childcare is a big one. If nobody could look after my daughter or if she's not at school or nursery then it wouldn't be possible for me to do it at a college or wherever' – *Female, 34, Unemployed*

'...unless they had some sort of library facilities where, say you had to bring your children with you, I'm just trying to think of things like that, or unless they gave you the opportunity to work remotely on days where you can't be in class, where you could still be in class but via Zoom, or just ways that they can help to facilitate that, and just be flexible for you where possible' – *Female, 37, Furloughed*

To a lesser extent, women who are parents would want the cost of childcare to also be covered. This was particularly the case for those who had less financial security, for example, those who are unemployed, have limited savings or do not have a partner to support them.

'My perfect package would be it's got the exact hours I'd need. If I did need childcare there'd be X-amount of hours discounted or free, a bit like the 15 hours free that you can get for 2-year-olds' – *Female, 30, Unemployed*

## Transport

For some participants it was also noted that the location of the course would need to be local and for some, it would need to be accessible by public transport. Participants would be willing to spend less than an hour in total, travelling to and from a college. They also noted that any travel time would cut into the time they could spend learning.

'You don't want to spend too much time travelling and not actually learning' – *Male, 50, Furloughed*

Generally, participants who had wider commitments, such as young children or a full time job, were less willing to compromise on the time needed for travel. For instance, one interviewee, who has two young children and also cares for her father-in-law who lives with Parkinson's explained that she would need to stay near home:

'I don't mind being half an hour away but because of my commitments here I've got to be somewhere where I can just get back quick if I needed to' – *Female, 30, Unemployed*

Another participant with a full time job felt that the time needed for travel would need to be limited, as otherwise this would limit their free time and be tiring.

'Say you've done nine to five and then got to travel somewhere. Then it's four hours and then you've got another hour, you're not going to get home until 11 o'clock, and then you've got to get back up for work. It's a big ask if you're doing that twice a week for a year or two years, it seems very tiring' – *Male, 44, Employed*

A minority raised that they would also want the cost of travel to be covered. This was particularly the case for those who lacked financial security. The cost of travel and whether financial support would be available to cover this was significant when contemplating the offer.

'I would hope for a bit of free parking because I know how expensive parking can be. If it was like £5 every time, that would be out of my reach. I just have to watch the pennies because I have to pay all the bills. I think if you had free parking and the fees paid, that would be marvellous, because it's accessible' – *Female, 54, Employed*

## Course delivery

Course duration was noted by some as a factor in their decision making. The preferred duration of a course varied from four weeks to one year. For most participants, course duration was not viewed as a dealbreaker towards the offer, and they would generally be willing to negotiate this.

Participants that are motivated to learn and believe that a course would benefit their future career prospects are typically willing to take up a course that would last longer. On the other hand, there were participants who were less willing to invest time in a longer course learning because they wanted to complete the course and move into a new job as quickly as possible.

'[A shorter course length] helps you focus more and commit to passing the qualification as soon as' – *Male, 45, Employed*

As well as this, previous learning experience was also an indicator of how much time participants were willing to dedicate to a course, for example, one individual did their Level 2 course in four weeks and expected the same of a Level 3 course.

In terms of course delivery methods, an online approach appealed because it would allow them to be flexible and they could learn as and when they had time to. This was particularly the case for those who had demanding commitments such as a full time job or women with parenting responsibilities.

'I probably would prefer that [online provision] because sometimes I do have to drop everything and just go to my father-in-law, or if I get a phone call from the school I've got to just go. Online would be best, it gives me that little bit more freedom' – *Female, 30, Unemployed*

'Just, no time, or the location of it, or if it's not online, if it doesn't fit my schedule [could all prevent me from taking up the offer].' – *Male, 24, Unemployed*

There were also those who felt that doing learning face to face would be appealing because, it would give them the opportunity to socialise, ask questions in person and help them to stay motivated.

'[Going into college] might help you to stay on track if you're working from home. You know once a week you're going to go there, you're going to see your tutor' – *Female, 32, Employed*

Overall, most participants felt that there were disadvantages and advantages to both online and face-to-face learning. Therefore, most felt that a blended approach would be most suitable, with online learning that they could do in their own time being the key source of learning, but with an option to have face-to-face interactions with their peers and tutors on a monthly basis.

In addition to this, there were mixed opinions about how the course should be structured. Most noted that they would want to complete the course continuously without breaks and get the course completed as soon as possible. This was often the case for those who wanted to experience the benefits of the qualification, such as getting a job with better career prospects or getting a higher income, as soon as possible.

'I'd probably just do the whole course [in one go]. There's no point otherwise, that's what it's there for. You'd obviously finish it' – *Female, 26, Furloughed*

Whilst a minority of other participants said that they would prefer course modules to be spread out in staggered units, so that they could take their time with learning. This was more common amongst those who lacked confidence in learning or felt that this would offer them greatly flexibility if they had time constraints.

'That [having staggered units] would be easier for me ... because of my personal ability. I can only absorb so much, so I need to do little bits and then perhaps revise on ... what I've done ... I can't take big chunks in' – *Female, 51, Unemployed*

## Support

This section of the report explores the sources individuals would be most likely to go to for information and advice on learning and training.

### Learning and training information sources

Survey respondents were asked where they would be most likely to go to for information or advice on gaining new skills to improve their job or career prospects<sup>13</sup> (Figure 8). Over half (55 per cent) of respondents indicated they would use a general online search for information or advice about gaining new skills. Around a quarter said that they would go to Jobcentre Plus (26 per cent); to family, friends or colleagues (24 per cent); to education providers (23 per cent); or to their current employer (23 per cent). Seventeen per cent stated that they would seek information from prospective employers or from a professional, sector or trade organisation. Sixteen per cent said they would go to the National Careers Service for information, and 15 per cent would look on social media (see Figure 8).

Seventeen per cent of respondents indicated that they did not know where they would look for information about skills to improve their job prospects.

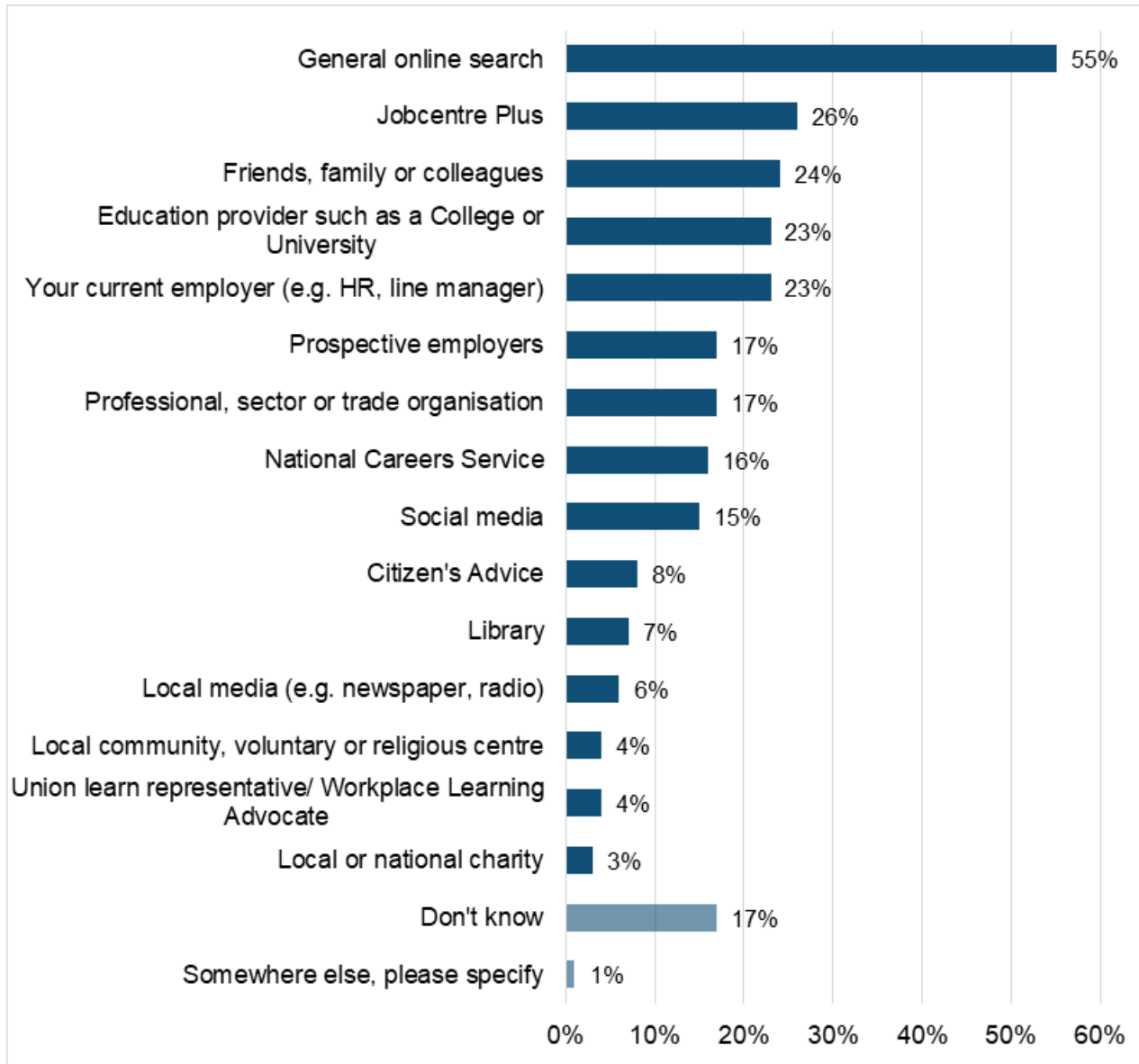
Respondents who are employed (full time or part time) are more likely than unemployed adults to go to their current or previous employer for information or advice (25 per cent, compared to nine per cent). Those in full time work are also more likely than unemployed adults to seek support through a professional, sector or trade organisation (24 per cent, compared to 12 per cent). In contrast, unemployed adults who are looking for work are more likely than average to seek information through Jobcentre Plus (42 per cent, compared to 26 per cent).

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<sup>13</sup> From a list of 14 options (including 'Something else'), respondents were asked to select the three that they were most likely to go to for information and advice.



**Figure 8: Sources of information and guidance**



Source: Online survey. Base: All respondents (1,006)

Similar to the survey, most interview participants stated that they would use an internet search engine to search for this information and advice.

‘I wouldn't know where else to look... The internet is pretty straightforward, you can find everything’ – *Female, 34, Unemployed*

The search terms mentioned by participants included:

- ‘Retraining for mature people’
- ‘Further education’
- ‘Adult learning’

- 'Evening classes'
- 'Courses for adults'
- 'Courses for gaining qualifications for jobs'

In addition to these search terms, participants would also enter their local area or their subject area of interest.

'...put training courses in and probably put the area that I live in and then just see what variety come up and take it from there' – *Female, 57, Employed*

Specific online sources mentioned and these included GOV.UK and local college websites. These websites are viewed as being trustworthy, informative and in some circumstances, participants were already familiar with them. However, clarity was equally important and not all interviewees felt this was the case.

'[the information on GOV.UK needs to be] step-by-step, and I think it needs to be in layman terms as well, like bullet points, so it's very easy to read and it's not jargon.' – *Female, 42, Employed*

Whilst the internet was noted by the majority of participants as the first place they would source information, being able to discuss information and obtain support in-person, or over the phone, was also considered to be a good option. Participants noted that the information and support is more likely to be tailored to their own circumstances. A number of participants mentioned libraries and colleges, a few participants mentioned Citizens Advice.

'You're only going to get a brief description as to what the course outline is [online], but it's only when you go physically talk to somebody [at the college] and say 'I've got an interest' that they will tell you more about it' – *Male, 60, Self-employed*

A number also noted Jobcentre Plus, however, most participants said that they would not use it for information and advice around learning or training. Participants gave several reasons for this, including, they feel that Jobcentre Plus is focused on employment opportunities as opposed to learning opportunities; it is targeted towards individuals receiving benefits; there is a stigma attached to visiting Jobcentre Plus; Jobcentre Plus staff are too busy to help; or they do not live close enough to a Jobcentre Plus.

'Well, up here, the closest Jobcentre is about 25 miles away, so that wouldn't be [possible]' – *Female, 33, Employed*

'I know it sounds terrible, but I'd be too embarrassed if anyone saw me [in Jobcentre Plus]' – *Male, 55, Furloughed*

Participants also noted that they would go to their employer for information and advice on internal courses or courses within the same sector.

'I've been here a long time, and so has [the training manager], so we kind of have a good relationship... I feel comfortable to ask him anything'. – *Male, 26, Employed*

However, participants considering a move to a different employer or sector felt that their current employer would not be forthcoming with this information, since they would not want to risk their employees finding employment elsewhere.

## Engaging a diverse group of adults

The survey results indicate that respondents with recent experience of learning are statistically more likely to be interested in the NSF Free Courses for Jobs offer than those who have not, and say they are more likely to take up the offer. These respondents are also more likely to be planning to take up learning or training to improve their career prospects in the next 12 months. This supports wider evidence, which shows that adults who have participated in learning within the last three years are more likely to continue doing so than those who have not<sup>14</sup>. As such, there is a risk of deadweight – that is, those who take up the Free Courses for Jobs offer would have taken up learning anyway, without the additional financial investment.

Just over two fifths (43 per cent) of respondents who have not taken part in learning since leaving full time education stated that they would be interested in the offer, and 34 per cent of this group said that they are likely to take up the NSF Free Courses for Jobs offer. This indicates that there is some potential to engage a wider group of adults in learning through the offer.

We have therefore undertaken analysis of the subgroup of respondents who:

1. Have not undertaken learning in the past three years, or since leaving full time education  
And
2. Are 'very' or 'quite' interested in the Free Courses for Jobs offer, and/or would be 'very' or 'quite' likely to take it up.

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<sup>14</sup> Learning and Work Institute, [Adult Participation in Learning Survey](#)

This group was looked at separately as it is likely that this is the group for whom the offer could make the most difference to.

The analysis indicates that this subgroup, when compared to those who do not fit into this subgroup, are more likely to be:

- Unemployed (32 per cent compared to 21 per cent) and less likely to be employed full time (36 per cent compared to 43 per cent).
- Parents (40 per cent compared to 31 per cent).
- Younger, with 22 per cent aged 24-35 (compared to 18 per cent of the wider sample) and 34 per cent aged 36-45 (compared to 25 per cent).

This subgroup of respondents were more likely to cite dispositional barriers to learning compared to those who are not part of this subgroup. This group was most likely to state their main barrier to taking up the NSF Free Courses for Jobs offer was not having the skills or confidence to learn at this level (16 per cent, compared to nine per cent of the remaining survey sample). They were also more likely to say that they would not know where to look for information (15 per cent, compared to nine per cent).

Practical barriers that were more likely to be raised by these survey respondents, compared to the remaining survey sample, include:

- Covering childcare costs (eight per cent, compared to four per cent).
- A lack of transport (17 per cent, compared to 10 per cent).
- Not having access to a computer or laptop (six per cent, compared to three per cent).

When asked what would make them more likely to take up the Free Courses for Jobs offer, these respondents were more likely to select options related to improving their employment prospects:

- Almost a third (32 per cent) said they would be more likely to take up the offer if they were given information on what jobs they could apply for and potential earnings (compared to 19 per cent of other respondents).
- A quarter (25 per cent) said that they would be more likely to take up the offer if an employer who they wanted to work for requested one of the qualifications (compared to 16 per cent of other respondents).
- A quarter (25 per cent) also said that they would be more likely to take up a course if they were offered a guaranteed interview (compared to 18 per cent of other respondents).

They were also more likely to select answers related to careers advice:

- Nearly a third (32 per cent) said that they would be more likely to take up the offer if they were offered careers advice to help them choose the right course (compared to 14 per cent of other respondents).
- Just over a fifth (21 per cent) said they would be more likely to take up the offer if they were offered careers advice to help them get a job utilising their new skills (compared to 13 per cent of other respondents).

Thirty per cent also said that they would be more likely to take up a course if a wider range of subject areas were included, compared to 17 per cent of other respondents.

These findings indicate that adults who have not recently undertaken learning may require more proactive and targeted outreach and support to engage them in the NSF offer. This support could include careers information, advice and guidance when making decisions about their learning, as well as learner support during their course. When asked where they would go for information or advice on gaining new skills to improve their job or career prospects, respondents in this subgroup were most likely to say that they would conduct a general online search (63 per cent, compared to 52 per cent of other respondents) or go to Jobcentre Plus (31 per cent, compared to 24 per cent of other respondents). As such, it is important to ensure that information online is clear, accessible, up to date and available from credible sources. Providing information through Jobcentre Plus could also be a particularly useful way of reaching out to those who are currently unemployed.

## Conclusion and recommendations

The aim of this research is to understand how adults can be effectively engaged in the National Skills Fund (NSF) Free Courses for Jobs offer. The study consisted of two strands: a survey, providing quantitative data on who is likely or unlikely to take up the offer and what their barriers and motivators are; and qualitative interviews, which offer more detailed insight into adults' reasons for engaging with learning, how likely they would be to take up the offer and what would encourage them to do so.

The majority (61 per cent) of survey respondents indicated that they would be interested in taking up the NSF Free Courses for Jobs offer, and 55 per cent said they are likely to take up the offer. Individuals taking part in the qualitative interviews were overwhelmingly positive about the offer. Reasons for taking up the offer include it being fully funded; because it could improve job prospects; and it could be an opportunity to gain a qualification, which was particularly important to interviewees who felt that they didn't reach their potential in previous education. Employment and career progression are key motivators for taking up the offer. Both the survey and the interviews indicate that people would be more likely to take up the offer if they received encouragement from an employer and there is a clear line of sight to job or a progression opportunity.

Wider evidence on adult decision making about whether or not to learn highlights the influence of life events that can trigger engagement<sup>15</sup>. This study supports this with the qualitative interviews indicating that people with children who have reached, or are approaching, school age are likely to start considering learning or different career options. The economic impact of the pandemic may also trigger some adults into learning, with those who have been furloughed in the past year being more likely to be interested in the NSF Free Courses for Jobs offer.

For those who are interested in the NSF Free Courses for Jobs offer, the survey indicates that they are more likely to experience situational barriers, such as a lack of transport, difficulties with continuing paid work, and difficulties finding childcare cover and covering travel costs. In contrast, those who are not interested in the offer were generally more likely to identify dispositional or attitudinal barriers, for example, not wanting to go back into learning or not looking to change their job. The differences in the barriers between these two groups reflect the different stages of decision making that they are at.<sup>16</sup> At the pre-contemplation stage of decision making, adults are not actively engaging with the possibilities of learning. They may be influenced by their perceptions of themselves, social and cultural norms and/or previous experiences. Opportunities to engage them are based on changing attitudes and may include interventions that raise

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<sup>15</sup> Kantar Public and Learning and Work Institute (2018) [Decisions of adult learners](#). Department for Education

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

the profile of learning in adults' consciousness or communications that create a culture in which learning is an ordinary part of life. Once adults are at the contemplation stage of decision making, where they are considering options, they are more likely to be influenced by practical and circumstantial issues. Opportunities to maintain engagement include careers information, advice and guidance and ensuring that learning provision is delivered flexibly.

The findings emphasise the need for flexibility in the delivery of learning to ensure it fits alongside work and other commitments, with survey respondents stating a preference for developing skills on the job or through online or distance learning. Flexibility and convenience was a cross-cutting theme in the qualitative interviews, and the specific requirements for the timing or mode of delivery varied greatly by individuals' circumstances, such as their work pattern, caring responsibilities or confidence in their ability to learn. This demonstrates the importance of learning providers' ability to tailor their provision to different groups of learners.

The survey highlights the characteristics of adults who are more likely to consider taking up the NSF Free Courses for Jobs offer. This includes adults who are thinking about taking up learning in the near future (87 per cent, compared to the average, 55 per cent) and those who have had recent learning experiences (84 per cent of respondents who are currently engaged in learning, compared to the average, 55 per cent). Younger adults are also more likely to consider taking up the offer (78 per cent of respondents aged 24-35 were likely to take up the offer, compared to 24 per cent of those aged over 55). These findings are consistent with wider evidence that shows that adult participation in learning declines with age, and that those with more recent experience of learning are most likely to continue in the future<sup>17</sup>.

There is a risk that a blanket approach to outreach and marketing of the NSF Free Courses for Jobs offer will result in high levels of deadweight, whereby people taking up the courses would have done so anyway in the absence of the policy. The evaluation of the DfE's Cost and Outreach Pilots found that, while the offer of course fee subsidies was a factor in encouraging adults to enrol on courses, the subsidy had more impact on the timing of learning, rather than participation itself, with the subsidy enabling adults to do the course sooner than planned<sup>18</sup>. In this way, the course fee subsidy provided a trigger for learning, rather than necessarily reaching adults who wouldn't have taken up learning otherwise.

Subgroup analysis of respondents who do not have recent experience of learning but who stated they would be interested in the offer or likely to take it up, indicates that this group are more likely to be unemployed, parents and aged 24-45. This subgroup of

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<sup>17</sup> Learning and Work Institute, [Adult Participation in Learning Survey](#)

<sup>18</sup> Learning and Work Institute (2021) [Cost and Outreach Pilots evaluation: final report](#). Department for Education

respondents was more likely to cite dispositional barriers to learning compared to others, with a lack of skills or confidence being the main barrier. They were also more likely than other respondents to say that they would not know where to look for information, indicating that this group may require more proactive and targeted outreach and support to engage them in the NSF offer. When asked where they would go for information or advice on gaining new skills to improve their job or career prospects, these respondents were more likely to mention an internet search and Jobcentre Plus. This emphasises the importance of clear and credible information being available online from trustworthy sources, as well as the role of Jobcentre work coaches in raising awareness of the NSF Free Courses for Jobs offer and potentially making referrals to learning providers.

The survey results show that respondents' level of interest in the subjects included in the offer vary by gender, reflecting existing gender differences across sectors in the labour market. For example, women were more likely than men to be interested in health and social care and childcare and early years. In contrast, men were more likely than women in construction and engineering. It is therefore important that the Free Courses for Jobs offer addresses rather than reinforces the underrepresentation of women and men in different sectors.

## Policy considerations

The research highlights a number of considerations for the DfE as they develop and implement the National Skills Fund:

1. **Communications** about the offer should:
  1. focus on **potential benefits** to individuals, especially employment-related outcomes such as the jobs people could apply for and potential earnings. This could help to raise individuals' perception of learning. It is important that these communications are proactive in order to reach adults who may not see the relevance of learning. This could include testimonials from people who have taken up the Free Courses for Jobs offer which discuss the positive impacts that the qualification has had on them.
  - a. encourage people to think about how learning could benefit their prospects in the **future**, as well in the **short-term**. This should help to ensure that people are adaptable to longer-term changes in the market, rather than waiting until their job is at risk of redundancy before they consider upskilling or retraining.
  - b. aim to **challenge gender stereotypes** across sectors. For example, through the use of role models, and myth-busting information to demystify the jobs in different sectors and the skills and personal attributes required.



- c. targeted at those who **may not otherwise take up learning** i.e. are unemployed, parents and aged 24-45. In particular, messages should seek to address dispositional barriers relating to confidence and clear signposting to sources of information.
  - d. contain information on the **practical elements** of the course, as well as where they can go to find out more about the offer.
2. **Credible and trustworthy sources** with clear information about the learning offer need to be easy to find online. This is particularly important once individuals are aware of an offer and require practical information about the courses available, entry requirements, the time commitment involved and the location of learning etc. to support their decision making.
  3. Some research participants would be more likely to take up learning if they knew a qualification was endorsed by an employer. Therefore, the government needs to **secure employer support** for the courses available as part of the offer, and relay this in communications about the offer. One way to achieve this, for example, would be for job adverts to emphasise that employers value these qualifications and signpost where people could get the qualification or find out more about the offer. The government could consider including this as criteria in government contracts to ensure that this happens.
  4. Ensure it is **accessible to those on low incomes** by:
    - a. supporting the wider **financial costs** of learning, for example the cost of childcare and transport, particularly for adults with limited financial resources. Unemployed survey respondents were more likely to indicate that they would need help with these situational barriers.
    - b. raise awareness of the offer amongst **Jobcentre Plus work coaches**
  5. Learning providers need to ensure their provision is **accessible to adults and can flex to their different circumstances**, for example:
    - a. options for **learning at work** to support individuals to learn and balance their work and wider commitments. This links to the appeal of developing skills on the job, and also addresses difficulties in balancing work and wider commitments. This would require partnership working between employers and learning providers, as well as ESFA policy and funding to support this.
    - b. deliver courses in the **evenings as well as during the day** and offering a combination of **online and face-to-face delivery**. In addition, flexibilities to deliver

intensive or modular provision may also require changes to ESFA funding policy and/or national regulatory frameworks.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Learning and Work Institute (2021, unpublished) Flexible learning at Levels 3-5



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For any enquiries regarding this publication, contact us at:

[danielle.beaton@education.gov.uk](mailto:danielle.beaton@education.gov.uk) or [www.education.gov.uk/contactus](http://www.education.gov.uk/contactus)

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