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Evaluation of the Level 3 Free Courses for Jobs offer

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Pye Tait Consulting



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Social Research

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Executive Summary

Introduction

There is strong evidence about the value of gaining a Level 3 (L3) qualification.¹ However, a third (34%) of people fail to reach L3 by age 25,² while the cost of L3 qualifications is known to have a measurable negative impact on their uptake by adults.³

To help the country respond and 'build back better', in September 2020 the Government announced the *Lifetime Skills Guarantee*. The Lifetime Skills Guarantee includes the Level 3 Free Courses for Jobs offer, which from April 2021 provided fully funded L3 (A Level-equivalent qualifications) in England for adults who do not currently hold a L3 qualification.

The aim of the Free Courses for Jobs offer is to enable eligible adults to reskill and upskill, to help them access better job opportunities and to address key skills priorities. In April 2022, eligibility to the Level 3 Free Courses for Jobs offer was expanded, on a trial basis, to also include adults earning low wages or unemployed, even if they already hold a L3 or higher.

In addition to fully funding eligible learners through the Free Courses for Jobs offer, providers are paid per-qualification a funding uplift to support delivery for each eligible learning aim, based on published Guided Learning Hours for the qualification.

Pye Tait Consulting was commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) to undertake an independent evaluation of the Level 3 Free Courses for Jobs offer. At the time of evaluation, the offer comprised approximately 400 L3 courses in a variety of sector subject areas (SSAs).

Four specific objectives at the outset of the research were to undertake an uptake analysis, a provision analysis, a learner analysis, and a process analysis in order to:

- identify the nature and extent of impact using quantitative and qualitative metrics,
- explore implementation effectiveness, and
- draw on best practice/lessons learned to determine what could be improved in the future.

The evaluation ran from September 2021 to May 2022. It comprised a survey of 403 providers and 235 learners with follow-up in-depth interviews with 33 providers and 20

¹ Department for Education (2021) Review of post-16 qualifications at Level 3 in England

² Department for Education (2022) Academic year 2020/21: Level 2 and 3 attainment age 16 to 25

³ Department for Education (2021) The National Skills Fund – Government Consultation

learners.⁴ Five case studies, based on the provider in-depth interviews, are contained in Appendix C. In addition, analysis of Individualised Learner Record⁵ (ILR) data was undertaken. This allowed a comparison to be made between a baseline of 2018/19 data before the offer was introduced and the early days of the offer from April to November 2021.

This evaluation took place during the first year of the Free Courses for Jobs offer at a time when the country was still recovering from the Covid-19 pandemic. Findings reported herein represent a snapshot of the policy in its infancy at this particular point in time.

Key findings

Providers' views on capacity and demand

ILR analysis reveals that the number of providers offering eligible courses has remained steady, but the average number of courses offered per provider has increased.

Just under three quarters (72%) of surveyed providers say they have introduced new SSAs to their offering, with Health and social care most commonly mentioned. Around half (47%) of surveyed providers say their capacity has increased to a small extent (under 10% increase in adult learners). Meanwhile, just under one quarter (24%) of surveyed providers say they have made no change in their capacity for adult learners.

Most interviewed providers suggest that demand for courses included in the Free Courses for Jobs offer and for jobs linked to these courses is slightly higher than those outside of the offer. A minority raise a concern that courses in scope of the offer do not meet local labour market needs.

Uptake

Compared to the 2018/19 baseline before the Free Courses for Jobs intervention started, starts of funded learners on eligible courses⁶ have increased by 54% (from 7,173 to 11,042 in April-November 2021). Starts are up in all nine English regions, and in most SSAs, with notable relative increases in Health and social care, ICT practitioners, and Building and construction.

⁴ Respondents are henceforth referred to throughout the report as either surveyed providers, surveyed learners, interviewed providers or interviewed learners.

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/individualised-learner-record-ilr>

⁶ That is, learners funded through the Free Courses for Jobs offer

Almost three quarters (74%) of surveyed learners say they would have been very unlikely, or slightly less likely, to have begun their L3 course had it not been free⁷. They say they would not have been able to fund the course themselves, most typically due to: unemployment, low income, childcare costs, family commitments, or ineligibility for learner loans.

Mode of delivery

Around two thirds (64%) of surveyed providers agree that the Free Courses for Jobs offer has enabled their institution to deliver more remote live classes/study groups, or to employ more staff to deliver adult L3 courses (63%). Agreement levels are noticeably higher among providers who did not previously offer adult L3 courses.

The increased provision of remote and flexible learning was largely driven by the Covid-19 pandemic, but the benefits of this approach enable adult learners to study flexibly, and almost all interviewed learners are positive about these experiences.

Impact of funding for providers

Two in five interviewed providers agree the funding is adequate to meet their needs and allows them to increase the volume of learners. Around three quarters (76%) of surveyed providers agree the uplift funding specifically has enabled them to increase their adult L3 learner capacity, with high agreement levels that it has also helped them offer more flexible delivery – this is higher among providers who did not previously offer adult L3 courses. A minority raise a concern about the sufficiency of funding to support wider activities such as administration or course/curricula development. Around two in five interviewed providers suggest the offer might be improved by increasing funding to support its promotion, marketing, and advertising.

Providers' reflections

One third of interviewed providers believe the offer's goals are being met, arguing it is enabling people to access education who may not otherwise have been able to. One third believe the goals are not currently being met, raising concerns about levels of awareness of the offer, and also around learner eligibility. The remainder believe it is too early to judge. Since fieldwork was conducted, it should be noted that the Free Courses for Jobs offer has been extended on a trial basis from April 2022 to include all adults who earn under the National Living Wage or who are unemployed, regardless of their prior qualification level; and that the Government has launched a new Skills for Life campaign.

⁷ Although respondents were aware that their course was free, they may not have been aware of the FCFJ offer. As reported in section 2.5 38% of learners were aware their course was free but were not aware of the FCFJ offer.

The vast majority of providers believe the DfE's implementation and administration of the offer to be without barriers. Almost all (96%) surveyed providers who are delivering the offer intend to carry on with the Free Courses for Jobs offer in the future.

Prior learning and transitioning

Just over half (53%) of surveyed providers say some adult L3 learner applicants have no prior L1 qualification, which rises to two thirds (67%) saying some applicants have no prior L2 qualification (prior skills requirements vary by L3 course). Similar proportions report insufficient English skills (71%), insufficient Maths skills (69%), or a lack of other pre-requisite skills (69%). Most providers (76%) typically signpost them to a relevant L1 or L2 course instead.

Transitioning between levels is a notable concern for some providers, as applicants are often unemployed or come from more deprived areas and cannot readily afford the cost of L1 or L2 courses. One quarter (25%) of learners agree they would have benefitted from prior learning before starting their course – most commonly centring on subject specific knowledge – while just over three in five (61%) disagree.⁸

ILR analysis reveals that the number of funded learners on eligible courses whose previous highest qualification is a Full L2 has increased by 104% to 8,518 in April-November 2021, compared to 3,474 in the 2018/19 baseline.

Remaining barriers to study

Previous research has found that financial cost is a key blocker with a measurable negative impact on overall uptake of L3 qualifications.⁹ With part of this notable barrier reduced by removing course costs, two in five learners (40%) say that no other barriers to study remain. However, around one quarter (27%) note they hold caring responsibilities that might block their learning, while just over one fifth (21%) point out other financial considerations, such as transport and equipment, still persist. Whilst learners may be able to access Learner Support to assist with these costs, not all may be eligible. Meanwhile, providers' perception of the largest remaining barrier is that adult learners may have no internet access at home for learners funded through the offer (15%).

Learner diversity

ILR analysis reveals that, compared to the 2018/19 baseline, starts have increased for:

⁸ To note, funding is available via the Adult Education Budget (AEB) for all eligible adults aged 19 and over in England to study English and Maths qualifications up to and including L2, and Essential Digital Skills Qualifications. In areas where adult education has been devolved, Mayoral Combined Authorities and the Greater London Authority are responsible for the funding policies in their areas.

⁹ Department for Education, 2018, Impact evaluation of 24+ Advanced Learner Loans

- male and female learners,
- learners of all age groups,
- learners with a learning difficulty, disability and/or health problem,
- learners from all four quartiles of deprivation, and
- learners of all ethnicities (except Bangladeshi).

The greatest increases were seen in learners that consider themselves to have a learning difficulty, disability, and/or health problem (up 125%), males (up 64%), learners aged 50 to 64 years (up 94%), and in learners who live in the second least deprived quartile (up 81%).

Relatively speaking, uptake has increased most among those who are English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British.¹⁰ Uptake remains highest among learners from the most deprived quartile compared to the baseline, but the relative share of starts from the most deprived quartile has decreased from 38% to 33%.

Drop-out rate

Surveyed providers estimate the average (mean) percentage of learners that drop out before the Free Courses for Jobs courses finish to be 12%, with the most common response (mode) of 5%. Around two in five (41%) say that the drop-out rate is no different from other courses, while remaining providers are split as to whether the drop-out rate is lower or higher. Meanwhile, with the offer only going live in April 2021 and final ILR data not being available at the time of writing, it is too early to undertake meaningful analysis on drop-out rates of ILR data.

Extent of employer engagement

The *Skills for Jobs* White Paper sets out a vision to strengthen links between employers and further education providers by placing employers at the heart of the system. While the scope of this evaluation did not extend to engaging directly with employers to understand their views, providers were asked about this point during in-depth interviews. Responses generally fall into one of two equal-sized groups: those who actively engage employers in the delivery of the courses, and those who do not engage them in delivery, or do so to only a limited extent.

All interviewed learners in employment (n=15) confirm their employers are aware of the offer, although one third (n=5) of these learners did have to inform their employer about Free Courses for Jobs. Just over two thirds of the employed learners interviewed (n=11)

¹⁰ <https://guidance.submit-learner-data.service.gov.uk/21-22/ilr/entity/Learner/field/Ethnicity>

believe their employer offers them adequate support for their studies, with a minority stating internal training is preferred by their employer instead.

Learners' motivations and expectations

Around two thirds (69%) of surveyed adult learners say they are taking their L3 as it will provide them with good future job prospects, and over half (55%) say it is due to an interest in the subject.

There is near consensus among surveyed learners that they are enjoying their course (97%), that it has met their expectations (92%), and that it will help them progress in their career (90%).

Interviewed learners' report that, with their course now underway or complete, their top goals are to find a job or to improve their career prospects. The majority of interviewed learners had some concerns about returning to education before starting their course. However, most (14 of 20) interviewed learners now see learning in a more positive light as a result of their experience, noting in particular the close support given by tutors.

Policy considerations

Based on the conclusions being drawn from this evaluation of the Free Courses for Jobs offer, a number of considerations are highlighted for the DfE.

ILR analysis shows that starts have increased for learners from almost all backgrounds. However, starts have increased to a lesser extent for learners from ethnic minority backgrounds or from the most deprived areas (although enrolments are highest amongst learners from the most deprived quartile). Given the highly positive feedback received from learners about their course and experience, and to ensure that everyone benefits equally from the offer, more case studies could be developed based on those from minority backgrounds to communicate the potential benefits.

More broadly, with providers raising concern about their capacity to undertake new or different marketing, ongoing communication at a national level is required to raise and maintain awareness of the offer. It should be noted that, since this evaluation began, the Government has launched a new Skills for Life campaign, and a specific filter on the National Careers Service course finder tool. Consideration should be given to what advice and support could be offered to providers to assist with their marketing of the offer.

Some barriers still remain for learners (such as a minimum level of prior learning, and other financial costs), and careful thought should be given to the level, awareness, and administration of financial support for learners with a low-income background, to ensure that L3 courses remain accessible. This support could be for 1) additional financial costs

such as caring responsibilities, travel, or equipment, or better highlighting the existing learner support available, and 2) to enable learners to successfully transition onto a L3 course. Currently, support is available via the Adult Education Budget (AEB) low wage flexibilities to allow eligible learners in devolved areas earning under the National Living Wage annually to access provision up to L2 for free. Mayoral Combined Authorities and the Greater London Authority offer similar low wage flexibilities.

Some providers note that courses in scope of the offer do not adequately meet their local labour market needs. Since this research was carried out, the DfE has announced that Mayoral Combined Authorities and the Greater London Authority will have the ability to use up to 20% of their Free Courses for Jobs grants to fund technical and vocational qualifications outside the national list, subject to meeting certain criteria (e.g. the qualifications must be in SSAs covered by Free Courses for Jobs).

With providers to-date reporting a largely trouble-free implementation process by the DfE, the planning and implementation of the administration of the offer should be reviewed and lessons learned noted, such that best practice can be carried forward by the DfE to related roll-outs in future.

Further exploration of any potential shift in learner numbers (from non-funded L3 courses and from L2 courses, to funded L3 courses) is required to determine the extent to which changes are attributable to the Free Courses for Jobs offer. Such research would need to take into account wider contextual issues.

Research directly with employers is suggested. Any future study could focus on broad levels of awareness of, and appetite for, involvement in the offer, as well as understanding what barriers exist for employers to engage with the Free Courses for Jobs offer, support required to assist staff through qualifications, and the extent to which the offer meets their needs.

This evaluation of the Free Courses for Jobs offer was undertaken less than a year after implementation. Ongoing monitoring of the intervention is required to ensure that the offer remains fit for purpose, is meeting the needs of adult learners and providers, and to track trends in uptake, achievements, and withdrawals. A number of changes have been made to the offer since this evaluation began (such as to courses in scope, and to learner eligibility criteria) and future evaluations will need to take these into account.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

There is strong evidence about the value of gaining a Level 3 (L3) qualification. On average L3 qualifications result in a 14-16% earnings-return and a 4% increase in the chance of employment.¹¹ However, a third (34%) of those under the age of 25 reportedly fail to reach L3,¹² and some adults who do so will not have experienced the same benefits as others. Furthermore, between 2011/12 and 2018/19, adult participation in Further Education (FE) decreased from 3.1m learners down to 2.1m.¹³ These issues have been exacerbated by the damaging effects of the recent Covid-19 pandemic on industry, lives and livelihoods, as well as disruption to education and training.¹⁴

To help the country respond and 'build back better', in September 2020 the Government announced the *Lifetime Skills Guarantee*. The Lifetime Skills Guarantee includes the L3 Free Courses for Jobs offer which provides fully funded L3 (A Level-equivalent qualifications) in England for adults who do not currently hold a L3 qualification, by fully funding their first L3 qualification. In April 2022, eligibility was expanded on a trial basis to also include adults earning low wages or unemployed, even if they already hold a L3 or higher. The aim of the Free Courses for Jobs offer is to enable eligible adults to reskill and upskill, to help them access better job opportunities and to address key skills priorities.

At the time of evaluation, approximately 400 L3 courses were available in a variety of sector subject areas (SSAs). These courses were selected to offer good wage outcomes or address skills needs in the economy – or a combination of both – thereby empowering adults with the tools they need to secure a better job.

In addition to the Free Courses for Jobs offer fully funding eligible learners, providers are paid per-qualification a funding uplift for each eligible learning aim, based on published Guided Learning Hours (GLH) for the qualification. Qualifications of 360 GLH or more receive a funding uplift of £600 per eligible learner, while qualifications of 359 GLH or less receive a funding uplift of £150. This amount is adjusted/weighted for disadvantaged areas/learners.

¹¹ Department for Education (2021) Measuring the net present value of further education in England 2018 to 2019

¹² Department for Education (2022) Academic year 2020/21: Level 2 and 3 attainment age 16 to 25

¹³ Department for Education (2021) Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth

¹⁴ Ofsted (2021) Education recovery in further education and skills providers: autumn

Prior research has shown that participation in education reduces with age,¹⁵ and that several barriers remain for adult learners aged 24+.¹⁶ Learning and Work Institute's 2022 report for the Department for Education (DfE) found that one in eight (12%) adult learners faced situational barriers such as a lack of time due to commitments including caring responsibilities, but that there was substantial interest in the Free Courses for Jobs offer, with around two thirds (64%) saying they found it attractive due to the course being free.¹⁷

To help raise awareness and understanding of how the Free Courses for Jobs offer may enhance learners' careers, the Government has launched a new Skills for Life campaign¹⁸ and a specific page on the National Careers Service course finder tool¹⁹ to demonstrate which courses are locally available that are included in the offer. The Government has also pledged to link apprenticeships with L3 qualifications to demonstrate better the education progression routes and career pathways available to learners.²⁰

In autumn 2021, Pye Tait Consulting was commissioned by the DfE to undertake an independent evaluation of the L3 Free Courses for Jobs offer.

1.2 Aims and objectives

This evaluation of the L3 Free Courses for Jobs offer has three discrete aims, namely to:

- identify the nature and extent of impact using quantitative and qualitative metrics,
- explore implementation effectiveness, and
- draw on best practice/lessons learned to determine what could be improved in the future.

More specifically, the objectives can be defined into four core clusters.

- **Uptake analysis:** Use of Management Information (MI) relating to adult learners to determine the impact of the Free Courses for Jobs offer by tracking changes in: uptake rates for L3 courses included in the offer; uptake rates for L3 courses not included in the offer as well as L2 courses; the characteristics of adult learners taking L3 courses; and the potential influence of confounding factors, e.g. the Covid-19 pandemic.

¹⁵ Learning and Work Institute (2019) Adult Participation in Learning Survey

¹⁶ Department for Education (2018). Decisions of adult learners

¹⁷ Department for Education (2022). National Skills Fund: Free Courses for Jobs

¹⁸ <https://skillsforlife.campaign.gov.uk/courses/free-courses-for-jobs/>

¹⁹ <https://nationalcareers.service.gov.uk/find-a-course/searchFreeCourse>

²⁰ Department for Education (April 2022). The National Skills Fund: Government consultation response

- **Provision analysis:** Changes in the landscape of L3 provision available for adults; how providers are using the funding; how qualifications in the offer are being delivered; the role/influence of employer involvement; good practice and barriers faced/overcome; and any differences across provider types and regions.
- **Learner analysis:** The difference the offer has made to participating learners by exploring their attitudes/motivations; barriers faced/overcome; and any differences in perceptions with respect to learner demographics, settings, and protected characteristics to identify any unintended consequences.
- **Process analysis:** How well the offer has been implemented and funded to meet intended goals for strengthening L3 numbers in key areas of the economy and from disadvantaged groups; what has worked well and less well; and what could be improved.

1.3 Methodology

1.3.1 Overview

The methodology for the evaluation has comprised:

- development of an evaluation framework and logic model,
- in-depth interviews with a range of 33 providers in Autumn 2021,
- a mixed-method (online and telephone) survey of providers (403 responses from 308 providers) in early 2022,
- an online survey of adult learners on Free Courses for Jobs courses, all of whom are eligible for the funding (235 responses²¹) in early 2022,
- follow-up in-depth interviews with 20 learners in early 2022,
- analysis of Individualised Learner Record (ILR) data, and
- five provider case studies.

This evaluation was undertaken during the first year of the Free Courses for Jobs intervention, at a time when the country was still recovering from the Covid-19 pandemic. Findings reported herein represent a snapshot at this particular point in time.

²¹ Of these, 231 are funded through Free Courses for Jobs. The remaining four paid their course fee through another funding source and were therefore not asked most survey questions.

1.3.2 Ongoing changes to Free Courses for Jobs

It should be noted, to help set the evaluation in context, that changes to the Free Courses for Jobs offer have been made to its implementation since the evaluation commenced in September 2021.

Firstly, the DfE announced on 17 November 2021 that the Free Courses for Jobs offer would be extended from 1 April 2022 to include adults who already hold a L3 qualification and who earn under the National Living Wage. Interviews with providers took place shortly before this announcement.

Secondly, the list of courses eligible for funding within the Free Courses for Jobs offer²² is constantly under review by the DfE with new courses being added at ongoing intervals since the offer's introduction in April 2021. For example, the department added Hospitality and catering qualifications to the offer in July 2021. In addition, a mechanism exists for Awarding Organisations and Mayoral Combined Authorities to suggest changes to better meet needs.

Thirdly, as noted above, since this research was conducted the DfE has enabled Mayoral Combined Authorities and the Greater London Authority to use up to 20% of their Free Courses for Jobs grants to fund technical and vocational qualifications outside the national list, subject to meeting certain criteria (e.g. the qualifications must be in the sector subject areas covered by Free Courses for Jobs).

In early 2022, a new Skills for Life campaign and website and a specific page on the National Careers Service course finder tool were launched to demonstrate which courses are locally available as part of the offer.

1.3.3 Notes on primary fieldwork and analysis

All primary research tools were co-developed between Pye Tait Consulting and the DfE. The provider survey was live from 24 January to 1 April 2022. Responses were gathered using a mixed methodology. The DfE provided details of all individuals within providers who had consented to be contacted, and these individuals were sent an email invitation with a link to complete the survey. In addition, telephone boosts were employed to gather responses from providers. Different individuals at the same provider were able to participate, to gather as rounded a view as possible on the impact of Free Courses for Jobs. The research was promoted on social media and with the kind assistance of the Association of Colleges and the Association of Employment and Learning Providers.

²² The list of eligible courses is available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/find-a-free-level-3-qualification/list-of-free-level-3-qualifications-available-to-eligible-adults>

The learner survey was live from 25 January to 6 April 2022. The DfE provided details of all learners who had opted in to be contacted for research purposes to Pye Tait, and these individuals were sent an email invitation with a link to complete the survey. In addition, providers participating in their survey were asked to cascade the research on to eligible learners at their institution.

Learners had the chance at the end of the survey to opt-in if they were interested in participating in a follow-up in-depth telephone interview. Learners participating in in-depth interviews each received a £25 voucher to thank them for their time and input.

The nature of the survey design was such that hidden/automatic routing was incorporated. The rationale for this was to minimise respondent burden and the result is that not all questions were asked of all respondents.

Random Iterative Method (RIM) weighting was used to adjust the achieved survey sample of providers to be representative of the population by region and provider type. More details on this can be found in Appendix A.2.

Note that some charts and tables may not sum to 100% due to rounding. Unless otherwise stated, the data in the report refer to weighted findings.

The five case studies are derived from in-depth interviews with providers and are contained in Appendix C.

1.3.4 Notes on ILR analysis

The aim of the ILR²³ data analysis is to compare the change in the number and profile of learners undertaking the Free Courses for Jobs aims from April 2021 to November 2021 compared to those same aims being delivered in a baseline year. The baseline year of 2018/19 has been chosen as the last full year before the Covid-19 pandemic. The principal focus of the analysis has been on starts on courses as the eight-month period since the go-live date did not allow for meaningful levels of completions. The following ILR data sets were used:

- 2018/19 and 2020/21 R14, and
- 2021/22 R04.

The data sets were extracted from the ILR based on the following eligibility criteria.

- Undertaking a course eligible for L3 Free Courses for Jobs at the go-live date of 1 April 2021.

²³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/individualised-learner-record-ilr>

- The learners' start (based on course start date) or achievement (based on actual end date and outcome is achieved) is on a date at which course it was eligible for Free Courses for Jobs.
- Age at start of learning is 24+.
- Does not hold a previous L3 qualification or apprenticeship.²⁴
- Learners have claimed funding using the Free Courses for Jobs offer.
- Publicly funded courses only (covered by Sources of funding for the learner: ESFA formula funding; ESFA non-formula funding; No ESFA funding financed by Advanced Learner Loan).

Since the go-live date for the offer of 1 April 2021, additional courses have been included as part of the offer. These courses have not been included as part of this analysis.

In addition to the criteria outlined above, learners who are eligible but who have not claimed the Free Courses for Jobs offer in the 2020/21 and 2021/22 data sets have also been considered in the ILR analysis. For context, some providers may not have a Free Courses for Jobs funding allocation if they were unsuccessful in the latest round of Adult Education Budget (AEB) funding, but may still deliver courses which are in scope of the offer, with eligible learners being supported through Advanced Learner Loans. For completeness, the data for the full impact of the offer are shown in the charts, however, unless otherwise noted, the discussion focuses purely on a comparison of the baseline with learners who are currently funded through the Free Courses for Jobs offer. This is the basis of the results presented in this report (unless otherwise stated) and may be considered an underestimate of the potential impact of the offer.

Further details about the ILR analysis including the methodology utilised, and any limitations to be aware of, are contained in Appendix A.3.

Timelines

The Free Courses for Jobs offer came into effect on 1 April 2021. Incorporated into the analysis are data pertaining to learners on eligible courses for the period from April to November 2021.

The baseline is based on the 2018/19 data which looks at learners in the period August 2018 to July 2019. This data set was used as it provides the most recent full year of delivery prior to the Covid-19 pandemic and therefore avoids any artificial deflation of the

²⁴ For the 2018/19 and 2020/21 data, the Prior Attainment field is used as the means of capturing a learner's previous experience. In 2021/22, the Prior Level field is used. A learner may have multiple Prior Levels in their ILR and we have a) removed any learner with a L3 or above qualification and then b) assigned the learner's most recent record for each learner. Note that this will exclude any learner whose record has been adjusted to lower their Prior Level from above L3 to below L3 at a later stage. This scenario is very rare and will make a negligible impact on the results.

baseline had the 2019/20 data been used. However, since the August 2018 to July 2019 period does not coincide with the timeframe for the current data, the starts and achievements occurring in the following months from the 2018/19 data have been used for the purposes for deriving the baseline: August 2018 to November 2018 and April 2019 to July 2019.

Given the eight-month period since the offer began, there are limited data related to achievements in the period April to November 2021. This limits the conclusions that can be drawn on achievements. Therefore, the analysis has been restricted to look at the overall level of achievements and has not assessed each criteria in the same way as analysis of starts, completion status, and withdrawals reasons as part of the ILR analysis.

1.4 Respondent profile

The learner and provider surveys gathered responses from across the nine regions of England.

Table 1 Regional breakdown of responses to provider and learner surveys

Region	Base or headquarters of provider (unweighted)	Learner's region of study
East Midlands	35	11
East of England	30	23
London	74	75
North East	26	18
North West	69	14
South East	46	19
South West	36	26
West Midlands	44	17
Yorkshire and the Humber	43	25
Total	403	228

Base: 403 providers and 228 learners. Source: Pye Tait Consulting 2022.

The provider survey achieved a spread of completions across different types of institution. The three "other" provider types are charitable or community trainers.

Table 2 Provider survey responses by provider type

Provider type	Number of responses to provider survey (unweighted)
General FE college incl Tertiary	233
Other public funded i.e. LAs and HE	73
Private sector public funded	67
Sixth form college	6
Special Colleges - (Agriculture and Horticulture & Art Design and Performing Arts), Specialist Designated College	21
Other	3

Base: 403 respondents. Source: Pye Tait Consulting 2022.

The size of providers responding to the survey ranged from very small (single digits) to very large (over 50,000), with responding providers having an average of 5,903 total learners (unweighted mean). Just under half of respondents were able to provide an answer to this question.

Table 3 Provider survey responses by total number of learners per provider

Total number of learners	Number of responses to provider survey (unweighted)
Fewer than 500 learners	38
500 to 1,999 learners	26
2,000 to 4,999 learners	38
5,000 to 9,999 learners	49
Over 10,000 learners	28

Base: 179 respondents. Source: Pye Tait Consulting 2022.

The learner survey and in-depth interviews achieved broad samples across different age groups, genders, and ethnicities.

More detailed breakdowns of respondent profiles for the provider and learner surveys, and provider and learner in-depth interviews, are contained in Appendix B.

2. Impact on capacity, uptake, and delivery

This chapter explores the impact of the Free Courses for Jobs intervention on uptake, delivery, and capacity, specifically examining the following issues:

- courses being offered by providers and taken up by learners,
- level of uptake of courses,
- mode of delivery being used to deliver courses on scope of the offer,
- the specific impact of the uplift funding,
- marketing of the offer, and
- providers' reactions to the Free Courses for Jobs offer.

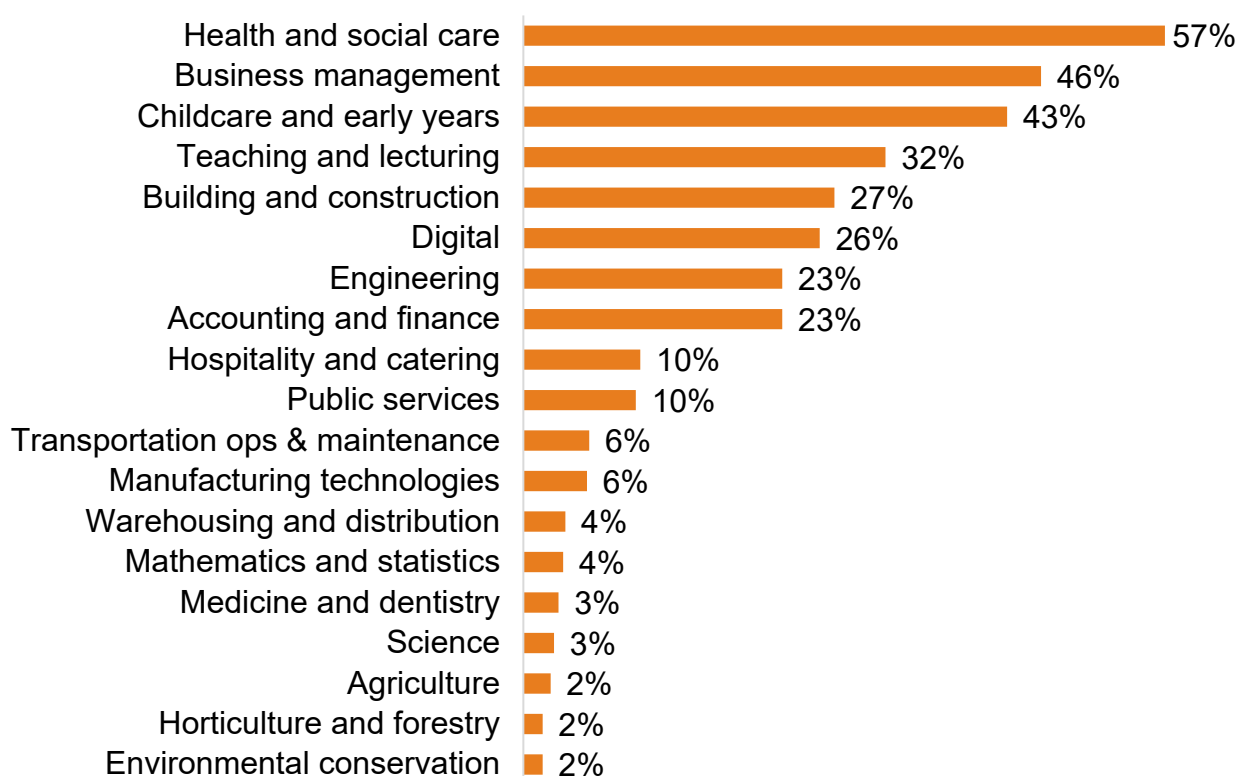
2.1 Courses on offer

2.1.1 What providers offered prior to Free Courses for Jobs

Over five in six (86%) surveyed providers which had implemented the Free Courses for Jobs offer say they offered L3 courses for adults aged 24+ before the offer came on stream.

Of those surveyed providers that offered adult L3 courses before delivering Free Courses for Jobs, the sector subject areas (SSAs) most commonly offered include Health and social care (offered by 57% of providers), Business management (46%), and Childcare and early years (43%). The most common SSA offered in each English region prior to Free Courses for Jobs was one of these three SSAs, with the exception of the South West where Building and construction was the most common SSA offered to adults (63% of providers).

Figure 1 SSAs offered by providers before Free Courses for Jobs



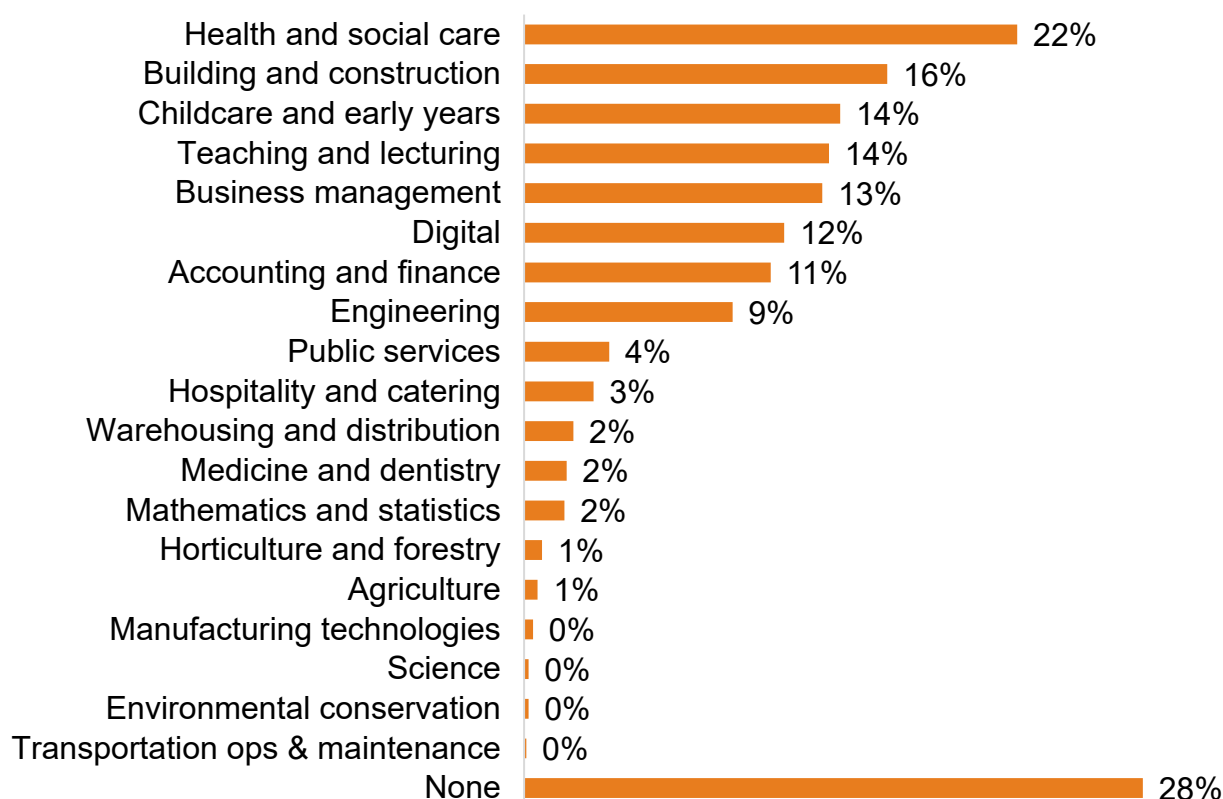
Base: 272 respondents (multiple responses permitted). Source: Pye Tait Consulting, 2022.

In in-depth interviews, providers were asked about their experience of delivering L3 courses for adults aged 24+, to gain some understanding of institutions' background in delivering courses for adults and context for subsequent views. Half state that they are very experienced and have been offering adult L3 learning for at least four years. A quarter state they have limited experience in offering L3 adult provision, while the remaining quarter note that most of their L3 learners to this point have been young people.

2.1.2 What courses are available as part of Free Courses for Jobs

Surveyed providers implementing the Free Courses for Jobs offer were asked which SSAs they had newly introduced as a result of the offer. Just over a quarter (28%) say they have not introduced any new SSAs to their offering. Just under a quarter (22%) say they have newly introduced courses in Health and social care (22%), while around one in six (16%) have introduced courses in Building and construction.

Figure 2 SSAs newly offered by providers as a result of Free Courses for Jobs



Base: 233 respondents (multiple responses permitted). Source: Pye Tait Consulting, 2022.

Regionally, three in five surveyed providers in the North East have newly introduced courses in digital (60%), over half in the East Midlands have introduced courses in Business management (55%), and around three in five in the South West have done likewise for Health and social care courses (61%).

Of surveyed providers that did not offer adult L3 courses prior to Free Courses for Jobs, their newly introduced courses are most commonly in the SSAs of Health and social care (29%), Childcare and early years (28%) and Building and construction (26%).

In in-depth interviews, providers relate how learning provision is demand-led by certain sectors looking to recruit and upskill the workforce. Interviewed providers also comment how they have seen some learners looking to retrain and change sectors, and particularly noticeable is a move from the hospitality to the care sector, where customer service skills are seen as a good fit in the care sector. To a large extent this was driven by the Covid-19 pandemic which forced hospitality businesses to close or operate reduced opening hours. More detail on demand can be found in section 2.1.4.

We offer it because there is demand for the courses and we want to help people progress and gain skills. It supports people in health and social care to either find jobs or develop skills for progression. –
Specialist Designated College, London

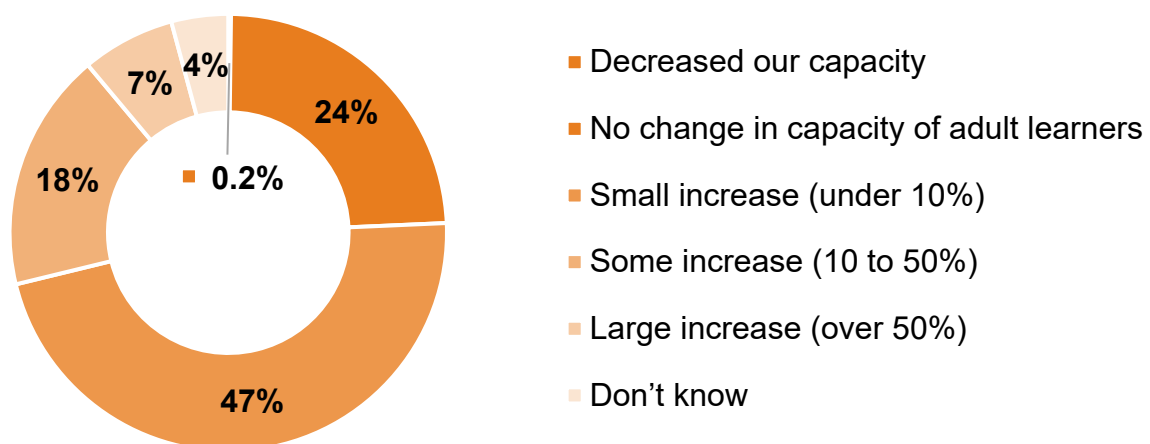
2.1.3 Impact of Free Courses for Jobs offer on providers' capacity

Just under half of surveyed providers (179 of 403) were able to report the total number of learners at all levels, and most (n=141) could provide the number of all adult learners aged 24+ studying for a L3 qualification at their institution. On average, these adult learners account for 8.7% of all providers' learners (equivalent to 516 learners per provider, unweighted mean).

Similarly, of surveyed providers able to report the number of learners at all levels (179 of 403), most (n=155) could provide the number of all adult learners aged 24+ studying for a L3 qualification at their institution making use of the free funding. On average, these adult learners account for 1.1% of all providers' learners (equivalent to 63 learners per provider, unweighted mean), or 12.2% of all adult learners studying for a L3.

Surveyed providers were asked about the extent to which the funding from Free Courses for Jobs has impacted their capacity (i.e., whether it had impacted the actual number of adult L3 they could teach). Just under one quarter (24%) say there is no change in their capacity for adult learners, while around half (47%) say their capacity has increased to a small extent (under 10% increase in adult learners) and one quarter (25%) report their capacity increasing by over 10%. Slightly higher proportions of providers which had not offered adult L3 courses prior to Free Courses for Jobs said there was no change in capacity (28%) or a large increase in capacity of over 50% (16%) compared to providers which had offered adult L3 courses previously (24% and 5%, respectively).

Figure 3 Impact of Free Courses for Jobs on providers' capacity



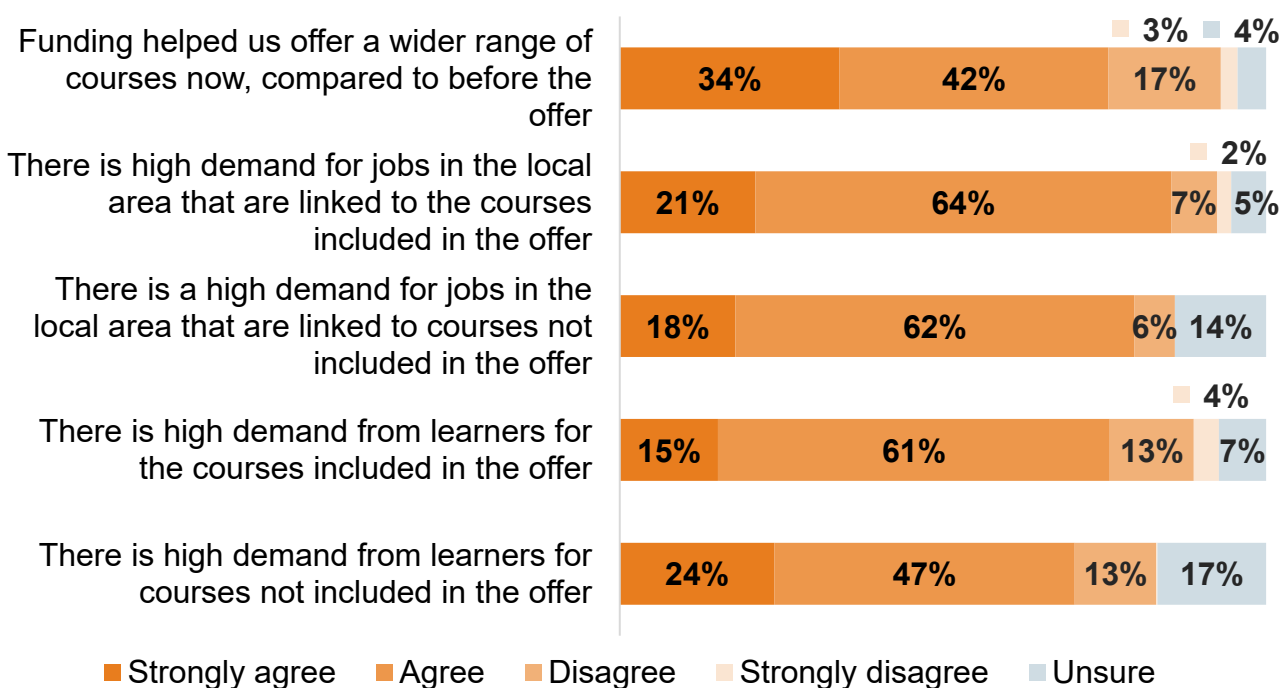
Base: 288 respondents. Source: Pye Tait Consulting, 2022.

One third of interviewed providers (11 of 33) explained how they are looking to implement the funding, either to increase the capacity of their current offering of adult L3 provision, or to expand their offering that is currently for young people aged under 24 to include adults aged 24+. They outline how they are choosing to get involved in delivering the offer as they already have the staff and content available to deliver courses. Broadly, providers are seeking to be involved in the offer to be able to satisfy market demand, rather than as a “strategic decision”. In justification, providers argue they see the wider benefits that the offer will bring for learners and the economy.

2.1.4 Providers’ views on demand

Just over three quarters (76%) of surveyed providers agree that the funding has helped them offer a wider range of courses now compared to before Free Courses for Jobs was introduced. Agreement levels are highest among private sector public funded providers (82% agree; 16% disagree) while general FE colleges are more split (55% agree; 42% disagree). The majority (95%) of providers which did not previously offer adult L3 courses before the offer said they could now offer a wider range of courses.

Figure 4 Providers’ views on demand for courses



Base: variable 270 to 296 respondents. Source: Pye Tait Consulting, 2022.

A slightly higher proportion of surveyed providers agree there is high demand from learners for courses included in the offer (76%) compared to courses not included in the offer (71%). Meanwhile, a slightly higher proportion agree that there is high demand for jobs in their local area that are linked to the courses included in the offer (85%) compared

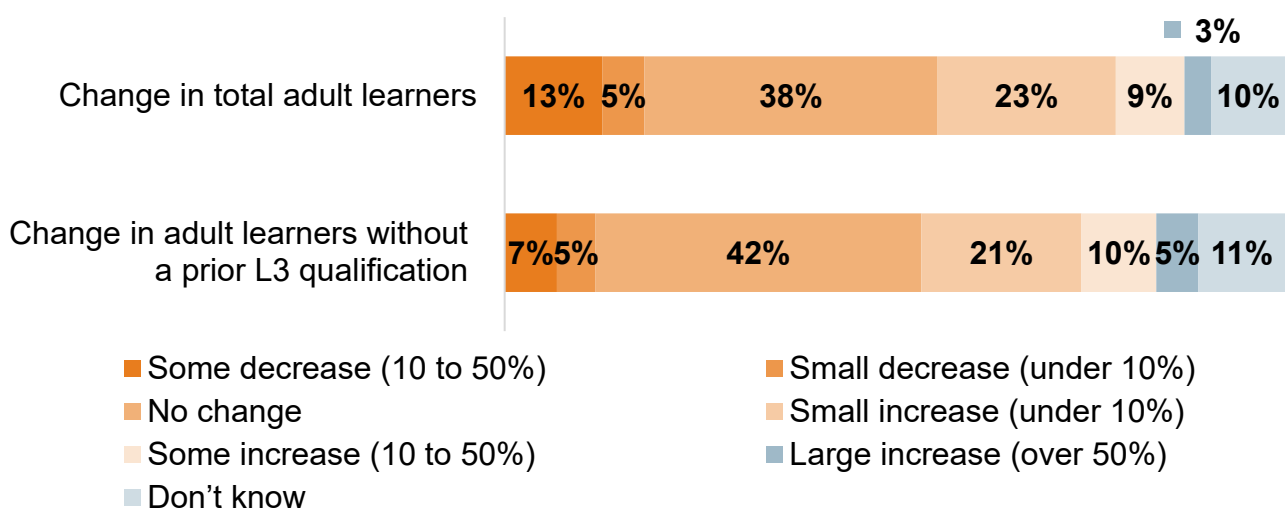
to courses not included in the offer (80%). On this latter point, a notably higher proportion of providers in the West Midlands (23%) disagree that there is high demand for jobs in their local area linked to courses available in the offer.

2.2 Uptake

2.2.1 Providers' views on uptake

Surveyed providers were asked whether they had observed a change in numbers of total adult learners, and of adult learners without a prior L3 qualification, since the Free Courses for Jobs offer was introduced in April 2021. On both these counts, around two in five providers believe that learner numbers have remained at similar numbers. Just over a third believe total adult learner numbers have increased (35%) with a similar proportion stating likewise for a change in adult learners without a prior L3 (36%). This is higher among providers who did not previously offer adult L3 courses before Free Courses for Jobs (47% in both instances).

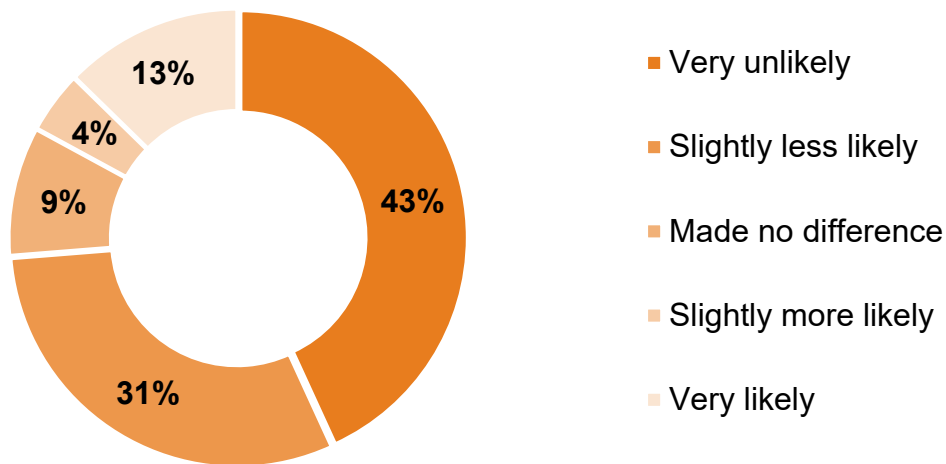
Figure 5 Providers' views on changes in numbers of adult learners



Base: 294 (top) and 284 (bottom) respondents. Source: Pye Tait Consulting, 2022.

Learners were asked whether they would have taken up their L3 course anyway, had the course not been free. Almost three quarters (74%) say they would have been very unlikely, or slightly less likely, to have begun their L3 course, while 9% say the funding made no difference to their decision. One in six (17%) say it is very or slightly more likely they would have undertaken their course, had it not been free.

Figure 6 Whether learners would have taken a L3 course without funding



Base: 229 respondents. Source: Pye Tait Consulting, 2022.

Examining responses by age, there is a trend that more learners aged 50+ would not have undertaken their course had it not been free, whereas more younger learners (aged 24 to 29) would have undertaken their course anyway without the funding. Meanwhile, a greater proportion of those studying remotely would have been unlikely to take their course without the funding (85%) compared to those learning via 100% classroom or a blended approach (both 65%).

This issue was explored in greater detail in learner in-depth interviews. Those who would have been unlikely to have done their course without the free funding say this is because they would not have been able to fund the course themselves, typically citing one or more of the following: unemployment, low income, childcare costs, family commitments, or ineligibility for learner loans. Three note that, without the offer, they would have had to rely on Advanced Learner Loans, which they believe would have delayed their start date due to time taken for approval. Interviewed learners who say they would have been likely to study even without the funding are all in employment and report no financial barrier, however, they welcome the funding to enhance their career prospects.

[The funding] is very essential – I'm unemployed with extremely low income, I definitely couldn't get where I wanted to go without this funding. – *Learner, Public services*

2.2.2 Uptake by surveyed learners

Learners participating in the survey were asked in which SSA they are currently training. Around two in five (37%) are undertaking a course in Health and social care, while around one in five (18%) are training in Accounting and finance, and one in ten (10%) in Childcare and early years. Other SSAs are each undertaken by no more than 7% of surveyed learners. Where learners know the name of their course, the most common is

AAT – Accounting (mentioned by 43 surveyed learners), adult health and social care (28), and counselling (24).

Around three in five (63%) surveyed learners are undertaking their L3 in a sector which is “new” to them, i.e., in which they have not worked before. This is particularly high for learners in Yorkshire and the Humber (84%), South East (79%), North West (79%) and East of England (78%), as well as for learners aged 35-39 (75%), and those who were unemployed at the start of their course (81%).

Over half (53%) of surveyed learners are undertaking a Diploma or National Diploma, and just over one fifth (21%) are studying for a L3 Certificate. L3 Awards are being studied by 7% of surveyed learners, L3 NVQs by 4%, A Level or AS Level by 2%, and L3 National Certificates by 2%. The remaining 10% are unsure of their qualification type.

In terms of course length, around two fifths of surveyed learners indicated they know their length of study, and these are evenly split between those whose courses take 360+ Guided Learning Hours (GLH) (19%), and those whose courses are 360 GLH or below (19%), with the remainder being unsure (62%). A higher proportion of learners who are self-employed (35%) or volunteers (46%) are studying courses of 360+ GLH compared to learners employed full time (17%) or part time (12%). Meanwhile, shorter courses of 360 GLH or below are more common for learners who hold a prior L2 qualification (24%) compared to learners without a prior L2 (6%).

Three quarters of learners in the in-depth interviews attest that, because the L3 course is free, it has given them greater flexibility in the course they have chosen to study. Half of this group state this is simply because the funding barrier has been removed, while others state that it has allowed them to study for their own interests or for professional development purposes. These themes are explored in detail in Chapter 3. The remaining quarter of learners interviewed say they would have undertaken the qualification anyway without the free funding.

2.2.3 Uptake findings from ILR analysis

This section presents findings from the ILR analysis, comparing the change from the baseline (2018/19) position to the current picture. It should be noted that the results cover the eight-month period from April to November 2021. Enrolment figures on eligible courses have continued to increase since November 2021.²⁵

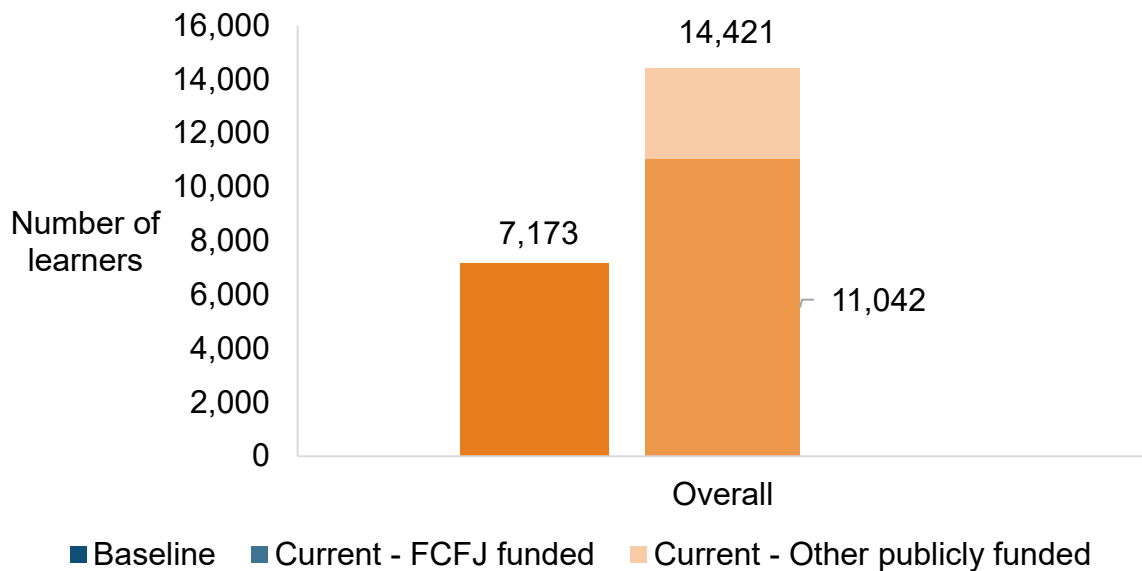
Overall starts

Compared to the baseline, starts on eligible courses have increased by 54% from 7,173 to 11,042. Note that uptake overall may be higher because these figures only look at

²⁵ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/further-education-and-skills/2021-22>

those learners who have claimed the Free Courses for Jobs offer in the current period. When including learners studying eligible courses but who are not funded through the Free Courses for Jobs offer, overall starts have increased by 101% from the baseline position to 14,421.

Figure 7 Change in starts



Source: Analysis of ILR data.

When discussing findings from the ILR analysis in the remainder of this report, results will focus primarily on learners who are on government-funded courses, and therefore the figures are likely to be an underestimate of the true picture. This is in line with all DfE official statistic publications.

Overall achievements

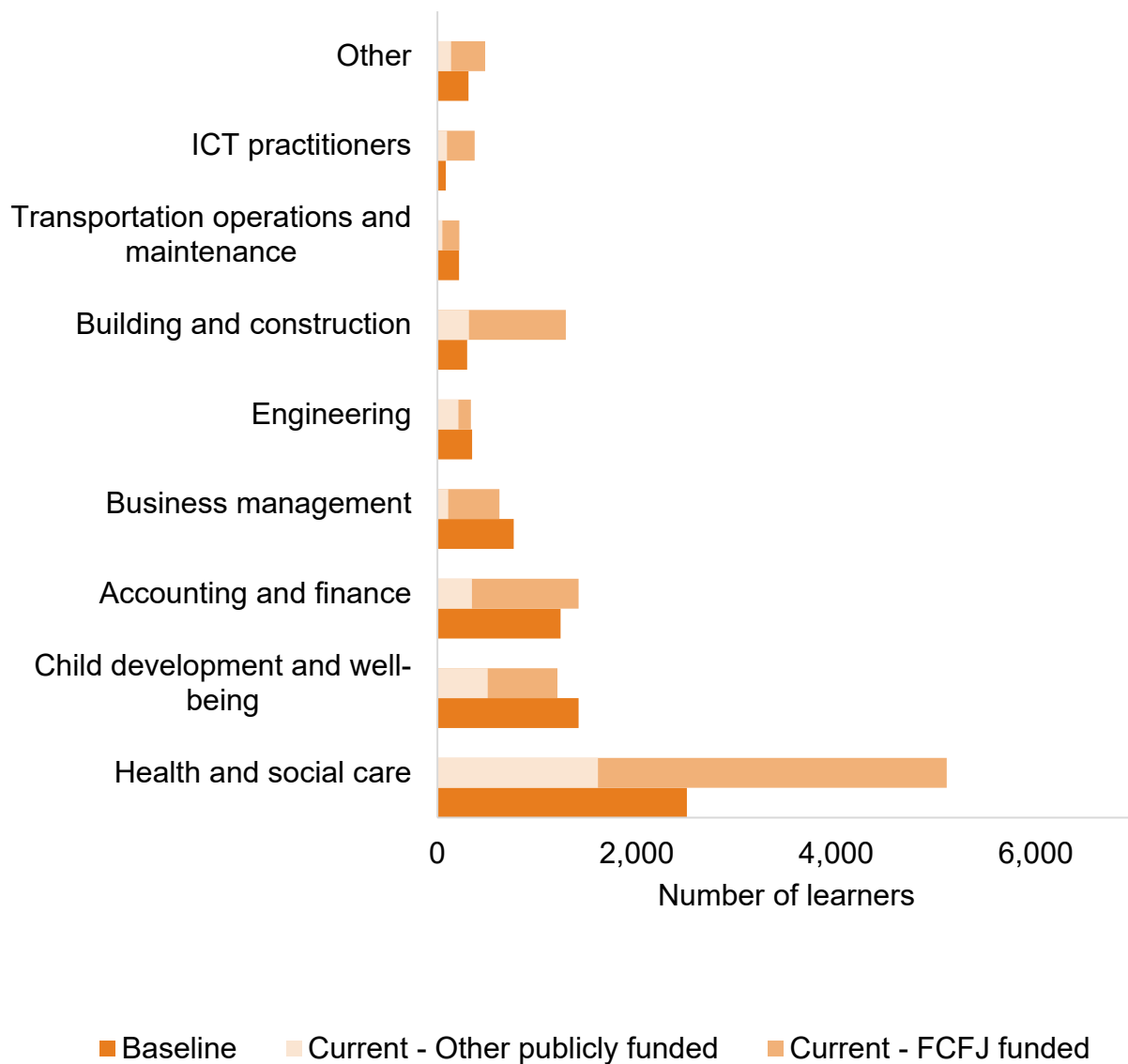
Our analysis shows that, compared to the baseline, achievements of funded learners on eligible courses have increased by 61% from 860 to 1,387. However, given the eight-month period of the ILR analysis – and the fact that Level 3 courses typically take longer than this to achieve – there are limited data related to achievements in the period April to November 2021 from which any conclusions can be drawn. Therefore, when discussing findings from the ILR analysis in the remainder of this report, we focus purely on starts.

Starts by sector subject area

Starts have increased in most SSAs. Health and social care comprised around one third (35%) of all starts in the 2018/19 baseline and this proportion has risen to nearly half (46%) since the introduction of the Free Courses for Jobs offer. Meanwhile, Building and construction has increased its share from 4% to 12%. It should be noted that these are

provisional findings based on a snapshot in time and may change if the analysis is subsequently repeated over a different timeframe.

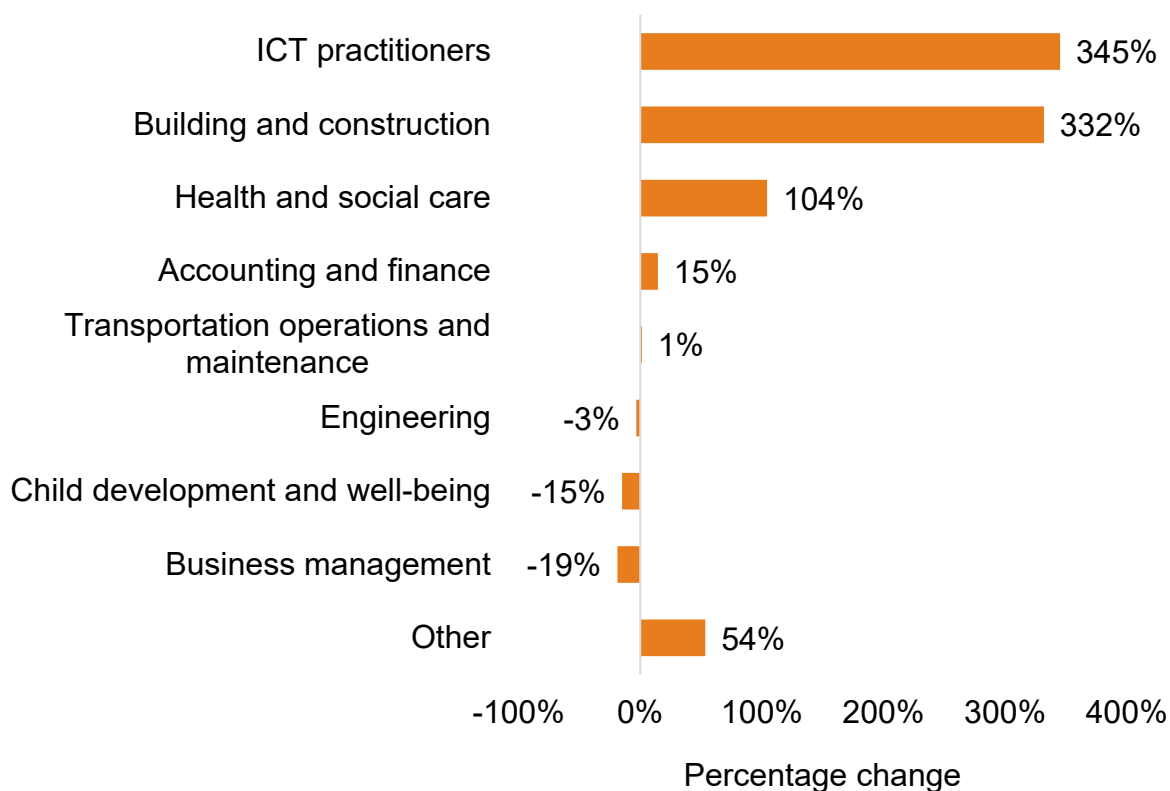
Figure 8 Change in starts by SSA



Source: Analysis of ILR data.

Starts have increased most for SSAs incorporating ICT practitioners (up 345% albeit from a reasonably small number of starts in 2018/19), Building and construction (up 332%), and Health and social care (up 104%). The three SSAs in which starts have fallen are Business management (down 19%), Child development and wellbeing (down 15%), and Engineering (down 3%).

Figure 9 Percentage change in starts by SSA

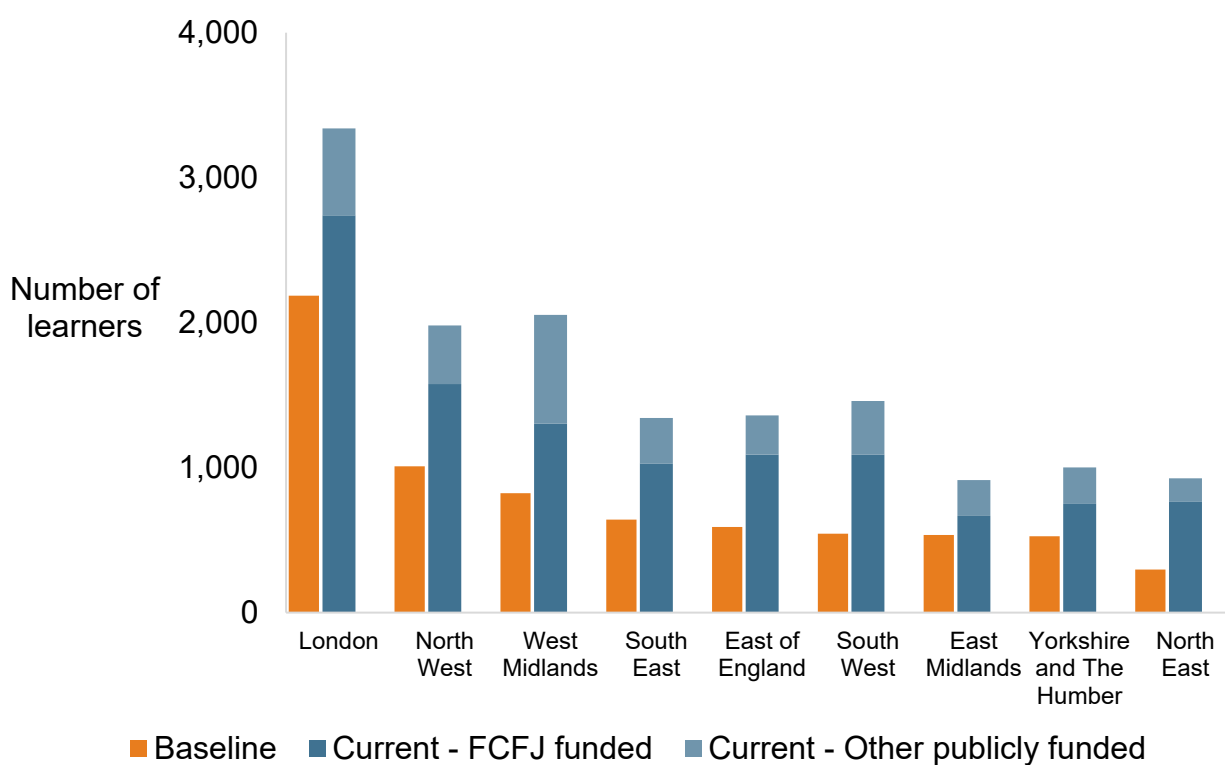


Source: Analysis of ILR data.

Starts by learner region

Starts have increased in all nine English regions. The largest increases are seen in the North East (up 158%) and the South West (up 100%). Meanwhile, the smallest increases are in the East Midlands and London (both 25%).

Figure 10 Change in starts by learner region



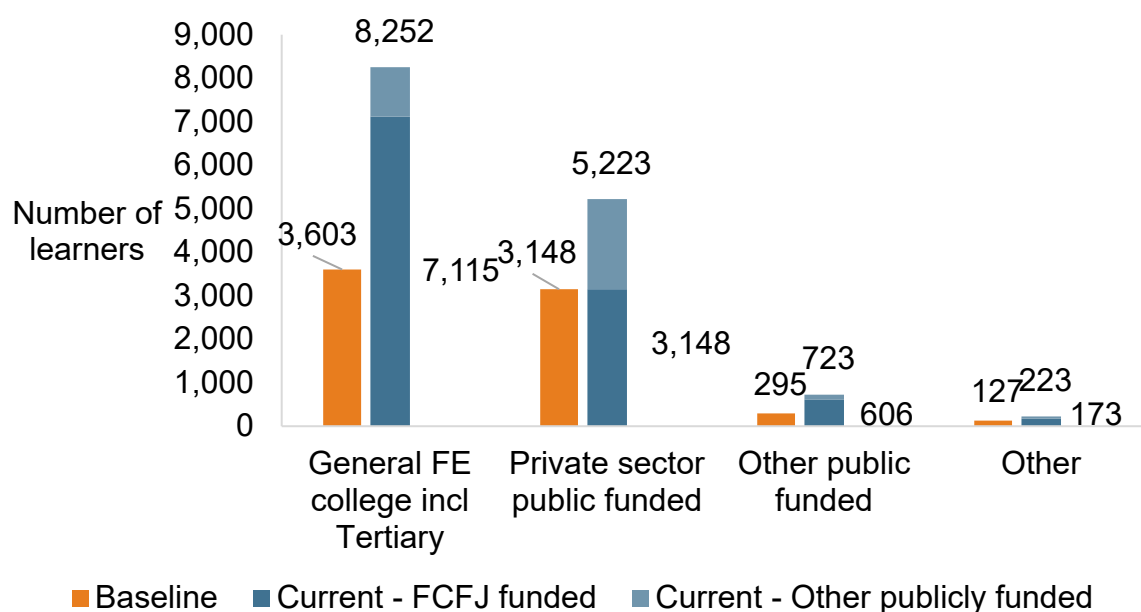
Source: Analysis of ILR data.

The largest share of starts is in London which accounts for one quarter (25%) of all starts in the current position, although this is a decrease from 31% in the 2018/19 baseline.

Starts by provider type

Starts have increased, compared to the baseline position, for General FE colleges incl. tertiary (up 97%), Other public funded providers (up 105%), and 'Other' providers (up 36%). The number of starts on eligible courses by funded learners at Private sector public funded providers is the same as the baseline position.

Figure 11 Change in starts by provider type



Source: Analysis of ILR data.

The largest share of starts is for General FE colleges incl. tertiary, which has increased from 50% of all starts on eligible courses in 2018/19 to 64% in 2021. In contrast, there has been a decrease in the share of starts for Private sector public funded providers, down to 29% now from 44% of all starts in 2018/19.

2.2.4 Additional courses suggested for inclusion

Providers were asked, via an open-ended survey question, which specific additional qualifications they felt should be included in the offer to meet market needs. Of the 152 responses received, four SSAs are commonly mentioned.

- Health and social care qualifications (mentioned by 34 respondents) including specific health and social care courses, midwifery, and mental health.
- Engineering, and Building and construction qualifications (24 respondents) including specific courses such as Access to HE Diploma (Engineering).
- Business management qualifications (23 respondents) including Business and Finance, Business Administration, and HR.

Other commonly suggested qualifications include those related to hair and beauty (13), creative arts (12), teaching and training (11), access courses across the spectrum (12), and digital (8). Some proposed courses already included in the offer, suggesting low levels of awareness of the courses available as part of Free Courses for Jobs.

2.3 Mode of delivery

2.3.1 How providers are delivering courses within the offer

Over five in six (85%) surveyed providers say that, before the Covid-19 pandemic, they typically delivered L3 courses using a blended model of remote and classroom. Around two in five delivered by remote live classes/study groups (41%) or using remote pre-recorded classes or slides (40%), while a fifth (21%) of providers state they commonly used a 100% classroom approach prior to the pandemic.

Around two thirds (64%) of surveyed providers agree that the Free Courses for Jobs offer has enabled their institution to deliver more remote live classes/study groups, or employ more staff to deliver adult L3 courses (63%). Three in five (60%) say it has allowed them to develop more pre-recorded learning material, or deliver more classroom-based training (57%).

Just over half (53%) agree the offer has enabled them to deliver more adult L3 courses in evenings, though fewer agree likewise for weekends (39%). Meanwhile, providers are split as to whether the offer has enabled them to develop more modular adult L3 courses (50% agree; 38% disagree).

Agreement levels are noticeably higher for most statements among providers who did not previously offer adult L3 courses. For example, over five in six of this group (87%) agree the offer has enabled them to employ more staff, over two thirds (68%) that it has enabled the delivery of more evening courses, and four fifths (81%) that it has enabled the delivery of more remote live classes/study groups.

Where surveyed providers disagreed that the Free Courses for Jobs offer had enabled them to provide more flexible or expanded delivery in at least one way, the most common reason given is that there is insufficient demand from learners (44%). A third (33%) cite a lack of financial resource and a fifth (21%) a lack of capacity among existing staff to offer more flexible delivery.

Among 'other' reasons mentioned by 34 providers, a third note that they already offer sufficiently flexible delivery, a similar proportion that they would offer more flexibility were other/different courses included in the offer, and others say it is too soon to note any impact as the offer has only recently been implemented.

Providers participating in in-depth interviews were also asked about the impact of the Free Courses for Jobs offer on their delivery. Over half state they are delivering qualifications in the Free Courses for Jobs offer through a blended model including classroom-based learning, pre-recorded material, slides, and interactive workshops. A quarter state they provide qualifications within the offer via a classroom-based approach

but have also adapted their courses to make them shorter and more intense to suit adult learners' commitments.

Approximately half of interviewed providers state that the funding has not changed the way they deliver courses in practice. One in five providers note that the funding has enabled them to increase capacity as a direct result of the funding, commenting that learners' access to free education has really driven the demand. Three providers note that, in response to this offer, they have adapted their offering to ensure sufficient uptake on courses that will mean they are financially viable.

We offer blended learning. We do this to accommodate shift patterns in the care sector, and also to make allowances for people with caring responsibilities. If we didn't do this, there would be a lower take up of courses. – *Private Sector Public Funded, London*

Covid-19 is viewed as the major catalyst for the increased provision of remote learning which continues to be a more accessible and flexible way for adult learners to undertake courses and is particularly helpful for working adults or those with caring responsibilities. However, classroom-based learning continues to be of value to build relationships with learners and is far more effective for teaching practical skills in sectors such as care and engineering.

2.3.2 Impact on mode of delivery for learners

Learners responding to the survey were asked how they were being taught. Just over two in five (43%) learners are being taught only using remote (online) methods, while one in three (33%) are being taught via a 100% classroom approach. The remainder (24%) are being taught via a blended delivery of both classroom and remote learning.

Over half (55%) of those surveyed learners who are in full time employment are being taught using only remote (online) methods.

Learners were asked in in-depth interviews if the mode of delivery has suited them as an adult learner, and whether delivery could have been developed further to support their learning. Almost all (17 of 20 interviewed learners) are positive about their experience in this regard, mentioning that delivery has been flexible and adaptable to their needs as an adult. Learners – particularly those studying remotely or via a blended method – note that providers' approach has allowed them to learn in their own free time, offering them flexibility around employment, childcare, family, illness, and other commitments. Meanwhile, learners in a classroom setting believe they achieve a deeper level of learning via direct interaction with other students and their tutors.

The flexibility of being able to learn at my own pace and time has been fantastic. With a busy lifestyle it fits around me rather than me fitting around it. – *Learner, Hospitality and catering*

Of the three respondents who are less positive about their experience, two would prefer more in-person teaching available to mitigate delays they have experienced in liaising with tutors or other students, while one would prefer more remote learning to reduce contact with others in light of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Interviewed learners were also asked whether they felt their course could have been delivered in another way that they would have found helpful. A third believe that their course delivery has been exactly what they required in terms of support, access to tutors, level of interaction, practical in-classroom work and available content online. A third of interviewed learners – all of whom are learning remotely (only) or 100% classroom – suggest a more blended delivery would offer greater benefits for them, either through having a more “hands-on” practical element, or to offer more flexibility.

It would be helpful if the course was done all or in part remotely as I could work more hours. I have had to reduce my hours to the course.
– *Learner, Accounting and finance*

The remaining third of interviewees note additional points, including:

- closer support, particularly around assessment work and exams, including additional resources (digital resources are mentioned for those studying remotely),
- availability of a platform to allow interaction between students and tutors,
- more support for learners where English is not their first language, and
- greater support for learners struggling with Maths.

2.4 Impact of funding for providers

Interviewed providers were asked to comment on the extent to which the funding (and funding amount) as part of the Free Courses for Jobs offer was meeting their needs as a provider to support them to build capacity at L3 and adults’ needs. Two in five agree the funding is adequate and allows them to increase the volume of learners.

However, seven providers (of 33) suggest the funding is not sufficient to provide wider support, for example employing additional staff, administration, course/curriculum development, or marketing promotion. These activities are extra costs to those associated with individual learner costs, providing a barrier to being financially viable. As a result, providers say they are restricted in what they can realistically offer.

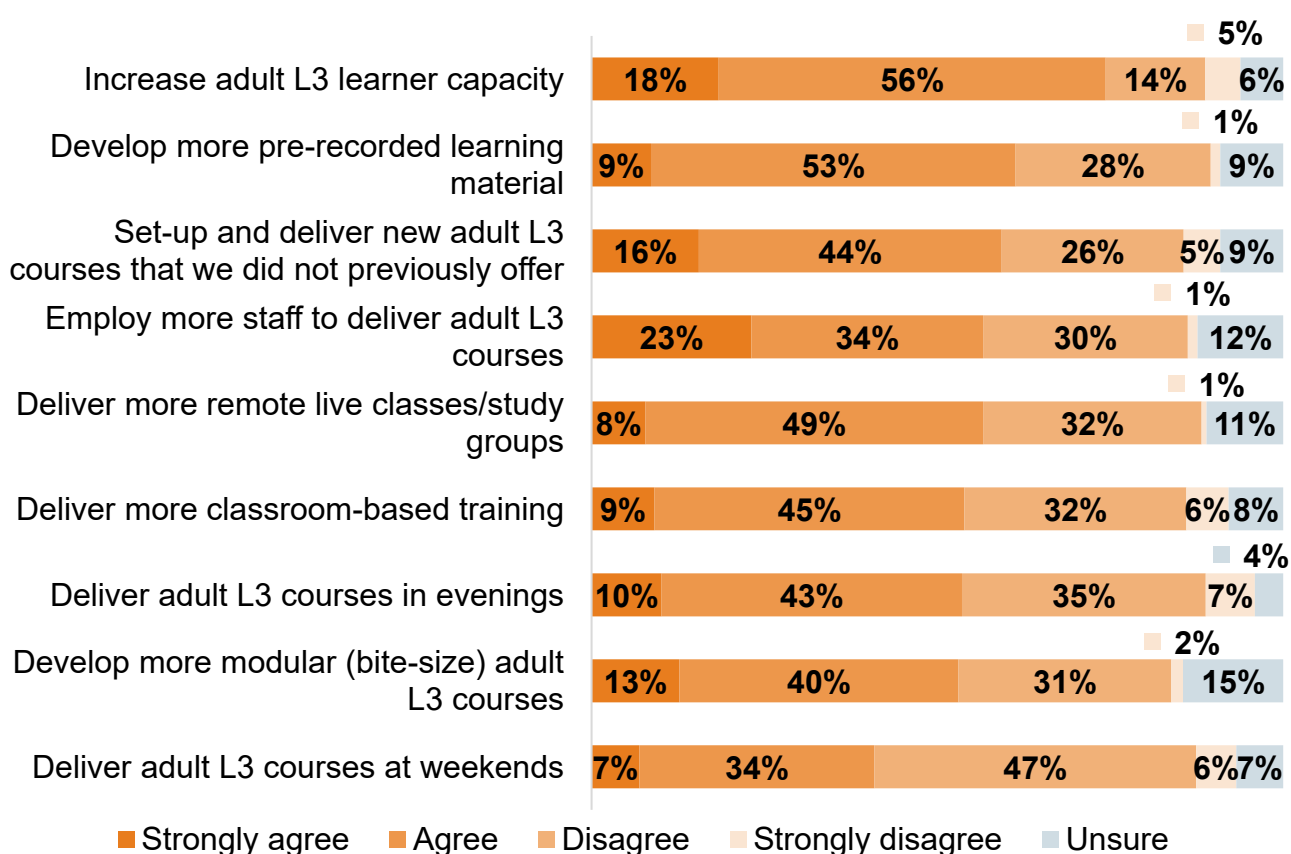
Meanwhile, nine providers interviewed believe the funding is currently too restrictive and suggest that greater levels of flexibility could be introduced. Concerns typically focus on the courses available and in-scope of the offer which, providers say, can limit how they can utilise the finances to help them build provision that best suits their area and market. Suggestions in this regard are outlined in section 2.2.4. These providers suggest the offer is not tied to specific courses but should instead allow providers to utilise the funding for their own means (while still remaining ring-fenced to assist with L3 adult delivery) to align more heavily to the market requirements.

2.4.1 Impact of uplift funding

As part of the Free Courses for Jobs offer, providers are paid a funding uplift for each eligible learning aim, based on published Guided Learning Hours (GLH) for the qualification. Qualifications of 360 GLH or more receive a funding uplift of £600 per eligible learner, while qualifications of 359 GLH or less receive a funding uplift of £150. This amount is adjusted/weighted for disadvantaged areas/learners.

Around three quarters (76%) of surveyed providers agree the uplift funding specifically has enabled them to increase their adult L3 learner capacity. Around three in five agree that the uplift specifically has enabled them to: develop more pre-recorded learning material (62%), set up and deliver new adult L3 courses they did not deliver previously (60%), or to employ more staff to deliver the adult L3 courses (57%). Providers are split as to whether the uplift funding has enabled more delivery at weekends (41% agree; 53% disagree), more delivery in evenings (53% agree; 42% disagree), or the development of more modular adult L3 courses (50% agree; 33% disagree).

Figure 12 Impact of uplift funding on providers' delivery

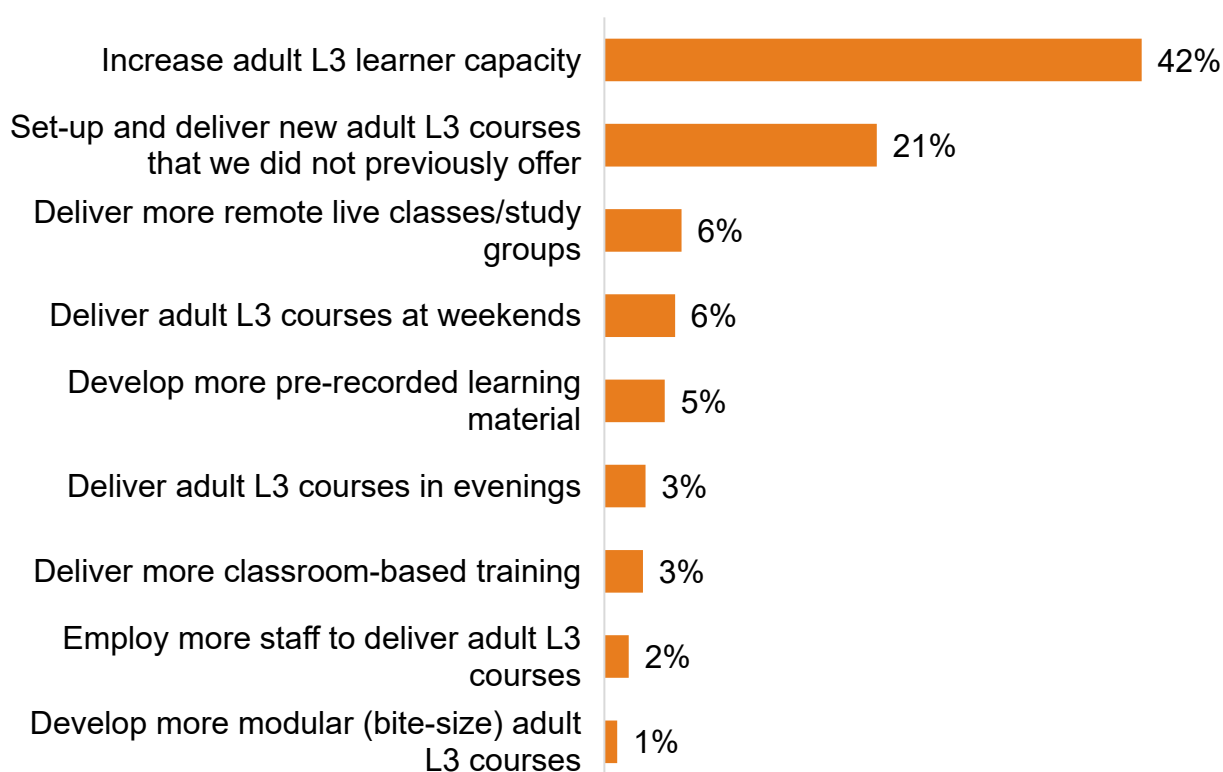


Base: variable 252 to 281 respondents. Source: Pye Tait Consulting, 2022.

Agreement levels are noticeably higher for most statements among providers who did not previously offer adult L3 courses. For example, four fifths (80%) of this group agree that the uplift has enabled the delivery of more live classes/study groups, and around three quarters (74%) agree the uplift funding has enabled the development of more modular adult L3 courses.

From this same list of options, surveyed providers were asked to choose which single aspect they feel would benefit most from continued uplift funding. Just over two in five (42%) perceive that the uplift funding is best utilised specifically to increase adult L3 learner capacity, while around one in five (21%) believe it is best used to set-up and deliver new adult L3 courses that they did not previously offer. This latter option was selected by about half (49%) of providers that had not previously offered adult L3 courses prior to Free Courses for Jobs.

Figure 13 Single aspect that would benefit most from uplift funding



Base: 276 respondents. Source: Pye Tait Consulting, 2022.

The top selected option by providers in each region was one of the two most commonly selected overall, except in the South West where just over half (52%) of providers perceive the uplift funding is best employed to develop more pre-recorded learning material. Meanwhile, just over a third (35%) of providers in the North East believe the uplift would be best used to deliver more adult L3 weekend courses.

There is no notable difference in response by type of provider.

In the in-depth interviews with providers, those aware of the uplift say this has not impacted on their decision to run courses as part of the offer. Instead, they note the uplift has helped to provide an increased level of support in some cases, but generally has gone towards the costs associated with running the courses. Providers further note that the uplift funding has had very little impact on how the qualifications would have been delivered had this not been available. For those providers which have made changes, it is noted that the uplift has helped them to speed up the process to reach the point they were already aiming for.

2.5 Marketing

Just over one quarter (28%) of surveyed providers attest to undertaking additional or different marketing for adult L3 learners for courses under the offer. Over half (56%) say they have not done so, and the remainder (16%) are unsure.

Additional marketing is most common in the South West (65%) and North West (46%) and least common in the East Midlands (4%) and Yorkshire and the Humber (8%).

More or different marketing has been undertaken more commonly by sixth form colleges (78%), special colleges (52%), and general FE colleges (37%) and less commonly by other public funded institutions (17%).

A third (33%) of providers who did not previously offer adult L3 courses have undertaken more/different marketing, while just under two thirds (64%) have not.

However, these findings appear to contradict those from a different survey question, where 64% of providers agree or strongly agree that the offer has enabled them to undertake more marketing to target adult L3 learners, while two thirds (67%) agree or strongly agree that the uplift funding specifically has enabled them to do likewise. Note that this survey question was asked as one of a series of statements, and therefore may have received less consideration than were it asked by itself.

Of those that have undertaken additional marketing, 97 providers commented on what activities they have undertaken in addition to their usual marketing. The most popular additional means of campaign (mentioned by 23 providers) is via social media, using sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Google ads. Other additional promotional activities include:

- making leaflets, and placing adverts in newspapers and online equivalents (mentioned by 21 respondents),
- greater promotion on providers' websites (18),
- greater employer engagement (11),
- involvement in roadshows at local town centres, shopping locations, and libraries, (10),
- holding open events or career fairs (9), and
- working more closely with local authorities (3).

Those surveyed providers that have not undertaken additional or different marketing were asked why they had not done so. Most (79%) say that their current marketing strategy already works. Around one in seven (15%) say they have insufficient funding available to undertake such activity, and 6% say they already have sufficient learner

numbers. Concerns around insufficient funding are higher than average among providers in the North East (59%) and among providers who did not previously offer adult L3 courses (32%).

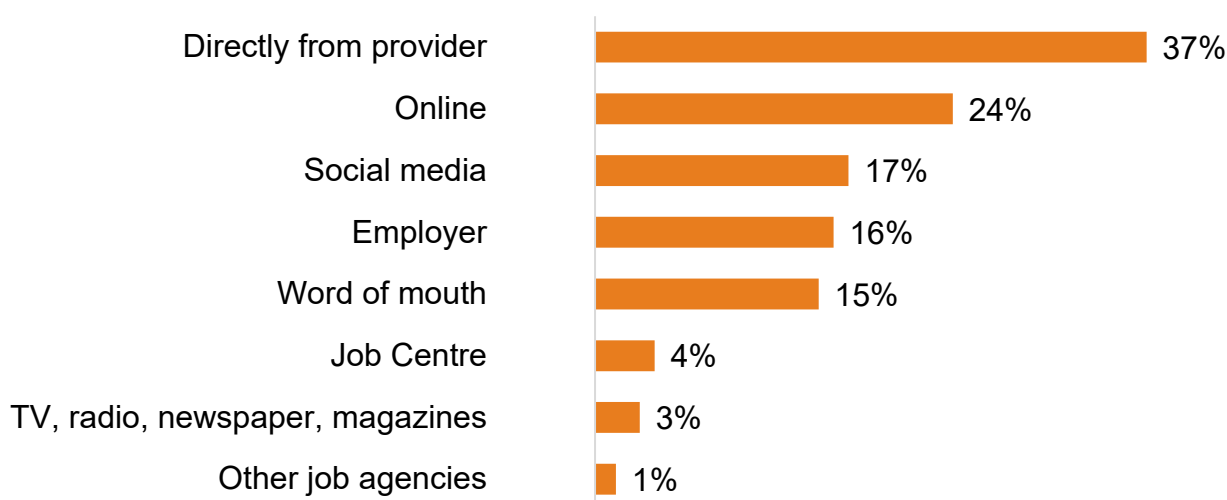
Around two in five interviewed providers believe the level of funding for the promotion, marketing, and advertising of the offer to be inadequate, with little to no funds remaining to support wider delivery. The knock-on effect, providers say, is little to no impact on the number of adult learners who are aware they are eligible, resulting in no increase in the number of adult learners undertaking L3 qualifications. Since fieldwork concluded, the Government has launched a new [Skills for Life](#) campaign.

This needs a higher national profile - even if you search online, you don't get a good output. This may increase uptake if people actually knew it existed. – *General FE College, East Midlands*

Among learners, just over three in five (62%) were aware of the Free Courses for Jobs offer before they began the survey questionnaire, with the remainder (38%) unaware. It would therefore appear that this latter group of learners were interested in courses to which they were entitled to free funding but were unaware of this. We should also note that the name of the policy changed from Level 3 Offer to FCFJ after learners had begun their courses, and so some learners may have known the offer under a different title.

Just under two in five (37%) surveyed learners previously aware of the offer say they heard of Free Courses for Jobs directly from their training provider, be that through face-to-face contact, visiting the website, or other marketing. Around a quarter (24%) learned about the offer online, and about one in six heard about it via social media (17%), via their employer (16%), or by word of mouth through family, friends or colleagues (15%). A higher proportion of those employed full time learned about the offer from their employer (34%).

Figure 14 How learners heard of Free Courses for Jobs



Base: 136 respondents (multiple responses permitted). Source: Pye Tait Consulting, 2022.

In-depth interviews with learners explored this point further. Nine of the 20 interviewed learned about the offer from their provider, either through the website, being informed while studying for their L2, being contacted having recently completed a course, or being told the L3 course was free after their application was submitted. Three learned about the offer from friends already taking advantage of the free funding, two saw adverts on social media, and others learned via word of mouth.

I did a L2 in AAT, and then the college tutors told me about the course. I asked if there was funding for the L3 and when I heard it was free, I decided to do it. – *Learner, Accounting and Finance*

2.6 Providers' reactions to Free Courses for Jobs

2.6.1 Reflecting back

Interviewed providers were asked to reflect back and comment on the perceived success of the Free Courses for Jobs offer intervention by the DfE, and the extent to which it is meeting its intended goals. One third believe these goals are being met, one third believe otherwise, while the remainder believe it is too early to judge.

Providers stating the funding is achieving its goals observe how the offer has allowed people to access education who may otherwise not have had the funds to do so, especially individuals from low income and/or low education backgrounds. They suggest the offer negates any potential worries surrounding loans and provides adult learners with opportunities to partake in courses while maintaining a family life.

Those who believe the intervention is not currently meeting its intended aims believe some disadvantaged groups are still not aware of or able to access the offer. They raise particular concern about individuals who may wish to upskill or reskill but are not currently eligible for this offer as they already hold a L3 qualification in another topic,²⁶ or may not be sufficiently educated and require a lower-level qualification first (L1 or L2), which are not included in the funding offer. There is also concern that courses are not accessible to the unemployed, or for individuals with particularly low incomes. It should be noted that the Free Courses for Jobs offer is being extended on a trial basis from April 2022 to include adults who earn under the National Living Wage or are unemployed, regardless of their prior qualification level. Interviews with providers took place shortly before this announcement by the DfE. In addition, it should be noted that government-funded provision is available up to and including L2 for eligible adults. Providers note some L3 qualifications offered may be too lengthy (too many GLH) for people who rely heavily on income, and that commitment to these courses may simply be too much, especially regarding potential transport costs or income loss due to time away from work.

2.6.2 Ease of administration

Interviewed providers were asked about the extent to which administrative and reporting mechanisms were working as expected for the Free Courses for Jobs offer, and if they had faced any challenges where lessons could be learned for future roll-out. The vast majority – more than four in five – have faced no issues at all, and the application and reporting processes are straightforward and easy to implement.

We have no problem. No challenges faced about reporting of numbers or accessing the finance – our system works fine. I haven't heard any of our folks saying other than this is a good thing to have done, and it could go further, but how it's gone so far has been positive. – *Other Public Funded, East Midlands*

A minority report minor issues. These issues include small technological errors (for example, the system not displaying the correct funding amount for a short period of time). Devolved organisations and certain regions believe they face a more cumbersome process with a limited budget, and highlight difficulties understanding fee assessment, and issues accessing the funding via the ILR. No suggestions for improvement or lessons learned from these hinderances were made by providers.

2.6.3 Future intentions

Almost all (96%) surveyed providers intend to carry on with the Free Courses for Jobs offer in the future. Of the small minority (4%) who do not intend to do so, most are private

training providers, and two explained their reasoning, which centres on a lack of demand from learners for eligible L3 courses, with greater interest in L1 or L2 courses.

In-depth interviews with providers explored this further. Most say they will continue to offer the same range of courses – which is where their expertise lies – and would do so with or without the offer. A minority of interviewed providers plan to offer more courses or extend their programme directly as a result of the intervention (for example to expand from health and social care to also include childcare courses) – these are often larger colleges that have capacity and resource to do so. Meanwhile, smaller providers would appreciate more clarity around the duration and the future of the initiative to help them with longer-term planning. For such providers, L3 courses are viewed as a long-term investment and commitment because they do not have spare resource and staff to develop and deliver new courses. In addition, other interviewed providers confirm they will continue to make use of the funding even though they say they cannot build their capacity with this.

One interviewed provider does not intend to use the offer in the future because it is already in touch with local employers and the funding does not meet their needs. Another believes that the funding is too limited for any potential expansion of their range of courses in the future.

Longer-term use of the Free Courses for Jobs offer by providers is often linked to requests to increase its flexibility to allow a greater range of courses to be made available. Courses suggested are those which will help to meet market demands locally with the main focus on employers' needs and filling skills gaps and shortages quickly (see section 2.2.4 for more detail).

3. Impact on adult learners

This chapter explores the impact of the Free Courses for Jobs intervention on adult learners, specifically examining the following issues:

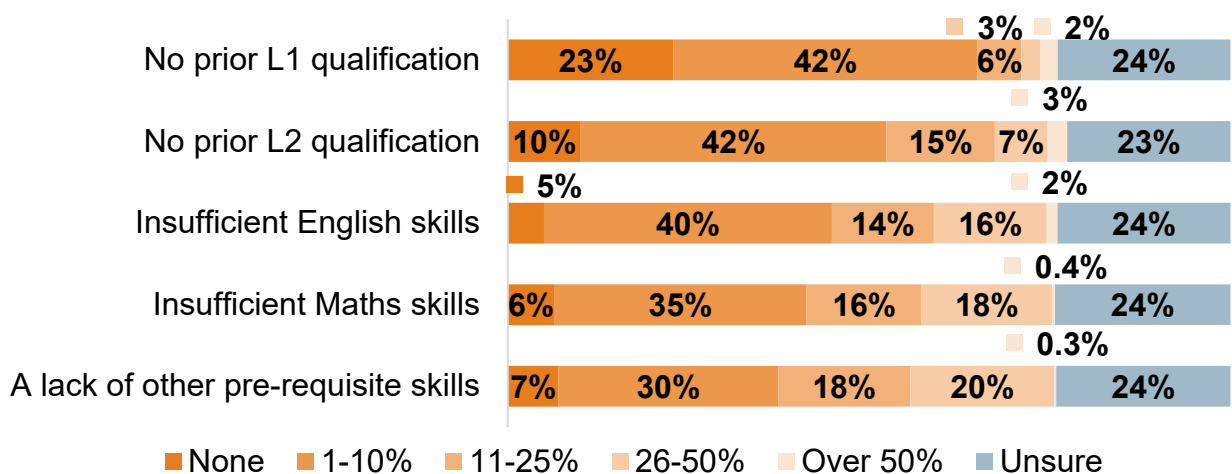
- levels of prior learning and transitioning to L3 courses,
- remaining barriers to study now the financial barrier of the course fee is removed,
- changes in diversity of adult learners,
- changes in drop-out rates,
- extent of employer engagement with the offer and learners, and
- learners' motivations and expectations.

3.1 Prior learning and transitioning

3.1.1 Views from providers and learners

Surveyed providers were asked for their views regarding the extent to which they are finding applicants for adult L3 courses funded through the Free Courses for Jobs offer (including those that go on to study on these courses) have no prior L1 or L2 qualification, insufficient English or Maths skills, or a lack of other pre-requisite skills. Just over half (53%) of providers say some adult L3 learner applicants have no prior L1 qualification, which rises to two thirds (67%) saying some applicants have no prior L2 qualification. Similar proportions report insufficient English skills (71%), insufficient Maths skills (69%), or a lack of other pre-requisite skills (69%).

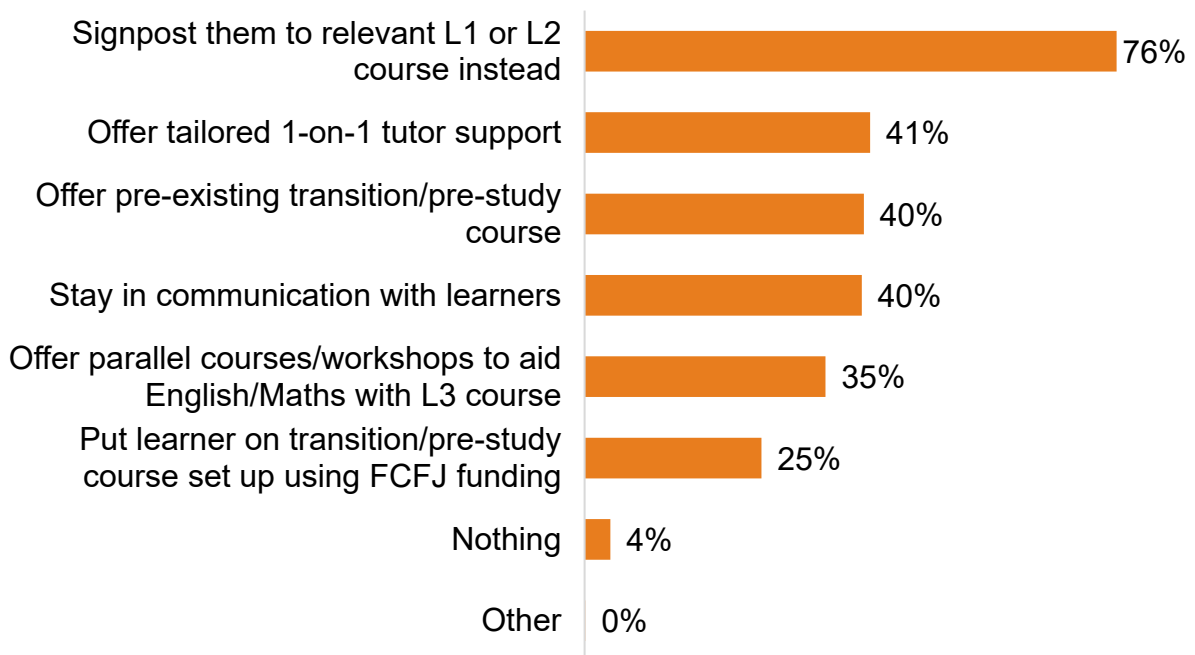
Figure 15 Providers' views on skills lacked by adult applicants to L3 courses, by proportion of applicants



Base: variable 205 to 293 respondents. Source: Pye Tait Consulting, 2022.

Around three quarters (76%) of providers say that, when adult learner applicants do not meet the skill level required to undertake a L3 course, they will signpost them to a relevant L1 or L2 course instead. Around two in five will offer tailored one-to-one support to prepare learners (41%) or put learners on a pre-existing transition course (40%). One quarter (25%) place learners on transition courses that they have specifically set up using the funding provided through the Free Courses for Jobs offer.

Figure 16 Support given to learners who do not meet skill level required



Base: 258 respondents (multiple responses permitted). Source: Pye Tait Consulting, 2022.

A larger proportion of other public funded providers (such as local authorities and HEIs) offer support in comparison to other provider types. For example, around three quarters (76%) of these providers put learners on pre-existing transition courses (compared to 40% of General FE colleges and 32% of private sector public funded providers), and 70% place learners on transition courses that they have specifically set up using the funding available through the Free Courses for Jobs offer (compared to 22% of FE colleges and 15% of private providers). Nearly nine in ten public funded providers (88%) stay in communication, and around three quarters (77%) offer tailored one-to-one support.

Transitioning between levels is a notable concern among surveyed providers. In the in-depth interviews, two explain further how they do not have the financial resource available to cover the cost of L1 and/or L2 courses for applicants that do not meet the minimum skill level for a L3 course, meaning these potential learners have to find funding themselves. Providers note such applicants are often unemployed or come from more deprived areas and cannot readily afford the cost of these L1 or L2 courses. In this context, these providers argue that funding for L2 or even L1 courses, or English and Maths courses, might be more beneficial if targeted specifically at these individuals.

We will do our best to support as we always do, but it's very difficult because we just don't have the resource. What you've got is a free L3, but a fee for L2. – *General FE College, East Midlands*

As described above, funding is available via the AEB for all adults in non-devolved areas to study for English and Maths qualifications up to and including Level 2, and that Essential Digital Skills Qualifications are fully funded for adults who do not already have Level 1 digital skills. The AEB also funds adult learners in devolved areas to study for their first full Level 2 if they earn under the National Living Wage annually. Mayoral Combined Authorities and the Greater London Authority are responsible for adult education provision in their areas.

As some L3 qualifications require a minimum proficiency in English or Maths, providers in in-depth interviews suggest a need for improved communication to explain to learners what prior learning is required before they apply for a L3. Around one in five interviewed providers rely on some form of assessment to check applicants' existing skill levels, including literacy and numeracy, in addition to checking their prior learning record. Across interviewed providers, there is consensus that providing a tailored approach for each learner and a positive first experience on campus are key factors in supporting individuals towards a L3.

We're about inclusion rather than exclusion – you don't take the people who can't do a L3 onto a L3 course, you give them guidance and advice to help them progress, and steer them to the right path of progression. Because of the size and chunkiness of the L3 you would never put someone on that course that couldn't handle it, that would be too daunting and they wouldn't be prepared. – *General FE College, Yorkshire and the Humber*

Among learners responding to the survey, one quarter (25%) agree they would have benefitted from more prior learning before starting their course, while just over three in five (61%) disagree, and the remainder (15%) are unsure. About a third (31%) of learners who do not currently hold a L2 qualification agree they would have benefitted from more prior learning, compared to 22% of those who do currently hold a L2.

Where learners agree that prior learning might have helped, opportunity was provided to note specific prior learning, and 42 comments were received. Just over a third (16) say they would have liked a greater background knowledge of their subject to feel better prepared. A quarter (11) state it would have been beneficial to have a higher standard of English, while nine say likewise with better Maths skills. Six note they would have liked to have undertaken a L2 first to help them prepare.

In-depth interviews with learners explored this latter point in more detail, to understand whether holding a L2 (or not) impacted on the type of course chosen. Most (14 of 20) say they were influenced by their L2 qualification, noting it to be a natural progression to continue their studies in the same field to help enhance their career prospects. One specifically notes their L2 assisted their preparation to undertake a L3, while another requires both a L2 and L3 for their job.

In my L2 I got a placement at a nursery, and they were kind enough to let me keep that job. I then got a promotion and that motivated me to go for the L3, so I chose a course based on that placement. The L2 definitely helped with assignments too. – *Learner, Childcare and early years*

Those interviewed who do not hold a L2 qualification say they are currently employed and that the L3 is in their sector of work and will help enhance their career prospects.

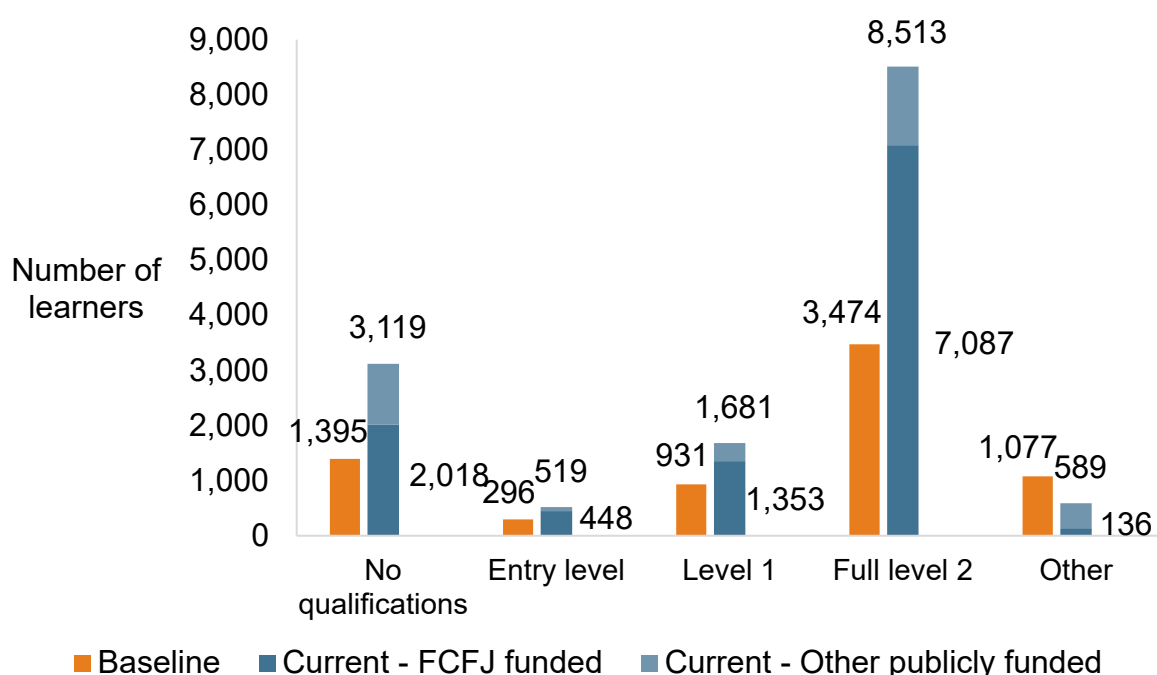
3.1.2 Prior learning findings from ILR analysis

This section presents findings from the ILR analysis, comparing the change from the baseline (2018/19) position to the current picture.

Starts by prior attainment

Compared to the baseline position, the number of funded learners on eligible courses whose previous highest qualification is a Full L2 has increased by 104%. Smaller increases are seen for the number of starts for learners whose previous highest qualification is a L1 (up 45%), Entry level (up 51%), or who have no qualification (up 45%).

Figure 17 Change in starts by prior achievement



Source: Analysis of ILR data.

Of all starts in the baseline, around half (48%) of learners held a Full L2, and this has increased to a share of about two thirds (64%) in the current picture. In contrast, for learners eligible for the Free Courses for Jobs offer but who are not funded through the offer, around two in five (42%) have a highest qualification level of a Full L2.

Impact on other courses

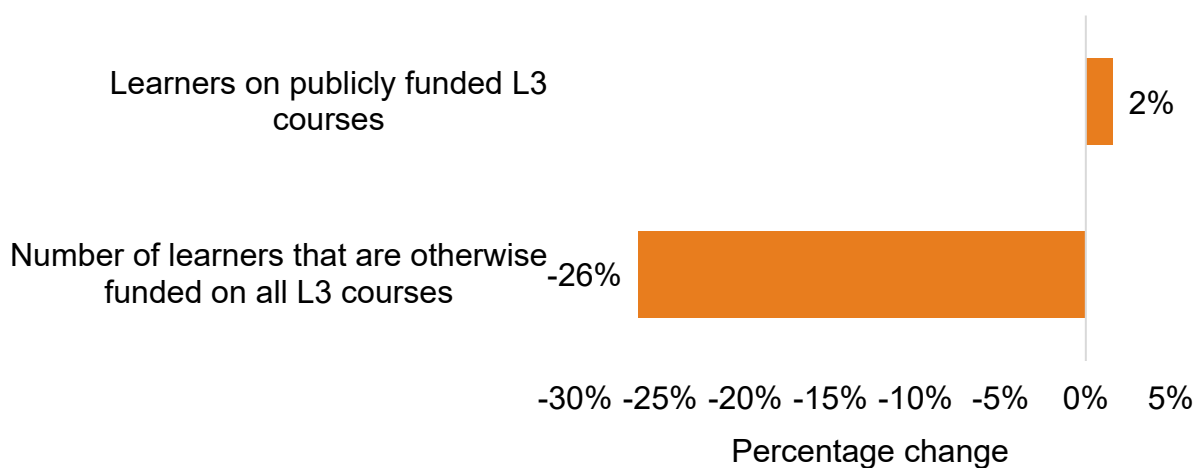
With the Free Courses for Jobs offer making certain L3 courses freely funded to eligible learners, ILR data were examined to investigate any potential impacts on other courses. This is not a full analysis of displacement effects created by the Free Courses for Jobs from different qualifications but provides an initial indication of the changes that have occurred between the 2018/19 baseline and the current data. To be comprehensive, the analysis would need to take into account wider contextual issues such as policy changes, the Covid-19 pandemic, and be based on a longer time series. Consequently, the findings reported here cannot be interpreted in response to the Free Courses for Jobs Offer, instead this section is used to identify gaps in knowledge and areas for further investigation and monitoring over time.

Looking at learners on all L3 courses (i.e., those which are publicly funded and those which are otherwise funded) there has been an overall decrease in the number of learners on such courses of around 10%. This considers all learners on eligible courses whether they are claiming the Free Courses for Jobs offer or not, and is in line with

trends in Advanced Learner Loan funding since 2016.²⁷ However, the share of the starts on courses which are eligible for the offer has doubled from 14% in the 2018/19 baseline to 29% currently.

There has been a small increase in the total number of learners on publicly funded L3 courses (both those eligible and ineligible for Free Courses for Jobs) of around 2%. There has been a 26% decrease in the number of learners that are otherwise funded on all L3 courses – it is unclear how this finding corresponds to trends over a longer time period, which show that Advanced Learner Loan numbers have been declining since 2016/17,²⁸ and therefore further investigation is required to place this finding in context. In the 2018/19 baseline, learners starting courses currently eligible for the Free Courses for Jobs offer accounted for 20% of all L3 learners. In the current data, these learners account for 40% of all L3 starts, doubling the share of learners on these courses.

Figure 18 Change in adult learners on publicly funded and otherwise funded L3 courses



Source: Analysis of ILR data, 2022.

Looking at L2 courses using the same eligibility criteria, there is a reduction in the number of starts of around 19%. However, official statistics point to a trend over time that, recently, starts among those aged 25+ on L2 courses are reducing.²⁹

Further exploration is required to understand if there have been any potential displacement effects caused specifically by the Free Courses for Jobs offer on other qualifications in the context of wider contextual changes.

²⁷ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/bde608b3-8457-4bc8-9c02-42e74fcad9fa>

²⁸ *Ibid*

²⁹ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/203a8889-429b-469f-abe1-560b2278f6a1>

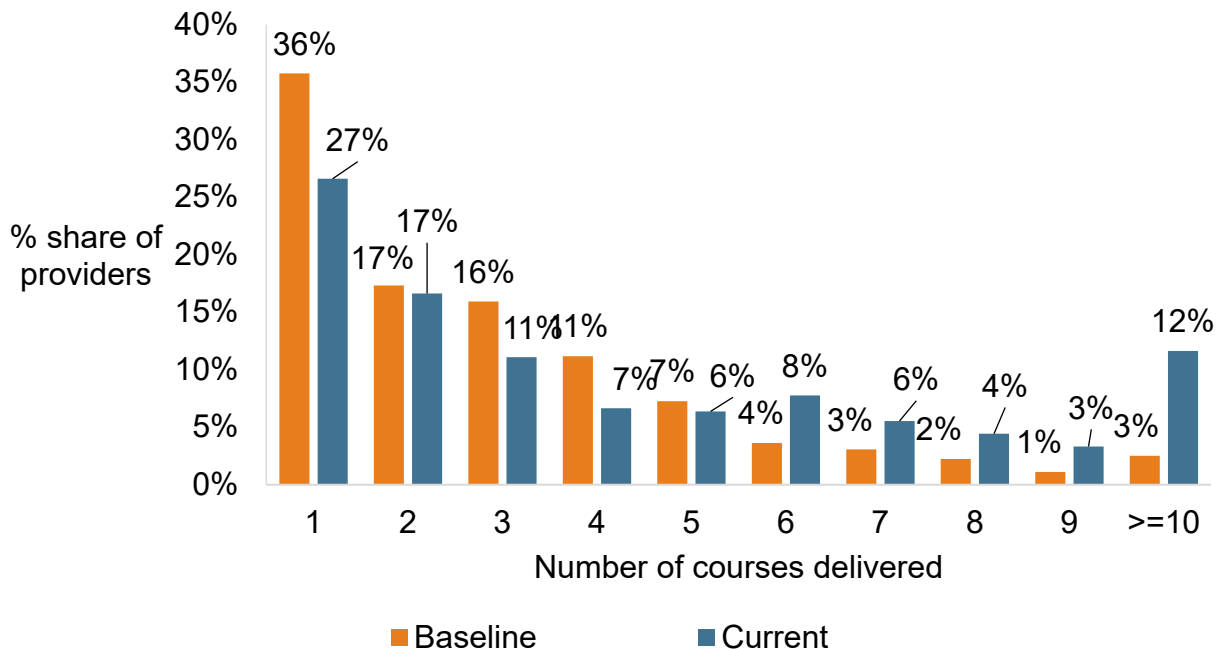
Number of courses being delivered

The potential impact on the number of courses which providers are delivering that are eligible as part of Free Courses for Jobs was also explored. This initially included all eligible courses regardless of whether there were learners claiming the Free Courses for Jobs offer. A further analysis was carried out to consider only those providers who were delivering courses with learners who were claiming the Free Courses for Jobs offer.

In the 2018/19 baseline, a total of 358 providers had learners on eligible courses, and around one third (36%) of these delivered just one course, while one third (33%) delivered two or three courses. In the current position, the total number of providers delivering eligible courses has increased slightly to 361, of which 81 are delivering eligible courses for the first time, while 78 from the 2018/19 baseline are no longer delivering such courses.

Analysis reveals that providers who are delivering eligible courses are now typically delivering, on average, a greater number of eligible courses compared to 2018/19. The share of providers delivering more than five courses has increased from 13% in the baseline to 33% now. This proportion remains around one third for those who are delivering eligible courses and have learners who are claiming the Free Courses for Jobs offer.

Figure 19 Number of courses being delivered by providers



Source: Analysis of ILR data.

For context, it should be noted that some providers may not have a Free Courses for Jobs funding allocation if they were unsuccessful in the latest round of Adult Education Budget (AEB) funding. However, these providers may still deliver courses which are in scope of the offer, with eligible learners being supported through Advanced Learner Loans.

3.2 Remaining barriers to study

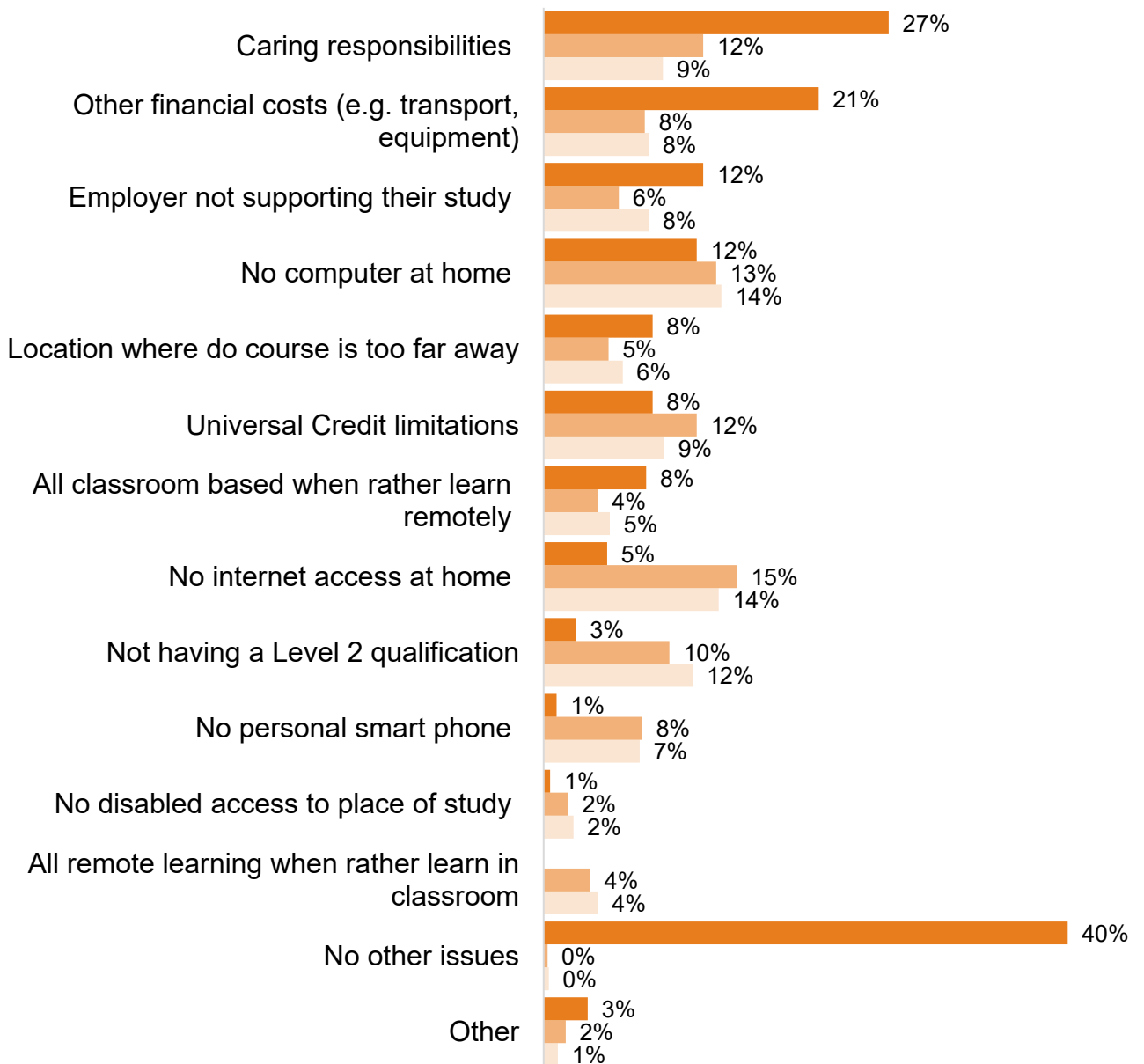
Previous research has found that financial cost is a key blocker with a measurable negative impact on overall uptake of L3 qualifications.³⁰ The Free Courses for Jobs offer is intended to open the door for eligible adults in England by removing the financial barriers to education and training and by fully funding a specific L3 qualification in economically beneficial areas.

While a notable barrier to adult learning has now been removed, providers were asked if they had observed any other issues that might prevent adult learners from successfully completing a L3 course, and whether these barriers also exist for adult learners on non-funded L3 courses. Learners were asked a similar question as to whether there are any issues that might prevent them from successfully completing a L3 course.

Two in five (40%) surveyed learners say that there are no other barriers to study now. However, around one quarter (27%) note they hold caring responsibilities that might block their learning, while a just over one fifth (21%) state other financial considerations such as transport and equipment persist. Caring responsibilities are cited more commonly by female learners (32%) than male learners (12%) likely due to childcare arrangements. Eligible learners may be able to access Learner Support to help with these costs.

³⁰ Department for Education, 2018, Impact evaluation of 24+ Advanced Learner Loans

Figure 20 Barriers to successfully completing a L3 course



- Learner view
- Provider view: Barrier for adult learners on L3 course funded through offer
- Provider view: Barrier for adult learner on L3 course not funded through offer

Base: 203 learners, 281 (funded) and 239 (non-funded) provider respondents (multiple responses permitted). Source: Pye Tait Consulting, 2022

Meanwhile, providers' perception of the largest remaining barrier is that adult learners will have no internet access at home, for both learners funded (15%) and not funded through the offer (14%). Other barriers commonly perceived include learners having no computer at home, not having a L2 qualification, or caring responsibilities.

The issue of persisting financial costs was explored further with learners via in-depth interviews. Most (16 of 20) agree the financial barrier has been fully removed and that it costs them nothing to do the course. Six do note that some small associated costs remain but these are covered through other means, for example travel costs covered using student travel cards, or childcare being paid for by their place of work or study.

Not paying for the course has freed up funds for travel to the college, so that's fully removed the barrier. Childcare costs are covered mostly by my placement as part of my wage. – *Learner, Childcare and early years*

The remaining four interviewees still feel associated expenditure is inhibiting completion of their L3. Two note how they are studying while working, but are having to work reduced hours to fit in learning, meaning they have a lower income. Others say they have a cost burden for extensive travel, childcare, or digital resources such as laptops.

Other barriers are still experienced by 14 of the 20 learners participating in in-depth interviews. Most (11) say the time required for study places a burden on other commitments, with caring responsibilities cited most often. The three others say the largest remaining barrier for them is around resources, especially having internet access and technology required for learning.

I am working full time and have two children to look after, the biggest barrier to me is finding the time to do my studies. – *Learner, Accounting and finance*

Of those with caring responsibilities, there is an even split as to whether this has restricted the course of study chosen. The learners who report caring responsibilities restricted their options note that they have been forced to choose a remote mode of learning to give them flexibility in how they study to fit in caring commitments. Those who say it has not restricted their chosen course say they have made it work for them, either by selecting a blended mode of learning to study remotely outside of caring commitments, and/or to study in the classroom during school hours.

I was looking specifically for distance learning, it is more flexible, I can juggle learning, work and care for my family.' – *Learner, Business Management*

In terms of other barriers, interviewed learners were asked specifically whether their location has impacted on the course they have chosen. Most (16 of 20) say their location has had no impact and typically note that they are either studying remotely so that geography is irrelevant, or that they are studying with a provider based locally. Where

location has had an impact, these four learners state that there are limited courses on offer to adults in their local area in their specific topic of interest.

Interviewed providers agreed that, with the financial barrier now removed, the most significant barrier they perceive to remain for learners is a lack of sufficient time to dedicate to a L3 qualification, citing wider responsibilities and commitments and the need to balance work and family (care and childcare) commitments with learning. Providers are offering greater flexibility to ensure adult learners can study around commitments – this is covered in more detail in section 2.3.

Other remaining barriers to learning are pointed out by providers.

- Financial barriers for transport and equipment cost including the outlay required for internet access, devices to access training online, and transport.
- Other financial limitations and restrictions, for example individuals with job-seeker allowance or on Universal Credit are not allowed to undertake long courses and retain their credit.
- Psychological barriers, particularly among individuals who have been out of education for longer or who are unemployed, who may suffer from low confidence and motivation, and be daunted by the thought of returning to education.
- Qualification length: L3 course length is intimidating to those who have been out of education for a long time or to those who simply wish to upskill to meet market demands.
- Educational background: individuals may have poor literacy and/or numeracy skills, or language barriers may exist for learners for non-native English speakers.
- Digital poverty: individuals may lack suitable digital skills to be able to access courses with any interactive or online aspects.
- Prior education: individuals lack some pre-requisite skills needed to join a L3 course, meaning they first need to catch-up at L1 or L2.

3.3 Learner diversity

Providers in in-depth interviews state that their use of existing mechanisms and tools helps to support learners, for instance those with special needs, or from more deprived backgrounds. Existing mechanisms referenced which providers find to be successful in meeting the learning needs of more vulnerable groups include:

- making all resources available in large print and/or different colours to engage with the learners more, and making resources available in text-to-talk format,

- focusing on life skills, Maths and English, and personal development around resilience and confidence, communication skills,
- use of individual learning and learning targets, and focus on making learners employable, for learners who are long-term unemployed,
- additional English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) or Maths support for learners that struggle with certain programmes, and
- offering online courses and blended learning and making recordings available to learners after sessions.

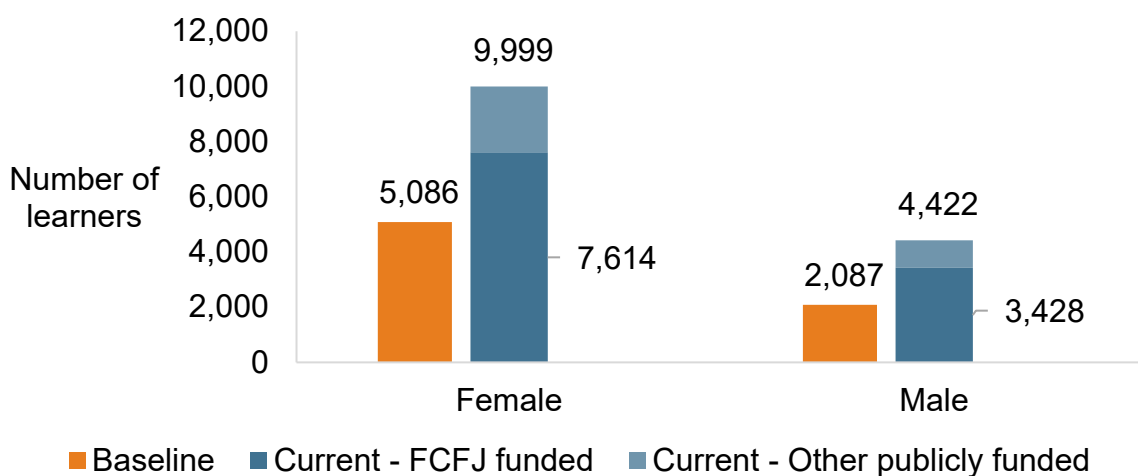
3.3.1 Diversity findings from ILR analysis

This section presents findings from the ILR analysis, comparing the change from the baseline (2018/19) position to the current picture.

Starts by sex

Compared to the 2018/19 baseline position, starts have increased by 64% for males, and by 50% for females.

Figure 21 Change in starts by sex



Source: Analysis of ILR data.

Overall, there has been a small shift in the relative proportion of males and females undertaking eligible L3 courses, with males now accounting for 31% of all starts, up from 29% in the baseline, while female start numbers have correspondingly fallen slightly from 71% to 69%.

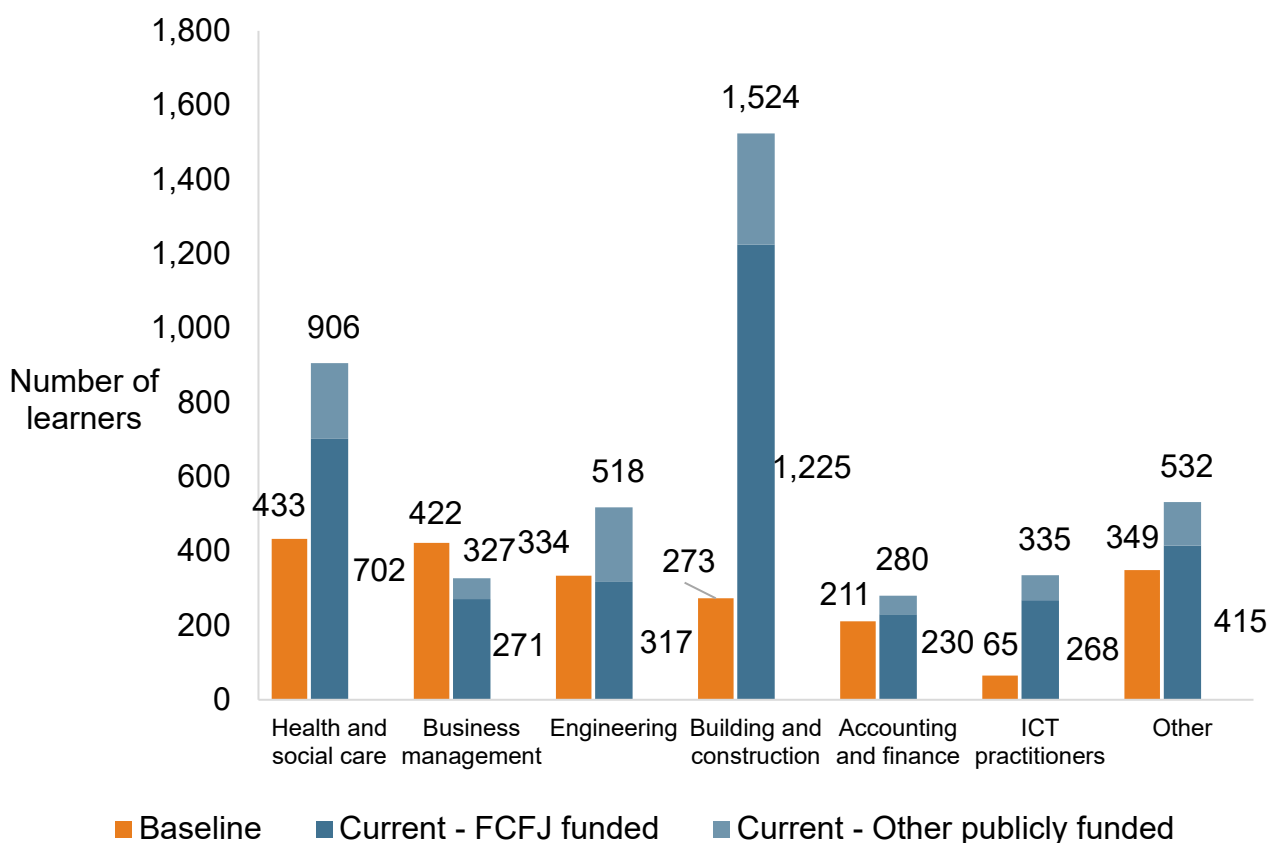
Surveyed providers were asked whether they had seen any change in the diversity of adults aged 24+ on those L3 courses funded by the Free Courses for Jobs offer. Over half said they have seen no change in the number of males (61%) or females (54%).

Starts by sector subject area and sex

The uptake of courses for sector subject area (SSA) is examined in section 2.2.3. Exploring this further by sex reveals deeper trends at work.

Among males, there has been an increase in starts across most SSAs, with the largest increase in starts on Building and construction courses (up 349%). Meanwhile there has been a decrease in starts in Business management (down 36%) and Engineering (down 5%).

Figure 22 Change in starts by SSA for males

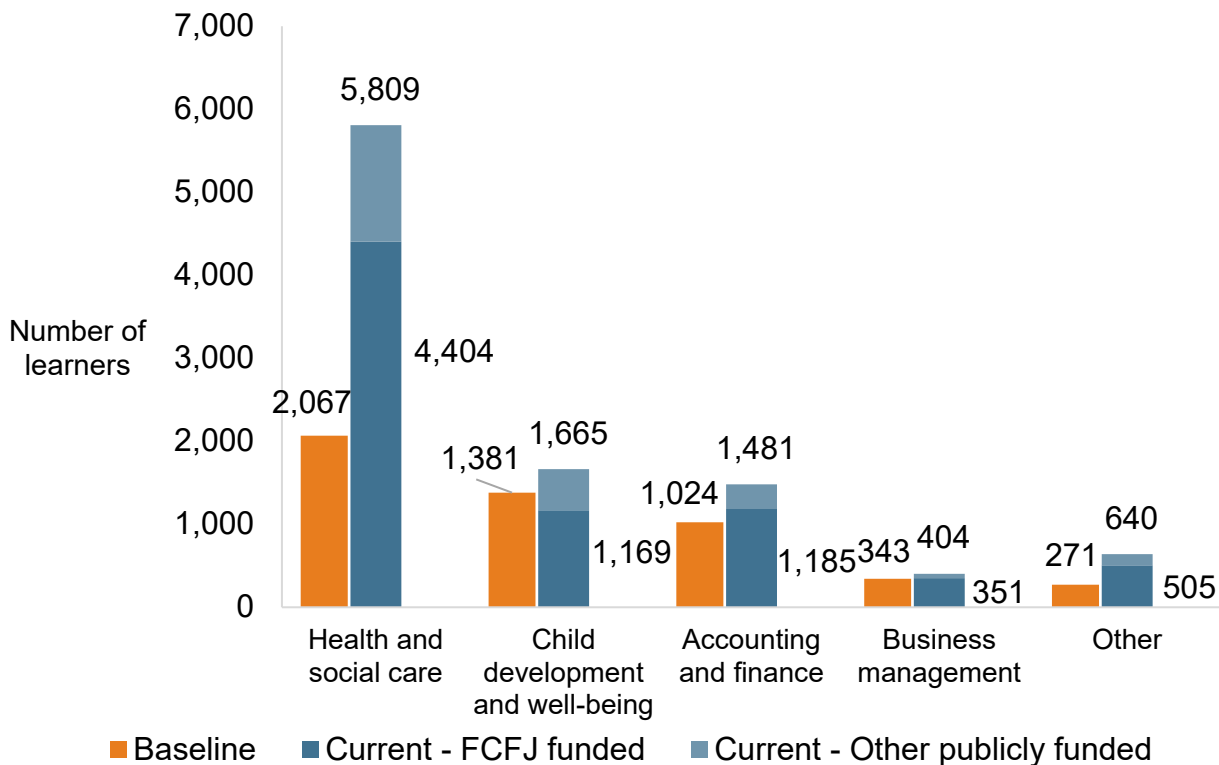


Source: Analysis of ILR data.

The result of this large upswing in Building and construction courses mean that these now account for over a third (36%) of all funded courses for males, compared to 13% in the baseline. The largest drop has been in Business management with this SSA now accounting for 8% of all male starts compared to 20% in the 2018/19 baseline.

Among females, there has been an increase in starts across most SSAs, with the largest increase in starts on Health and social care courses (up 113%). Meanwhile there has been a decrease in starts in Child development and well-being courses (down 15%).

Figure 23 Change in starts by SSA for females



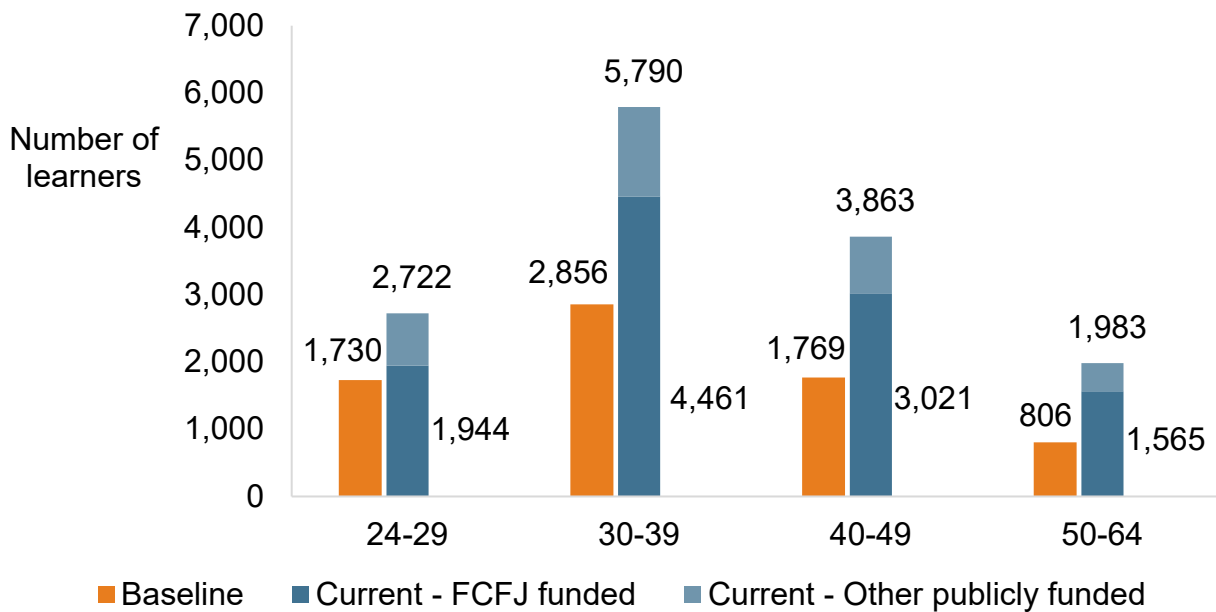
Source: Analysis of ILR data.

The result is that Health and social care courses now account for around three in five (58%) of all funded courses for females, compared to 41% in the baseline. The largest drop has been in Child development and well-being with this SSA now accounting for 15% of all female starts compared to 27% in the 2018/19 baseline, while Accounting and finance has also seen its relative share of female starts fall from 20% to 16%.

Starts by age

The number of funded learners starting eligible courses has increased, compared to the baseline, for all age groups. The largest increase is seen among learners aged 50-64, rising from 806 to 1,565, a jump of 94%.

Figure 24 Change in starts by age band



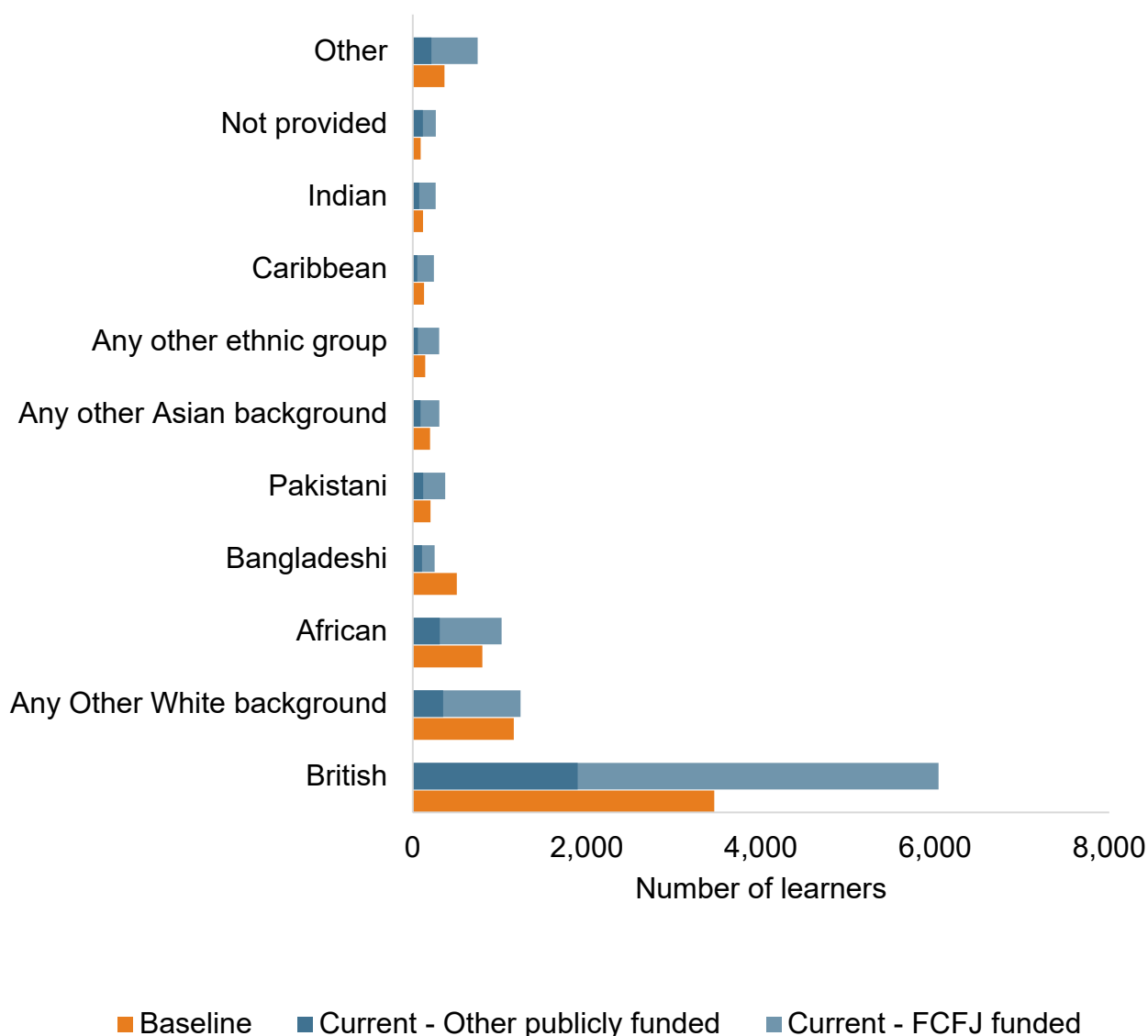
Source: Analysis of ILR data.

Proportionately, starts among funded learners aged 40 to 49, and aged 50 to 64, have increased, now accounting for 27% and 25% of all starts, up from 25% and 11% in 2018/19, respectively. Meanwhile, the share of starts among those aged 24 to 29 has fallen from 24% in the baseline to 18% currently.

Starts by ethnicity

Compared to the baseline position, starts have increased for all ethnic groups except Bangladeshi. In that group there has been a 50% decrease in the number of starts. Where ethnicity data are available, the largest increases are seen for learners with the following backgrounds: Indian (up 123%), Any other ethnic group (up 112%), Caribbean (up 86%), and Pakistani (up 84%).

Figure 25 Change in starts by ethnicity³¹



Source: Analysis of ILR data.

In terms of the relative proportion of funded learners on eligible courses, learners from an English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British background now account for over half of starts (55%), up from 48% in the baseline. The overall volume of starts has increased for learners from Any other white background and from an African background. However, their relative shares of all starts have fallen from 16% to 11%, and from 11% to 9%, respectively.

³¹ British includes English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British (<https://guidance.submit-learner-data.service.gov.uk/21-22/ilr/entity/Learner/field/Ethnicity>)

Over half (52%) of surveyed providers say they have seen no change in the number of people from different ethnic minority backgrounds. Increases in the number of learners from different ethnic minority backgrounds are most commonly reported by providers based in London (58%), East Midlands (54%), and East of England (52%), and least common among providers in the North East (3%).

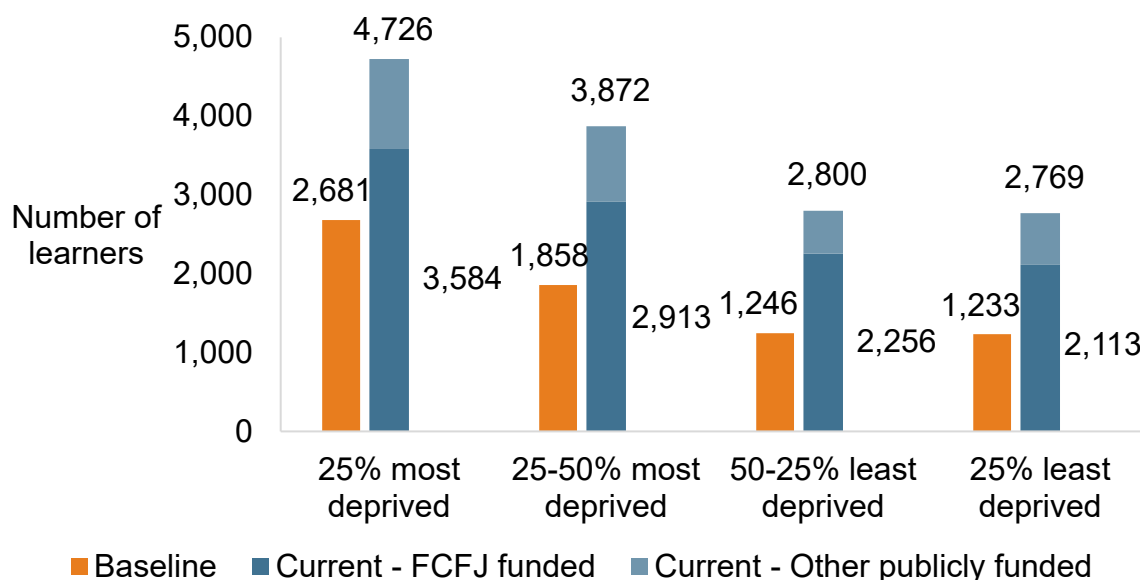
Starts by levels of deprivation

Based on the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) of their local authority, learners were divided into four quartiles for this analysis.

Across all quartiles, starts have risen compared to baseline levels. Starts among learners in the quartile of least deprived local authorities in England have increased by 71%, with the largest increase in the second least deprived quartile (up 81%). Starts of funded learners on eligible courses in the most deprived quartile of local authorities in England have increased by 34%. The absolute number of starts from the most deprived quartile is higher than those from the other three quartiles.

Looking at the change in the relative proportion of starts across these quartiles, funded learners in the most deprived quartile now account for 33% of all starts on eligible courses, down from 38% in the baseline.

Figure 26 Change in starts by IMD



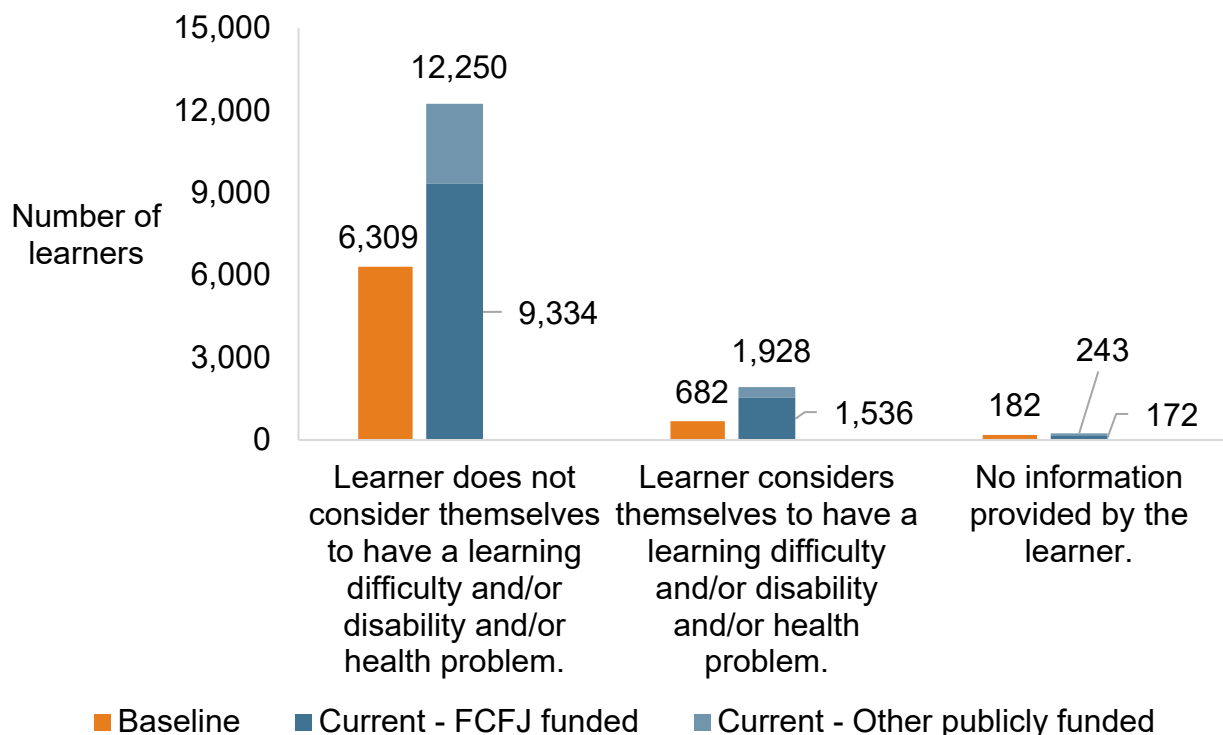
Source: Analysis of ILR data.

Starts by learning difficulty/disability/health problem

Compared to the baseline position, there has been a 125% increase in the number of learners starting eligible courses who consider themselves to have a learning difficulty,

disability, and/or health problem. There has also been an increase of 48% in the number of learners who do not consider themselves to have a learning difficulty, disability, and/or health problem.

Figure 27 Change in starts by learning difficulty/disability/health problem



Source: Analysis of ILR data.

The share of those who consider himself or herself to have a learning difficulty, disability, and/or health problem has increased from 10% at the baseline to 14% currently.

Over half (57%) of surveyed providers perceive no change in the number of people with a learning or physical disability. Increases in the number of learners with disabilities are most commonly reported by providers based in London (51%), and East Midlands (53%), and least common among providers in the North East (3%) and Yorkshire and the Humber (1%).

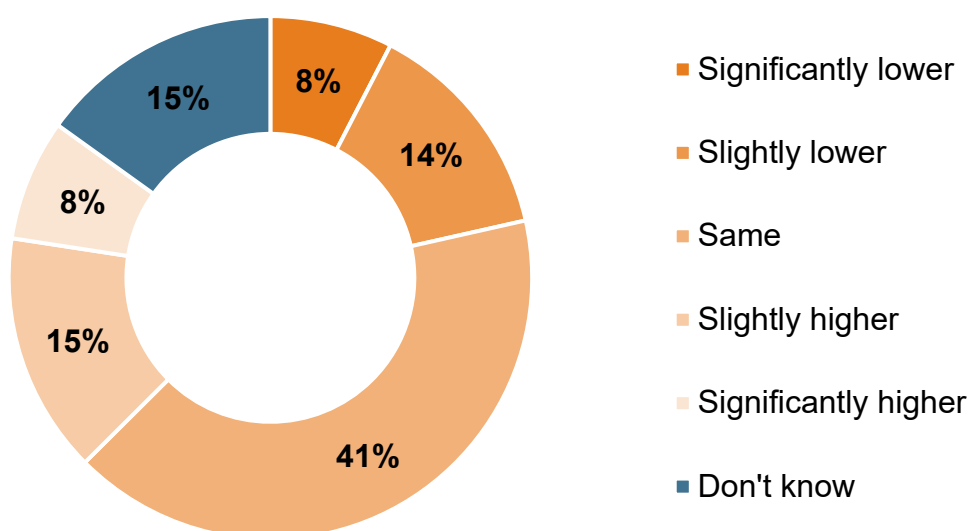
3.4 Drop-out rate

Providers responding to the survey were asked about their average drop-out rate (i.e. non-completion rate) of adult learners on any Free Courses for Jobs eligible and ineligible L3 courses. Just over half of responding providers were able to provide an answer, with an average (mean) response of a drop-out rate of 12%. The most common response was 5%.

There is some small variation among responses by region, with an average (mean) drop-out rate of 6% reported by providers in Yorkshire and the Humber and 19% in the South East. Other regions are very close to the overall average figure.

Following on from this, surveyed providers were asked, compared to other courses at the same stage of delivery, how the drop-out rate of learners on L3 courses funded by the Free Courses for Jobs offer compares to their average drop-out rate. Around two in five (41%) say that the drop-out rate is the same, while remaining providers are split as to whether the drop-out rate is lower or higher. Around one in six (15%) are unsure.

Figure 28 Perceived drop-out rate of adults on L3 courses compared to other courses



Base: 280 respondents. Source: Pye Tait Consulting, 2022.

The drop-out rate on L3 courses part of the Free Courses for Jobs offer is reported to be lower than average by providers in the East Midlands (62%). A higher drop-out rate than average is reported by those in the South East (46%) and East of England (38%).

Those providers that had not previously offered adult L3 courses before Free Courses for Jobs more commonly say that the drop-out rate is lower than their average drop-out rate for other courses (30%), while those that offered adult L3 courses before the offer are split (20% believe it to be lower, and 24% higher).

In-depth interviews with providers also explored the retention rate of adult learners on L3 courses before and after the implementation of the offer. A third say that, with the offer only being implemented in April 2021, it is too early to pass judgement, noting that comparing retention rates is difficult to undertake so early due to the long length of some L3 courses and the relatively small volume of learners. Meanwhile, one third report no change in drop-out rate, stating that retention for non-funded courses appears to be the

same as for the funded provision. Around one quarter believe the drop-out rate has likely increased. They reason that, as the course is fully funded with no financial expense for the learner, these learners have less of an investment or commitment to the course, so could be more likely to leave. The remaining interviewed providers (three) believe they are seeing an overall decrease in drop-out rate, arguing that funded learners may feel greater obligation to see the course through to completion.

3.5 Extent of employer engagement

The *Skills for Jobs* White Paper sets out a vision to strengthen links between employers and further education providers by placing employers at the heart of the system, so that education and training leads to jobs that can improve productivity and fill skills gaps.

While the scope of this evaluation did not extend to engaging directly with employers to understand their views, providers were asked their views during in-depth interviews and generally fall into one of two groups: those who actively engage employers in the delivery of the courses, and those who do not engage them or do so to a limited extent.

The first group of providers cooperates with employers in the delivery of all their courses (typically ranging from L3 to L6) to ensure the content meets market demand in alignment with the aspirations of the *Skills for Jobs* White Paper. The degree of engagement depends on the nature of the course. For example, a learner will need to be employed to undertake a work-based diploma, or to take part in apprenticeships or certain digital courses. Some providers in this category also note that employers have set up optional units within the programme that meet their needs.

These providers typically already have a (pre-existing) approach or strategy towards employer engagement, to align to the aspirations of the *Skills for Jobs* White Paper. The extent of this engagement varies depending on the nature of each course, and has not been driven by the Free Courses for Jobs offer as it is already a key part of providers' engagement with the local business community (e.g. with employers and local authorities).

For the second group, in cases where employers are not actively involved in the delivery of the Free Courses for Jobs offer, some providers allow employers to attend courses, enquire about further information, or request feedback on learners' progress. In other cases, providers say they do not engage with employers as they believe they offer a more learner-focused provision, and that employers are not the central target. Finally, some find it hard to engage employers in general, noting that some employers show little interest in specific courses or in becoming involved in delivery.

Most providers feel it is difficult to judge the extent to which employers have played a role in learners' decisions to take up courses under the Free Courses for Jobs offer. Some

believe that employers are involved in this process indirectly because they influence the market's need through sector and awarding bodies, or because the employer creates a work environment that requires learning and training of staff. There are instances where employers have referred staff and made use of the offer to upskill their workforce, or at least encouraged them to take up a course if they are eligible. These employers provide learners with free time or sponsorship to attend the course. In a small number of cases, some employers have discouraged staff from attending courses as they cannot afford staff to be absent or to reduce productivity.

The extent of employer awareness and involvement in the offer was also explored in the in-depth interviews with learners. Of those in full or part time employment (n=15), all say their employer is aware of the Free Courses for Jobs offer. However, one third of this group (five) say their employer only became aware when informed directly by the learner.

I told them after I enrolled, and they said they could offer support if needed. This was fully my choice to do the course and they didn't know about it prior to me enrolling. – *Learner, Warehousing and distribution*

Just over two thirds of the employed learners interviewed (11 of 15) believe their employer offers them adequate support for their studies. Most specifically mention how their employers are fully flexible in changing shifts or reducing hours to accommodate study, while four note how their managers will assist and advise on certain points relating to their work and study.

The remaining four interviewees who feel they do not receive adequate support from their employers say this is either because their employer is not aware they are undertaking a L3 course, or because their employer would rather they undertake training internally.

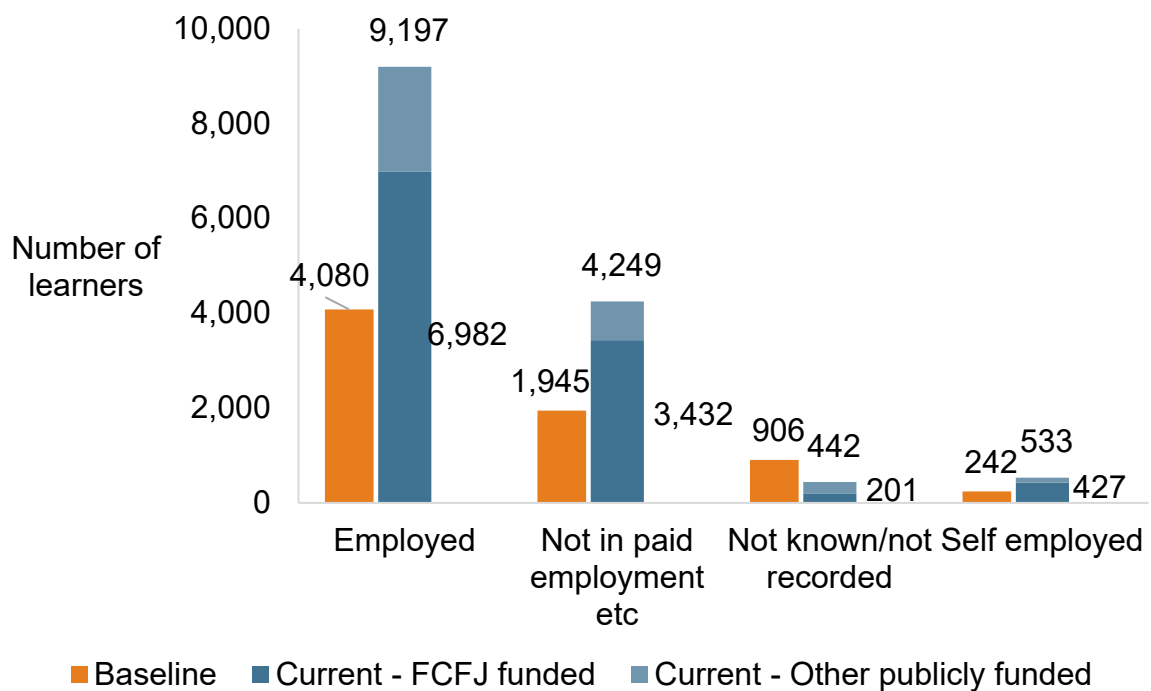
3.5.1 Employment status findings from ILR analysis

This section presents findings from the ILR analysis, comparing the change from the baseline (2018/19) position to the current picture.

Starts by employment status

Compared to the 2018/19 baseline position, starts have increased by 71% for funded learners undertaking eligible courses who are employed on their first day of learning, and by 77% for learners who are not in paid employment, not looking for work, and/or not available for work.

Figure 29 Change in starts by prior employment status



Source: Analysis of ILR data.

Overall, there has been a small shift in the relative proportion of learners who are employed undertaking eligible L3 courses, with such learners now accounting for 63% of all starts, up from 57% in the baseline.

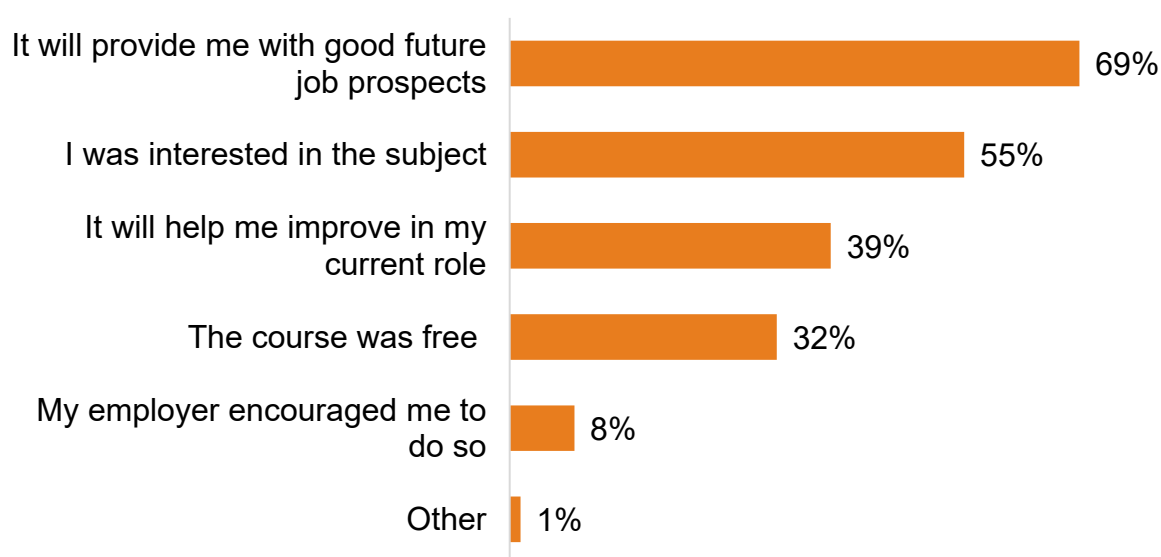
There is negligible difference in these figures when undertaking analysis based on Employment status prior to learning, or Employment status on first day of learning.

3.6 Learners' motivations and expectations

3.6.1 Perspectives prior to studying

The reasons for undertaking a free L3 qualification were explored, and – from a pre-defined list where multiple options could be selected – around two thirds (69%) of adult learners surveyed argue it will provide them with good future job prospects, and over half (55%) say it is due to an interest in the subject. Just under two in five (39%) say they enrolled to help improve in their current role, while few (8%) are taking their L3 because their employer encouraged them to do so.

Figure 30 Learners' reasons for taking a L3 course



Base: 230 respondents (multiple responses permitted). Source: Pye Tait Consulting, 2022.

A higher proportion of learners aware of the offer before completing the survey say it will help them improve in their current role (44%) compared to those who were unaware (29%) suggesting a degree of forethought in choosing to study. Learners employed full time more commonly say their employer encouraged them to study for a L3 (17%). Meanwhile, those learning remotely say they are studying because the course is free more commonly (45%) than those learning via 100% classroom (25%) or a blended mode (20%).

Reasons for study were explored further in in-depth interviews and these largely reflect the survey responses. Eight (of 20) say that, by embarking on the L3 course, they hope to find a job as a result. Six learners – all currently employed – say they hope it will enable them to progress in their career as they are aware of the importance of having the relevant qualifications to be considered for promotion. Among other employed learners interviewed, four say they are switching career, while two are studying predominantly for interest.

I hope to gain a promotion, I have always been overlooked due to not having any qualifications beyond GCSEs. I have always been good to stand in for a manager, but the lack of qualifications has held me back. – *Learner, Hospitality and Catering*

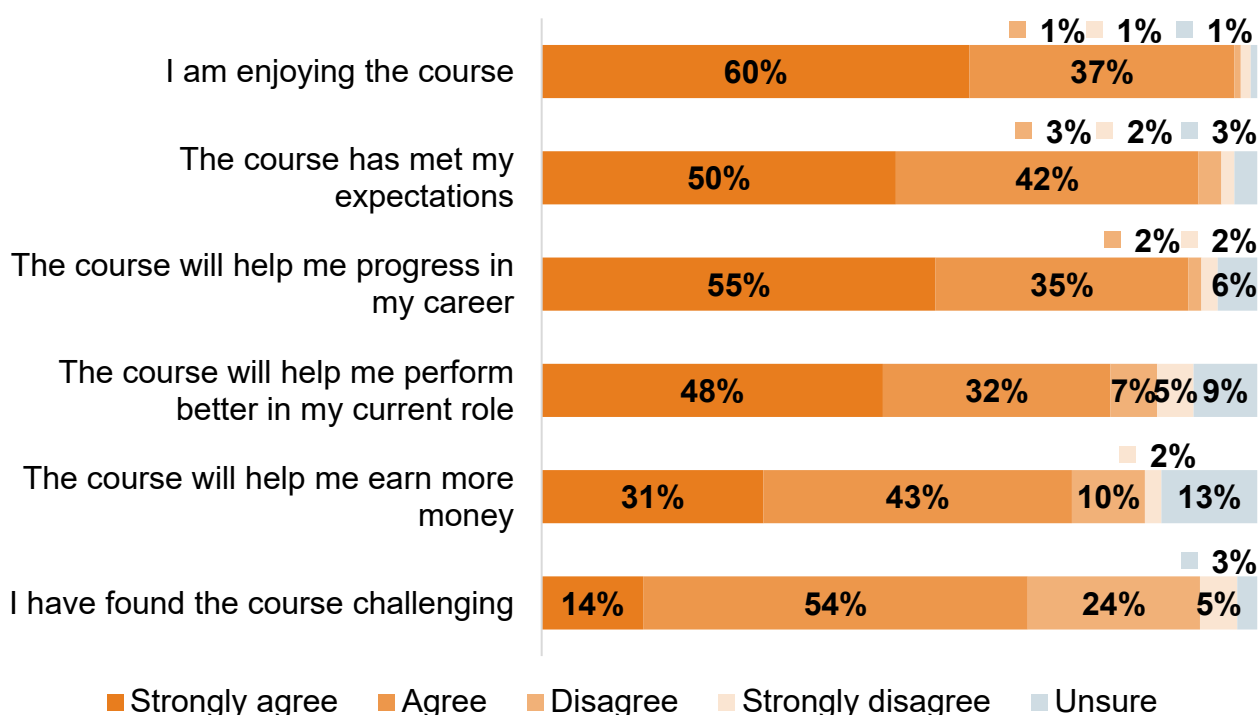
Asked to reflect back on their thoughts and feelings prior to starting their course, around two thirds of interviewed learners (13 of 20) say they enjoy learning and were looking forwards to undertaking their course and had no worries or concerns. The other seven learners mention a worry in returning to a teaching environment, and four specifically raise concern about feeling uncomfortable beforehand of being older than other learners.

Three participants say they were concerned beforehand about the course difficulty and whether they would be good enough to complete their study.

3.6.2 Learners' reflections on their course and experience

Reflecting back on their course, there is near consensus among learners that they are enjoying their course (97%), that it has met their expectations (92%), and that it will help them progress in their career (90%). Four in five (80%) say the course will help them perform better in their current role, while just over two thirds (68%) say they have found the course challenging.

Figure 31 Learners' reflection of their course and experience



Base: variable 212 to 220 respondents. Source: Pye Tait Consulting, 2022.

Those aware of Free Courses for Jobs prior to the survey more often agree the course will help career progress (95%) compared to those who were not aware but still funded by the offer (84%). Meanwhile, those being taught via a 100% classroom approach appear to place greater value on their course, with most (91%) agreeing the course will help them earn more money compared to those learning remotely (61%) or via a blended model (75%). Interviewed learners studying via 100% classroom commonly say this provides an interactive and engaging forum, with good access to course-related conversations with peers and tutors.

Reflecting back on their course, interviewed learners say they find their course informative and helpful, and that it is meeting their expectations and helping them achieve their goals. Learners are generally content with their tutors and the support received, and those who have found the course challenging acknowledge that learning should not be a “walk in the park”.

With their course now underway or complete, interviewed learners’ top goals are to find a job or to improve their career prospects. Six interviewed learners who have already completed their course are already seeing their qualification bear fruit, either having already secured a new position, or being close to doing so. These learners point to greater confidence and motivation to achieve more through the process of learning, as well as the qualification being a positive addition to their CV to provide greater opportunity for future work or study.

I have already gained a promotion as a direct result. I feel more confident in myself and feel I am capable of furthering my career rather than feel penalised for having a family young. – *Learner, Hospitality and catering*

Most (14 of 20) interviewed learners see learning in a different light as a result of their experience. On commencement of their course, learners afraid of returning say that fears soon passed as they received close support from tutors. Others perceive the education system to have improved since their last involvement. Six learners whose view has not changed say they enjoyed studying beforehand and were confident in their abilities to return to education.

Indeed, most interviewed learners would like to continue their studies after their L3, typically with the aim of progressing their career, however, concerns are raised about the feasibility of this in terms of funding and time. Those not interested in further study typically have a clear career plan in mind they wish to follow which does not involve onward learning.

4. Views from those not participating in the Free Courses for Jobs offer

4.1 Providers

Of the 403 providers completing the survey, three quarters (301 or 75% (unweighted)) had implemented the Free Courses for Jobs offer from the DfE, and the remaining quarter (102 or 25%) of providers had not. Just under half (48%) of special colleges and around two in five (41%) other public funded providers had not implemented the funding.

The 102 providers which had not implemented the funding were not asked most remaining survey questions. However, they were asked why they were not currently implementing the Free Courses for Jobs offer. Of the 95 comments received, one third (33) say they have yet to receive funding but are planning to apply for this, or have already received funding but are still preparing for delivery. Around one in five (17) say they did not meet the eligibility criteria for funding or see the administration process as too onerous. A similar proportion say they receive funding for adult provision from other sources (largely from local authorities). Around one in six (14) say they had no staff or capacity to apply for funding nor to implement more courses. Others comment that they:

- specialise in L1, L2 courses and/or apprenticeships (mentioned by 11 providers),
- were not aware of the offer (10), and
- have experienced difficulties in recruiting learners for courses in scope (9).

These 102 providers were also asked whether they intend to implement the Free Courses for Jobs offer in the future, and around two thirds (65% – unweighted) confirmed they will. The SSAs in which these providers most commonly intend to deliver courses through the offer include:

- Health and social care (mentioned by 40% of this group),
- Accounting and finance (34%),
- Business management (26%),
- Childcare and early years (25%),
- Digital (25%), and
- Building and construction (22%).

Other SSAs were each mentioned by 12% or fewer of these providers.

4.2 Learners

All of the 235 learners completing the survey were eligible for the Free Courses for Jobs offer funding. Almost all (231 or 98%) learners' courses were funded through the offer, while the remaining respondents (four or 2%) paid their course fee through another funding source.

The four learners who had paid course fees were not asked most remaining survey questions. However, they were asked if they were offered the potential to take up a qualification under the Free Courses for Jobs offer from a provider, and three confirmed this was the case.

This group of learners were also asked why they had chosen to take a L3 course that they had to pay course fees for, to which all answered that they were not aware of the Free Courses for Jobs offer.

5. Conclusions and policy considerations

5.1 Conclusions

The aim of this evaluation of the NSF Free Courses for Jobs offer has been to:

- identify the nature and extent of impact using quantitative and qualitative metrics,
- explore implementation effectiveness, and
- draw on best practice/lessons learned to determine what could be improved in the future.

Specific objectives at the outset of the research were to undertake an uptake analysis, a provision analysis, a learner analysis, and a process analysis. This was achieved through a combination of surveys and in-depth interviews with providers and adult learners, and via analysis of ILR data. The following sub-sections draw out conclusions from the research findings, linking to the four objectives.

5.1.1 Uptake analysis

A key objective of the Free Courses for Jobs intervention is to increase the proportion of adults aged 24+ achieving a L3 qualification. In this regard, the offer has had a clear positive impact, with ILR analysis revealing that the number of starts of funded learners on eligible L3 courses is up 54% compared to the 2018/19 baseline. While this analysis only examined the first eight months of the offer, official statistics show that enrolments have continued to increase.³²

The evidence gathered through this evaluation indicates that full funding L3 qualifications via Free Courses for Jobs is making a difference to uptake for learners from all backgrounds, and particularly for those on low income, who are unemployed, or have other living costs (such as childcare). Corroborating this, just under three quarters (74%) of surveyed learners say they would have been very or slightly unlikely to have undertaken their L3 course without the funding.

The sector subject area seeing the biggest increase in take-up, for the period covered by this evaluation, is Health and social care. Courses in Building and construction are also increasingly popular, while starts on Business management courses have fallen slightly. This trend appears to reflect the wider UK market need currently: anecdotally, providers (at time of interview in Autumn 2021) were reporting seeing some learners being “subject switchers”. Such switches would most commonly be away from hospitality – a sector particularly hard hit by the Covid-19 pandemic with businesses forced to close or operate

³² <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/further-education-and-skills/2021-22>

reduced hours – to care. Nearly two thirds (63%) of surveyed learners say their course is in a sector new to them, suggesting that Free Courses for Jobs is enabling labour market transitions to some extent.

Interpreting the ILR analysis findings, there appears to have been a degree of change in uptake of other courses since the offer's introduction. The analysis shows an increase in the proportion of learners studying funded L3 courses, and relative decreases in those studying non-funded L3 courses or L2 courses. This finding is reflective of a snapshot in time and does not take into account wider contextual issues such as policy changes, the Covid-19 pandemic, a longer time series, or the way in which courses are delivered (which learners here note has influenced their study choice). Therefore, it is difficult to conclude the extent to which this apparent trend in displacement is attributable to the Free Courses for Jobs offer, particularly given the wider trend in decreasing L2 and L3 uptake among adults aged 25+. ³³

5.1.2 Provision analysis

The funding provided through Free Courses for Jobs has successfully enabled just over three quarters (76%) of surveyed providers to offer a wider range of courses than before the offer. ILR analysis reveals that while the number of providers offering adult L3 courses has remained steady, the average number of courses on offer per provider has increased.

In practical terms, this has enabled around two thirds of surveyed providers to deliver more remote live classes (64%) or employ more staff to deliver adult courses (63%). While courses are available to study remotely, via 100% classroom, or a blended approach, Covid-19 (rather than Free Courses for Jobs) has been the driver for more remote learning. However, with wider commitments such as caring responsibilities or work, the benefits of flexible delivery are welcomed by adult learners, although value is still placed on face-to-face for certain aspects.

The uplift funding specifically is having a positive impact, with just over three quarters (76%) of providers saying this has allowed them to increase adult learner numbers, and higher among providers not previously delivering in L3 adult courses.

Over a quarter (28%) of providers which had not previously offered adult L3 courses prior to the Free Courses for Jobs said there was no change in capacity. However, higher proportions – compared to providers with prior experience of delivering adult L3 courses – state the offer has helped them employ more staff for adult delivery, to put on more weekend classes, and to offer a wider range of courses. This indicates that providers new to adult L3 delivery are using the funding strategically to switch their focus. Further

³³ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/e96875af-a373-4d5c-8735-9e92d7fe9674>

exploration is required to understand the impact on other courses offered by these providers.

Most providers report that demand for courses included in the Free Courses for Jobs offer and for jobs linked to these courses is slightly higher than those outside of the offer, but a minority believe some of the courses in scope do not meet local market needs. A minority raise concerns that the level of funding available is insufficient to support wider supporting activities such as administration, design of new courses/curricula, or marketing and promotion.

5.1.3 Learner analysis

Prior to Free Courses for Jobs, cost was a key blocker for adult learners to study and had a measurable negative impact on uptake of L3 qualifications.³⁴ With this barrier removed, two in five (40%) surveyed learners report no remaining barriers to study. However, wider commitments such as caring responsibilities or other financial costs remain. Flexibility in delivery is available via providers, although this will vary depending on the course of study chosen. Additional financial support is also available for learners for other costs (e.g. transport, equipment), although not all learners will necessarily be eligible. Conclusions, however, should be drawn with care as:

- the learner survey sample is reasonably small (235),
- the achieved learner sample comprises none who indicate they have a formal caring responsibility (see Table 12 in Appendix section B.2) although many reference caring duties in their responses, and
- this evaluation has not engaged with potential learners interested in studying but for whom barriers still remain.

Analysis of ILR data reveals that, in the first eight months of this offer and compared to the 2018/19 baseline, uptake has increased for:

- male and female learners,
- learners of all age groups,
- learners with a learning difficulty, disability and/or health problem,
- learners from all four quartiles of deprivation, and
- learners of all ethnicities (except Bangladeshi).

This suggests that the offer has indeed had an impact on learners from all backgrounds including those from less privileged backgrounds. ILR analysis reveals that uptake is highest among those from a British background, and among those from the most

³⁴ Department for Education, 2018, Impact evaluation of 24+ Advanced Learner Loans

deprived quartile. However, the relative proportion of starts from this latter group has decreased since the baseline compared to other quartiles, suggesting that there remains additional work to increase uptake.

Transitioning to L3 courses remains a notable subject of concern of surveyed providers, with over half (53%) saying some adult applicants hold no prior L1 and two thirds (67%) saying likewise regarding a prior L2. Other concerns exist around the affordability of L1 or L2 courses, or those needing to take supporting English or Maths courses, particularly for learners who are unemployed or on a low income. A quarter of surveyed learners confirm they would have benefitted from additional subject-specific knowledge or improved English or Maths skills prior to their course. These results suggest that there are learners who are willing to gain a free L3 qualification to boost their skills and career prospects, but report that they cannot afford to study another course to fill gaps in pre-requisite skills which providers require to place them on a L3 course. As noted above, government-funded provision up to and including L2 is available for eligible adults.

5.1.4 Process analysis

Around one quarter (28%) of surveyed providers say they have undertaken more or different marketing in relation to the offer, but the majority have done nothing new or different. Two in five (38%) surveyed learners say they were not aware of the Free Courses for Jobs offer before completing the survey for this research – however, this might be a case of branding and promotion. Free Courses for Jobs was previously known as the L3 adult offer until early 2022 (just when the learner survey launched) and so learners may have been aware of the offer but under a different name. Indeed, three quarters say they would have been very or slightly less likely to have studied had their course not been free, indicating reasonable awareness levels.

Learners who were aware of the Free Courses for Jobs offer most commonly heard about it from their provider. Interviews with learners reveal that employers, while generally supportive of learners, have middling levels of awareness of the opportunity. Therefore, while the Free Courses for Jobs offer has seen a good initial uptake in its first eight months, these findings suggest there is opportunity for wider promotion to drive up levels of awareness. With almost all (96%) surveyed providers confirming their intention to continue with the offer, this opportunity is set to increase engagement and uptake.

Feedback from providers indicates that administration of the Free Courses for Jobs offer has largely been trouble-free and straightforward to implement. Given how well this process appears to have gone, it is certainly worthwhile reviewing the process that led to this point, to understand what lessons can be learned to ensure future implementations go as smoothly.

5.2 Policy considerations

Based on the conclusions being drawn from this evaluation of the Free Courses for Jobs offer, a number of considerations are highlighted for the DfE's consideration.

Work remains to drive uptake on starts, particularly among those from ethnic minority backgrounds or from the most deprived areas. Given the highly positive feedback received from learners about their course and experience (97% enjoying their course, and 90% saying it will help them progress their careers), more learner case studies could be developed based on those from minority backgrounds, to communicate the potential benefits to these groups and how these barriers can be addressed.

More broadly, in addition to the Skills for Life campaign launched in early 2022, ongoing communication at a national level is required to raise and maintain awareness of the offer, and consideration should be given as to what advice and support could be given to providers to assist with this awareness-raising exercise.

Careful thought should be given to providing greater levels of financial support to learners with a low-income background to ensure that L3 courses remain accessible. Such support could be targeted in two areas. Firstly, to cover additional financial costs such as travel or equipment, and secondly to enable learners to successfully transition onto a L3 courses for example through covering the cost of a related L1 or L2 course. As noted, there is some existing support for eligible learners undertaking L1 and L2 courses.

A regional-requirement approach to courses in scope of the offer may ensure specific market needs can be met. We have noted elsewhere in this report the additional flexibilities granted to Mayoral Combined Authorities and the Greater London Authority since this research was conducted.

Further exploration of any potential shift in learner numbers (from non-funded L3 courses and from L2 courses, to funded L3 courses) is required to determine the extent to which changes are attributable to the Free Courses for Jobs offer. Such research would need to take into account wider contextual issues such as policy changes, the Covid-19 pandemic, and a longer time series. Meanwhile, learner numbers on all L2 and L3 courses should be closely monitored to ensure that the skills pipeline continues to meet market demands.

We suggest further research directly with employers as this evaluation has found that levels of awareness of the offer by employers could be higher. However, we note that a third (34%) of surveyed learners who are employed full-time learned about the offer from their employer.

Any future study involving employers could focus on:

- broad levels of awareness of, and appetite for involvement in, the offer,
- understanding what barriers exist for employers to engage with Free Courses for Jobs,
- support required to assist staff through qualifications, and
- the extent to which the offer meets their needs.

This evaluation has been undertaken within the first year of the Free Courses for Jobs offer going live. Ongoing evaluation of the intervention is required to ensure that the offer remains fit for purpose, is meeting the needs of adult learners and providers, and to monitor future trends in uptake. A number of changes have been made to the offer since this evaluation began (such as to courses in scope, and to learner eligibility criteria). This evaluation has also faced limitations in undertaking a full analysis of ILR data on achievements and withdrawals (see Appendix A.3 for more detail), but which could be addressed once the lag from the initial 'go-live' date has dissipated. More detailed analysis to examine trends in achievements and withdrawals can be undertaken once more data become available over a longer time period.

Providers to-date report a largely trouble-free implementation process by the DfE. Processes around the administration of the offer should be reviewed and lessons learned noted, such that this best practice can be carried forward by the DfE to related roll-outs in future.

Appendices

Appendix A: Detailed methodology

Section 1.3 outlines the main points of the methodology employed in this evaluation. This appendix contains more detailed information on the:

- question topics used in the primary fieldwork,
- method used to weight the findings from the provider survey, and
- method to undertake the detailed analysis of the ILR data.

A.1 Question topics

The research tools for the primary fieldwork were co-designed between Pye Tait and the DfE and aligned to the evaluation's aims and objectives. The topic guide for provider in-depth interviews explored providers':

- use of funding and impact on delivery,
- views on the perceived impact of the offer for adult learners,
- views on the impact of the funding for them, and
- perceived success of the intervention to-date.

The provider survey followed up these lines of questioning to explore:

- prior experience of delivering adult L3 courses and courses newly delivered via the offer,
- impact of funding on delivery, and the specific impact of uplift funding, and
- perceived barriers remaining for learners.

The learner survey, as well as gathering demographic information to undertake sub-group analysis, explored learners':

- motivations for undertaking a L3 and the impact the funding had on this decision,
- views on any remaining barriers to learning, and
- reflections and experiences of their course.

The follow-up learner interviews explored these themes in more detail covering learners':

- reasons for choosing a L3 course and influencing factors,
- views on the extent to which delivery meets their needs as an adult learner,

- views on the impact of the funding and any remaining barriers to learning, and
- reflections and experiences of their course.

A.2 Weighting

Random Iterative Method (RIM) weighting was used to adjust the achieved survey sample of providers to be representative of the population by region and provider type.

As the methodology utilised in this study sought to gather multiple responses from providers by speaking to different individuals at the same institution, the first step was to identify the total number of “unique” providers which responded. In all, views were obtained from 308 different providers.

To undertake weighting by region, population data for each English region was obtained from the Office for National Statistics’ (ONS’) mid-year population estimates in June 2020, which provided the proportion of people living in each English region. The number of unique provider responses in each region was then adjusted to reflect the relative proportion of the population in each English region.

Table 4 Weighting by region

Region	Number of unique responses to provider survey	Known population	Population proportion per region	Weighting factor	Weighted number of provider responses
East Midlands	26	4,865,583	8.6%	1.02	27
East of England	26	6,269,161	11.1%	1.31	34
London	64	9,002,488	15.9%	0.77	49
North East	19	2,680,763	4.7%	0.77	15
North West	50	7,367,456	13.0%	0.80	40
South East	38	9,217,265	16.3%	1.32	50
South West	22	5,659,143	10.0%	1.40	31

West Midlands	32	5,961,929	10.5%	1.01	32
Yorkshire and the Humber	31	5,526,350	9.8%	0.97	30

Known population data source: ONS Mid-year population estimates, UK, June 2020, released June 2021

To undertake weighting by provider type, data on the total number of each type of provider were gathered from a variety of sources. This provided the proportion of each provider type across England. The number of unique provider responses per provider type was then adjusted to reflect the relative proportion of provider types across England.

Table 5 Weighting by provider type

Provider type	Number of unique responses to provider survey	Known population	Population proportion per provider type	Weighting factor	Weighted number of provider responses
General FE college incl Tertiary	158	163	6.9%	0.13	21
Other public funded i.e. LAs and HE	64	439	18.5%	0.89	57
Private sector public funded	61	1,700	71.7%	3.62	221
Sixth form college	6	45	1.9%	0.97	6
Special Colleges, Specialist Designated College	16	24	1.0%	0.19	3

Other	3	-	-	0.0001	0
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Number of types of provider sources: AoC college key facts 2021-22; Gov.uk Local government structure and elections; HESA; AELP key facts about ITPs 2021.

A.3 ILR analysis

This section provides additional detail pertaining to the methodology utilised for the ILR analysis outlined in section 1.3.4, and outlines limitations that readers should be aware of when interpreting the results.

Impact of learners on eligible courses but not claiming funding

In addition to the criteria outlined in the Methodology section, learners who are eligible in all ways but who have not claimed the Free Courses for Jobs offer in the 2020/21 and 2021/22 data sets have also been considered in the ILR analysis. Since the offer was not available prior to April 2021 this makes no difference to the baseline data. It could be argued that looking at learners in the current data sets who are eligible, whether they are claiming the offer or not, is more comparable with the baseline. However, since the evaluation is focused on the uptake of the Free Courses for Jobs offer, we have compared the baseline numbers to the uptake in the current data set or those claiming the offer. This is the basis of the results presented in this report unless otherwise stated and may be considered an underestimate of the impact of the offer. For completeness, the data for the full impact of the offer are shown in the charts.

Achievements

As there were only eight months of data (April to November 2021) to analyse on achievements, this limits the level of conclusions that could be drawn. Therefore, the analysis has been restricted to look at the overall level of achievements and is not assessed by each of the criteria in the same way as starts. For the same reason, an analysis of completion status and withdrawal reasons has not been undertaken as part of the ILR analysis.

Achievement data for learners have been identified by considering:

- a) for the current data: only those learners starting after 1 April 2021, and
- b) for the baseline: only those learners starting:
 - after 1 April 2019 for the April to July 2019 baseline and
 - after 1 April 2018 for the August to November 2018 baseline.

Given the short timescales for which the offer has been available, it is not unexpected that courses will not have completed and therefore achievements will therefore be limited.

Impact on other courses

We have considered the impact on wider L2 and L3 offerings for those eligible learners. This has been done using the same eligibility criteria as above, except for the current data set the filter on having claimed funding has not been applied to ensure that all providers who are offering courses are included. A further sensitivity test has been carried out to assess the impact of not excluding those who did not claim funding. The wider comparison in the baseline and current data sets includes all L3 courses which were not included in those available at the offer go-live date. These courses were offered to those aged 24+, without an existing L3 qualification on a publicly funded course. If at least one learner was on each course, it was included in the analysis.

This analysis was further expanded to cover those learners on any course regardless of funding (i.e. any Sources of funding for the learner code).

Prior experience of providers

Prior experience of providers in offering L3 courses which are eligible for the offer has been considered by counting the number of courses offered by each provider with at least one learner on each course. This uses the same criteria as outlined above but includes any course which was eligible at the go-live date and does not depend on whether the offer funding was claimed. This was to allow for an assessment of the wider delivery to be made.

Notes on presentation of results

The results of the ILR analysis have been prepared based on the criteria outlined below. More details on the underlying data, including how the data have been grouped for analysis, are outlined below.

Sex

Sex is defined in the ILR as male or female and has been reported this way.

Sector subject area

The sector subject area is based on the subject areas defined by the DfE on Find a Learning Aim website.

Due to small numbers, the following sector subject areas have been grouped into “other” for reporting purposes.

- Agriculture
- Environmental conservation

- Horticulture and forestry
- ICT for users
- Manufacturing technologies
- Mathematics and statistics
- Medicine and Dentistry
- Public services
- Science
- Teaching and lecturing
- Warehousing and distribution

Age band

Age bands are based on the age at the start of the learning aim and have been grouped for the purposes of clarity of reporting.

Ethnicity

Ethnicity descriptions are provided in the ILR data. Due to small numbers the following descriptors have been grouped into “other” for reporting purposes. All other descriptors remain as per the ILR.

- Any other Black / African / Caribbean background
- Any Other Mixed / multiple ethnic background
- Arab
- Chinese
- Gypsy or Irish Traveller
- Irish
- White and Asian
- White and Black African
- White and Black Caribbean

Levels of deprivation

Levels of deprivation have been defined using the English Indices of Deprivation 2019 from the Ministry of Housing Communities and local Government.

The IMD average rank for each learner's local authority has been calculated and presented as quartiles covering the following quartile groups.

- 25% most deprived
- 25-50% most deprived
- 50-25% least deprived
- 25% least deprived

A small number of learner's local authorities did not map to the data in the IMD data but this only applied to 2% of learners.

Learner region

Learners' regions have been mapped from the learner local authority field. A small number of local authorities are not based in the English regions but only occurred in <0.5% of cases.

Prior attainment/ prior level

Due to small numbers the following prior attainments have been grouped into "other" for reporting purposes.

- Not Applicable Not Known
- Not known
- Other qualification, level not known
- Other qualifications below L1.

Provider type

Provider types have been grouped as follows due to small numbers:

- Academy-Converter: Private sector public funded
- Academy-Sponsor Led: Private sector public funded
- Charitable Unincorporated Association: Private sector public funded
- Community Interest Company: Private sector public funded

- General FE College incl Tertiary: General FE college incl Tertiary
- Higher Education Organisation: Other public funded
- Limited Liability Partnership: Private sector public funded
- Local Authority with an Education Remit: Other public funded
- Local Authority without an Education Remit: Other public funded
- PRI/LBG/NSC (Use of Limited Exemption): Private sector public funded
- Pri/Ltd by Guar/NSC: Private sector public funded
- Private Limited Company: Private sector public funded
- Private Unlimited Company: Private sector public funded
- Public Limited Company: Other public funded
- Sixth Form college: other
- Special college - Agriculture and Horticulture: Other
- Specialist Designated college: Other

Employment status

Employment status on first day of learning and prior have been grouped been grouped into the following for reporting purposes.

- Employed 16 hours or more per week: Employed
- Employed less than 16 hours per week: Employed
- Employed hours not known: Employed
- Employed 16-19 hours per week: Employed
- Employed 20 hours or more per week: Employed
- Learner is employed for 0 to 10 hours per week: Employed
- Learner is employed for 11 to 20 hours per week: Employed
- Learner is employed for 21 to 30 hours per week: Employed
- Learner is employed for 31+ hours per week: Employed

- Not in paid employment, looking for work and available to start work: Not in paid employment etc
- Not in paid employment, not looking for work and/or not available for work: Not in paid employment etc
- Not Collected: Not known/not recorded
- Not known/not recorded: Not known/not recorded
- Self-Employed 16 hours or more per week: Self employed
- Self-Employed less than 16 hours per week: Self employed
- Self-Employed hours not known: Self employed
- Self Employed 16-19 hours per week: Self employed
- Self Employed 20 hours or more per week: Self employed
- Learner is Self-Employed for 0 to 10 hours per week: Self employed
- Learner is Self-Employed for 11 to 20 hours per week: Self employed
- Learner is Self-Employed for 21 to 30 hours per week: Self employed
- Learner is Self-Employed for 31+ hours per week: Self employed

Learning difficulty/ disability/ health problem

The status of a learner's Learning difficulty/disability/health problem is defined directly from the ILR data as follows.

- Learner considers himself or herself to have a learning difficulty and/or disability and/or health problem.
- Learner does not consider himself or herself to have a learning difficulty and/or disability and/or health problem.
- No information provided by the learner.

Sex & Sector subject area

Cross tabulations have been prepared for sex and sector subject area.

Due to small numbers the following sectors have been grouped into "other" for reporting purposes for males.

- Agriculture
- Child development and well-being
- Environmental conservation
- Horticulture and forestry
- ICT for users
- Manufacturing technologies
- Mathematics and statistics
- Medicine and dentistry
- Public services
- Science
- Teaching and lecturing
- Transportation operations and maintenance
- Warehousing and distribution

Due to small numbers the following sectors have been grouped into “other” for reporting purposes for females.

- Agriculture
- Building and construction
- Engineering
- Environmental conservation
- Horticulture and forestry
- ICT for users
- ICT practitioners
- Manufacturing technologies
- Mathematics and statistics
- Medicine and dentistry

- Public services
- Science
- Teaching and lecturing
- Transportation operations and maintenance
- Warehousing and distribution

Appendix B: Respondent profile

This appendix provides a greater level of detail on the background and demographics of the respondents to the provider and learner surveys and in-depth interviews. Note that not all respondents answered all questions as these questions were optional to complete.

B.1 Provider survey

In addition to provider region and type outlined in section 1.4, respondents to the provider survey were also asked for their broad job role. Around one third (127 or 32% unweighted) of respondents are curriculum leads or course practitioners and just over one quarter (106 or 26% unweighted) are principals, heads, or managing directors.

Table 6 Provider survey responses by job role

Job role	Number of responses to provider survey (unweighted)
Curriculum lead or course practitioner	127
Principal, head, or managing director	106
Assistant or deputy principal or head	90
Finance manager/director	56
Other	23

Base: 402 respondents. Source: Pye Tait Consulting 2022.

‘Other’ job roles mentioned on more than one instance include:

- careers advisor (mentioned by 8 respondents),
- business development director or manager (5),
- administrator, e.g. student records manager, partnership manager (3), and
- head of marketing or sales (2).

B.2 Learner survey

Table 7 Learner responses by age

Learner age	Number of responses	Percentage of responses
24 to 29	17	7%
30 to 34	36	16%
35 to 39	52	23%
40 to 49	67	29%
50 to 59	54	21%
60+	3	1%

Base: 229 respondents. Source: Pye Tait Consulting 2022.

Table 8 Learner responses by gender

Learner gender	Number of responses	Percentage of responses
Female	171	75%
Male	51	25%
Prefer not to say	1	0.4%

Base: 229 respondents. Source: Pye Tait Consulting 2022.

Table 9 Learner survey responses by employment status

Learner employment status at course start	Number of responses	Percentage of responses
Employed full time	71	33%
Employer part time	60	28%
Unemployed	58	27%
Self-employed	17	8%
Volunteer	11	5%

Base: 217 respondents. Source: Pye Tait Consulting 2022.

Table 10 Learner survey responses by ethnicity

Learner ethnicity	Number of responses	Percentage of responses
White	139	62%
Asian or Asian British	32	14%
Black, Black British, Caribbean, or African	26	12%
Mixed, Multiple ethnic groups	16	7%
Other	6	3%
Prefer not to say	5	2%

Base: 224 respondents. Source: Pye Tait Consulting 2022.

Table 11 Learner responses by caring responsibilities

Whether learner has caring responsibility	Number of responses	Percentage of responses
Yes	0	0%
No	80	91%
Prefer not to say	8	9%

Base: 88 respondents. Source: Pye Tait Consulting 2022.

Table 12 Learner responses by disability

Whether learner has disability (learning or physical)	Number of responses	Percentage of responses
Yes	34	15%
No	191	83%
Prefer not to say	4	2%

Base: 229 respondents. Source: Pye Tait Consulting 2022.

Among surveyed learners, around three quarters (73%) currently hold a L2 qualification, while the remainder (27%) do not.

B.3 Provider in-depth interviews

A total of 33 interviews were undertaken with providers across all English regions.

Table 13 Provider responses by region

Region	Number of responses
East Midlands	3
East of England	3
London	5
North East	6
North West	5
South East	4
South West	2
West Midlands	2
Yorkshire and the Humber	3

Base: 33 respondents. Source: Pye Tait Consulting 2022.

Table 14 Provider responses by institution type

Provider type	Number of responses
General FE College incl. Tertiary	13
Other Public Funded i.e. LAs and HE	3
Private Sector Public Funded	14
Sixth Form College	1
Specialist Designated College	2

Base: 33 respondents. Source: Pye Tait Consulting 2022.

Interviewed providers ranged in size. Nine taught fewer than 1,000 learners, 11 taught between 1,000 and 5,000 learners, six taught over 5,000, but fewer than 10,000 learners, while seven taught over 10,000 learners.

In addition, interviewed providers held a range of Ofsted ratings.

Table 15 Provider responses by Ofsted rating

Ofsted rating	Number of responses
Outstanding	3
Good	11
Requires Improvement	13
Inadequate	1
Remained good at a short inspection that did not extend	1
NULL	4

Base: 33 respondents. Source: Pye Tait Consulting 2022.

The sample, in agreement with the DfE, was purposefully chosen to include mostly “early adopters” of the funding available through the Free Courses for Jobs offer – these 24 providers have been involved in the offer from its first implementation in April 2021. The remaining nine providers are “late adopters”, that is, providers who have expressed interest in participating but who had yet to receive any funding from the DfE through the offer as of the end of August 2021.

B.4 Learner in-depth interviews

Table 16 Learner responses by sector subject area of study

Sector subject area of study	Number of responses
Accounting and finance	4
Business management	1
Childcare and early years	2
Digital	1
Health and social care	6
Hospitality and catering	2
Public services	2
Teaching and lecturing	1
Warehousing and distribution	1

Base: 20 respondents. Source: Pye Tait Consulting 2022.

Table 17 Learner responses by region of study

Learner region of study	Number of responses
East Midlands	2
East of England	1
London	5
North East	0
North West	2
South East	2
South West	2
West Midlands	2
Yorkshire and the Humber	3

Base: 19 respondents. Source: Pye Tait Consulting 2022.

Table 18 Learner responses by employment status

Learner employment status at course start	Number of responses
Employed full time	10
Employer part time	3
Unemployed	5
Self-employed	1
Volunteer	1

Base: 20 respondents. Source: Pye Tait Consulting 2022.

Table 19 Learner responses by ethnicity

Learner ethnicity	Number of responses
White	9
Asian or Asian British	3
Black, Black British, Caribbean, or African	4
Mixed, Multiple ethnic groups	2
Other	2

Base: 20 respondents. Source: Pye Tait Consulting 2022.

In addition, nine of those interviewed have caring responsibilities, while ten do not, and one preferred not to say.

Most interviewed learners (17 of 20) already hold a L2 qualification prior to undertaking their L3 course, while the other three do not already hold a L2.

Appendix C: Case studies

The following five case studies have all been developed based on the in-depth interviews with providers and have been approved by each institution. These case studies provide specific examples of the take-up and implementation of the Free Courses for Jobs offer by a range of providers, to present the diversity of business models at the point in time.

Case study 1



Using rich experience and the network of employers to deliver the funding offer effectively

Blackpool and The Fylde College is a Further and Higher Education college in North West England that offers a variety of courses in different sectors with a key focus on ensuring learners' progression into employment or Higher Education. The College welcomes the Free Courses for Jobs offer for its support to adult learning in the context of lifelong learning. The Free Courses for Jobs offer has become a life-changing initiative for individuals who would have otherwise resorted to a loan or compromised their work/family commitments.

It is letting me gain a qualification for free, and it has worked around the kids and family; having to pay for it would have been a barrier. It will enable me to progress onto my degree. – *Learner, Mental health*

It is helping me to develop my career. I would have never been able to afford it, and the free funding has been amazing. I have not got the pressure of paying it back especially with having a young family. – *Learner, Diploma in Working with Children and Young People's Workforce*

I have no income as I founded a charity in aid of my child who died of meningitis, and I would have never been able to complete the course without this. After leaving school and college with no A-Levels or qualifications I have found getting the job I wanted difficult; this is supporting me. – *Learner, Counselling*

One of the key challenges faced by the College in implementing the funding has been a mismatch between L3 courses tending to be longer qualifications, and the realities of a post-pandemic economic recovery that focuses on the speedy upskilling of adults. In overcoming this challenge, the College has picked shorter and more intensive courses from those available in the offer. These courses are 'tried and tested over time' in terms of their quality and approved by employers who take an active role in selecting content and modules for curricula. The College works closely with the local community and deprived areas to ensure that adults with learning difficulties, health problems, and those who are vulnerable not only gain access to learning but also become employable.

My job role is already changing, and I feel recognised from taking the course. I have never been able to afford to take courses. I am now even considering university. – *Learner, Adult care*

The College sets targets for individual learning around the technical curriculum as well as the broader curriculum of personal development, providing adult learners with the knowledge, skills and behaviours needed in the workplace. It also provides free workshops as 'pre-study type programmes' to those learners who require a quick upskill to meet the entry requirements – these existed already prior to the offer and were expanded upon for the courses under the offer. A range of vocational courses as well as evening lessons are available for adults who are upskilling or re-training. The College has also developed an effective system of blended learning and maintains high retention rates among its adult learners.

It was something I have always wanted to do but could never afford it, so this funding has accelerated it for me. It has made a massive difference for me taking on the course. I would have been reluctant of taking a loan as the course amount is high and the need to pay this back. – *Learner, Early years educator*

In the future, the college will look to break down longer L3 qualification into more flexible units or modules aligned with employers' needs, while still using the Free Course for Jobs offer. Setting up courses in new areas that are in demand is also a priority. The College would particularly welcome Government support to promote the initiative to the broader public, as well as support to streamline adult funding across various awarding organisations to further strengthen the focus on learning and teaching.

Case study 2



Cambridge Regional College is one of the largest Further Education colleges in the East of England. The College has two main sites in Cambridge and Huntingdon and boasts specialist vocational facilities in a range of areas from engineering, construction, science to catering, hospitality and hair and beauty. The College works with over 1,000 employers in the region and nationally and is rated as the number one provider in the region in terms of apprenticeship employer satisfaction.

Prior to Free Courses for Jobs, the College offered a range of programmes for adults at L3, with most students accessing this learning through loan funding or by self-financing. The introduction of Free Courses for Jobs has enabled the College to expand the range of courses offered, with L3 courses offered for online learning in health and social care and Information technology for the first time.

We offered courses covered by NSF [Free Courses for Jobs] funding to support what is a good move by government. The students taking up the offer are benefitting because the funding is free - if it wasn't free, they probably wouldn't have accessed learning at L3. – *Provider*

Cambridge Regional College has invested heavily in marketing the adult L3 courses and has targeted the provision in key sectors where there is local demand for skills. Uptake has been a slow burn and they believe a national marketing campaign by the government would increase awareness amongst the adult population and lead to a much higher uptake in training at L3. The College would also like to see greater flexibility nationally regarding which courses qualify for funding – for CRC the key is to meet demand for skills at a local level, and to ensure that there is sufficient flexibility for the devolved authorities to be able to target funding in a directed manner.

The College has modified its delivery to focus on remote learning in a flexible manner, this includes pre-recorded material and access to tutor support. Its target learner is probably employed and struggling to get into college. The College works closely with employers in the local area to ensure course content meets their needs, and to ensure methods of delivery can enable employers to support staff during their training.

Case study 3



Moving forward with new solutions and greater flexibility

Weston College is one of the fastest growing Further and Higher Education colleges in the UK, located in Somerset and expanding to Bristol. The College operates closely with the University of the West of England (UWE Bristol) and uses one of their campuses to deliver its courses.

Weston College has made adult provision a strategic priority and anticipates the Free Courses for Jobs offer will help to increase their volume of adult provision.

The College's choice of qualifications within the offer is based on the local community's needs: employment in health and social care is prominent in North Somerset, and the popularity of construction, management skills, and digital skills is also growing within the Bristol region. The College believes the Free Courses for Jobs offer is a great opportunity for learners to join at entry level and progress higher. The recent change to allow learners who already hold a L3 in another subject to access the funding is also welcomed.

At my workplace, they are looking for a supervisor. I knew I needed this course for that job and so when I saw it advertised on Facebook, I knew I needed to apply. I really want to develop and improve myself and make another step in my career. – *Learner, Leadership and management*

It's come at exactly the right time. I've already gained experience as a manager, but I haven't got the educational side of it, the qualification will complement my experience and I could go even further. – *Learner, Leadership and management*

The biggest challenge the College has faced in implementing the Free Courses for Jobs offer is an influx of applicants who already hold a L3 qualification in another subject. In addition, some learners require assistance with the transition from L2. The College has set up a four-week transition programme for its digital skills course in response to the

challenge of bridging any gap for learners wishing to enrol on the Free Courses for Jobs. This transition programme was created specifically for adult learners in preparation for courses available as part of the offer, and the College would like the government to support such a transition course for other qualifications.

The College is running a double roll-out for the courses to ensure uptake (i.e. running two parallel cohorts of training). It also actively uses its resources and capacity to support marketing and recruitment for courses within the Free Courses for Jobs offer and would welcome any additional support for such initiatives. Moving forward, the College would welcome the Free Courses for Jobs offer being extended to include more qualifications and suggest it could be extended to include some L2 courses too.

My reaction when I saw that this course was for free was, 'Is it true?'. This is an amazing opportunity to learn in a bit more depth about coding practices. I want to use coding to find my future job. – *Learner, Coding*

Shorter qualifications that allow quick upskilling are particularly popular among adult learners at Weston College, for example, a certificate in coding (110 guided learning hours) or a diploma in counselling (160 guided learning hours). Since many adults find it hard to commit to long courses due to work obligations, the College benefits from being both an apprenticeship provider and a Further Education College. It works closely with local employers allowing them to choose the optional units within the L3 programmes, which acts to boost employment outcomes on course completion.

I wanted to do this course because I want to improve myself as a manager and as a person. At the minute I am in line to be promoted, but there are a couple of things that I've got to do: this course will give me greater understanding make me better at my job. – *Learner, Leadership and management*

The college has introduced blended learning for most of its learners and especially adults who struggled to access lessons during the Covid-19 pandemic due to work or family obligations.

Case study 4



Easing individuals back into education through flexible courses

Founded in 1888, Blackburn College's purpose was the provision of technical, employment focused education for the people of Blackburn and the surrounding area. The focus remains the same today. Students travel from across Lancashire and beyond to study at one of the largest Colleges in the UK, on a truly world-class campus, designed to provide high quality learning and acquisition of the skills needed by employers. Blackburn College specialises in provision for 16–18-year-olds in technical and academic courses, Apprenticeships, A Levels and Higher Education; and has always delivered adult qualifications, offering a range of L1 to L3 courses in multiple sectors, including care, childcare, teaching assistants, accounting technicians, hairdressing, and beauty.

The College believes the Free Courses for Jobs offer has helped to increase access to these courses. It also believes the offer will support adult learners who, prior to this funding, would have had to finance the qualifications commercially or via learner loans.

This course being free has helped me achieve my dreams of becoming a practitioner. If the course was not free, then I would not have been able to afford it. It was so good to know that it was funded as this gave me the opportunities to gain a career. – *Learner, Early years*

The funding has helped me to further my education in college, helped me to grow further in work and has massively helped my confidence – I never would have been able to afford the course. – *Learner, Health and social care*

Blackburn College believes that the offer should act to attract higher volumes of adult learners onto these courses, due to the removal of financial barriers, however, the College is yet to see a notable increase in uptake for pre-existing adult courses. The volume of adult learners has continued to increase but to a lesser extent on Free Courses for Jobs courses. The College attributes this to the absence of national marketing directed at new learners (rather than advertising to providers). With increased awareness, the College would be able to develop, expand and adapt its L3 delivery to meet the requirements of new adult learners.

The funding has been a great big impact in my life. By gaining the knowledge since the start of the course, a lot of things has changed for me. My perception has changed. – *Learner, Health and social care*

The local community in the Blackburn and Darwen area has an unemployment level that is higher than the national average, and Blackburn College highlights that it is approximately the 14th most deprived local authority area in England. Because of this, the College is aware that adults may be reluctant to return and may harbour negative perceptions of the education system. Thus, additional support and work to ensure that entry into the courses is comfortable and meets their needs is required. The College suggests that if the funding included a greater number of smaller, flexible courses it would be beneficial in this regard, and would help to bring people back into the education system and increase employability/career progression, as a two-year course may otherwise seem a daunting process when re-entering education.

Accessing the course has supported me in furthering my career. This is something I wouldn't have been able to do if I hadn't had any support with funding due to family commitments. My L3 was something I had written off and felt I'd never be able to afford, so I am grateful for the opportunity. – *Learner, Early years*

While Blackburn College has experienced minor barriers in implementing the offer, such as a few issues involving their preferred awarding body not covering some of the desired L3 courses included, the college does offer a flexible approach for learners. Primarily, the College can offer both in-person and online provision, and this is flexible to learners' needs and/or prior commitments to ensure an easy entry into the education system and a preferential blended online learning method. The College specifically adjusts for adult learners who have missed face-to-face delivery due to the Covid-19 pandemic, to come back to campus and receive provision in person, such as via one-on-one meetings, as well as making e-learning available to those who are unable to travel.

Case study 5



Working closely with employers to meet local needs

Beacon Education Partnership is an established training and development organisation specialising in the Healthcare sector. Based in London, Beacon has been delivering high quality programmes, Modern Apprenticeships and Short Courses in a range of different Health and Social care settings for many years. Starting life as a Preferred Training Provider for University College London Hospital, Beacon has enjoyed a long and successful relationship with the NHS working with the likes of Great Ormond Street Hospital, Mental Health NHS Trust, Lewisham NHS Trust and Guys and St. Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust. However, more recently Beacon's focus has been on delivering Health and Social Care courses in an attempt to help address nationally recognised skills shortages.

Beacon fully supports the provision put in place to support adult learners at L3. It has worked hard to develop its training provision to accommodate caring responsibilities and work commitments of their learners who work in the care sector.

Although I am working part-time right now, I hope to find a better job when I finish the course. I would like to do more courses in Health and Social Care in the future. – *Learner, Health and social care*

Beacon's main focus is on longer courses and full qualifications as opposed to unitised delivery. It prefers to focus on the quality of the course and delivery. Adult learners both new to the sector or seeking to progress further prefer longer courses. They argue that it allows them the opportunity to fully develop their knowledge and skills. However, older learners in the sector prefer shorter courses as they are looking to maintain their skill set and position with their company.

Beacon has worked closely with employers and learners to develop its blended approach (classroom learning followed by interactive online workshops) which it finds offers flexibility and engages learners well. Beacon had implemented this approach pre-Covid-19 to accommodate shift patterns in the care sector, and also to make allowances for people with caring responsibilities. It has found that this blended approach has helped to increase uptake on courses.

I'm very happy to have the opportunity to be on a course that gives me the flexibility to study at my own time and with all the resources online and available support all the time from the tutor. I would

probably not be on the course if it was classroom based because I have little children and work as a healthcare assistant. I would like to further my education on completion of the course and also get a better paying job. – *Learner, Health and social care*

I appreciate the flexibility of working, studying, and being able to take care of my daughter. The flexibility makes it possible for us not to need the services of a nanny. I also want to go to university to study nursing at the end of the course. – *Learner, Health and social care*

Working full time and also having two small children means that remote learning suits me. If it was classroom-based, I would not have had the opportunity to complete this course. I'm a trained nurse in my own country and I'm using this course to help with English writing and adult social care knowledge so I can take the necessary steps to become qualified in this country. – *Learner, Health and social care*



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