

# (Adult) education, education, education

How adult education can improve the  
life chances of those on low incomes

Aveek Bhattacharya  
Scott Corfe  
Amy Norman

**SMF**

Social Market  
Foundation

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Before joining the SMF, he was Head of Macroeconomics and a Director at the economics consultancy Cebr, where he led much of the consultancy's thought leadership and public policy research. Scott's expert insights are frequently sought after in publications including the Financial Times, the Guardian, the Times and the Daily Telegraph. Scott has appeared on BBC News, Sky News, Radio 4 and a range of other broadcast media.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report explores the role that adult education does and could play in improving the labour market outcomes of low-income households. It draws on desk research, quantitative analysis and in-depth interviews with both participants and non-participants in adult education from low-income households.

With the economic fallout from the coronavirus pandemic set to lead to a significant increase in unemployment in the UK, adult education is likely to have a key role in helping individuals acquire the skills and qualifications needed for new employment.

As well as exploring the benefits of adult education, this report examines barriers to participation in adult education – particularly those faced by individuals in low-income households. Lastly, the report sets out a series of policy recommendations.

Adult education participation has been declining, in part driven by reduced funding

- **Over the last 15 years the UK has seen a significant decline in the levels of participation in adult education.** Since 2004 participation rates have almost halved (-49%) from 29% to just below 15%.
- **A big driver of the decline in adult education participation is likely to be a sharp fall in funding.** Analysis by Institute for Fiscal Studies finds that, excluding apprenticeships, total spending on adult education has fallen by nearly half (48%) or around £1.3bn (in 2020-21 prices) from 2009-10 to 2019-20.
- **Formal training in the workplace has also declined over the past 15 years.** The latest Employer Skills Survey shows that one third of staff have received no training in the past 12 months.
- **Those that participate in adult education tend to be more socially advantaged, better educated to begin with and closer to the labour market.** This suggests that those who may benefit most from education and training – the low-skilled, low-income, unemployed and vulnerable – receive less of it.

The 2019 Adult Participation in Learning Survey found that 53% of those who left school aged 16 have not taken part in any learning since, a figure significantly higher than for those that remained longer in education.

- **Public investment in training is relatively low in the UK compared to other countries.** Across the G7 countries, the UK has the lowest public expenditure on training as a percentage of GDP. The last comparable data from the OECD shows the UK spent just 0.01% of GDP on training in 2011, compared to 0.31% in France and 0.25% in Germany.

Declining participation comes despite evidence of significant benefits from adult education participation

- **SMF analysis presented in this report shows that:**
  - **Among those in paid employment, those participating in employer-provided training in 2012-13 saw only slightly stronger personal income growth than those that did not participate (12.8% versus 12.0%).**

- **In contrast, those participating in a college or university degree, diploma or course saw notably faster income growth (25% versus 15%).**
- **The analysis suggests that employer-provided training is less valuable to individuals than education and training undertaken elsewhere.** This aligns with a theme emerging from our in-depth interviews, where employer-provided training was perceived often as just a “box ticking” exercise, rather than a genuine route to career or pay advancement
- **Those in the bottom half of the income distribution see stronger income growth after participating in college and university-based education.** This income growth premium is considerably greater than among those in the top half of the personal income distribution, suggesting improving access to formal adult education to those on low incomes could be particularly beneficial.
- **Our analysis shows that adults who were in work and participated in training in 2012-13, were more likely to have changed occupations five years later.** This is only true for those undertaking college/university courses or other types of non-employer-provided training, with little difference in likelihood of changing occupation among those that received employer-provided training.
- **People that were unemployed in 2012-13 and participated in some form of training, were far less likely to be unemployed five years later.** 16% of those that were in training were unemployed in 2017-18, compared to 27% among those that did not participate in some form of training.
- **In-depth interviews with adult education participants reveal a range of non-economic benefits of adult education.** These include improved wellbeing and developing skills that can be applied to day-to-day life outside of work. Study was also seen to promote a “virtuous cycle”, enthusing participants to pursue additional adult education opportunities.

The barriers to adult education participation are numerous, with “dispositional” barriers particularly important

- **Barriers to adult education participation are significant.** They include:
  - **Situational barriers** - arising from an adult’s personal and family situation;
  - **Institutional barriers** - arising from the unresponsiveness of educational institutions;
  - **Dispositional barriers** - relating to the attitudes, perceptions and expectations of adults that could be participating in adult education.
- **Dispositional barriers are the most frequently cited barrier to participation.** According to the Learning and Work Institute’s 2019 Adult Participation in Learning Survey, 59% of adults that have not participated in the previous three years said dispositional barriers were a factor. This compares with 35% citing situational barriers and 1% citing institutional barriers.
- **Scepticism over the benefits of adult education appears to be a significant barrier to participation.** Among those we interviewed that had not done any adult education, there was doubt that they would benefit from further learning. Adult education is often seen as providing certification or credentials that are necessary to do work (such as safety

training) rather than actually improving job performance or creating opportunities for career advancement.

- **For many adults, the time and financial costs of adult education are likely to be a significant situational barrier.** Across the in-depth interviews, fees tended to be less of an issue than foregone earnings and the time costs of education.

## Recommendations

While recent Government commitments to adult education are welcome, much more needs to be done. This report recommends:

- **A substantial increase in adult education funding of at least £1.3bn per annum to offset the decline in funding seen in recent years, and a three year commitment to support long-term planning.** With the Government apparently reconciled to the loss of hundreds of thousands, even millions, of 'unviable' jobs, the adult education system is likely to come under substantial pressure in the months to come. It is inconceivable that it can meet the increasing demands that will be placed on it without a great deal more financial support.

Though the Treasury's Comprehensive Spending Review will only cover a single year's expenditure, we recommend a three-year settlement for adult education, skills and training services to provide greater certainty and ensure investment on a scale appropriate to the challenge.

- **This funding should be simplified and should largely follow the learner.** The funding system for adult education is widely believed to be excessively complicated. One way to streamline funding structures would be to consolidate adult education funding into a single scheme of 'learner accounts', providing each individual over a certain age with a government grant to spend on accredited education or training.
- **A large scale outreach campaign is needed to demonstrate the benefits of adult education.** Such a campaign should include advertising in traditional and digital media, but our interviews suggest there is no substitute for personal contact. 'Outreach' involves going to people in the places where they are (such as "the school gates"), rather than expecting them to seek out information spontaneously. Throughout our interviews, participants described the importance of "role models" that could reassure them that "people like them" can benefit and thrive in education.
- **Responsibility for coordinating adult education should be clearer.** One proposal in this direction would be to make it a statutory duty of local authorities (or, where they exist, devolved regional authorities) to provide a certain range of adult education courses, as indeed it was in the past. Having said that, any new statutory duties will need to be complemented with additional funding from central government.
- **The Government should make a concerted effort to increase awareness and take-up of employee training rights.** The acceptable grounds for rejecting employee requests for training could be restricted, with an expectation that employers bear 'reasonable' costs in order for their employees to attend training.



## CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus pandemic is having a profound impact on the UK economy. Lockdown and social distancing have accelerated the shift towards online retail, threatening the more than three million jobs in the sector as high street stores close. City centres and jobs in sectors including hospitality have also suffered as many office workers continue to work from home.

Critically, some of this job shedding is likely to be permanent rather than temporary in nature. As the SMF has previously argued,<sup>1</sup> evidence suggests that a significant number of consumers will permanently shift their shopping behaviour in favour of online retail, even once the pandemic ends. Furthermore, homeworking is likely to be much more prevalent following the pandemic, as social distancing and forced remote working have provided a “proof of concept” for many organisations – demonstrating that a significant proportion of the workforce can work effectively from home, at least for a portion of the week. Reduced commuter footfall in urban centres – on a permanent basis – looks set to lead to further job losses in the retail and hospitality sectors.<sup>2</sup> As the SMF has noted in other research,<sup>3</sup> these sectors of the economy also employ a significant proportion of lower income individuals – raising the prospect of growing inequality and rising levels of poverty as a result of these structural shifts in the labour market.

This raises deep questions around what careers those losing jobs can and should shift into – and how to provide individuals with the skills needed to acquire jobs in the sectors of the economy where vacancies are in greater abundance. It is this latter issue – adult education – which is the focus of this report. By adult education, we include learning in a broad sense. This includes employer-provided training, college and university courses, government training schemes and other types of education such as apprenticeships.

Despite the demise of a “job for life”, our country’s education system remains focused on learning in childhood and early adulthood. For those wanting to acquire new skills in mid-to-late adulthood, to change career or gain a job, the current system is not fit for purpose. As we show in this report, adult education funding has declined in recent years and a substantial cash injection is needed. Furthermore, there are significant situational and dispositional barriers to participation in adult education, despite the benefits that lifelong learning could bring.

The UK Government has recently announced a new commitment to adult education, offering all those without an A-Level or equivalent qualification a free fully-funded college course from April 2021. While this is a welcome policy measure, there is more that can be done in this space, including encouraging those eligible for this new government support to participate. Employers could also be better encouraged to improve employee access to training and learning opportunities.

This report examines the state of adult education in the UK – recent trends, how the UK compares with other countries, as well as the benefits of and barriers to adult education participation. It concludes by setting out recommendations for how government can build on its recent announcements. Given devolved powers, our policy recommendations for the most part relate to England.

Our report focuses in particular on the benefits of adult education for those in lower income households, and how government can support adult education participation among this group. Evidence suggests that, at present, those from lower income households are significantly less

likely to be participating in adult education and that they are more likely to face barriers to doing so.

As well as SMF desk research, the report draws on interviews with ten low-income individuals from around the country, six of whom have done some form of adult education, four of whom have not. We conducted the interviews between 14<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> September 2020. Interviewees ranged from 23 to 55 years of age. Four interviewees were men while six were women. Interviewees were based in London, Wales, the East of England and Northern Ireland. All had left full-time education between 16 and 18 years of age. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and an hour. Participants were asked questions prepared in an interview guide.

The structure of this report is as follows:

- **Chapter 2** - examines trends in adult education participation over time.
- **Chapter 3** - examines the benefits of adult education participation.
- **Chapter 4** - discusses the barriers to adult education participation.
- **Chapter 5** - sets out recommendations for policymakers, drawing on the preceding research.

### Note on terminology

Definitions of adult education tend to vary across the literature and datasets by the type of learning. Generally, learning is divided into three categories of 'formal' 'non-formal', and 'informal'. Formal learning refers to learning that is undertaken with the intention of achieving a nationally recognised qualification. Non-formal learning refers to a course that does not lead to a nationally recognised qualification, and informal learning encompasses self-directed learning and 'leisure courses' such as hobbies. For the purpose of this report, we refer to adult education as encompassing all three types of learning, as often done so in the literature. Where an individual type of learning is referred to specifically, the definitions noted above are intended.

## CHAPTER 2 - TRENDS IN ADULT EDUCATION PARTICIPATION

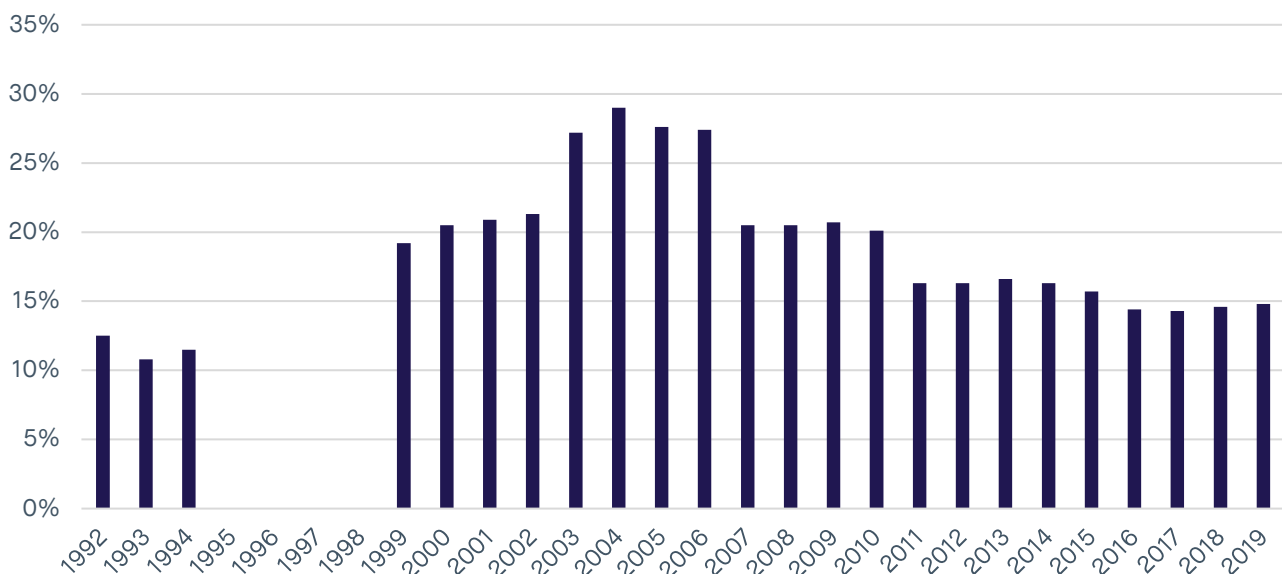
Drawing on a review of academic literature and public data, this chapter describes declines in adult education participation and funding over the past 15-20 years in the UK. Furthermore, this chapter identifies the groups of people most at risk of exclusion from adult education and training – notably, those on lower incomes and with relatively limited prior education. Finally, this evidence is situated within international context to compare the state of adult education in the UK with other countries.

### Participation in adult education over time

Over the last 15 years the UK has seen a significant decline in levels of participation in adult education. While the specific metrics used vary by data source and survey design,<sup>i</sup> this overall trend of decline is consistent across all measures. The New Labour government's emphasis on education policy in the late 1990s included an emphasis on increasing and widening participation; conceivably, an increase in adult learning participation in these years is associated with this policy package.<sup>4</sup> However, widening participation strategies were predominantly focused on those aged 18-30, therefore only extending potential benefits to some young adults.<sup>5</sup> Since 2004 adult education participation rates have almost halved (-49%) from 29% to just below 15% as seen in Figure 1.

Formal training in the workplace has also declined over the past 15 years.<sup>6</sup> The latest Employer Skills Survey shows that one third of staff have received no training in 12 months, a figure relatively unchanged since 2011.<sup>7</sup>

**Figure 1: Participation rate in education and training of adults aged 25-64 in the UK, 1992-2019**



Source: Eurostat, SMF analysis

Note: Data unavailable for 1995-1998

<sup>i</sup> See Adult Participation in Learning Survey, Learning & Work Institute, 2019; Adult Education Survey, Department for Education, 2016.

A review of the literature indicates that this decline has been a consequence of a decline in funding leading to education policy that prioritises resources for higher education and schools over further education or adult learning. While the trend of decline began before the 2008 financial crash, subsequent austerity measures on public budgets have also played a significant role in affecting the availability of funding. Consequently, constrained resources for further education and vocational skills have focused on young adults.<sup>8</sup> What has been referred to as a 'vocation fixation' has translated to an emphasis on and investment in apprenticeships over other forms of both classroom-based and work-based training (see Figure 2).

The expansion of higher education over recent decades has led to a greater proportion of the workforce holding higher-level qualifications (Level 4 and above) which could have conflicting effects on participation in adult education. While it could be inferred that a higher qualified workforce is less in need of adult education (i.e. for the purpose of upskilling), research also shows that the higher-educated are more inclined to participate in adult education.<sup>9</sup> Both effects could be at play, however we are unable to state the prevalence of either effect, or if they cancel each other out. In written evidence submitted to Education Select Committee, the closure of universities' adult education departments is also noted as a contributing factor to the overall decline in adult education provision and participation.<sup>10</sup>

## Funding of adult education over time

A number of organisations and bodies invest in adult education and skills from all sectors – public, private and third/voluntary – and at all levels – from local to national and European. As education is devolved among the four nations of the UK, this section focuses on the funding of adult education in England. While employers remain the largest investor in adult skills, funding from all sources has fallen over time.

### Public funding

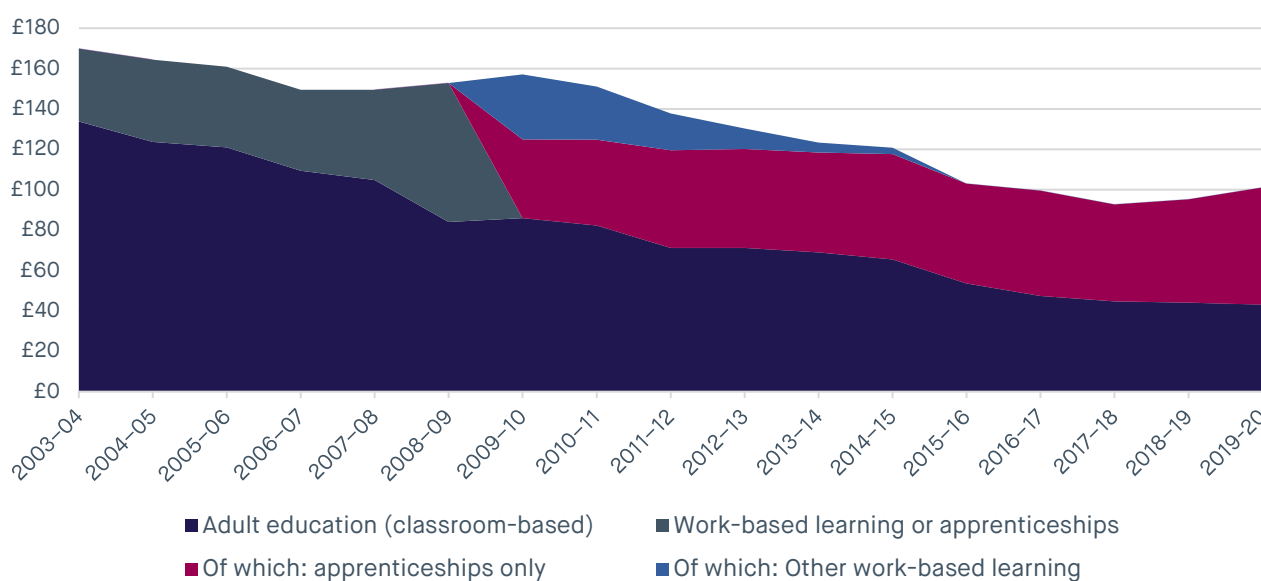
The organisation of public funding for adult education is complex, fragmented across many separate budgets and schemes with varying conditions for spending. The main source of adult education funding is available through the Adult Education Budget (AEB) (formerly the Adult Skills Budget). Since 2019, responsibility for the AEB is devolved among the Education Skills and Funding Agency (ESFA), six Mayoral Combined Authorities and the Greater London Authority; whereby around half of the national budget will be controlled by the devolved areas and the ESFA will retain funding control over the rest of the country. Other pots of funding for adult education are also available through the National Skills Fund and the National Retraining Scheme. Funding recipients range from local government and providers to individual learners across higher education (HE), further education (FE) and apprenticeships or traineeships – expenditure on which is often reported separately in Government budgets and the literature. Consequently, calculating total adult education funding precisely is challenging. However, evidence suggests that public funding of adult education has seen a notable decline over the past 15 years, alongside falling participation.

Analysis by the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) finds that, excluding apprenticeships, total spending on adult education fell by nearly half (48%) or around £1.3bn (in 2020-21 prices) from 2009-10 to 2019-20.<sup>11</sup> This in part is attributed to austerity measures on public spending and a shift towards apprenticeship funding for adults. It is worth noting the caveat that, in some cases, allocated funding has been greater than actual spending due to conditions and restrictions that

make the AEB difficult for providers to spend. There was an underspend of the AEB by at least £63 million in 2016-17, equivalent to almost 5% of the total amount allocated.<sup>12</sup>

Apprenticeships have increasingly become the focus of education and skills policy, benefiting from greater resources and funding. In the past decade, specific spending on apprenticeships (for both 16-18 and 19+ year olds) rose by about 50% in real terms, from £1.3bn in 2009-10 to £1.97bn in 2019-20, compared to a decline in other work-based and classroom-based learning (see Figure 2). While we cannot know a current and specific amount spent on apprenticeships by age group, we do know that over three-quarters (78%) of apprenticeships were undertaken by individuals aged 19 or over, compared to 16-18 year olds.<sup>13</sup>

**Figure 2: Total spending on adult education and skills in England per capita, 18-64 year olds, 2020-2021 prices**



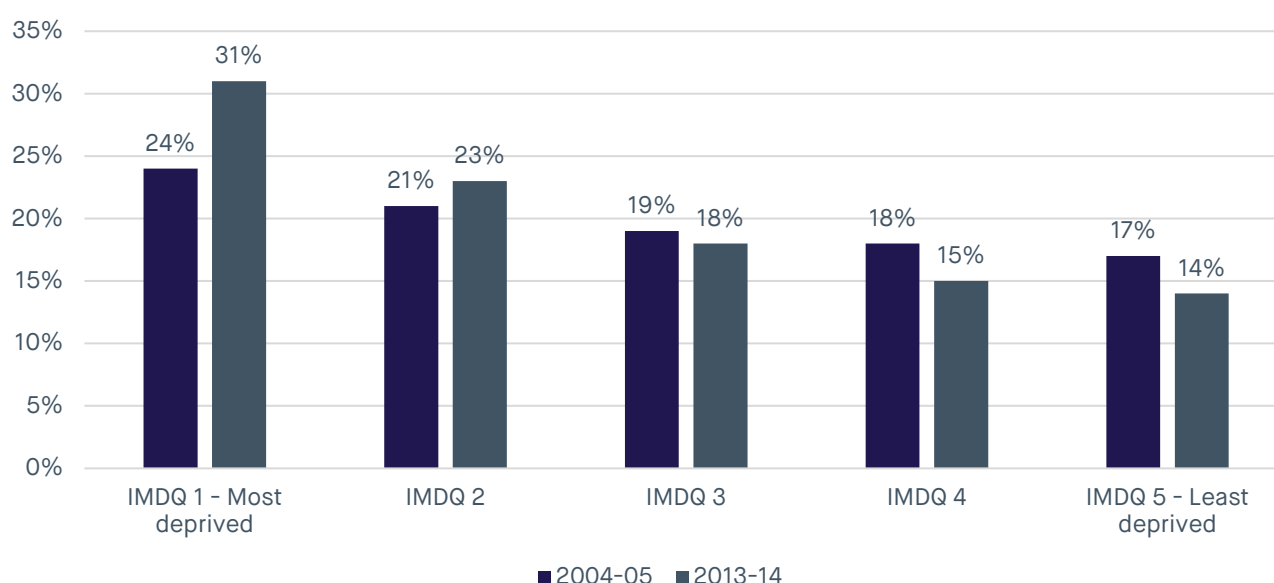
Source: IFS, ONS, SMF analysis

Note: Adult education (classroom-based)' includes all 19+ skills expenditure (excluding work-based learning, apprenticeships, higher education and offender learning). 'Work-based learning' includes Train to Gain and apprenticeships. Apprenticeships include 16-18 and 19+ apprenticeships.

Note: Prior to 2009-10, data are only available on spending on work-based learning as a whole. Subsequently spending can be split between apprenticeships and other work-based learning programmes.

The decline in adult education funding has been a source of major consternation. The Government-commissioned Review of Post-18 Education and Funding describes the 45% fall (in real terms) in adult FE funding between 2009/10 and 2017/18 as “one of the most important statistics in this entire report and cannot be justified in terms of either economics or social equity.”<sup>14</sup>

While overall public funding for adult education has decreased, training seems to be increasingly targeted where it is arguably needed most, for those residing in the most deprived communities. Figure 3 illustrates this shift of funding: between 2004-05 and 2013-14, the share of public adult education funding going to those in the most deprived quintile increased by seven percentage points.

**Figure 3: % of government-funding by IMD quintile in England, 2004-05 and 2013-14**

Source: BIS, ILR

### Other sources of funding

Government funding is not the only source of investment in adult education. The complex loan system and repayment arrangements of adult learners makes it hard to identify precisely who ultimately pays for what. However, over time, the grant component of Adult Skills Budget has been replaced by loans, shifting the long-term responsibility for resourcing from the state to employers and individuals. Individuals' own investment into adult education and skills is difficult to measure and compare over time due to the way in which the data are compiled. However, evidence from individual learner loans (predominantly HE Student Loans Company) shows an increase in loan funding indicating a rise in individuals' investment, which is unsurprising given it is the only route to funding available, outside one's employer, for many groups of people.<sup>15</sup> An estimate for 2013-14 suggests that just 7% of training was publicly funded, with the majority paid for by employers (82%) and individuals (9%).<sup>16</sup>

Employer spending on overall training stood at £44.2bn in 2017, equating to £1,530 per employee.<sup>17</sup> However, literature suggests that over time both the actual number and proportion of staff being formally trained to nationally recognised qualifications has decreased.<sup>18</sup> If this trend continues, there could be potential implications for the transferability of training between jobs whereby workers are required to repeat generic training (such as GDPR or health and safety) without recognised accreditation or qualifications. This would not only be onerous for workers, as their opportunities for training are limited to knowledge or skills they already possess, but it also places redundant time and financial costs on employers. Employer funding was split almost equally between off- and on-the-job training. Public sector (84%) and third sector (82%) employers were found to be more likely to invest in training of staff than private sector employers (71%).<sup>19</sup>

As we discuss later in this report, employer-provided training appears to vary significantly across income groups, with those on lower incomes less likely to be participating in training. As such, the figure cited above of £1,530 training spend per employee is likely to be lower among lower wage workers.

## Who participates?

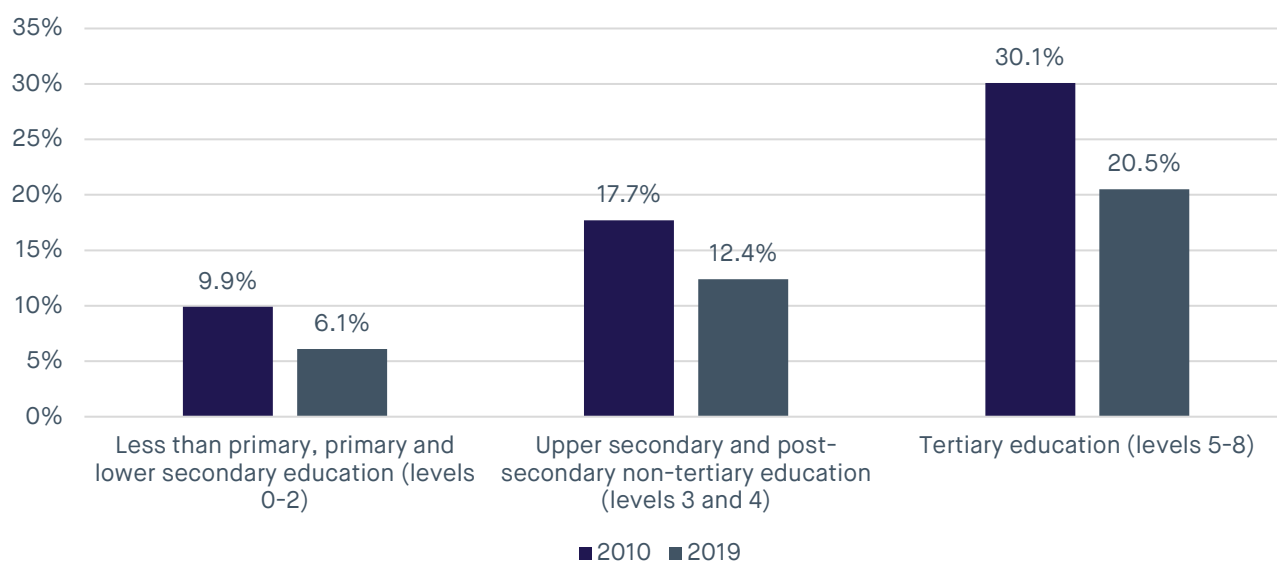
Participation in adult education varies among different groups of people. There are numerous system-level determinants that influence the likelihood of an adult to participate in further learning. Largely, adults who are most likely to participate in education and training are those from higher social grades, with more years of initial education and closer to the labour market. The evidence suggests that those who are arguably most likely to benefit from education and training, for the purposes of income growth or career advancement, receive less of it.<sup>20</sup>

### Initial education

One of the strongest determinants of participation in adult education both internationally and in the UK is an individual's initial education, including the age at which they left school and the qualifications they achieved. The later a person left compulsory education, the more likely they are to continue lifelong learning and participate in formal education as an adult.<sup>21</sup> The 2019 Adult Participation in Learning Survey<sup>ii</sup> found that those who left education aged 16 or under are significantly more likely (53%) to have not taken part in any learning since full time education compared to those who stayed until aged 17-18 (37%), 19-20 (36%) or 21+ (27%).<sup>22</sup>

The age at which an individual leaves compulsory education often correlates to their highest level of qualifications, particularly if they have not participated in any form of adult education. Figure 4, drawing on Eurostat data, shows that since 2010, participation rates for adult education have declined the most in percentage terms amongst those with the lowest educational attainment (levels 0-2), falling by 38% compared to 30% for those with Levels 3-4 qualifications and 32% for those with Levels 5-8 qualifications.

**Figure 4: Participation rate in education and training of adults aged 25-64 by educational attainment level in the UK, 2010 and 2019**



Source: Eurostat, SMF analysis

Labour market determinants

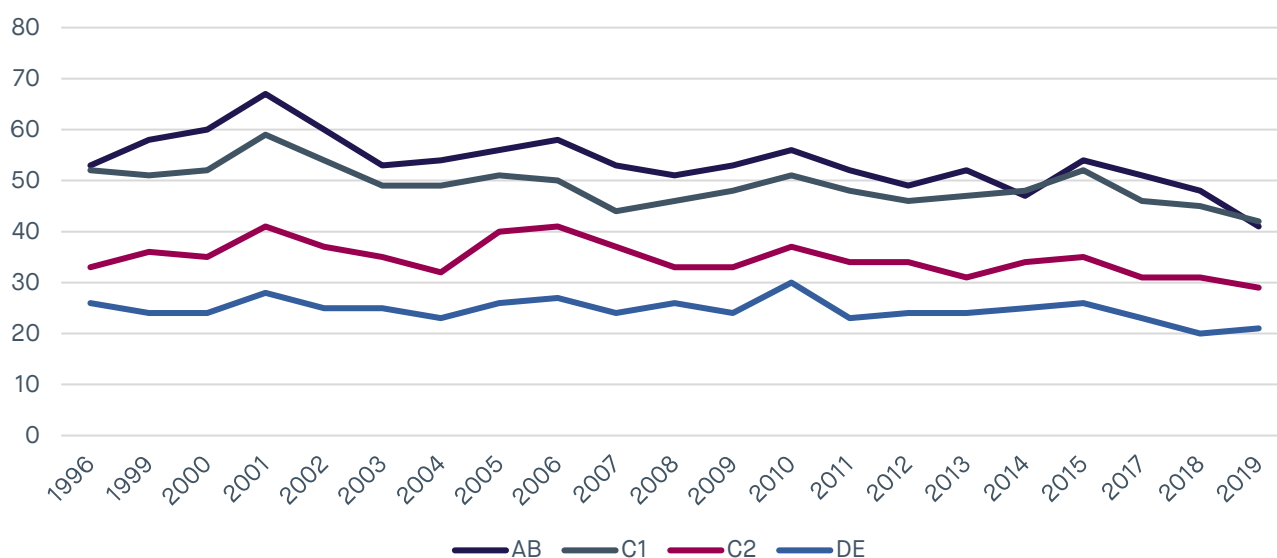
<sup>ii</sup> Total weighted base of survey included 5,011 respondents.



An individual's social grade or socio-economic status is also linked strongly to the likelihood of participation. Adult Participation in Learning Survey findings found that almost half of people (48%) from the lowest social grades (C2 and DE) have not done any formal learning since leaving full time education. This is relatively unchanged over time – see Figure 5.

Among those that do participate, learners from lower socio-economic groupings are more likely to take part in government-provided training than employer-provided training. Conceivably, this could indicate that despite declining resources, public funding for adult education is targeted at those from more disadvantaged backgrounds.<sup>23</sup> Alternatively, this might be a reflection of employers focusing training on higher wage workers, or employer-provided training being more prevalent in sectors of the economy which offer higher wages on average.

**Figure 5: Participation in adult learning by social grade in the UK**



Source: Learning and Work Institute

The closer an individual is to the labour market, the more likely they are to participate. Around two-thirds of full-time (66%) and part-time (69%) workers have participated in some learning since leaving initial education. The likelihood of participation is lower for the unemployed (57%), retired (50%) and those not seeking work (47%).<sup>24</sup> In part, this could be explained by the fact that people in these circumstances do not have access to employer-provided training.

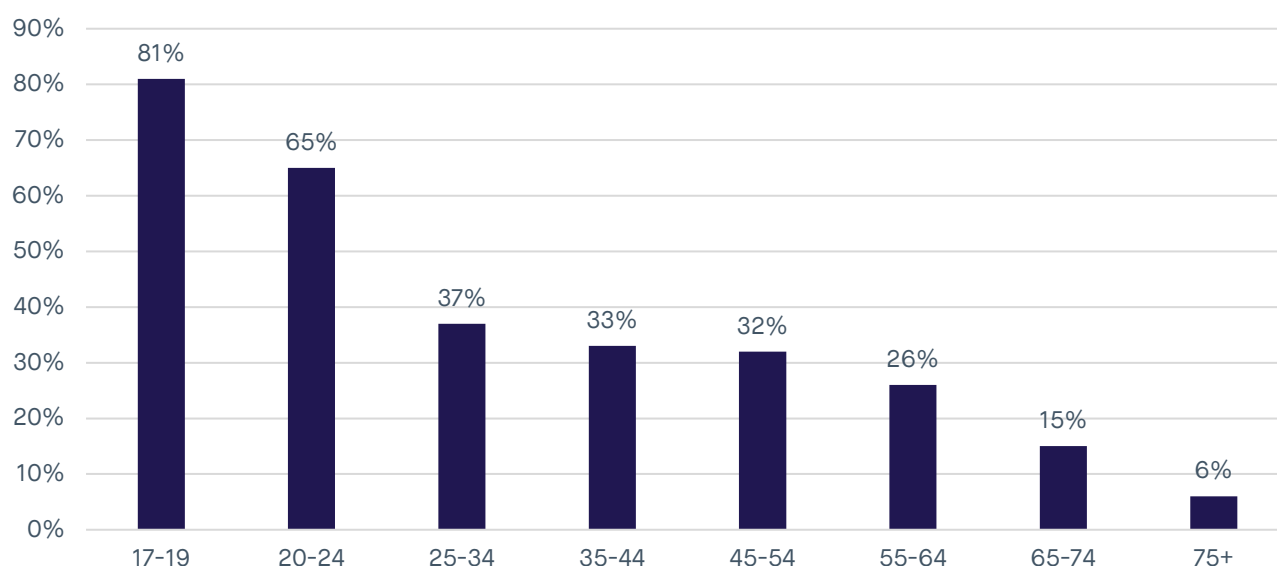
### Individual characteristics

Individuals' demographic characteristics are also related to their likelihood of participating in adult education. There is a strong correlation between an individual's age and their likelihood of participation. with older adults much less likely to participate in learning in the last 3 years. However, the Adult Participation in Learning survey highlights two significant cliff-edges, where participation declines (Figure 7). The first is in the mid-20s: participation in adult education falls by almost a half (-43%) between those aged 20-24 to 25-34. The second is at age 75: participation falls by 60% for over 75s compared to those aged 65-74 – this finding is less of a concern if the goal of adult education policy is solely in relation to employment (either getting a job or a promotion); however, it is worth considering from a public health perspective, given the social and wellbeing benefits of continued learning particularly for preventing cognitive decline.



Comparatively, participation rates are more consistent among those between 25 and 54 years old. Conceivably, this could partially be an effect of the survey cohort, however it could also relate to the emphasis of skills policy and funding on young adults (under 25). Whatever the explanation, older people appear more vulnerable to labour market shocks and modal changes. Compared to 2018, learning has fallen in nearly all age groups except for those between 20 and 35 years old where participation rates remained around the same. Overall, research suggests there is no significant difference between the participation rates of men and women or between ethnic groups in the UK.

**Figure 6: Participation in adult learning by age in the UK**



Source: Learning and Work Institute

### How does the UK compare with other countries?

To put these changes in the UK in context, it is helpful to look at similar trends in participation and funding in other countries. Overall, adult education participation rates in the UK are slightly above EU average but lag behind many other developed economies including Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands and France (see Figure 7). Over time, participation and funding of adult education has also declined significantly in the UK compared to other European and OECD nations.

### Skill level

The UK's level of literacy and numeracy proficiency remain in line with and above OECD averages respectively; however, that leaves around nine million people lacking functional literacy and numeracy skills in England.<sup>25</sup> Concerns have been raised around evidence that shows those joining the workforce are not much more skilled than older generations, especially compared to other countries such as Singapore or Germany.<sup>26</sup> This suggests that those entering the workforce now will need greater adult opportunities for learning and retraining in order to maintain relevant skills in a changing economy.

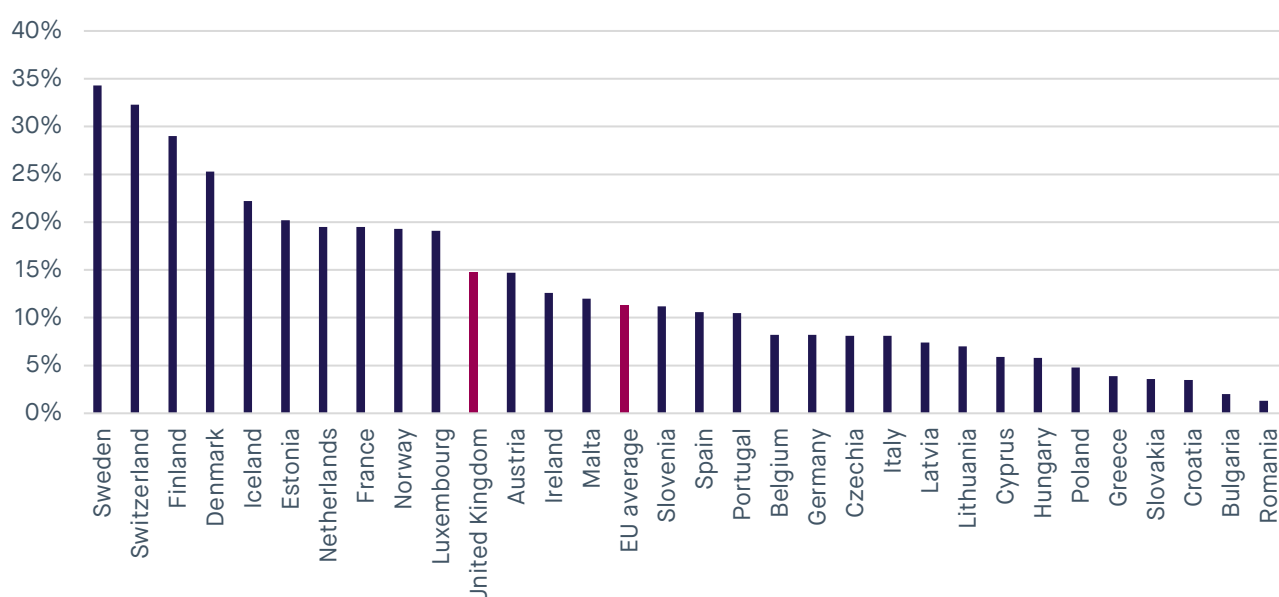
It has been suggested that without significant investment in skills, the UK could fall down international league tables by 2030.<sup>27</sup> In recent years the improvement of the UK's qualification

profile has failed to keep pace with other countries, having slowed over the past decade. The attainment of upper secondary education (Level 2) is generally understood as a minimum requirement for participating in the modern economy – those that do not achieve this level have been found to face particular difficulty in the labour market. As many as one in five UK adults have below Level 2 qualifications, compared to one in ten in South Korea, Canada and Finland.<sup>28</sup> Despite the UK having high levels of tertiary or high-skilled (Level 4+) adults, future economic growth and productivity will be impeded by failing to upskill and train lower-skilled adults.

### Participation in adult education

Globally, adult education participation rates are mixed, varying by economic and social factors of different countries. Survey results from 159 countries found that participation rates vary from over 50% in 15% of countries to below 5% in almost a third (29%) of countries. However, despite overall variance in participation, rates among marginalised and disadvantaged groups were found to be consistently low across those surveyed, as similarly found in the UK.<sup>29</sup>

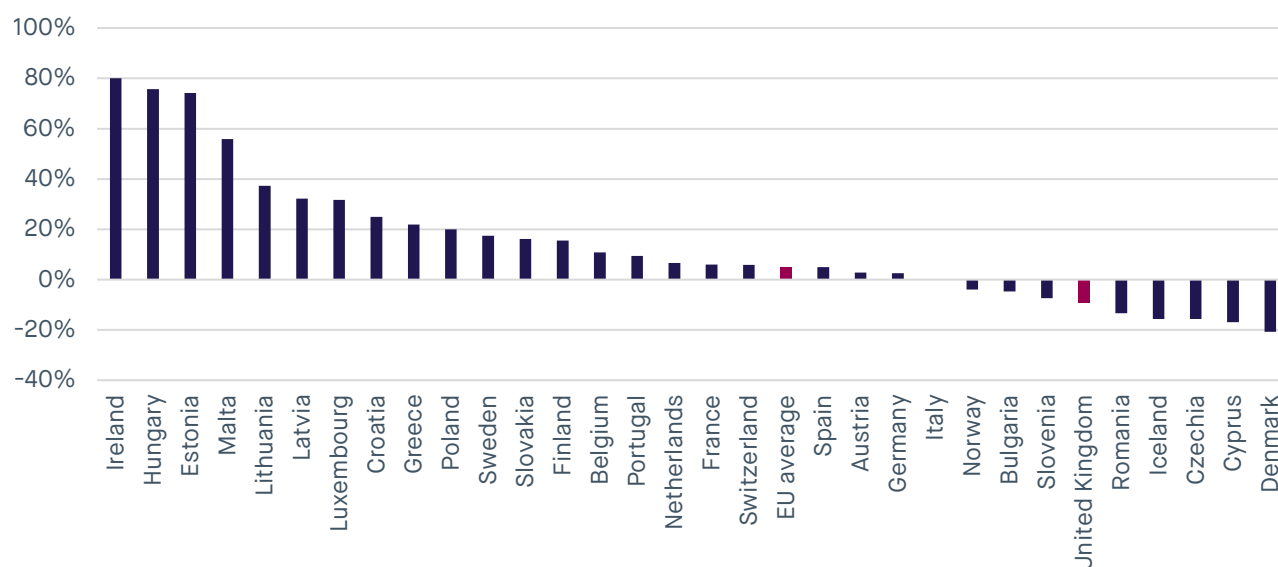
**Figure 7: Participation rate (%) in education and training of 24-64 year olds, 2019**



Source: Eurostat

Note: EU average includes the UK.

The European Adult Education Survey is one of the main data sources for comparing annual adult participation in education and training across different countries. Findings show that participation rates in Europe are highest in Sweden at over a third (34%) compared to the UK, where less than 15% of adults participate in education or training, standing just above EU average. However, since 2014, Ireland has seen the most significant increase in adult education participation in Europe at a rate of 80%, while the EU average increased by around 5% during this time – see Figure 8. By comparison, participation in the UK fell by 9% since 2014, the sixth biggest decline from Denmark at almost -21%.

**Figure 8: Percentage change of the participation rate (%) in education and training of 24-64 year olds, 2014-2019**

Source: Eurostat, SMF analysis

Note: EU average includes the UK.

UNESCO also found that more than half of 159 surveyed countries (57%) reported an increase in adult education participation since 2015, while just 9% (13 countries) reported a decrease. Evidently, the UK is among a global minority of countries with declining participation in adult education.<sup>30</sup>

Those who are least likely to participate in adult education are the low-qualified and the furthest from the labour market. Homing in on this group provides insight into how well the UK adult education system serves those most in need of it, compared to other countries. The UK participation rate sits around average for the unemployed but below average for low-qualified adults, compared to other countries (see Figure 8). Sweden and Denmark have the highest participation rates among those who are most disadvantaged; some suggest this is due to public support for higher public spending and funding mechanisms which target vulnerable groups.<sup>31</sup>

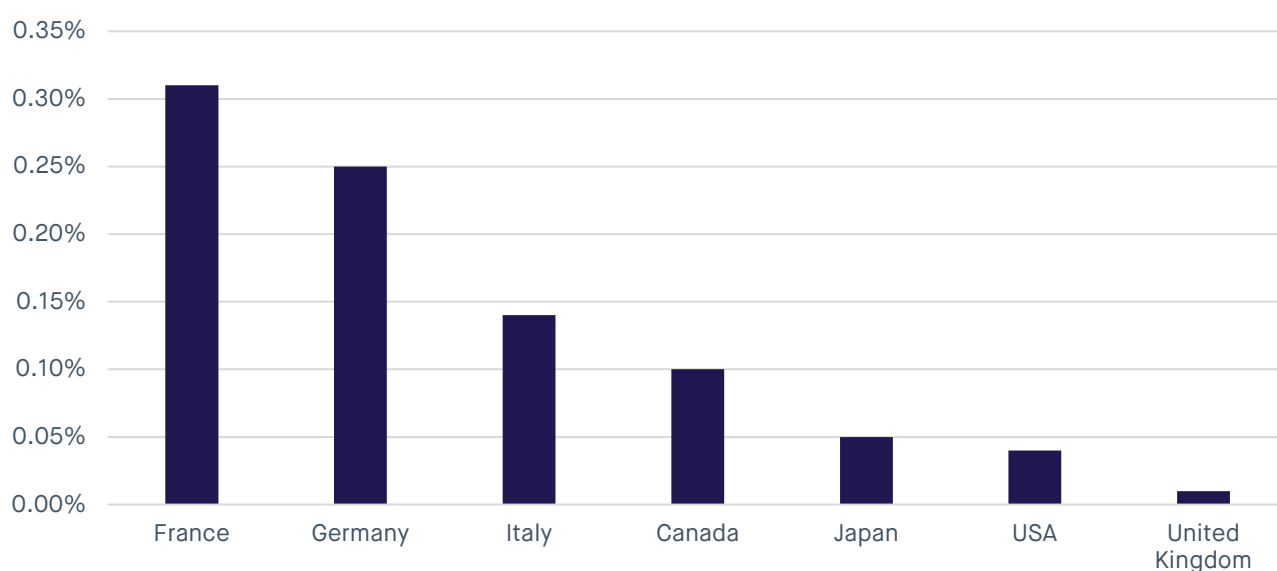
**Figure 9: Participation of adult education among unemployed and low-qualified, 2015**

Source: UNESCO; Eurostat

## Public spending on adult education

Public investment in training is relatively low in the UK compared to other countries. According to OECD data, the UK's spending on skills (as a % of GDP) is significantly lower than other G7 countries (see Figure 10). UNESCO finds that over a third (35%) of countries surveyed reported a decrease in adult education spending as a proportion of public education over the last 10 years across low-income, lower-middle and high-income countries. This indicates that globally, adult education has been not been prioritised by governments. Nevertheless, research shows that despite an overall decline, across many countries funding has been prioritised for disadvantaged adults such as those with a lack of education and skills, and the unemployed.<sup>32</sup> Three quarters (75%) of countries reported significant policy progress in adult education since 2015, with nearly 30% (44) of countries reporting no change. The UK is not included in the five countries that reported a regression in policy, during this time.<sup>33</sup>

**Figure 10: Public expenditure on training as a % of GDP, G7 countries, 2011**



Source: OECD

Note: 2011 is the last comparable year for data, after which UK data on this measure are unavailable.

## CHAPTER 3 - THE CASE FOR ADULT EDUCATION

### Evidence from the literature

The case for adult education has long been established through a wealth of academic, peer-reviewed research on the benefits of adult learning to the individual as well as the economy and society. For disadvantaged and low-income individuals specifically, adult learning presents an economic and social opportunity to break intergenerational cycles of poverty, improve household finances and overall health.<sup>34</sup>

#### Economic benefits

Economic benefits of adult education for individuals can include increased income levels or wage premiums often, but not always, associated with a promotion or job change. Broadly, the OECD finds that across 23 countries, better-skilled and highly-educated workers are more likely to be employed and earn higher wages.<sup>35</sup> The evidence on employment is clear; fewer than one in two 25-64 year olds with no qualifications are in work.<sup>36</sup>

However, research suggests the impact of adult education on income levels is more mixed, varying based on the level of training achieved as well as the sector and types of jobs available.<sup>37</sup> The evidence on wage returns of higher qualified individuals is well-known; estimates show that an individual with a bachelor's degree will earn on average £210,000 more than someone with A-level qualifications, over the course of their lifetime<sup>iii, 38</sup> However, evidence on the income benefits of participating in adult education and learning specifically later on in life is limited. Wage returns to apprentices for example are generally much greater for younger apprentices, yet the majority (78%) are older.<sup>39</sup> Some research suggests that adult learners who complete a 'full' Level 3 qualification show greater earnings return of nine percentage points than those that do not, and chances of employment increase by four percentage points on average 3-5 years after achievement.<sup>40</sup>

Conceivably, mixed evidence on the wage returns from adult education participation raises questions about whether Adult Learner Loans are the most effective policy option, given the cost of financing the loan may outweigh any wage increases resulting from the extra training.

More research is needed in this space to demonstrate individual economic benefits to education in mid-to-late adulthood. Conceivably, for example, the benefits of undertaking a degree in one's 30s or 40s could be very different to those from undertaking a degree in one's 20s. This might be the case for example, if those studying later in life struggle to gain entry into corporate graduate schemes, due to prejudices about the "suitability" of such individuals for an entry-level role. Exploring the attitudes of employers to hiring such individuals would, in our view, be a useful avenue for future research.

There is limited empirical evidence on the overall impact of investment in adult education strategies for poverty reduction in the UK. However, some research suggests that adult learning can improve the financial literacy of low-income disadvantaged families, enabling them to better organise their household finances.<sup>41</sup> Smaller-scale surveys of disadvantaged learners can provide some insight; the WEA (Workers' Educational Association) found that of their students

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<sup>iii</sup> After tax and loan costs.

that were previously unemployed, 33% found work, and for those previously employed, 7% earned more and 8% got a new job after completing their course.<sup>42</sup>

Beyond the individual, the wider economic benefits of adult education have also been well-explored in the literature. At an organisational level, adult learning is linked to gains in productivity, employee commitment and satisfaction, and lower turnover.<sup>43</sup> This is said to translate to increased output, innovation, employment levels and subsequent tax revenue at a national level.<sup>44</sup>

Economic growth and productivity is, in part, determined by the development of a broad set of skills across the labour market.<sup>45</sup> Research often focuses on the relationship between high-level qualifications (bachelor's degree and above) and productivity growth. The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) found that a one percentage point increase in the proportion of the workforce with a university qualification raises productivity levels by 0.2-0.5% in the long term.<sup>46</sup> However, upper-intermediate skills (practical, technical and occupational) have also been shown to make a positive contribution to productivity, particularly in sectors with a high non-ICT intensity.<sup>47</sup> Both high-level qualifications and intermediate vocational skills therefore play complementary roles in enhancing productivity. Yet, restricted and unequal access to training can have a negative impact on overall economic growth; whereby limited training opportunities for disadvantaged individuals can offset the productivity advantages of other workers' investment in skills.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, opportunities for upskilling and training must be available across skill levels and groups of people to achieve economic and productivity growth.

### **Social and personal benefits**

Economic advancement is not the only motivation for undertaking adult education. Learners have a range of objectives, from developing skills and capabilities that allow them to better flourish in their personal lives and participate more easily in society to 'merely' satisfying curiosity and making productive use of leisure time. Even courses that are primarily intended to provide labour market training can bring wider benefits.

A range of studies have demonstrated that adult learning can enhance personal wellbeing, particularly for people with low incomes or in poverty. Adult education has been shown to increase levels of self-confidence and empowerment and improve learners' focus and self-organisation.<sup>49</sup> Adults from disadvantaged backgrounds that participated in 'leisure courses' – e.g. amateur photography, art or pottery – are more likely to adopt a range of healthier behaviours. Their probability of giving up smoking rises by 7.3 percentage points, and their probability of taking up exercise rises by 18.5%. They are less likely to abuse drugs, have unhealthy diets or fail to attend cervical screening.<sup>50</sup> Adult education appears to have benefits for mental health, too. Middle aged and older learners are more protected against cognitive decline, and have reduced symptoms of depression and anxiety. Their overall life satisfaction and sense of purpose is also higher, the benefits of which were greater for educationally disadvantaged adults.<sup>51</sup>

Moreover, adult education seems to bring social benefits to people beyond the learner. Engaging in adult education is associated with improvements in parenting skills, and greater engagement of parents with their children's education.<sup>52</sup> It also encourages people to be better citizens; take up of adult education has been shown to improve levels of social cohesion, racial tolerance and levels of trust within a community.<sup>53</sup> It increases levels of civic engagement and participation in democratic processes.<sup>54</sup>

## Findings from quantitative and qualitative analysis

As part of this research, the SMF has examined data from the longitudinal Understanding Society (USoc) survey. Among the large number of questions asked in this survey are several which relate to adult education participation. This includes questions on motivations for undertaking adult education and the type of adult education undertaken – employer-provided, course in a college or university, a government training scheme or other initiative.

Furthermore, by examining questions related to personal income and socioeconomic characteristics, we can explore the links between training/education participation, income and labour market outcomes.

We stress that the analysis which follows is not a comprehensive econometric analysis of the returns from adult education. We do not, for example, perform regressions which attempt to control for the wide range of other factors which might impact labour market outcomes – such as innate ability, “work ethic”, past employment, previous education and caring responsibilities. This is intended to be an overview of descriptive statistics which might indicate where the gains from adult education participation lie, and provide hypotheses which could form the basis of further research in this space.

In addition to our analysis of the USoc survey, this section of the report draws on insights gleaned from the ten qualitative in-depth interviews of adults in lower income households undertaken as part of the research. Six of these adults had participated in adult education, while four had not. More detail about the in-depth interviews can be found in the introduction of this report.

### **Income gains from adult education participation**

To gain insights into the potential returns from adult education participation, we compared two waves to the USoc survey – wave 4 (“w4”, 2012-13) and wave 9 (“w9”, 2017-18). We compared labour market outcomes in wave 9 of those that did and did not participate in some form of training or adult education in wave 4.

We examine labour market outcomes five years after participation to recognise the fact that education may take time to filter through into returns. Individuals need to find new jobs, apply for promotions and complete their studies (which can take a number of years in the case of e.g. university degrees). We have been able to segment the findings by type of training undertaken in 2012-13. We restrict the analysis to those that were under 65 years of age (excluding those likely to have retired) in 2017-18.

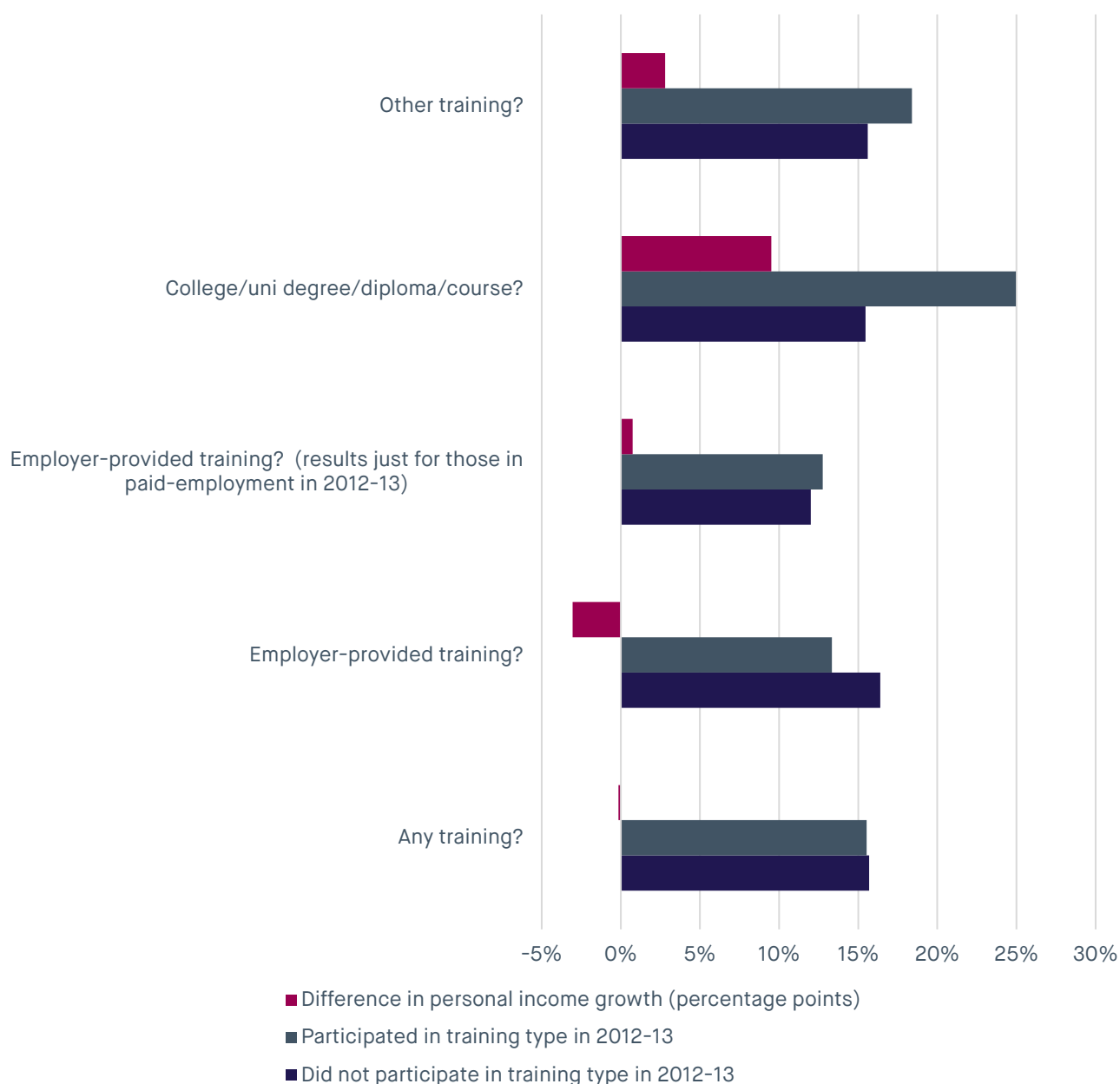
Notably, when looking at all categories of training, there is almost no difference in personal income growth between those that did and did not participate in training in 2012-13. However, these findings vary significantly depending on the type of training undertaken by the individual.

Those participating in employer-provided training in 2012-13 saw slower income growth than those not participating – though if we home in on just those that were in paid employment (excluding the self-employed) in 2012-13, the training group does register slightly stronger median personal income growth (12.8% versus 12.0%).

In contrast, those participating in a college or university degree, diploma or course saw notably faster median income growth (25% versus 15%). This does not appear to be merely a “base

effect” reflecting lower personal incomes in w4 for those participating in college or university training; at this point in time the personal incomes of participants and non-participants was broadly similar. Focusing on those *not* working as paid employees in 2012-13 shows a significant personal income growth premium among the college/university learning group – 61% median personal income growth by 2017-18 compared with 38% for those not participating in college/university learning.

**Figure 11: Median personal gross income growth between 2012/13 and 2017/18, by whether participated in training in 2012/13**



Source: SMF analysis of Understanding Society

At face value, the analysis appears to suggest that employer-provided training is less valuable to individuals than education and training undertaken elsewhere – for example in a college or university setting.



Notably, this aligns with a theme from several of the in-depth interviews undertaken as part of the research. A number of participants felt that employer-provided training was often little more than a “box-ticking” exercise, rather than a genuine endeavour to equip employees with new skills that they can use for career or pay advancement. Several described their training as consisting of little more than basic courses – for example simple “health & safety” training. Many interviewees also suggested that employers were reluctant to offer high quality training due to staff turnover, with company managers/bosses taking the view that there is little point in investing in training as employees will not stay for a long period of time. One believed she had been excluded because she was working part-time, saying that “it was almost like I was outside the staff team”.

*“some employers are wary of doing [training] ... as they are worried that you will leave ... especially if you are part-time” - Female, 55*

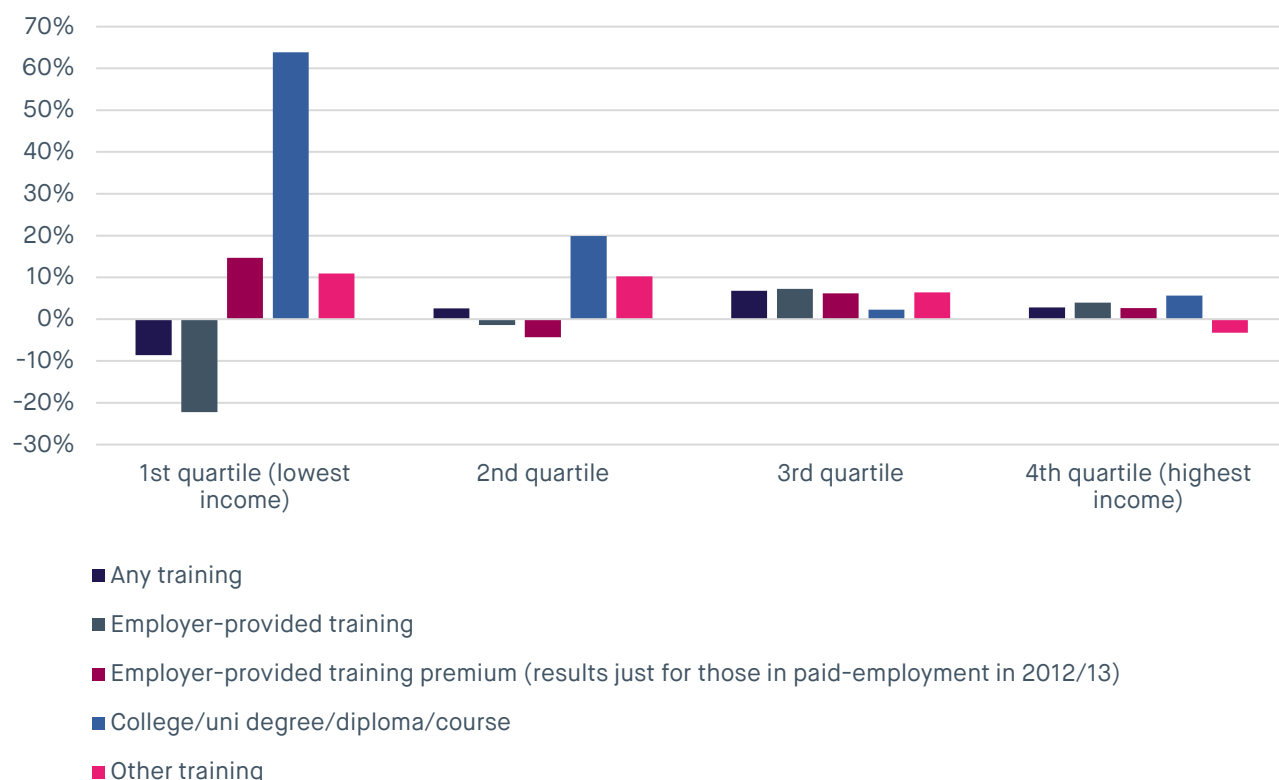
*“The training I received as an employee was generally job-specific. Management systems etc.” - Female, 52*

Segmenting the USoc analysis by personal income quartile suggests that while employer-provided training in 2012-13 is associated with stronger income growth for those in the top half of the income distribution, it is associated with lower income growth in the bottom half of the distribution. When the analysis homes in on those that were in paid employment in 2012-13, those in the lowest personal income quartile that participated in employer-provided training saw more rapid income growth than those that did not. However, those in the second lowest personal income quartile that participated in employer-provided training saw lower growth.

Segmenting the findings by occupation of employment shows that while participation in employer-provided training is associated with stronger income growth among those in routine occupations in 2012-13 (18% versus 14% employment growth among those in paid employment in 2012-13), this is not true for those in semi-routine jobs.

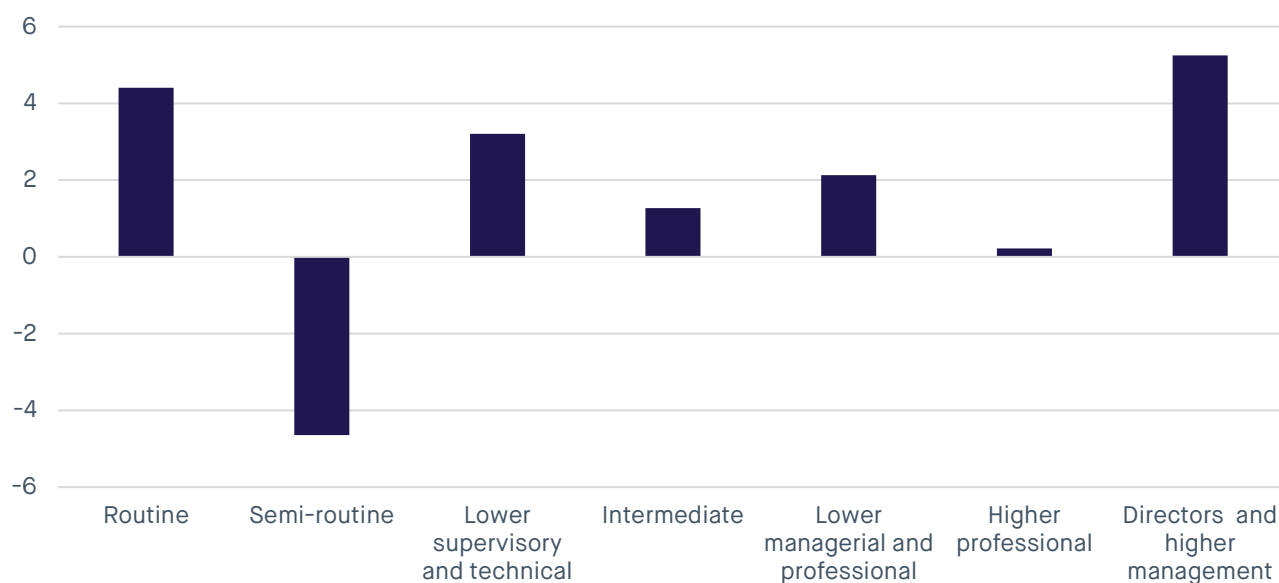
With respect to college, university and other training, those in the bottom half of the income distribution see stronger income growth after participating in such training/education. This income growth premium is considerably greater than among those in the top half of the personal income distribution, suggesting improving access to formal adult education to those on lower incomes could be particularly beneficial.

**Figure 12: Percentage point difference in median personal gross income growth between 2012-13 and 2017-18, by whether participating in training in 2012-13 (growth for those participating minus growth for those not participating). Results by personal income quartile in 2012-13.**



Source: SMF analysis of Understanding Society

**Figure 13: Percentage point difference in median personal gross income growth between 2012-13 and 2017-18, by whether participating in employer-provided training in 2012-13 (growth for those participating minus growth for those not participating). Results by occupation in 2012-13.**



Source: SMF analysis of Understanding Society

Segmenting the analysis by age group suggests that income growth from college and university training is more likely among those under the age of 40 than in older age groups. Ultimately, there might be an important age dimension to the returns from at least some types of adult education, though we note that the findings from the data could be driven by a wide range of factors which we do not control for here.

Among those that were in paid-employment in 2012-13, participation in employer-provided training is associated with stronger median personal income growth among those aged 20-29, but with slightly lower personal income growth among those aged 30-49. Conceivably, employer-provided training might be particularly valuable at the start of one's working life, but generally become less valuable over time, particularly if the training on offer does not expand significantly in scope over time.

**Figure 14: Percentage point difference in median personal gross income growth between 2012-13 and 2017-18, by whether participating in training in 2012-13 (growth for those participating minus growth for those not participating). Results by age group**



Source: SMF analysis of Understanding Society

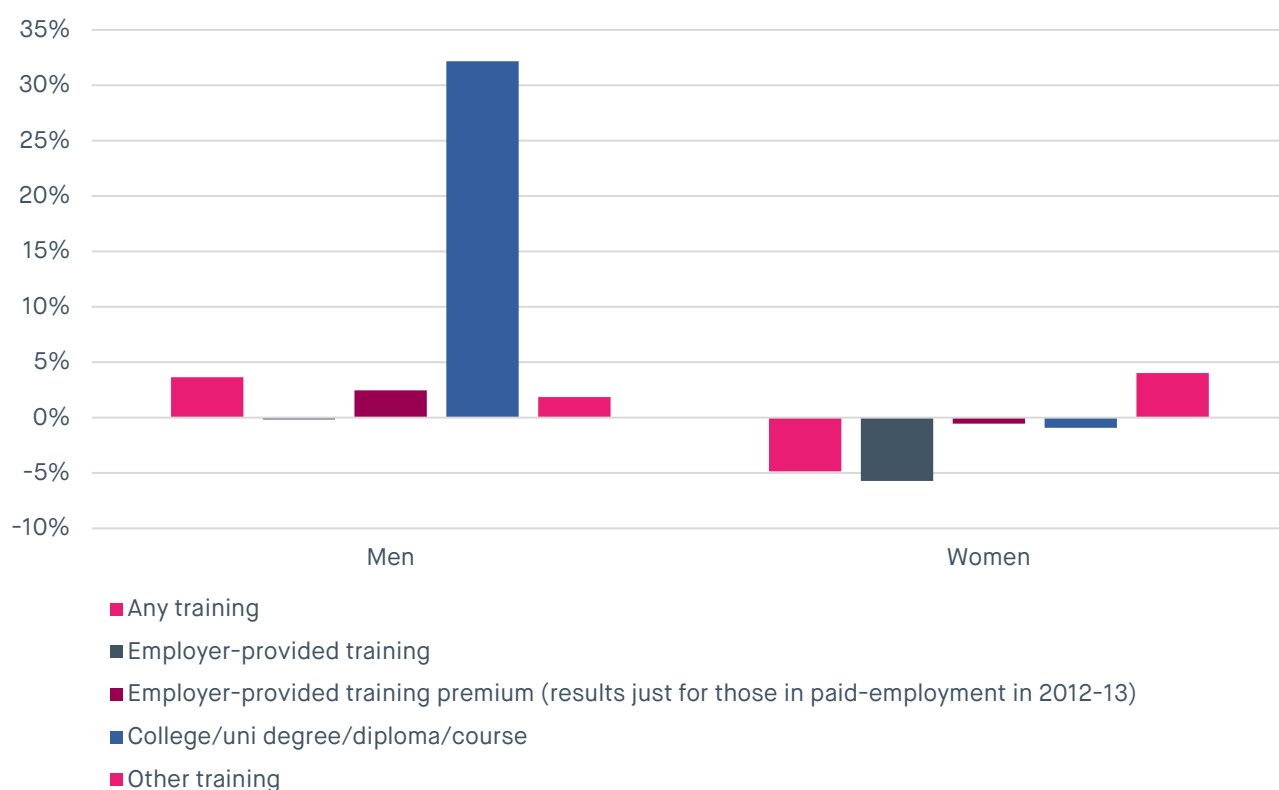
We also segmented our analysis by sex. This shows a trend – true for college/university learning and employer-provided training – of men seeing more of an income growth premium after participating in training. Indeed, women participating in training in 2012-13 saw slower income growth than those that did not participate.

A range of factors could conceivably drive this trend, including women dropping out of the labour force or working reduced hours for child and other caring needs. The findings may also reflect the types of training undertaken by women compared with men – for example, choice of university and college courses. In a university context, for example, a number of studies highlight

the relatively low representation of women in courses which lead to relatively high earning potentiation, such as economics<sup>55</sup> and STEM subjects.<sup>56</sup> The gender pay gap among those participating in apprenticeships has been attributed to differences in the sectors of apprenticeships for men and women. The 2018 Apprenticeship Pay Survey, for example, shows the female-dominated level 2 and 3 programme of hairdressing had the lowest mean weekly wage of £163. Electro-technical apprentices on the other hand, the majority of whom are male, were paid £337 – the second highest total weekly earnings from basic pay.<sup>57</sup>

Having said that, we acknowledge that the extensive and long-running research on the wage returns to training by gender have found mixed results, with some studies showing greater returns for women, and others showing greater returns for men.<sup>58</sup> Although the descriptive statistics presented here suggest that women are less likely to see adult education translate into stronger income growth, this is not a universal conclusion in the literature.

**Figure 15: Percentage point difference in personal gross income growth between 2012-13 and 2017-18, by whether participating in training in 2012-13 (growth for those participating minus growth for those not participating). Results by sex.**



Source: SMF analysis of Understanding Society

### Impact of adult education on job switching

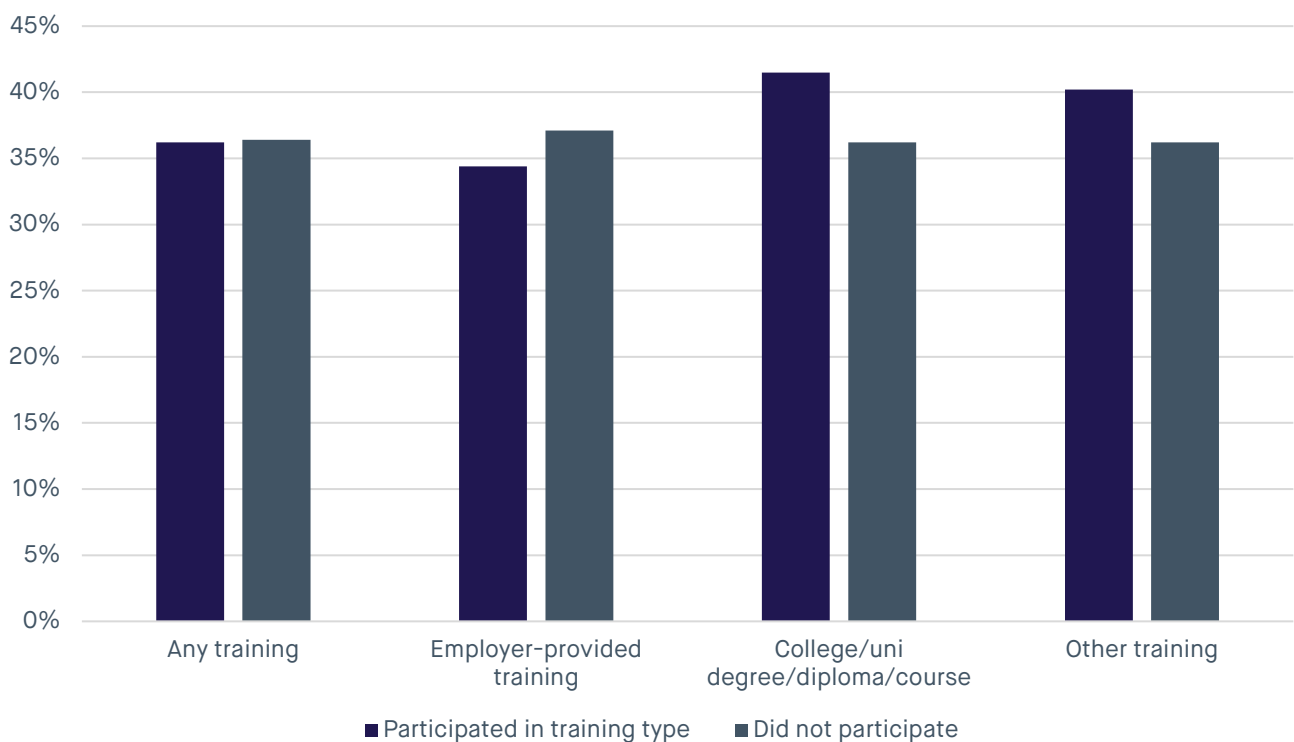
Another area of interest is the impact of adult education participation on industry and occupation switching. As the SMF has highlighted in past research, a significant proportion of low-paid workers are in the retail and hospitality sectors – where there is a limited “career ladder” to climb. As such, improving the income of workers in these sectors is likely to be best achieved through measures that make it easier for them to find employment in other parts of the economy.<sup>59</sup>

Our analysis shows that, among adults in work in 2012-13, those participating in training are (marginally) more likely to have changed occupations by 2017-18. When segmenting this by type of training, this is only true for those undertaking college/university courses or other types of training (excluding employer-provided training). There is little difference in likelihood of changing occupation among those that received employer-provided training in 2012-13.

A similar picture is seen in terms of likelihood of having switched industry of employment. College/university courses and other types of training (excluding employer-provided training) are associated with an increased likelihood of switching industry.

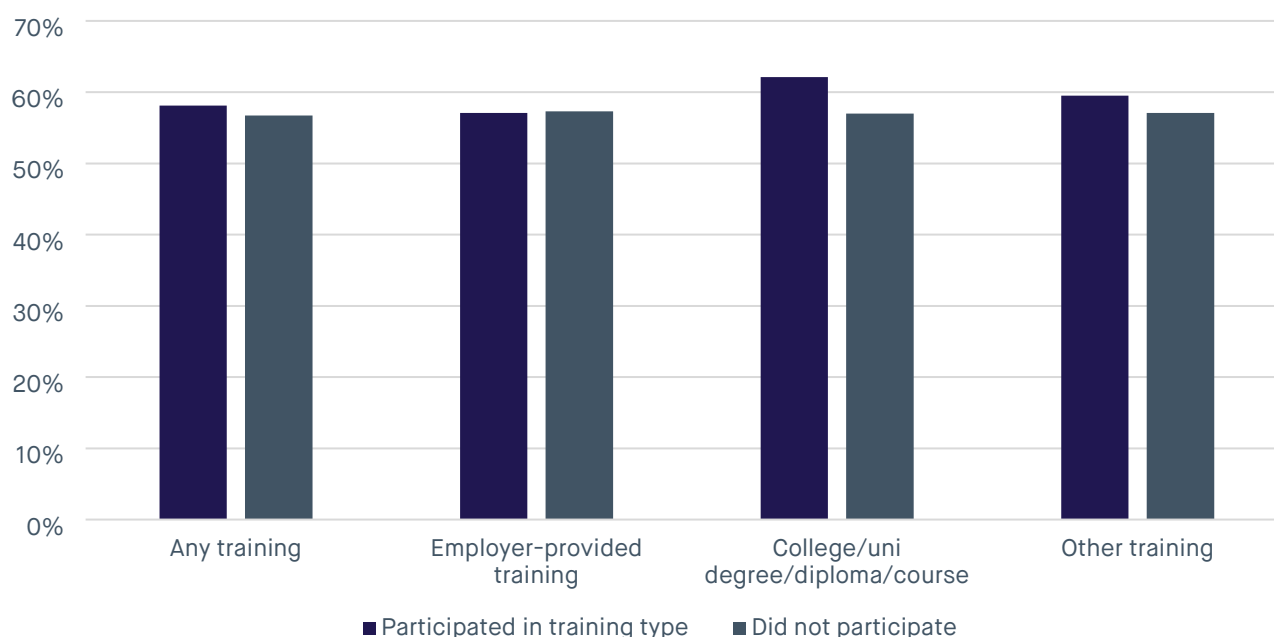
Sample size limitations mean that, unfortunately, we cannot segment this analysis by training type and by income quartile. There are a large number of observations in USoc where industry and occupation of employment are missing – resulting in a smaller overall sample size compared with the preceding analysis.

**Figure 16: % of individuals changing industry between 2012-13 and 2017-18 of USoc by whether participated in training, among those in work in 2012-13**



Source: SMF analysis of Understanding Society

**Figure 17: % of individuals changing occupation between 2012-13 and 2017-18 of USoc by whether participated in training, among those in work in 2012-13**



Source: SMF analysis of Understanding Society

Among the in-depth interviews with low-income adults undertaken as part of this research, career change was often cited as a reason for participation in adult education. This included allowing individuals to transition into self-employment. One interviewee undertook courses to become a self-employed counsellor while another trained to become a masseuse. Notably, in both of these instances, income progression was not the key factor driving this shift into self-employment. In the case of the individual that had trained to become a counsellor, a major reason for this was being able to work more flexible hours, allowing the individual to better manage a long-term health condition. The masseuse expressed a desire to live life on her own terms – adult education enabled her to achieve this by setting up her own business:

*“[The massage course] changed me from someone who was used to working in environments where there was pressure into a different world where only I was putting pressure on myself .... I’ve become a much more relaxed person .... Before everything was done at 100 miles per hour” - Female, 52*

Part of the reason for embarking on adult education in many cases is undoubtedly to get a pay rise or a better paying job. But, in our interviews, this was often wrapped into a broader notion of “progressing”. Beyond pay, “progress” can also mean a more interesting, challenging or flexible job – including through self-employment.

### Impact of likelihood of being in work

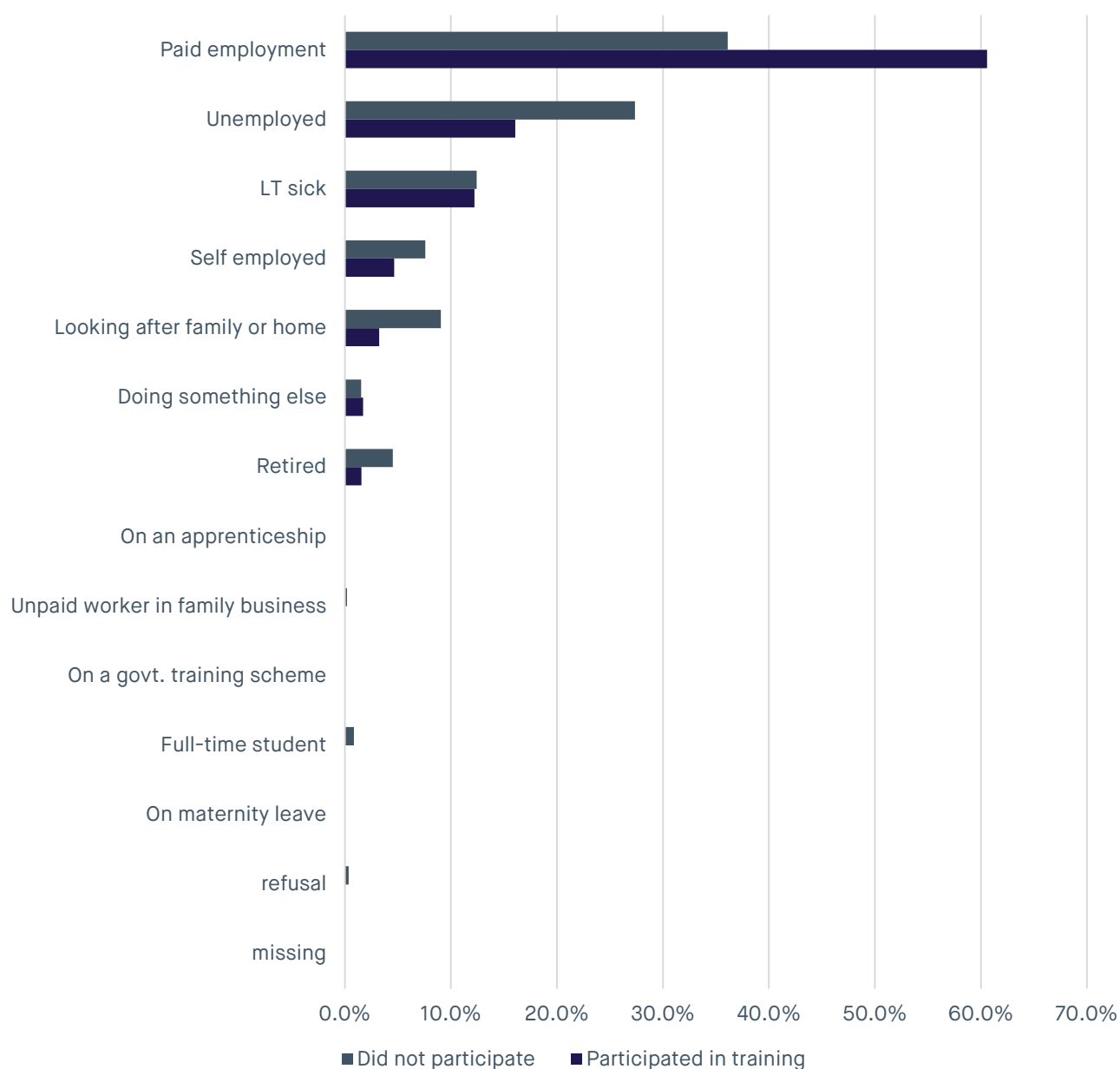
Another area of interest is the extent to which adult education participation can assist those that are unemployed. To assess this, we examined the 2017-18 labour market outcomes of those unemployed in 2012-13, by whether or not training was undertaken in 2012-13.

Among those that participated in some form of training in 2012-13, 16% were unemployed in 2017-18. This compared with 27% among those that did not participate in some form of training.

61% of those participating in training in 2012-13 were in paid employment in 2017-18, compared with 36% among those that were not.

Just over a fifth (21%) of those unemployed in 2012-13 of USoc reported participating in training. Government training courses were the most frequently cited type of training undertaken (13% participating). Some 3% reported participating in a college/university course and 3% reported participating in other types of training.

**Figure 18: USoc 2017-18 economic status of those unemployed in 2012-13, by participation in training**



Source: SMF analysis of Understanding Society

## Other considerations

Beyond labour market outcomes other benefits of adult education participation were cited in the in-depth interviews.

A number of interviewees felt that attending classes provided a good social environment – for example enabling them to meet new friends. “Soft” benefits such as increased self-esteem were also cited as benefits of adult education participation:

*“When I have studied I do feel... definitely in terms of self-esteem and self-worth – I feel quite proud – I have developed my knowledge base and intelligence” – Female, 55*

*“[Study] breaks up the monotony of the week ... you go and get the train ... it is a rewarding experience”. – Female, 46*

*“I’m a big fan of learning new things ... it interests me when I’m learning a new topic” – Female, 31*

A number of interviewees participated in “hobby” courses at local colleges and other institutions – such as classes on photography, pottery, screen printing, jewellery making and herbal medicine. Participation in these courses was out of interest, as a way of building one’s knowledge base and cultural capital, and also as a way of relaxing from the stresses of daily life. In the words of one interviewee:

*“Education is not just for people who are going to get a career lift out of it ... this COVID situation is totally boiling people’s heads ... there is going to be a mental health crisis. These [hobby] courses could help with it” – Female, 52*

Even so-called “hobby courses” can be a vital steppingstone to learning for many. By building confidence and connections with those that perhaps have a more proactive approach to education, they can be an initial step towards undertaking more extensive further and higher education. Among some of the interviewees, there was mention of a virtuous cycle, where participation in education stimulates an interest in further study:

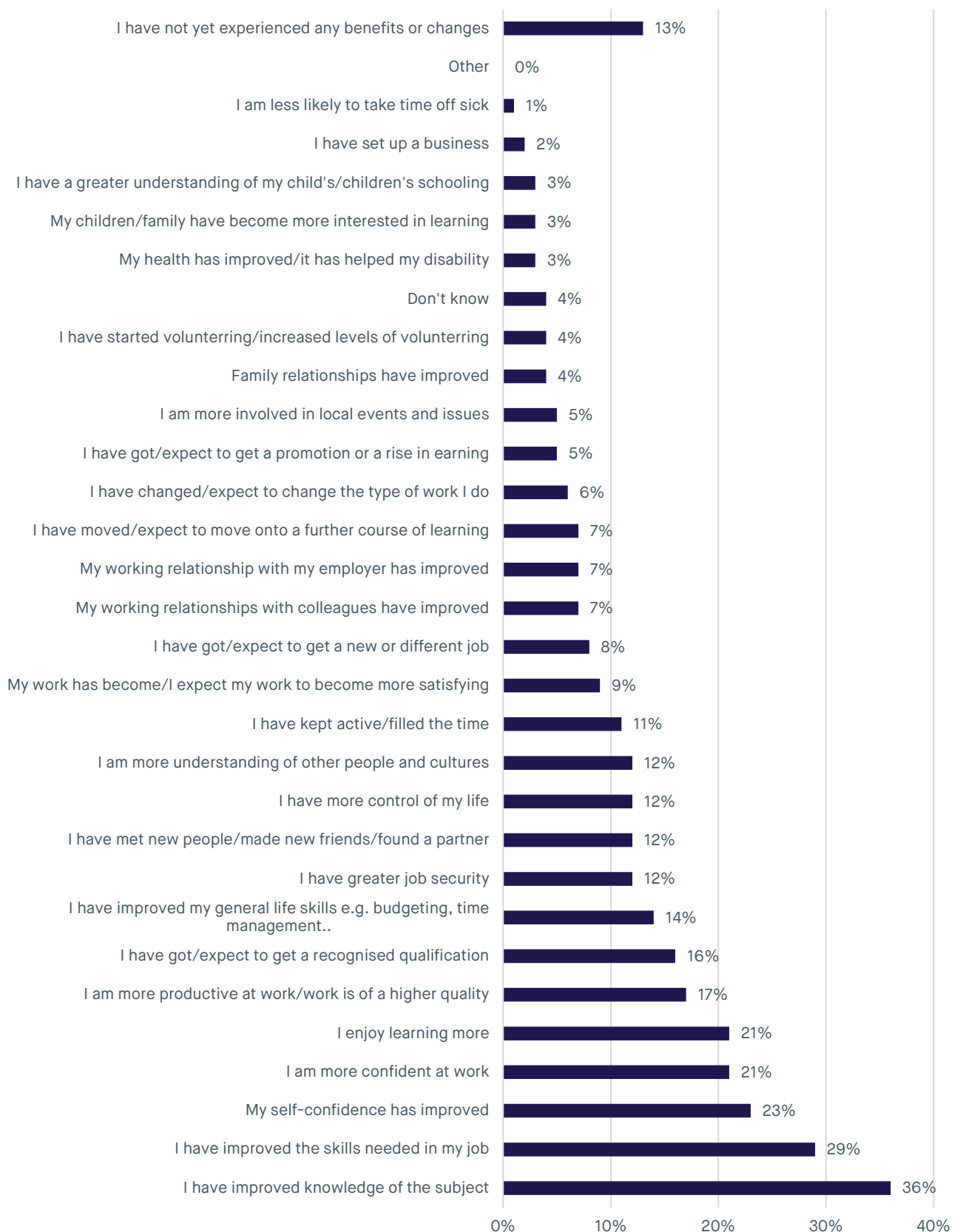
*“I’ve had a really good experience. My teacher told me that I’m going to catch the learning bug! I have caught the learning bug because I am carrying on” – Female, 31*

Once in adult education, people described broader “productivity” benefits beyond the world of work, such as improved organisation and research skills:

*“You’ve got to know how to research, Boolean operators for your word searches, I learned a lot of things I use in everyday life. Searching for things on Google, makes it a lot easier if you’ve got them words, trust me!” – Female, 31*

Many of these observations are mirrored in the Learning and Work Institute’s 2019 Adult Participation in Learning Survey. Among those that had recently completed or were currently engaged in adult education, the most frequently cited benefits included improved self-confidence, enjoying learning more and improved general life skills. Indeed, these factors stood above “getting or expecting to get a new job” – highlighting the importance of considering the broader benefits of adult education participation in addition to a narrow set of labour market metrics such as employment status and income.



**Figure 19: Changes or benefits experienced as a result of learning, % reporting benefit**

Source: Adult Participation in Learning Survey 2019

While benefits from adult education participation have been noted in the in-depth interviews and other sources, we should be cautious about believing that they would universally apply if non-participants in adult education decided to participate. In particular, current participants might be undertaking adult education because they have other traits which make it beneficial to them – whether that be in monetary or non-monetary terms. Those with more extrovert personalities, for example, might be more likely to participate in adult education courses and in turn report that that they have enjoyed the social side of studying (e.g. meeting new friends). Those with character traits which are conducive to career progression – such as underlying levels of “ambition” – might also be more likely to participate in adult education.

## CHAPTER 4 - BARRIERS TO WIDER PARTICIPATION IN ADULT EDUCATION

Although participation in adult education can bring a number of benefits – including income growth, increased job opportunities, reduced likelihood of being unemployed and improvements to wellbeing – there remain significant barriers to participation. As we showed earlier, adult education participation is less prevalent among those on lower incomes – suggesting obstacles to participation are particularly significant among this group.

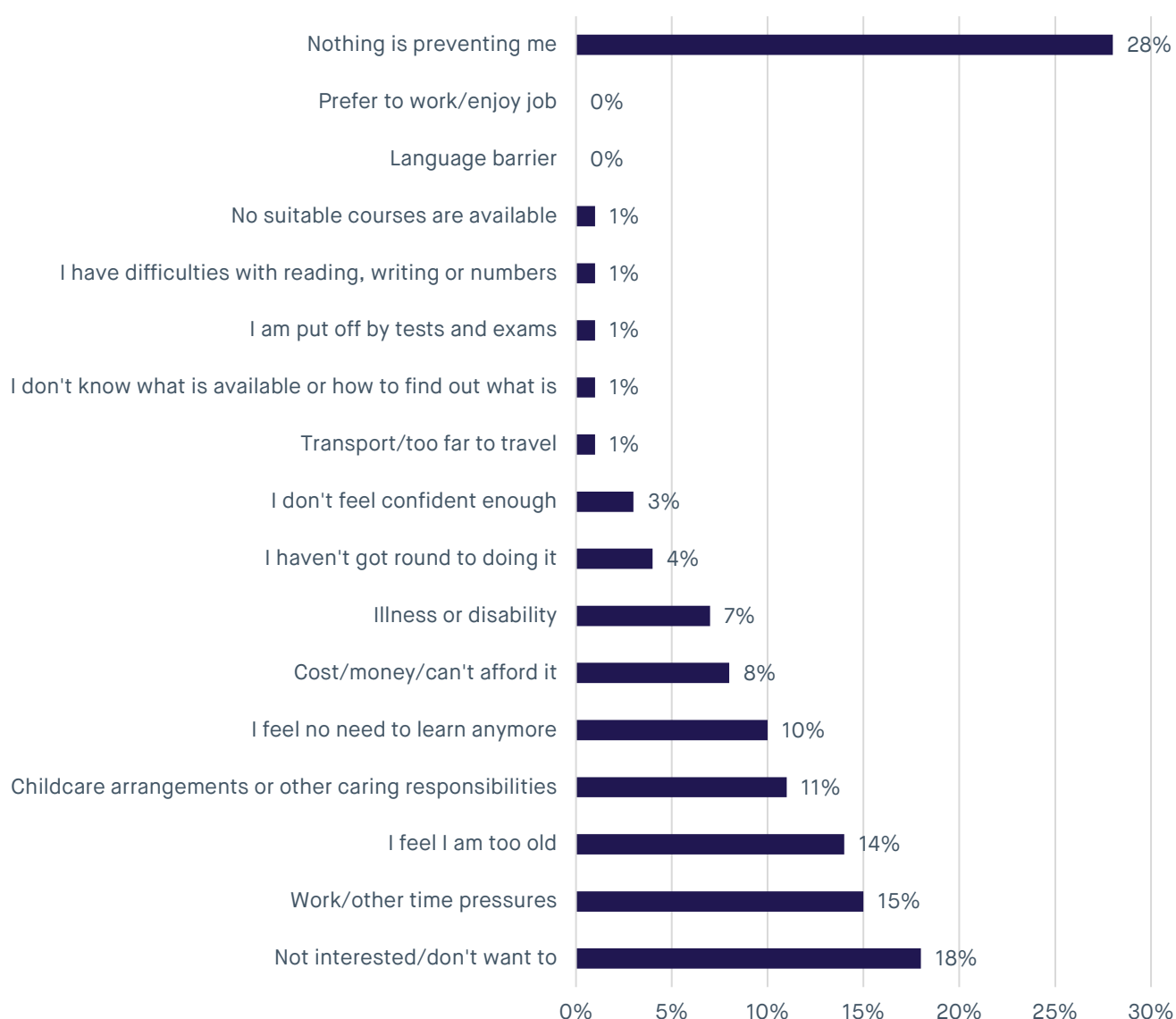
This chapter explores the factors that limit participation in adult education, drawing on existing literature as well as findings that have emerged from our in-depth interviews with adults in low-income households.

Barriers to adult education are often classified within the academic and government literature as:

- **Situational barriers** - arising from an adult's personal and family situation.
- **Institutional barriers** - arising from the unresponsiveness of educational institutions.
- **Dispositional barriers** - relating to the attitudes, perceptions and expectations of adults that could be participating in adult education.

According to the Learning and Work Institute's 2019 Adult Participation in Learning Survey, dispositional barriers are the most frequently cited barrier to participation (reported by 59% of adults that have not participated in the previous three years), followed by situational barriers (35%) and institutional barriers (1%). Dispositional barriers were cited more commonly among respondents from lower income socioeconomic groups, those from white backgrounds, and those furthest from the labour market such as the unemployed. Situational barriers were more likely to be cited by female participants than male, those from BAME backgrounds, and younger participants.<sup>60</sup>

Looking more granularly than these broad categories of barriers, the Adult Participation in Learning Survey shows that the most frequently given reason for not participating is not being interested in/not wanting to participate (18% of respondents that had not participated in the last three years) – a dispositional barrier. This was followed by work and other time pressures (15%), a situational barrier, and feeling too old (14%), another dispositional barrier. Just under three in ten (28%) of survey respondents said that nothing was preventing them from participating in adult education.

**Figure 20: Barriers to learning**

Source: Adult Participation in Learning Survey 2019

### Dispositional barriers

Dispositional barriers are connected with the internal or personal factors that put a barrier to learning for adults. This includes attitudes towards learning, which may have been driven by bad experiences of studying in the past.

Scepticism over the benefits of adult education also appears to be a significant barrier to participation – something that came through in our in-depth interviews. Among those that had not done any adult education, there was doubt that they would benefit from further learning. In some cases (such as those working in skilled trades), this is because practical experience is seen as sufficient:

*"It's constant learning anyway. You're taught the basics of repair, basically ... It's just been a case of practising myself" – Male, 35*

In others, adult education (especially that provided by employers) is regarded as a “tick box” exercise with limited benefits. Adult education is often seen as providing certification or credentials that are necessary to do work (such as safety training) rather than actually improving job performance or creating opportunities for career advancement. Where people believe in the value of adult education, they are willing to make sacrifices and sort out the practicalities. But if the gains are uncertain, people are less willing to take the risk.

Among interviews with self-employed people running very small businesses, we found limited appreciation for the possible benefits of management or business training. As well as boosting incomes, training of this sort could potentially play a role in addressing the UK economy’s “productivity crisis”.<sup>61</sup>

*“When I did my first self-assessment [tax return], I wouldn’t say it was daunting as such because I was reasonably computer literate, filling out forms. And I built it from there.*

*“I don’t know in terms of – I can’t really think – maybe something like marketing, effective ways of advertising [could be beneficial]. But with that one solution doesn’t fit all. I have had many conversations like cold calls from companies where he’s trying to sell me online search engine optimisation, to put me at the top of Google. And I think I tried it once and it didn’t pay off. Because of where I am that kind of marketing approach doesn’t work”*  
– Male, 35

More broadly, the in-depth interviews mirror the findings of the Adult Participation in Learning Survey, in that they suggest that dispositional barriers to education participation are significant. Adult learners need a lot of reassurance and confidence-building; a lack of confidence, fear of being unable to cope, the belief that adult education is not for ‘people like me’ were all factors that came up in the in-depth interviews. Fear of failure was an issue:

*“Well you’ve got to actually pass [a course] too, I would hate to not pass it and to think I’d wasted that time and money.”* – Male, 27

A common fear or concern among interview participants was that they would be the oldest people in their class – in the words of one 52 year old interviewee that participated in adult education at a college, “sometimes I felt like the granny in the room”. Some participants expressed an interest in apprenticeships, but there was a widespread perception that apprenticeships are only for young people, and not for adults.

Those that had overcome dispositional barriers to adult education often cited the importance of peer support and encouragement, particularly from “role models” that had been in similar circumstances. One individual we spoke to, for example, undertook a social work course after a work colleague she looked up to said that doing so could “open doors” and give her access to a wider range of job opportunities. At the same time, peer groups can undermine participation in adult education by discouraging it or not supporting it – with the culture in which one lives influencing an individual’s disposition. One interviewee, with respect to her family, noted:

*“We’re a working class family and [education] wasn’t really encouraged”* – Female, 55

## Situational barriers

Situational barriers to adult education stem from a person's life situation. These include a busy work schedule and not being able to take time off to study. Childcare and other care commitments may also provide situational barriers to education participation, particularly for women. The 2019 Adult Participation in Learning Survey showed that 38% of women reported situational barriers to adult education, compared with 30% of men.

For some, physical distance from educational institutions, combined with lack of access to transportation, may create further barriers. However, we note that the Adult Participation in Learning Survey suggests that this issue is not particularly pervasive – just 1% cited lack of transport or having too far to travel as a barrier to participation.

Adult education brings costs which can discourage people. Across the in-depth interviews, fees tended to be less of an issue than foregone earnings and the time costs of education. With many adults having significant ongoing financial commitments (e.g. rent, mortgages, bills) and time commitments (e.g. work, looking after children), there is often limited scope to engage in a wide range of adult education offers:

*“There have been times when I've looked at specialist training courses in relation to what I do. I looked at it but have then not followed through because ... the cost of doing the course and then immediately taking time out of my schedule to do it because if I not working I don't get paid. [As I am self-employed] It is not like when you're employed and you're going to a training course because you're still being paid for that” - Male, 35*

*“I'd never be able to do a full time course even if I wanted to with work and driving the kids to school” - Male, 38*

## Institutional barriers

Institutional barriers are those that result from educational institutions and the environment in which such institutions operate (e.g. the amount of financial support received from government). This could include:

- The cost of courses being excessive.
- Courses not meeting the needs of prospective learners.
- Courses not being offered at the times learners want – e.g. during working hours rather than at evenings, weekends or times that suit those working atypical hours.
- Lack of distance learning offers to support those that cannot travel to study.
- Courses not being offered in the right location.

While the Adult Participation in Learning Survey showed a low proportion of individuals citing institutional factors as a barrier to adult education participation, we note that this might reflect some conflation with situational barriers. For example, financial barriers to participation are arguably both situational and institutional in their nature, possibly reflecting limited incomes/wealth to fund education and well as excessive fees charged. Similarly, not having the time to undertake adult education may reflect educational institutions not offering a sufficient amount of evening, weekend and online study options.

In our in-depth interviews, institutional barriers to education participation were noted. For example, one interviewee thought that adult education choices in her area had become more limited in recent years, with a reduced number of evening and weekend study options curtailing the ability of adults to study. Also, the interviewee noted that the types of courses in the area had become more limited:

*“Before you could do hot stone massage, Swedish massage etcetera. Now it is just sports massage and a small number of other things” – Female, 52*

During the in-depth interviews, we asked interviewees whether they thought an increase in online study options would be beneficial in terms of widening access to adult education. Here, views were mixed with some believing online study would make it easier to participate, and others expressing a preference for study in a classroom/college/university environment (e.g. due to such an environment being more conducive to learning):

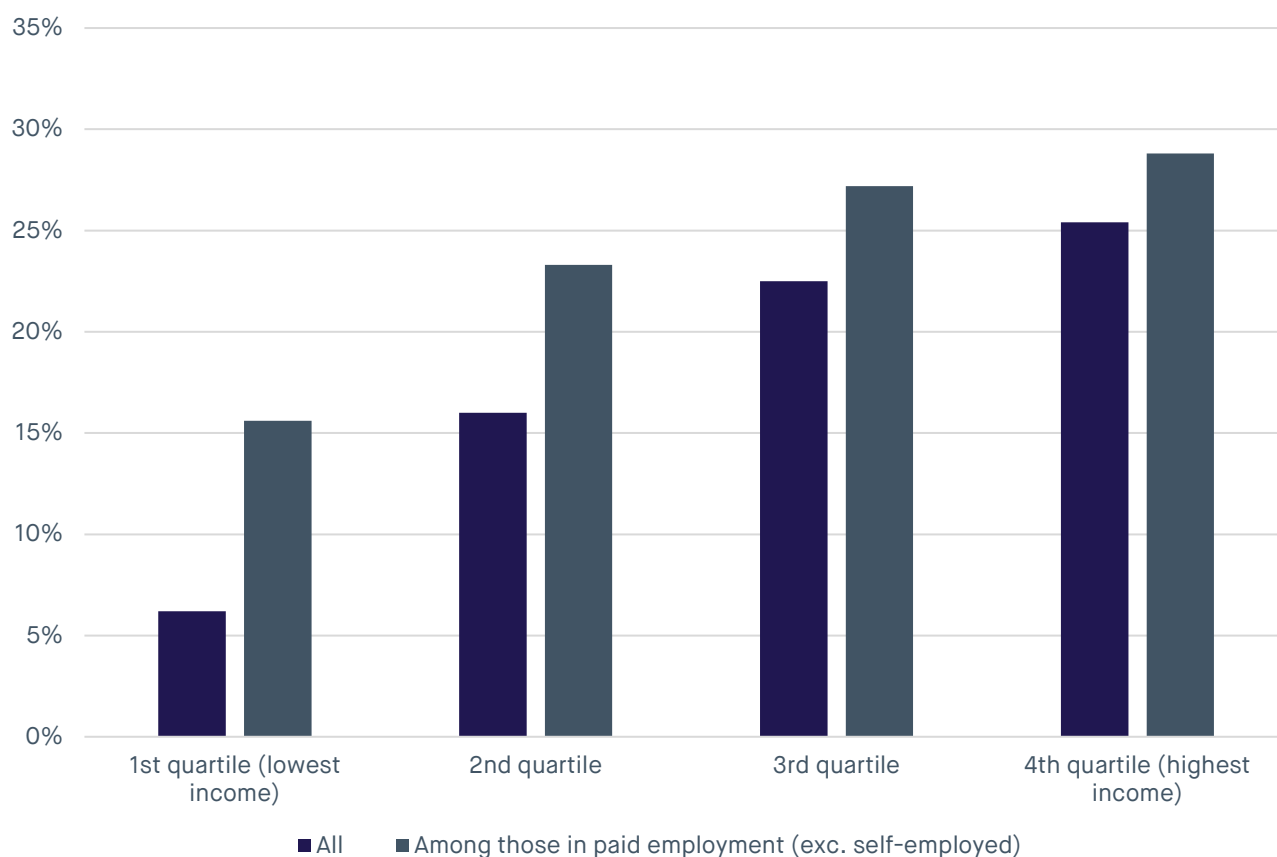
*“I don’t have a lot of time to do night classes, [with online study] it would be easier to just open up a laptop at home at night, just start doing it, or break times at work, opening up a laptop and just learning when you’ve got time to do it” – Male, 26*

*“It is easier in one respect to do a course online but sometimes it requires more discipline to do it. At home, you want to relax and doing this course would be difficult, whereas if you go somewhere - it’s like a mental thing. Having a different situation so you’re more likely to concentrate whereas if you’re at home, if you’ve got the kids and things, it’s more distracting.” – Male, 35*

## Other considerations

Arguably, the concept of institutional barriers should extend beyond educational organisations and consider the role of other societal institutions in limiting access to adult learning. In particular, the attitudes of employers towards employee learning may create a set of institutional barriers to adult education participation. Failing to see the value in employees learning, employers may be more inclined to deny requests to take time off work to attend courses, or to provide financial support for employee learning. Employers may also be reluctant to provide extensive on-the-job training, particularly if staff turnover is perceived to be high – something that those we interviewed often felt to be the case.

Our analysis of the Understanding Society survey suggests that employer-provided training is significantly less prevalent among those in the lowest personal income quartile. As such, this institutional barrier might be a key contributor to lower rates of adult learning among those on lower incomes.

**Figure 21: % participating in employer-provided training, adults under 65 years old, by personal income quartile**

Source: SMF analysis of Understanding Society w9 (2017-18)

Another broader institutional barrier, stretching beyond the education system, is the interaction of learning and training opportunities with state benefits such as universal credit. Some have suggested that the unemployment and benefits system discourage people from undertaking valuable training. For example, in an Education Select Committee hearing, Lucy Powell MP described constituents “who come to me because they want to do something like become an HGV driver, but that course is more expensive and so the Work Programme will offer them only the forklift course that everyone can go on and is much cheaper”.<sup>62</sup> One of our interviewees reported that the reduction in Universal Credit payments to offset her student maintenance grant (any grant payment above £110 in any payment period is counted as income for Universal Credit purposes) was something of a disincentive to studying, though not an insurmountable one:

*“They [DWP] don’t favour students very well, not even single parent students. You’re allowed £110 out of your student finance and then they take the rest pound for pound. It could be that I have student finance and I don’t get any UC which is going to be a bit tricky. But in the end, I decided I was going to do it and if that happens, I’ll just have to get a part time job or do something for us to survive.” – Female, 44*



## CHAPTER 5 - WHERE NEXT FOR POLICY?

Even prior to the pandemic, the UK Government had signalled an intention to reform and support adult education. Pilots of the National Retraining Scheme, announced in the 2018 Autumn Budget, were rolled out in six areas in England in July this year. The programme offers tailored advice and guidance and functional skills training, focused on English and Maths, to people on low wages aged 24 and above with no degree level qualifications.<sup>63</sup> It also includes 12-16 week 'bootcamps' focusing on digital skills. So far, 3,600 users have accessed the scheme.<sup>64</sup> The 2019 Conservative general election manifesto promised additional investment in the adult education<sup>65</sup>, most notably a £2.5 billion National Skills Fund (NSF) and £1.5 billion capital funding for upgrading further education college facilities over the course of the next parliament.<sup>iv</sup> The NSF was described as providing "matching funding for individuals and SMEs for high-quality education and training" as well as "strategic investment in skills", but that the Government would "consult widely" before determining its specific design.<sup>66</sup>

The current crisis, with the prospect of rising unemployment among low-skilled workers, has only increased the urgency of such measures. In September 2020, the Prime Minister announced that part of the NSF budget would be spent on a Lifetime Skills Guarantee - free, fully funded places on an approved list of college courses "valued by employers" for adults without A-levels or equivalent qualifications.<sup>67</sup> In the same speech, he also announced that further education students would have access to the student finance system on the same terms as university students, offering access to loans to fund up to four years of post-18 education.

In the months ahead, it is likely that further adult education measures will be announced, and more detail will emerge on measures like the National Skills Fund. As the Government considers its options, we have identified a number of issues and areas for improvement in the adult education system as it currently functions in England:

- Adult education is undervalued and under-resourced, with public funding having been almost halved in the past decade.
- Progress in numeracy and literacy has slowed in recent years, especially compared to peer countries, and nine million adults in England lack these basic skills.
- Many people - often those that would stand to benefit most from additional skills and training - require persuasion that adult education is suitable for them.
- Take-up of adult education is particularly low among self-employed and unemployed people, and those on lower incomes.
- The incentives of employers and employees are not always aligned - for example, where training is likely to lead to a change of job.
- People may be more receptive to adult education through targeted outreach at times and places of convenience or life transition - for example, children's schools.
- Learners, particularly those with past negative experiences of school, require close personal mentorship and support to help build confidence and guide them through the return to education.

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<sup>iv</sup> In the 2020 Budget, the Government announced £2.5 billion investment in the National Skills fund, with a further £500 million going to devolved administrations, and a £1.5 billion In capital spending on FE colleges In England, with a further £300 million going to devolved administrations: HM Treasury (2020), "Budget 2020", <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/budget-2020-documents/budget-2020>

- The quality and effectiveness of adult education, particularly non-formal, work-based courses, seems to be inconsistent.

In this section, we consider how these could be addressed by future policy.

### **A substantial increase in funding is needed with a long-term settlement for adult education, skills and training**

There are a number of measures the Government could introduce to revitalise adult education, but ultimately they are unlikely to succeed without a significant increase in resources. The sector entered the coronavirus pandemic in a much weakened state, with annual public funding cut by £1.3 billion in real terms. The Government's National Skills Fund offers a financial boost, though with details still to emerge, it is unclear precisely how much additional funding it will provide. However, the entire budget for the programme is £500 million a year in England,<sup>v</sup> and at least some of that budget is earmarked for apprenticeships, so it will certainly fall short of restoring funding to 2009/10 levels. With the Government apparently reconciled to the loss of hundreds of thousands, even millions, of 'unviable' jobs,<sup>68</sup> and the Bank of England forecasting unemployment to rise to 7.5% by the end of the year,<sup>69</sup> the adult education system is likely to come under substantial pressure in the months to come. It is inconceivable that it can meet the increasing demands that will be placed on it without a great deal more financial support.

Additional funding is a precondition for a number of changes that could improve the usage and effectiveness of adult education. A large-scale outreach programme, as we propose below, would require financing. Additional resources would also likely increase the flexibility and accessibility of courses on offer. The Prime Minister's skills and workforce policy adviser, Baroness Wolf, has called for the revival of 'night schools', which have declined in recent years.<sup>70</sup> For example, the number of evening courses offered by City of Bristol College fell from over 350 in 2013/14 to 217 in 2018/19. A number of colleges have suggested that cuts of this sort have been driven by reduced funding, and that additional money would be used to expand evening courses once more.<sup>71</sup>

Providing a comprehensive settlement for adult education services will require a multiyear funding commitment but in October 2020, the Treasury announced that the planned Comprehensive Spending Review would cover only a single year's expenditure for most areas. This is likely to hamper the Department for Education's ability to plan its proposed Further Education White Paper and other measures to support education and training for adults. On that basis, we recommend that the Treasury should make a three-year settlement for adult education, skills and training services.

### **This funding should be simplified and should largely follow the learner**

The funding system for adult education (and further education more generally) is widely believed to be excessively complicated. At present, there are too many separate sources of funding, each with their own conditions and bureaucracy. For commissioners and providers, the system is time consuming to navigate, and impedes long-term planning. For employers and learners, it can be confusing and off-putting. Worst of all, the proliferation and complexity of funding streams means that some people and institutions may be unable to access resources they are entitled to. The

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<sup>v</sup> The 2019 Conservative manifesto costed it at £600 million a year, and in the 2020 Budget it was revealed that a sixth of the funding will go to devolved governments under the Barnett formula)

Government has committed to exploring ways to simplify adult education funding in the upcoming FE White Paper.<sup>72</sup> However, its policies to date – introducing new pots of money in the form of the National Skills Fund and National Retraining Scheme – have merely added to the complexity, rather than diminishing it.

One way to streamline funding structures would be to consolidate adult education funding into a single scheme of 'learner accounts', providing each individual over a certain age with a government grant to spend on accredited education or training. As discussed below, Individual Learning Accounts, an early version of such a policy introduced in England in 2000, was widely regarded as a failure, but provided the correct lessons are learned from the experience, the Government should not be deterred. Indeed, in recent years several countries have begun to explore programmes of this sort. Most prominent is Singapore's SkillsFuture Credit, introduced in 2015, which offers every citizen over the age of 25 an initial S\$500 (c£285) to spend on eligible courses.<sup>73</sup> Government can then top up these accounts: for example, this year people aged 40-60 will receive a one-off top up of S\$1,000 and everybody else over the age of 25 will receive S\$500. Pilots of similar schemes are underway in Scotland<sup>74</sup> (Individual Training Accounts, worth £200 a year) and Wales<sup>75</sup> (Personal Learning Accounts). Unlike SkillsFuture Credit, however, these are not universal programmes, but are targeted at people seeking work or on low wages and limited to courses in priority subject areas.

The French Government introduced a system of Personal Training Accounts in 2015, funded by a levy on businesses with over 10 employees and self-employed workers.<sup>76</sup> Initially, workers were credited with a certain number of hours' worth of training each year, which they could reclaim from a sectoral training fund or the French employment service. Since 2018, however, the scheme has been converted to cash. Most full-time employees are now credited with €500 a year, up to a maximum of €5,000, while low-skilled employees are credited with €800, up to a maximum of €8,000.

None of these schemes are of sufficient scale to replace the existing adult education funding infrastructure in England. More ambitious still are the Personal Education and Skills Accounts (PESAs) proposed by an expert commission convened by Sir Vince Cable,<sup>77</sup> rebranded as 'Skills Wallets' in the 2019 Liberal Democrat general election manifesto.<sup>78</sup> They envisage every resident of England having access to an account, into which the government makes three payments of £3,000 – one at age 25, one at age 40 and one at age 55 – to make a total contribution of £9,000 (under the Liberal Democrat scheme the first payment is £4,000 and so each individual receives £10,000 in total from the government). In addition, the government may choose to make targeted top ups to the accounts of people with low-income or qualifications. Individuals and employers could also pay into the accounts, possibly with tax incentives for doing so. The money in these accounts would only be released for accredited education and training courses.

In the first instance, PESAs are seen as a supplement to, rather than a replacement for, the existing adult education funding system. The Cable commission anticipate that initially only 20% of eligible people will make use of their PESAs, at an annual cost of £1.3 billion<sup>79</sup> – almost exactly restoring adult education funding to its 2009/10 levels. If the scheme is successful and more people make use of it, the cost is likely to rise far in excess of the existing adult education budget – maximum liability is estimated to be £6.6 billion.<sup>80</sup> Over the medium term, it is conceivable that the majority of adult education funding could be absorbed into a programme like PESAs.

Moving towards a system of learner accounts could have a number of advantages. First, it could provide learners with a degree of control over their own careers and education and the ability to make longer term plans. Importantly, given the potential for conflicts of interest, it gives them a source of funding that is independent of their employer. Second, it can help make salient the amount of support that learners potentially have available to them. Indeed, this is why French Personal Training Accounts shifted towards cash rather than hours.<sup>81</sup> The awareness that thousands of pounds are available, going unused, could be an important psychological spur for people to explore education and training. This mechanism is likely to be especially powerful where funding is time limited, as is sometimes the case in Singapore, where some credits expire after five years.<sup>82</sup> Third, through the choices that learners make, such schemes direct funding towards the courses that people believe offer them the most benefit.

It is important to emphasise that a fully marketised voucher system, where the government merely provides funding and then steps back, would not be desirable. As discussed below, accreditation and quality oversight will be crucial. For many courses, price competition may not be appropriate. Given the importance of local provision for access, providers with smaller markets (for example, in rural locations) may require extra subsidy beyond what they earn in fees. Nevertheless, empowering learners a little more could be a positive step.

### **A large-scale outreach campaign is needed to demonstrate the benefits of adult education**

While there is believed to be substantial latent demand for adult education,<sup>83</sup> many people do not appreciate the potential value of further education or training or lack the confidence to make use of it. In part, this is because there has been relatively little attempt in recent years to persuade them otherwise. A large and ambitious outreach campaign could increase take-up of adult education, especially among those that could stand to benefit most.

Such a campaign should include advertising in traditional and digital media, but our interviews suggest there is no substitute for personal contact. 'Outreach' involves going to people in the places where they are, rather than expecting them to seek out information spontaneously. It is likely to be particularly effective if it targets people at key 'crossroads', where they are reconsidering their life plans. And it will work best if it comes from trusted messengers that people can identify with. Throughout our interviews, participants described the importance of 'role models' that could reassure them that 'people like them' can benefit and thrive in education.

It is beyond our scope to design a full outreach strategy, but those that have already been through adult education seem to be an underutilised resource at present. If the people we interviewed are anything to go by, there are thousands of potential evangelists willing to share their positive experiences. Indeed, many already are doing so informally with friends and colleagues. There may be scope to harness their enthusiasm, formalising their role and incentivising them to spread their message further. For example, they could be enrolled into 'ambassador' schemes. Or they could be offered 'bounties' – rewards for recommending others to adult education.

Our research also suggests that schools could play an important role in outreach. Parents go there every day to drop off and collect their children and encounter other parents just like them. Children starting school is often a trigger for parents to consider returning to full-time work or study. Yet schools seem to have been progressively dislocated from the adult education system. Where in the past adult education centres were literally located in schools, such arrangements seem to be less common.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, coordination with a range of the institutions that people

encounter on a day-to-day basis - local authorities, job centres - could be valuable in reaching potential learners.

Given their current low levels of participation, unemployed and self-employed people should be specifically targeted by an outreach campaign. For the former, embedding education and training into the work coaching process - involving work coaches more closely in local skills plans, and encouraging them to support jobseekers with a wider range of training needs - could be an improvement. For the latter, the central challenge is likely to be persuading them that training brings sufficient benefits to be worth shutting down their business or working reduced hours for the length of a course. That is likely to require sector-specific outreach, emphasising the value of sector-specific skills, perhaps alongside an overarching campaign on more generic management or business skills.

### **Investment in advice and mentorship is also important**

Many adult learners, often with limited educational experience and confidence, require help and support navigating the further education system, working out what is best for them and sustaining the belief that they can achieve their goals. The need would be even more pressing were learners responsible for personal budgets worth thousands of pounds. Consequently, widespread, accessible and high-quality advice and mentorship is critical to a well-functioning adult education system.

Investment in and coordination of formal institutions and services is central to this objective. We have already mentioned the importance of job centres and work coaches being aware of and encouraged to promote training opportunities in the local area. The National Careers Service should also be well placed to guide people through their objectives and options. The Cable commission proposes that anybody seeking to make use of their PESA funds for the first time should be automatically referred to a government careers adviser, although they are clear that the consultation is optional and careers advisers would have no power to veto the learners' choices.

As we discovered in our interviews, less formal peer mentorship and support matters greatly too, and should not be forgotten. Many learners are more likely to trust and respond to a person who seems relatable, clearly relevant to their life circumstances and who can draw on direct experience. Advice from such sources is likely to be valuable prior to application, but also to help sustain motivation while people study and also consider their options when they finish their courses. That suggests there could be benefit from investing in mentorship schemes, perhaps drawing on the pool of 'ambassadors' engaged to do outreach.

### **Responsibility for coordinating adult education should be clearer**

One plausible contributor to the relative neglect of adult education in recent years is a lack of clarity over responsibility and accountability for its success. A clear way forward would be to assign oversight for the system to a particular set of bodies. That is not to say that any single agency should be solely responsible for adult education. To the contrary, colleges, universities, local government, schools, employers and unions should all be contributing in different ways. Indeed, the international evidence suggests that coordinated, multilevel governance structures, combining national oversight and local planning and implementation can facilitate better adult education systems.<sup>85</sup> Forums like local or sectoral skills councils - bringing together a range of stakeholders - play an important role in many countries in determining the training needs for an

area or set of industries. However, coordination of this sort is made more difficult by the absence of a lead authority to do the coordinating.

One proposal in this direction would be to make it a statutory duty of local authorities to provide a certain range of adult education courses, as indeed it was in the past.<sup>86 87</sup> A risk with such an approach is that it merely adds to the responsibilities of local governments facing increasingly tight budgets, who will either be incapable of delivering or will have to divert resources from other essential services. It is vital, therefore, that an increase in statutory duties is accompanied by an appropriate increase in funding – directly through central grants, indirectly via learner accounts, or some combination of the two.

There is also a question over whether local authorities are best placed to be tasked with such a duty. Where they exist, devolved regional authorities – which already have some degree of power over adult education and skills – may be more appropriate vehicles. Covering larger areas, more closely corresponding to local employment and higher education markets, and possibly with greater capacity, it is possible that the city-region could be the optimal level for adult education coordination. On the other hand, local education authorities are better positioned to coordinate with schools. Moreover, if devolved regional authorities are given responsibility for adult education, that leaves open the question of what happens in parts of the country without devolution deals. In such areas, it may be necessary to convene bodies spanning multiple local authorities specifically to govern adult education, though the experience of devolution is that such a process could be complex and bureaucratic.

Either way, it is critical that responsibility for adult education is made clearer, and local-level coordination made more effective. We have already discussed the potential benefits of involving schools and job centres more closely in adult education. Universities could also do more: adult university education has declined substantially, an issue of grave concern for the recent 'Civic University Commission'.<sup>88</sup> Bringing these groups together, led by a single responsible agency, could improve the effectiveness of adult education.

### **Accreditation and monitoring of quality will be key**

With all the attention we have devoted to learner accounts, it is important to acknowledge that England has had unhappy experiences with such a scheme in the past. Individual Learning Accounts (ILAs) worth £150 per person towards training and education were launched by the government in 2000, but withdrawn the following year amidst complaints of fraudulent, mis-sold and low-value courses.<sup>89</sup> In one sense, the fate of ILAs is encouraging: part of the reason the programme was ended is because demand was far higher than anticipated, with over a million people participating in its first year.<sup>90</sup> The larger lesson, though, is about the importance of providing advice and guidance (as discussed above) and of careful accreditation and quality monitoring.

If public funding for adult education is increased, whether through a learner account scheme or more direct support, government will have to carefully consider which institutions and courses are eligible. In the first instance, it is understandable if the focus is on already recognised formal qualifications and subjects perceived to be of economic value. However, in the longer term, learners should be given greater flexibility to pursue non-formal courses that they believe will provide them with useful skills. Given that the value of adult education to learners extends beyond its impact on their economic prospects, and the fact that non-economically motivated



courses can lead to economic benefits, it would be desirable eventually to extend public support to courses in a wider range of subjects.

Quality and effectiveness are not only issues for publicly-funded education and training. Indeed, our research suggests they may be more of a concern for employer-provided courses, which seem to offer less of a tangible return. The Government could have a role to play in identifying and approving employer-based courses that work well, for example through a separate accreditation scheme. This would offer guidance to employers navigating an often crowded and complex field of training courses and providers. It could also make it easier for employees to carry training with them when they move jobs. This would reduce duplication of training courses, and possibly free up employer training budgets for additional training.

Most ambitiously, we could imagine an organisation which stands in relation to employers as the Education Endowment Foundation stands in relation to schools: reviewing the evidence on different forms of workplace training and carrying out original research of its own to identify 'what works' and then working with employers to ensure they adhere to best practice.<sup>91</sup> Plausibly, the remit of Investors in People, which consults with and accredits employers on their human resources standards, could be expanded to fulfil this role.<sup>92</sup>

At the level of courses and providers, there could be scope to develop something like the Adult and Community Education Learner Outcomes Tool used in New Zealand.<sup>93</sup> The tool consists of comparative online surveys, taken before and after a course to demonstrate the effect of the learning. The results of such surveys could help providers to improve their courses and help government, employers and learners to evaluate and choose between them.

### **The Government should make a concerted effort to increase awareness and take-up of employee training rights**

Since 2010, employees of large businesses (those with 250+ employees) have had the right to submit a formal request for time off for study or training relevant to their work. Employers are obliged to give such requests due consideration and respond within 28 days, and can only refuse on the basis of a set of circumscribed reasons. This right could be extended to smaller organisations, where training is often less available and productivity tends to be lower. However, the modest impact of the measure to date suggests it that on its own, as it currently stands, expanding further would bring limited benefits. A 2017 evaluation found considerable variation in awareness of the right to request training: around half of employers were familiar with it, and the number seems to have declined since its introduction.<sup>94</sup> Concerningly, awareness seems to be lower among firms with weaker human resources or organisational cultures around learning. Formal requests seem to be relatively uncommon. In those organisations where people would benefit from using their rights, they tend to be less likely to be aware of them. Organisations where people are aware of their rights are more committed to education and training, rendering such formalities superfluous.

That suggests that action is needed to ensure that more people are informed of their rights to request education and training, particularly in sectors such as construction and utilities, where awareness is especially low.<sup>95</sup> This could form part of the broader outreach programme described above. In the workplace, as elsewhere, peers have the potential to model the benefits of learning and encourage others. Some trade unions have appointed 'learning representatives' to identify, advocate for and encourage the use of education and training opportunities.<sup>96</sup> However,

government funding for the Union Learning Fund, which supports such activities and is currently worth £11 million a year, is reported to be removed entirely from March 2021.<sup>97</sup> From the perspective of adult education, this would be a retrograde step – at the very least, union learning representatives should be protected and extended and ideally similar schemes should be introduced to non-unionised workplaces.

At the same time, informing people of their rights and encouraging them to use them will only have limited effect if the rights themselves are not sufficiently strong. There may therefore be a case to increase entitlements to education and training. The acceptable grounds for rejecting employee requests could be further restricted – for example, expecting employers to bear ‘reasonable’ costs in order for their employees to attend training. The Government could go further still and provide financial support or incentives to employers to encourage them to release their workers – for example, by covering a proportion of wages while they are learning or providing a tax credit for employers that invest in workforce training. Conversely, it could require employers to take on more of the burden of training and mandate that employees must be released for training in all but the most exceptional cases.



## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> SMF (2020), “A New Life on the High Street”, <https://www.smf.co.uk/publications/new-life-for-the-high-street/>

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

<sup>3</sup> SMF (2019), “Pay Progression for Low-Paid Workers”, <https://www.smf.co.uk/publications/pay-progression-low-paid-workers/>

<sup>4</sup> ENLIVEN (2019) “Evidence to UK’s House of Commons Education Select Committee”, <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/education-committee/adult-skills-and-lifelong-learning/written/106373.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Taylor (2006) “Lifelong learning and the Labour governments 1997-2004”.

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