

Adult Participation in Learning Survey 2021

November 2021

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Contents

Introduction	5
About the Adult Participation in Learning Survey	7
Participation in learning	9
Demographic breakdowns.....	10
Future intentions to learn.....	18
Motivations to learn	20
Learning delivery	24
Method	24
Online learning	25
Qualifications.....	27
Benefits of learning.....	28
Barriers to learning	30
Current and recent learners	30
Adults who have not participated in learning within the last three years.....	31
Learning for career change	34
Changing job or career.....	34
Support needed to change job or career	36
Sources of information and advice	37
Basic skills learning	39
Awareness of free English and maths courses	39
Factors that would encourage take up of free English and maths courses	40
Annex: Methodology.....	42
Analysis.....	43
Measuring participation	43
Regression analysis	43
Definitions	44

Introduction

It is 25 years since the first adult participation in learning survey, and this one is published during Learning and Work Institute's centenary year. In that time many things have changed but lots has remained constant.

One of the constants is the central and increasing importance of learning for life and work. Longer working lives combined with a changing economy and labour market means an increased need for retraining and updating skills. Learning can also aid community engagement, active citizenship, and health and wellbeing, as well as being of benefit in its own right.

The range of motivations to learn and benefits from doing so in our survey shows people recognise this. Over half of learners took up learning for work-related reasons, and almost half for personal reasons, a significant increase on previous years. Interest in the subject is most cited (40 per cent) as a reason for learning, followed by developing as a person (36 per cent). Similarly, 30 per cent of people mention the enjoyment of learning as a benefit, with 22 per cent saying it improved skills for their jobs and 22 per cent increased confidence. People are learning for work, for personal benefit, for interest in the subject, and for the enjoyment of learning.

The good news is that 44 per cent of adults say they have taken part in some form of learning on a broad definition of learning that goes beyond formal courses. This is higher than in 2019 after a decade of declines, though a change in methodology to an online survey means we should be cautious in interpreting this figure.

In part the upswing in participation may reflect an increased engagement in learning through lockdowns during the pandemic, enabled by the long-term rise in online learning. Seven in ten learners said at least some of their learning was online, and one third of learners said they were learning independently. Women and older people were among those most likely to have taken part in online learning.

However, a second constant is that stark inequalities in the likelihood of taking part in learning persist. You are 1.5 times more likely to take part in learning if you are from a higher socioeconomic grade than a lower grade. People who completed their education at age 21 or above are twice as likely to participate in learning than those who left age 16 or lower. Younger people are far more likely to participate in learning than older people. White people are less likely to take part in learning than people from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds.

The result is that too many people that could benefit from learning are missing out, reinforcing inequalities in education, and contributing to other societal inequalities too.

How can we change this? The survey helps provide some pointers by asking people about their reasons for not taking part in learning and barriers to doing so. Of adults

who had not taken part in learning in the last three years, almost one in three said nothing was stopping them doing so or they did not want to. This suggests a need to inspire adults to want to learn, demonstrate the benefits from doing so, and develop a culture of learning.

Beyond this, 29 per cent said they feel they are too old to learn, 25 per cent cited the cost or affordability of learning, and 18 per cent mentioned work or other time pressures. To increase participation in learning, policy and practice will need to tackle this range of dispositional and situational barriers to learning.

This year's adult participation in learning survey takes a particular look at basic skills. This follows Learning and Work Institute research which showed that participation in basic skills learning in England has fallen 60 per cent over the last decade, worrying given that nine million adults have low literacy or numeracy.

Our survey finds that only four in ten adults are aware that free basic skills courses are available, falling to 33 per cent of those who left education at age 16. One in five could be encouraged to take up a course if it were delivered online or if course times fitted around work or home commitments. This provides lessons for the design of the Government's recently-announced adult numeracy programme, Multiply, as well as other basic skills provision.

The adult participation in learning survey provides a snapshot of adult learning and story of changes over time. The ways that we learn are changing and this has the potential to help raise participation in learning, but to do so we must tackle underpinning inequalities. The survey can help guide policy and practice by showing patterns of participation in learning and providing an insight into what motivates adults to learn and the support they need to engage in learning.

About the Adult Participation in Learning Survey

Since 1996, Learning and Work Institute (then NIACE¹) has been undertaking the Adult Participation in Learning Survey on an almost annual basis². The survey provides a unique overview of the level of participation in learning by adults, with a detailed breakdown of who participates and who does not, over a span of 25 years.

The survey deliberately adopts a broad definition of learning, including a wide range of formal, non-formal and informal learning, far beyond the limits of publicly offered educational opportunities for adults. Each year, a representative sample of approximately 5,000 adults aged 17 and over across the UK are provided with the following definition of learning and asked when they last took part, as well as how likely they are to take part in learning during the next three years:

'Learning can mean practising, studying, or reading about something. It can also mean being taught, instructed or coached. This is so you can develop skills, knowledge, abilities or understanding of something. Learning can also be called education or training. You can do it regularly (each day or month) or you can do it for a short period of time. It can be full-time or part-time, done at home, at work, or in another place like college. Learning does not have to lead to a qualification. We are interested in any learning you have done, whether or not it was finished.'

In addition to overall participation, the 2021 survey explores who participates in learning; motivations and barriers; how learning is undertaken; whether learning leads to a qualification; and benefits experienced as a result of learning. This year's survey also asks adults about their future job or career plans and their awareness of English and maths courses for adults.

The 2021 Adult Participation in Learning Survey includes 5,058 adults aged 17 and over across the UK. Fieldwork was conducted in October 2021. The sample has been weighted (generating an effective sample of 5,054) to provide a nationally representative dataset.

In 2020, fieldwork was conducted via telephone, due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Data for that year is not directly comparable with 2021 or previous years and has been excluded from this report, but the findings are available online³. In 2021, fieldwork was conducted online. Previous surveys have utilised a face-to-face approach; however, a shift in how people are communicating, with more households online

¹ National Institute of Adult Continuing Education

² Surveys were undertaken annually from 1996 except in three years: 1997, 1998 and 2016.

³ Learning and Work Institute (2020) [Learning through lockdown](#)

than ever before⁴, coupled with the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic creating challenges for face-to-face fieldwork, makes an online approach most appropriate. While checks have been done to test the consistency of results between methodologies, caution should be taken in directly comparing results to previous years. It is anticipated that the survey will continue to use an online approach in the future and the 2021 survey will provide a baseline for future years.

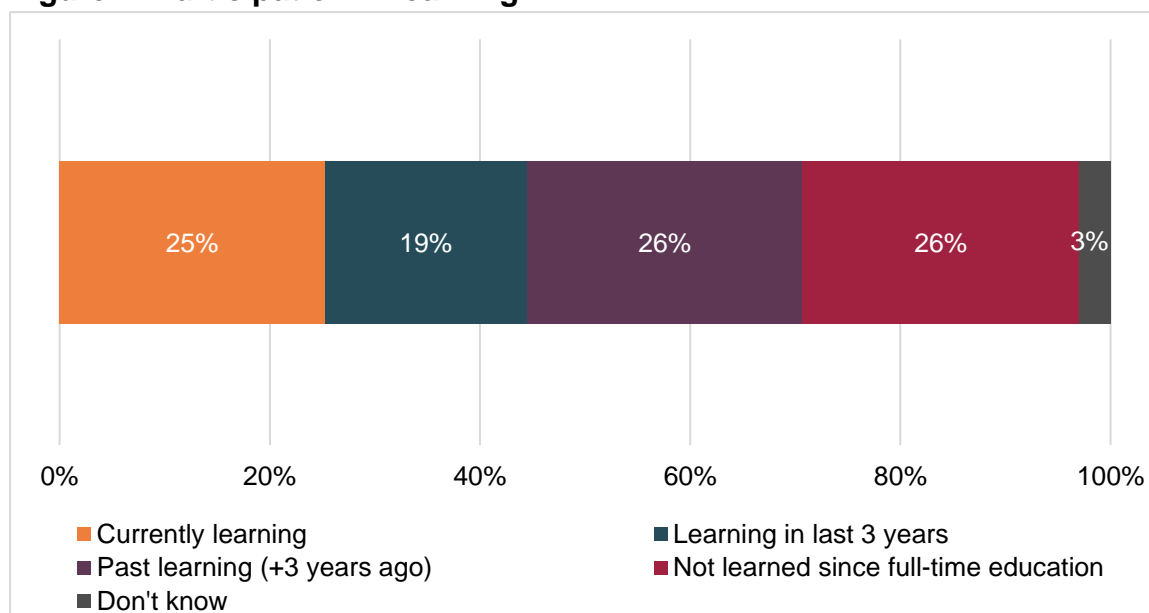
Further information about the methodology and the definitions used in this report can be found in the Annex. To find out more about the survey series and explore trend data through our interactive charts, visit www.learningandwork.org.uk.

⁴ The most recent figures indicate that 96% of households in Great Britain now have internet access (ONS, 2020). See: [Internet access – households and individuals, Great Britain - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/technology/articles/internetaccesshouseholdsandindividualsgreatbritain/2020)

Participation in learning

The 2021 survey shows that a quarter (25 per cent) of adults are currently learning, with a further 19 per cent having done so in the last three years (see Figure 1). Just over a quarter (26 per cent) of adults say they have not taken part in learning since leaving full-time education, while the same proportion (26 per cent) have done so, but over three years ago.

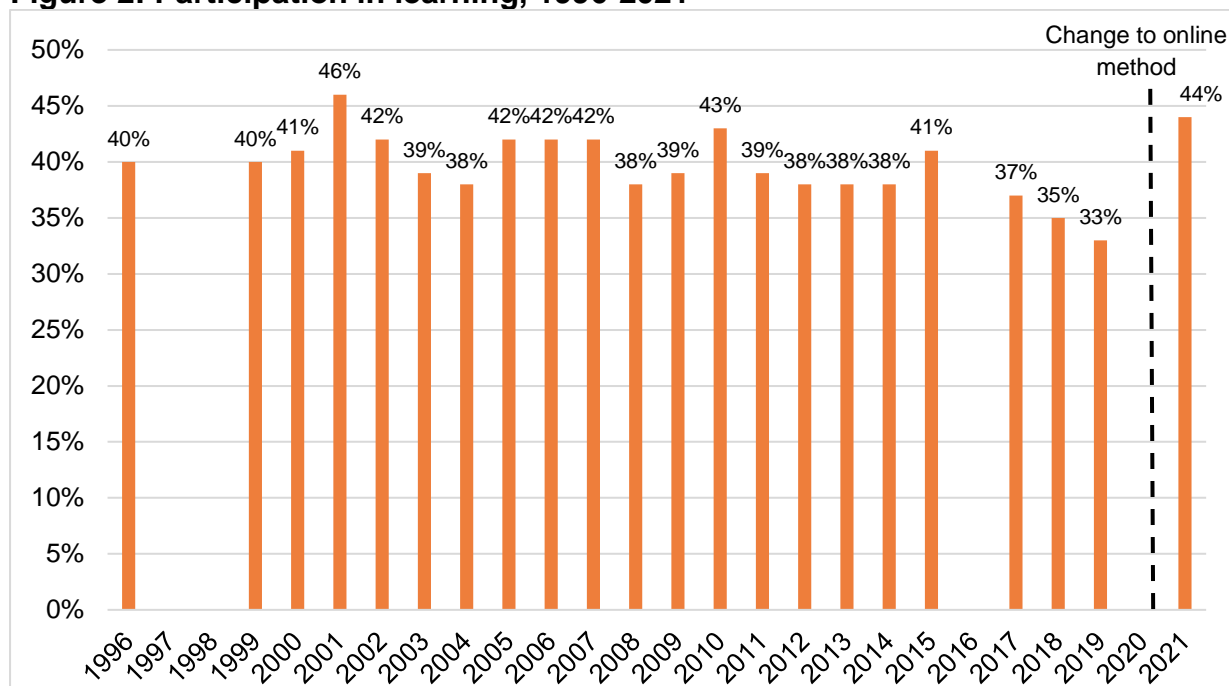
Figure 1: Participation in learning



Base: all respondents. Weighted base = 5,054, unweighted base = 5,058.

The 2021 survey shows the highest participation rate (current or recent learning) in recent years, 11 percentage points higher than the 2019 rate of 33 per cent (see Figure 2) and more in line with that seen in the 2000s. The rise in participation may relate to the Coronavirus pandemic as people reflect on their work and career goals and/or develop new interests. Some of the difference may also be due to the change in survey method, from face-to-face to online, meaning caution should be applied in interpreting changes with previous years. In previous years, the survey has shown that adults most likely to take part in learning are also most likely to have digital skills and access to technology.

Figure 2: Participation in learning, 1996-2021⁵



Base: all respondents to each survey. Weighted base for 2021 = 5,054; unweighted base for 2021 = 5,058.

Demographic breakdowns

Gender

Men and women are almost equally likely to be current or recent learners (45 per cent and 43 per cent respectively). This is consistent with findings from previous years.

Social grade

In line with previous surveys, social grade⁶ is a key predictor of participation in learning; respondents from higher social grades are more likely to be participating in learning than those from lower grades (see Figure 3). Over half (55 per cent) of adults in the AB social grade are current or recent learners. This compares to 41 per cent of those in the C1, 45 per cent in the C2, and 35 per cent in the DE social grades. Those in the AB social grade are significantly more likely to be current or recent learners when compared to all other social grades, and those in the C1 and C2 grades demonstrate a significantly higher participation rate than those in DE. More than twice as many adults in the DE grade have not participated in learning

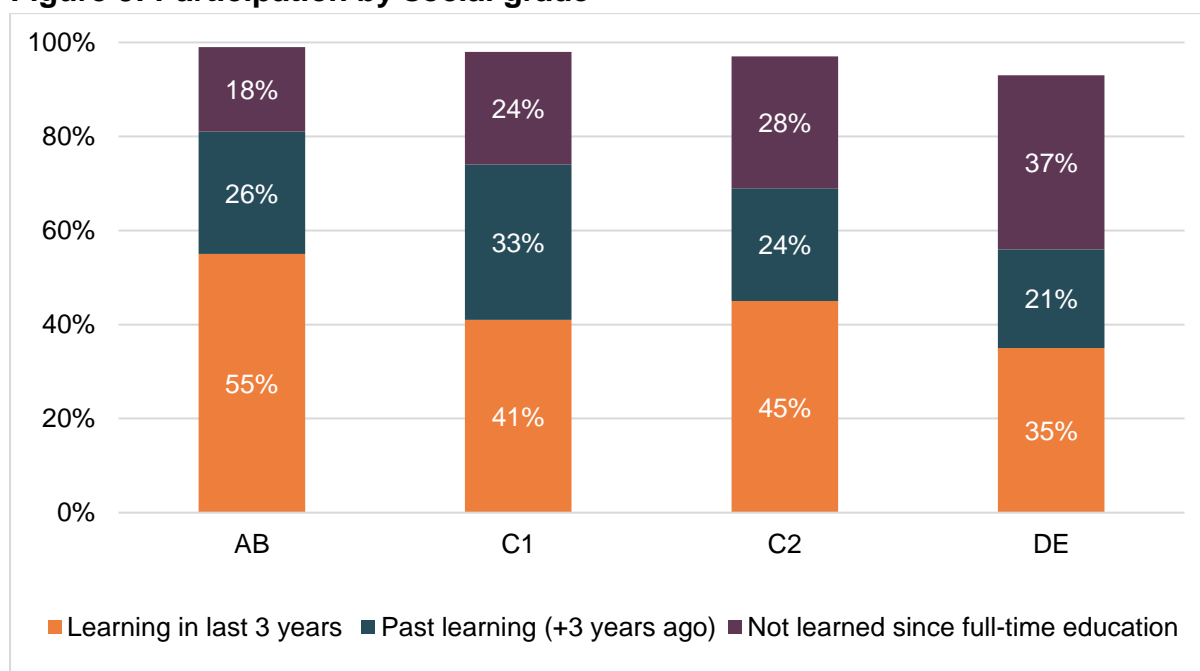
⁵ Figures for 2020 have been excluded. This is because the unique context of the Coronavirus lockdown restrictions, coupled with the use of a telephone survey approach, means that findings are not directly comparable to those from other years.

⁶ Social Grade A includes the upper and upper-middle classes and is generally grouped with Grade B, the middle classes. Grade C1 includes the lower-middle class, often called white-collar workers. Grade C2 mainly consists of skilled manual workers. Grade D comprises the semi-skilled and unskilled working class, and is usually linked with Grade E, those in the lowest grade occupations or who are unemployed.

since leaving full-time education compared to those in AB (37 per cent compared to 18 per cent).

When compared to 2019, the participation rate across most social grades has increased substantially⁷. The exception is the C1 grade, where the participation rate remains similar (this was 42 per cent in 2019). The increase in participation is relatively consistent across social grades (+14 percentage points for AB, +16 percentage points for C2, +14 percentage points for DE), meaning that while overall participation in learning has increased, gaps in participation between social grades have not narrowed.

Figure 3: Participation by social grade



Base: all respondents. 'Don't know' responses are not shown. Total weighted base = 5,054, AB = 1,334, C1 = 1,500, C2 = 1,023, DE = 1,198. Total unweighted base = 5,058, AB = 1,561, C1 = 1,305, C2 = 848, DE = 1,344.

Working status

Another key predictor of adult participation in learning is working status; closer proximity to the labour market is associated with higher participation rates (see Figure 4). This is consistent with previous years. Full and part-time workers⁸ are the most likely to participate in learning, with respective figures of 55 per cent and 52 per

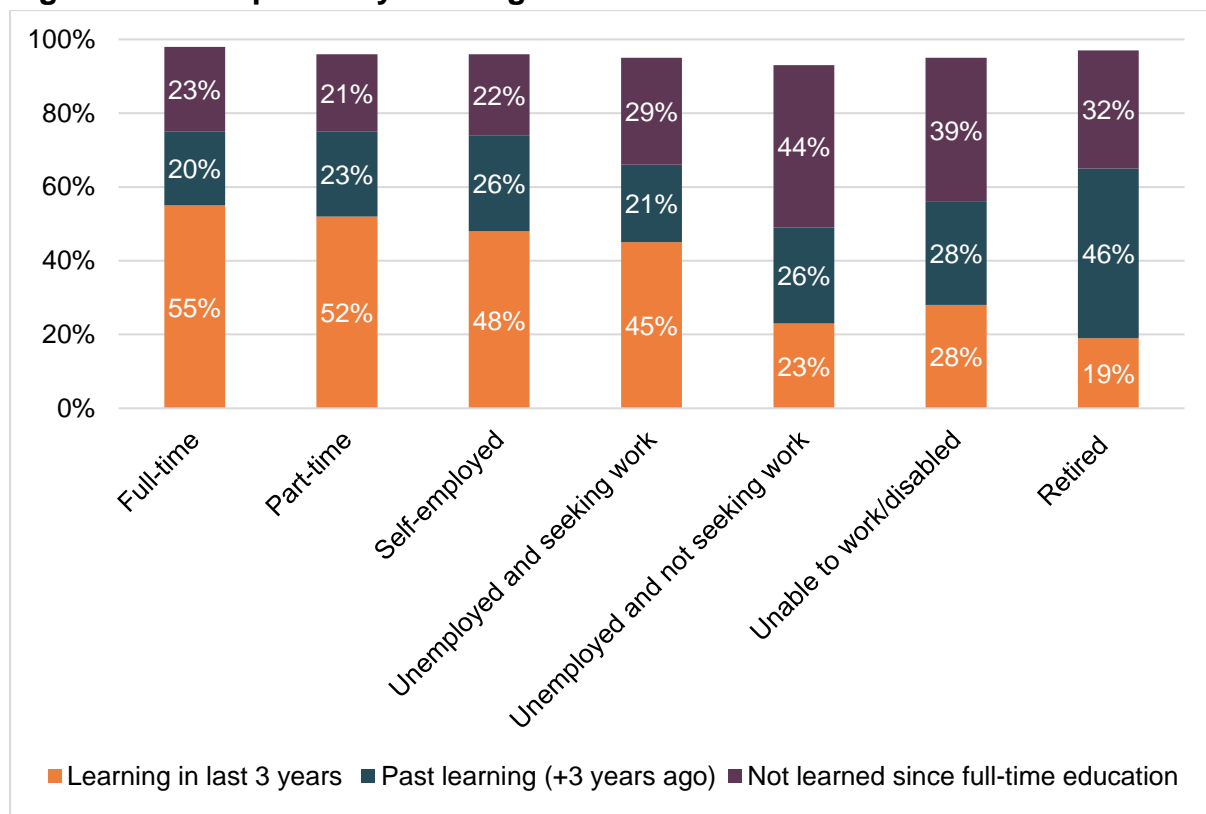
⁷ When compared to 2019, a higher proportion of respondents fall into the AB social grade (26 per cent compared to 19 per cent), while the proportion of respondents in the DE social grade is lower (24 per cent compared to 30 per cent). This is likely a result of the switch to an online survey method and may go some way towards explaining the marked increase in participation in learning from 2019.

⁸ Part-time workers are defined as those employed for fewer than 30 hours per week. It should be noted that in the 2019 survey, this category included individuals who worked between 8-29 hours only, with a separate category for those who worked for fewer than 8 hours per week. However, since only a small number of respondents (41) worked for fewer than 8 hours per week in the 2019 survey, this change is unlikely to affect year-on-year comparisons.

cent. The participation rate drops to 45 per cent for respondents who are unemployed and seeking work, 23 per cent for those who are unemployed and not seeking work, and 19 per cent for those who are retired. Respondents who are not seeking work are most likely to have not taken part in learning since leaving full-time education (44 per cent), followed by those who are unable to work or disabled⁹ (39 per cent).

Comparisons with 2019 show that participation has increased across all categories of working status, with the largest increases for those who are employed full-time (+17 percentage points), self-employed (+16 percentage points) and employed part-time (+13 percentage points). Those not seeking work (+ six percentage points) and retired (+ seven percentage points) show smaller increases. These findings show that while overall participation in learning has increased, disparities by employment status remain and have increased.

Figure 4: Participation by working status



Base: all respondents excluding those at school and in higher education. 'Don't know' responses are not shown. Total weighted base = 5,054, full-time = 1,982, part-time = 669, self-employed = 275, unemployed and seeking work = 222, unemployed and not seeking work = 369, unable to work/disabled = 162, retired = 1,100. Total unweighted base = 5,058, full-time = 2,081, part-time = 675, self-employed = 285, unemployed and seeking work = 239, unemployed and not seeking work = 382, unable to work/disabled = 184, retired = 953.

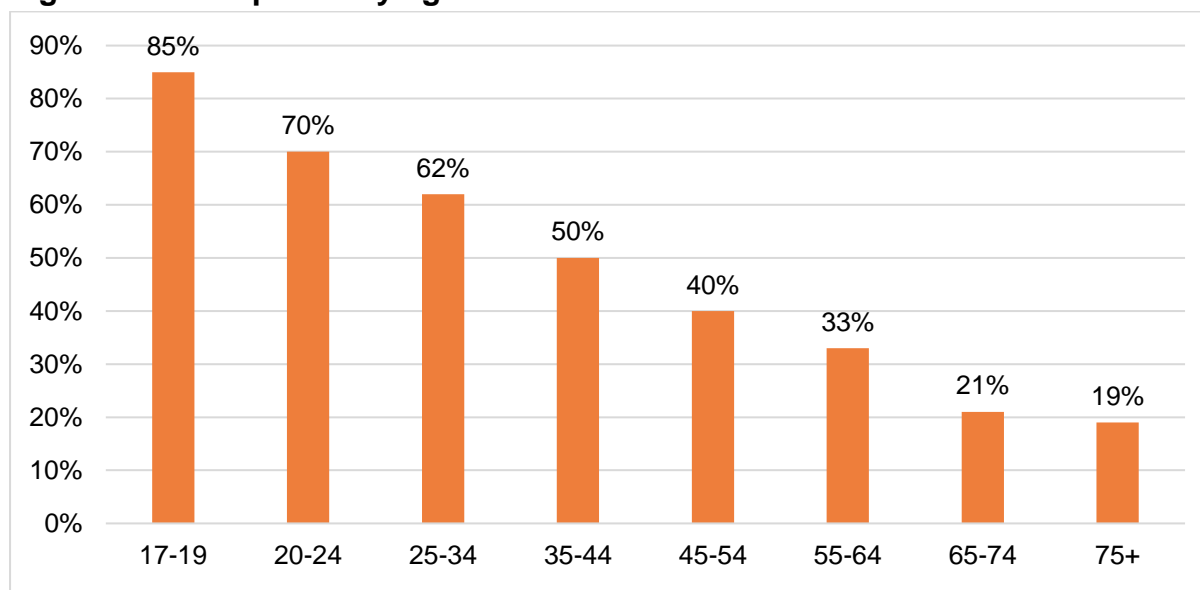
⁹ In the 2019 survey, these respondents were included in the unemployed and not seeking work category.

Age

There is a strong effect of age on likelihood to participate in learning; as in previous surveys, participation decreases with age (see Figure 5). Seventeen to 19-year-olds are the most likely to participate in learning, with a rate of 85 per cent. As age increases the participation rate drops, to 70 per cent of 20-24-year-olds and 62 per cent of adults aged 25-34. This falls to half (50 per cent) of adults aged 35-44, two fifths (40 per cent) of people aged 45-54, a third (33 per cent) of adults aged 55-64, and around a fifth of adults aged 65 and over.

When compared to 2019, there has been an increase in participation in learning across all age groups. This is most notable for the 25-34 and 35-44 age categories, where participation previously sat at just 37 per cent and 33 per cent respectively. The 2021 survey measured the highest rates of participation in learning for people aged 25-44 compared to previous years. In part, this may be due to differences in sampling between the face-to-face and online survey modes. This year's online survey has a higher proportion of respondents in the AB social grade and respondents in full-time employment within these age categories – both of which are characteristics associated with higher rates of participation in learning.

Figure 5: Participation by age



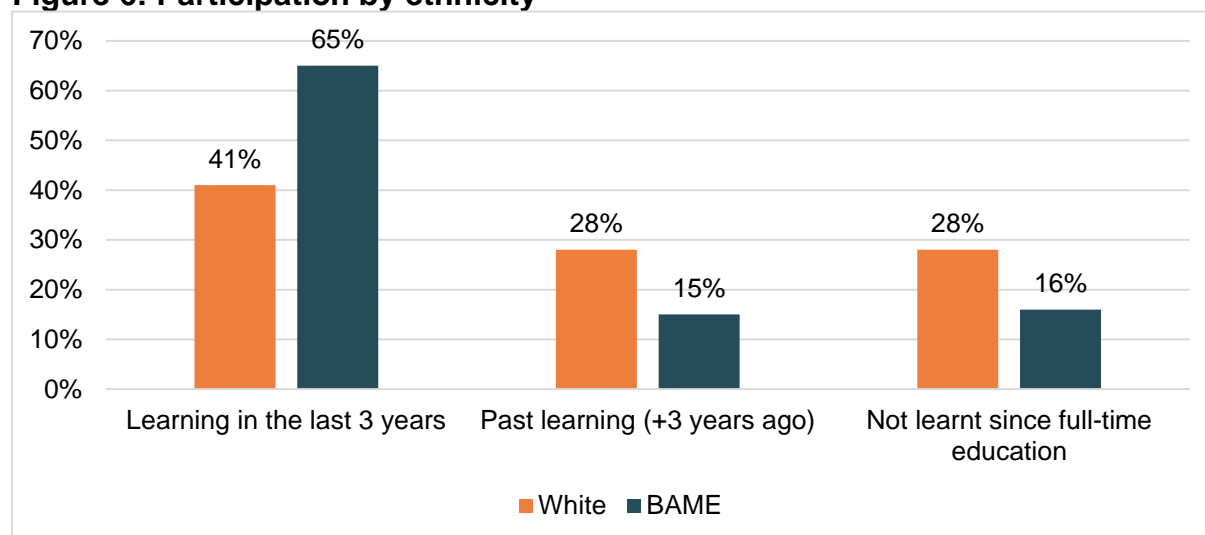
Base: all respondents. Total weighted base = 5,054, 17-19 = 198, 20-24 = 458, 25-34 = 842, 35-44 = 786, 45-54 = 843, 55-64 = 766, 65-74 = 851, 75+ = 310. Total unweighted base = 5,058, 17-19 = 188, 20-24 = 497, 25-34 = 891, 35-44 = 837, 45-54 = 886, 55-64 = 817, 65-74 = 697, 75+ = 245.

Ethnicity

In line with previous years, respondents from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds are significantly more likely to be current or recent learners when compared to respondents from white backgrounds (65 per cent compared to

41 percent) (see Figure 6)¹⁰. This difference is accounted for almost entirely by those who are currently learning (44 per cent of respondents from BAME backgrounds compared to 22 per cent of those from white backgrounds). Conversely, adults from white backgrounds are more likely to have taken part in learning over three years ago when compared to those from BAME backgrounds (28 per cent compared to 15 per cent), and also to say that they have not participated in learning since leaving full-time education (28 per cent compared to 16 per cent).

Figure 6: Participation by ethnicity



Base: all respondents. Total weighted base = 5,054, white = 4,230, BAME = 584. Total unweighted base = 5,058, white = 4,211, BAME = 595.

Further analysis of these findings indicates that:

- Within ethnic groups, there are slight differences in participation in learning rates according to gender. White men are slightly more likely than white women to be current or recent learners (42 per cent compared to 40 per cent), while women from BAME backgrounds are slightly more likely to be current or recent learners than men from BAME backgrounds (65 per cent compared to 64 per cent).
- Across all social grades, respondents from BAME backgrounds are more likely than white respondents to have participated in learning in the last three years. This difference is highest within the C2 and DE social grades. Three-quarters (75 per cent) of BAME respondents in the C2 grade have participated in learning in the last three years, compared to just 40 per cent of white respondents in the C2 grade. Around three in five respondents from BAME backgrounds (59 per cent) in the DE social grade have participated in learning in the last three years, compared to just 31 per cent of white respondents in the DE grade. These findings indicate that white working-class adults may be less likely to participate

¹⁰ We recognise that grouping respondents into two categories masks differences between individual ethnic groups. The size of the respondent base does not allow for more detailed analysis.

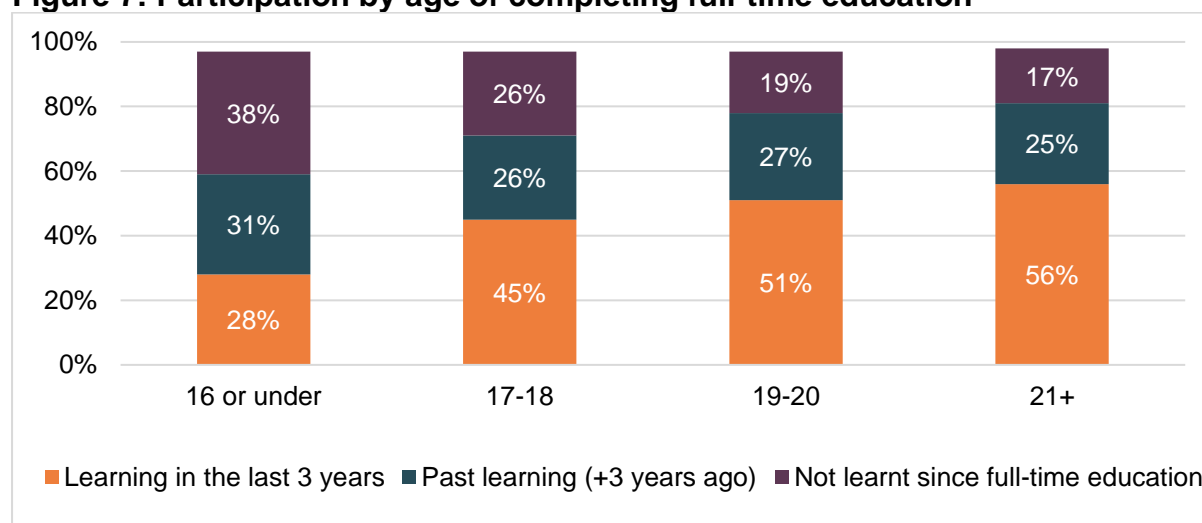
in learning. However, the sample size for BAME respondents is far smaller and these findings should be interpreted with caution.

Age completed full-time education

The age at which respondents completed full-time education is also strongly associated with participation in learning; the longer individuals remain in full-time education the more likely they are to learn as an adult (see Figure 7). This is consistent with previous years. Fewer than three in 10 adults (28 per cent) who left education aged 16 or under are current or recent learners. This figure increases significantly for those who stayed in education until age 17-18 (45 per cent), and further still for those who stayed in education until age 19-20 (51 per cent). Respondents who stayed in education until at least the age of 21 are more than twice as likely to say they are learners than those who left aged 16 or under, with a participation rate of 56 per cent.

Compared to 2019, learning participation rates have increased for all of these respondent groups. This increase is highest for those who left education aged 19-20 (+18 percentage points) and lowest for those who left education aged 16 or below (+10 percentage points).

Figure 7: Participation by age of completing full-time education



Base: all respondents. 'Don't know' responses are not shown. Total weighted base = 5,054, 16 or under = 1,946, 17-18 = 939, 19-20 = 478, 21+ = 1,357. Total unweighted base = 5,058, 16 or under = 1,503, 17-18 = 1,191, 19-20 = 555, 21+ = 1,496.

Geography

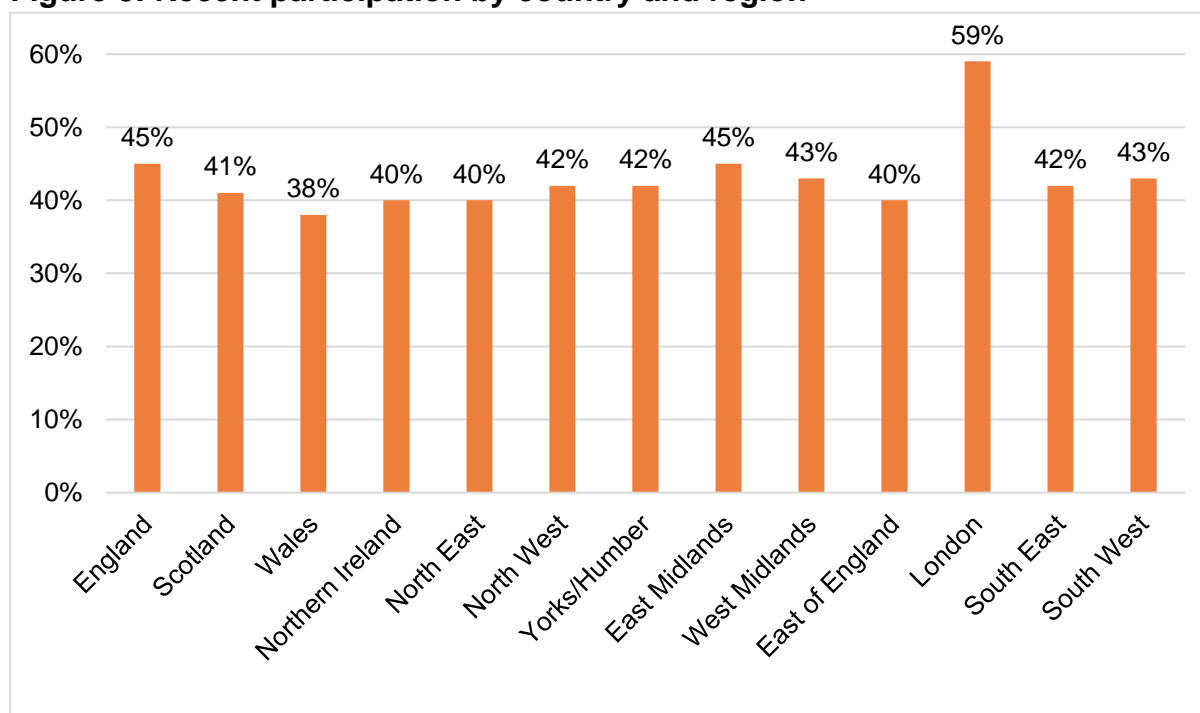
When comparing levels of participation in learning across the UK, the survey shows that 45 per cent of adults in England are either currently learning or have done so in the last three years, compared with 41 per cent of adults in Scotland, 40 per cent in Northern Ireland and 38 per cent in Wales (see Figure 8). Compared to 2019, participation has increased across all regions.

By English region, London has by far the highest participation rate (59 per cent). This is a substantial increase from the 2019 survey, where the proportion of current and

recent learners in London was 28 per cent. The North East and East of England have the lowest participation rates (both 40 per cent).

Participation in learning has increased across all English regions since 2019. However, the gap between the highest and lowest performing regions has increased from 17 per cent in 2019 to 19 per cent in 2021, indicating that regional differences are not closing as a result of increased participation.

Figure 8: Recent participation by country and region



Base: all respondents. Total weighted base = 5,054. England = 4,253, Scotland = 424, Wales = 237, Northern Ireland = 140, North East = 205, North West = 560, Yorkshire and the Humber = 417, East Midlands = 368, West Midlands = 445, East of England = 473, London = 663, South East = 691, South West = 433. Total unweighted base = 5,058. England = 4,323, Scotland = 395, Wales = 219, Northern Ireland = 121, North East = 252, North West = 565, Yorkshire and the Humber = 469, East Midlands = 422, West Midlands = 470, East of England = 500, London = 627, South East = 610, South West = 408.

Regression analysis of participation in learning

A regression analysis shows that when social grade, age, age completed full-time education and working status are all taken into account, all four variables are significant predictors of participation in learning¹¹. Of the variables included in the analysis, age emerges as the most important predictor of current or recent learning. With each 'step up' in age category (for example, for 17-19 to 20-24), likelihood of participation decreases, such that individuals are over a quarter less likely to participate in learning than those in the age group immediately below.

A similar pattern occurs for age completed full-time education; the later individuals leave full-time education, the more likely they are to be current or recent learners.

¹¹ The regression analysis excluded respondents still in school or higher education

Likelihood to participate increases by approximately a quarter with each 'step up' – for example, those who left education aged 17-18 are around a quarter more likely to participate in learning than those who left education aged 16 or below.

Social grade is also shown to be a significant factor in determining participation. Likelihood of participation increases with each 'step up' in social grade category (from DE to AB), such that those in a higher social grade are approximately a fifth more likely to participate in learning than those in the grade immediately below them.

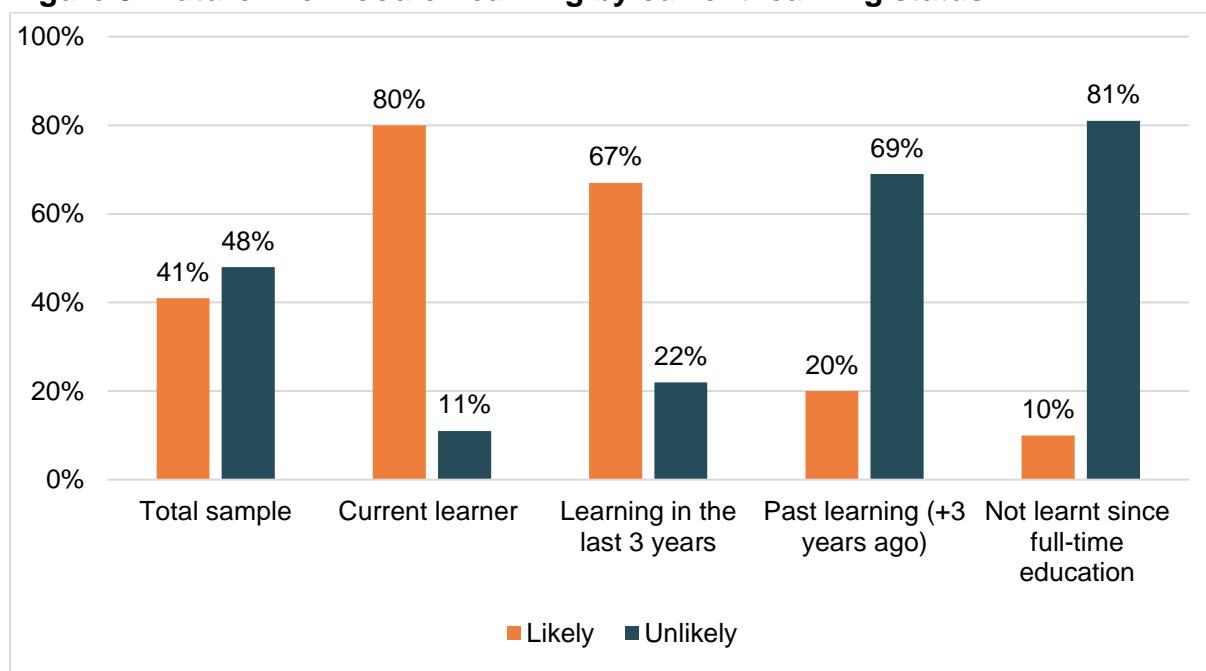
Compared with those in full-time employment, likelihood to participate in learning decreases for those who are unemployed or economically inactive. Unemployed adults (seeking work) are almost three-tenths less likely to participate in learning, while unemployed adults (not seeking work) are more than three-fifths less likely to do so. Likelihood to participate in learning decreases by more than half for those who are unable to work/disabled, and by more than two-fifths for retirees.

Future intentions to learn

As well as patterns and experiences of current/recent learning, the survey captures future intentions to learn and how these vary by demographics. All respondents were asked their likelihood of taking up learning in the next three years. Just over four in 10 adults (41 per cent) say that they are either very (20 per cent) or fairly (22 per cent) likely to take up learning in the next three years, while 48 per cent say that they are fairly (17 per cent) or very (31 per cent) unlikely to do so. Eleven per cent of respondents indicated that they do not know whether they are likely to take up learning.

In line with previous surveys, current or recent participation in learning is a key indicator of future intentions to learn (see Figure 9). Four in five current learners (80 per cent) say that they are likely to take up learning again in the next three years, compared to just 10 per cent of adults who have not taken part in learning since leaving full-time education. The more time since adults have participated in learning, the less likely they are to consider doing so in the future. This emphasises the importance of encouraging adults to try out learning and providing support for them to continue doing so throughout their lives.

Figure 9: Future likelihood of learning by current learning status



Base: all respondents. 'Don't know' responses are not shown. Total weighted base = 5,054, Current learners = 1,252, learned in last 3 years = 976, studied/learned over 3 years ago = 1,331, have not studied/learned since leaving full-time education = 1,325. Total unweighted base = 5,058, Current learners = 1,284, learned in last 3 years = 1,038, studied/learned over 3 years ago = 1,297, have not studied/learned since leaving full-time education = 1,269.

Regression analysis of future participation in learning

A regression analysis shows that when social grade, age, age completed full-time education and working status are taken into account, all are significant predictors of future intention to participate in learning. Age and age completed full-time education

emerge as the most important predictors. With each 'step up' in age category (for example, for 17-19 to 20-24), likelihood to take up learning in the future declines by almost one third. The later individuals leave full-time education, the more likely they are to indicate that they will participate in learning in the future. This likelihood increases by around one third with each 'step up' – for example, those who left full-time education aged 17-18 are around one third more likely than those who left education aged 16 or below to indicate that they will take up learning in the future.

Social grade is also a key predictor of future learning, with likelihood to take up learning in the future increasing by around a fifth with each 'step up' in social grade category (from DE to AB).

Compared with those in full-time employment, unemployed adults who are not seeking work and retirees are less likely to indicate that they intend to learn in the future. When all other predictors are taken into account, likelihood to take up learning in the future declines by almost a half for individuals in these categories.

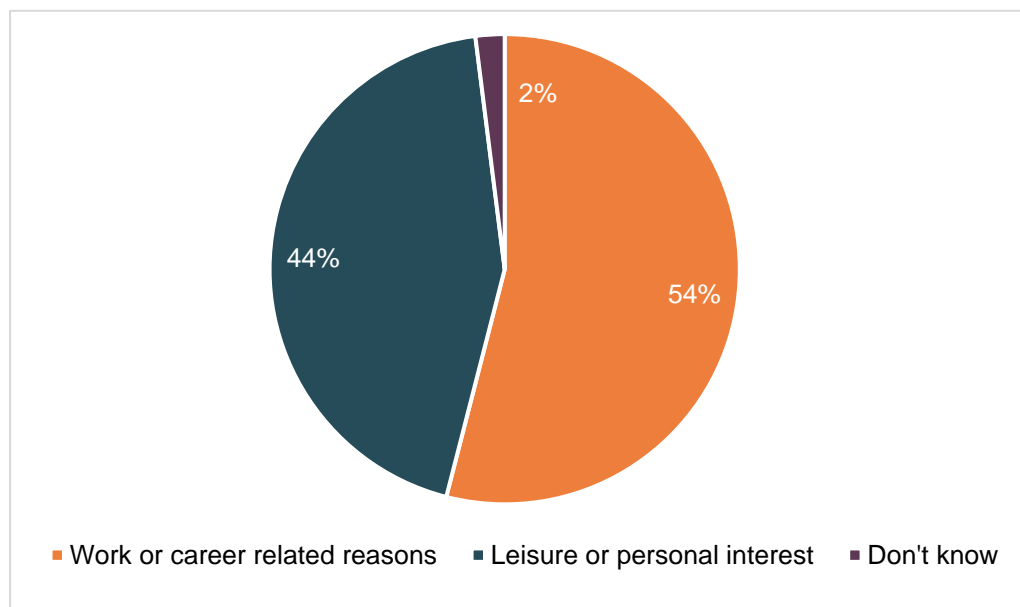
Interestingly, when all other factors are held constant, unemployed individuals seeking work are more likely to indicate that they intend to take up learning in the future, with likelihood increasing by almost a half for these respondents. This finding highlights the importance of learning as a route into employment.

Motivations to learn

Each year, those who have engaged with learning within the previous three years are asked to state whether they started their *main* learning for ‘work or career related reasons’, or whether they have taken up learning for ‘leisure or personal interest’ (see Figure 10).

Over half (54 per cent) of learners have taken up their main learning for work and/or their career, while 44 per cent have taken this up for leisure or personal interest. When compared to previous surveys, respondents are far more likely to take up learning for leisure or personal interest – just one-fifth (20 per cent) of learners said this in 2019.

Figure 10: Motivation for taking up main learning



Base: all current or recent learners. Weighted base = 2,228. Unweighted base = 2,322.

Some groups of adults are more likely to learn for work and/or career related reasons than others, including:

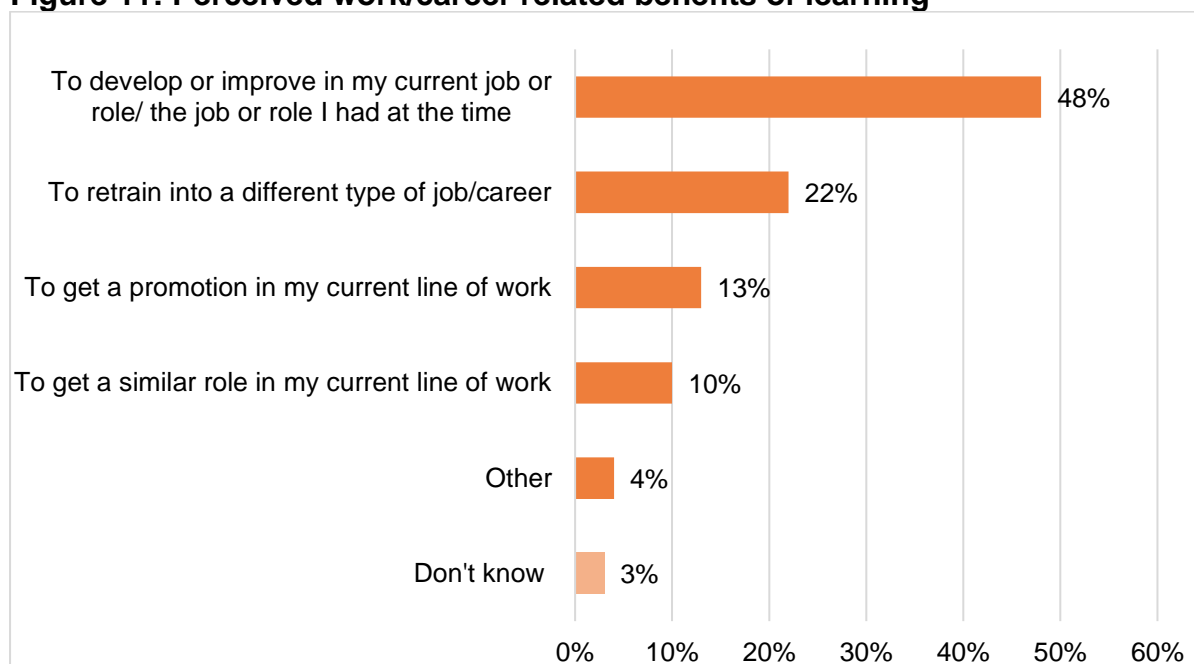
- **Younger adults**, particularly those aged 17-19 (78 per cent), 20-24 (67 per cent) and 35-44 (60 per cent).
- **Employed adults**, with 61 per cent of those in full-time employment and 59 per cent of those in part-time employment taking up their main learning for work or career reasons.
- **Parents**, who are more likely to learn for work or career reasons than respondents without parenting responsibilities (57 per cent compared to 52 per cent).

By contrast, adults learning mainly for leisure or personal interest are more likely to be:

- **Older adults**, with over half (55 per cent) of respondents aged 55-64 and almost eight in 10 (78 per cent) of those aged 65-74 saying that they learned for leisure or personal interest.
- **Retired adults**, with nine in 10 (90 per cent) learning for leisure or personal interest, compared to just 37 per cent of full-time employees and 41 per cent of part-time employees.

Adults whose main learning was for work or career-related reasons were asked how they think this learning might help their work or career prospects (see Figure 11). By far the most common response, cited by almost half (48 per cent) of learners, is that it will help them to develop or improve in their current job role. More than one in five respondents (22 per cent) say that it will help them to retrain into a different job or career. Thirteen per cent believe that their learning will help them to gain a promotion in their current line of work, while one in 10 (10 per cent) hope that their learning will support them to get a similar role in their current line of work.

Figure 11: Perceived work/career related benefits of learning



Base: all respondents who have recently or are currently learning for work and/or career related reasons. Weighted base = 1,204; unweighted base = 1,252.

These findings are broadly similar to those from 2019, although respondents to the 2021 survey were less likely to identify improving and developing in their current role as a motivating factor (-12 per centage points) and more likely to identify retraining

into a different type of job or career (+ nine percentage points)¹². This may reflect the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on people’s work and careers: more than two in five survey respondents (43 per cent) indicated that they had experienced some change to their working status or conditions since March 2020.

All adults with current or recent experience of learning were asked to identify their broader motivations for starting their *main* learning (see Table 1). Respondents were most likely to identify motivations related to their personal interests or development – two in five (40 per cent) said that they are motivated to learn because they are interested in the subject, while 36 per cent stated that they want to develop themselves as a person. Around a quarter of respondents (26 per cent) are motivated to learn to do their current job better/improve their job skills, with fewer being motivated by the desire to get a new job (15 per cent) or change the type of work they do/their career (12 per cent). Other common motivating factors are gaining a recognised qualification (21 per cent) and improving self-confidence (19 per cent).

Table 1: Motivations to learn

Motivation	Percentage
I am interested in the subject	40%
To develop myself as a person	36%
To help me do my current job better/improve job skills	26%
To get a recognised qualification	21%
To improve my self-confidence	19%
To improve my health and wellbeing	16%
To get a new or different job	15%
To make my work more satisfying	14%
To get a promotion or better pay	13%
To change the type of work I do/change career	12%
To help me get onto a future course of learning	12%
To meet people	10%
Not really my choice – Employer/professional/benefit requirement	9%
To support my children's schooling	5%
Other	2%
Don't know	2%

Base: all current or recent learners. Weighted base = 2,228; unweighted base = 2,322.

Note: Respondents could give more than one answer

¹² This answer option was worded slightly differently in the 2019 survey, as follows: “To retrain into a substantially different type of job”

To enable comparisons with previous surveys, motivations were grouped into four categories¹³:

- **Work-related**, including: To get a new or different job; To change the type of work I do/change career; To help me do my current job better/improve job skills; To get a promotion or better pay; To make my work more satisfying
- **Learning and knowledge**, including: To get a recognised qualification; To help me get onto a future course of learning; I am interested in the subject; To support my children's schooling
- **Personal and social**, including: To develop myself as a person; To improve my self-confidence; To improve my health and wellbeing; To meet people
- **Requirements**, including: Not really my choice - Employer/professional/benefit requirement

The majority of respondents (60 per cent) indicated that they are motivated by factors related to learning and knowledge (see Table 2). This is similar to the 2018 results and contrasts with the findings from the 2019 survey, where work-related motives were more prevalent. Due to slight changes in the answer options for 2021 this finding should be treated with caution.

As in previous years, there is a prevalence of non-career related motivations for learning, with over half of learners (53 per cent) taking up their main learning for personal or social reasons. This highlights the importance of ensuring a broad range of learning opportunities are available; both work and non-work-related opportunities are vital to encourage adults to engage with learning.

Table 2: Grouped motivations for learning, 2018, 2019, and 2021

Group	Percentage 2018	Percentage 2019	Percentage 2021
Learning and knowledge	53%	78%	60%
Work-related	52%	81%	52%
Personal and social	45%	61%	53%
Requirement	16%	20%	9%

Base: all current or recent learners. Weighted base 2018 = 1,747; unweighted base 2018 = 1,702. Weighted base 2019 = 1,659; unweighted base 2019 = 1,515. Weighted base = 2021 = 2,228; unweighted base 2021 = 2,322.

¹³ The list of answer options for this question was reduced for the 2021 survey. As such, while motivations can be categorised in a similar way, there are some slight differences to these groupings when compared to 2018 and 2019. A key difference is that in 2018 and 2019, there were two separate groups for 'health and wellbeing' and 'social and community' motivations. These have now been combined into one 'personal and social' category. The figures for 2018 and 2019 are the figures for 'health and wellbeing' and 'social and community' combined.

Learning delivery

Method

Learners were asked how they did or are doing their *main* learning, which provides insights into where adults are most likely to access learning (see Table 3). Over a third (34 per cent) of learners said they learned independently on their own. This is followed by 16 per cent who learned through a University or higher education institution, 15 per cent who learned on a training course at work, and 14 per cent who learned on the job.

Where and how adults learn remains broadly similar to previous years, although respondents to the 2021 survey are far more likely to say that they learned independently on their own (for example, this figure was 16 per cent in 2019 and 21 per cent in 2018). This change may relate to the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic.

Table 3: Method of learning

Location	Percentage
Independently on my own	34%
Through a university/higher education institution/Open University	16%
On a training course at work	15%
On the job	14%
On an external training course arranged by my employer	9%
Through a further education college/tertiary/6th form college	9%
Through a local adult education centre or class	8%
Through local community facilities e.g. library, museum, place of worship, bookshop etc.	7%
Independently with others	7%
On an apprenticeship	6%
Through a voluntary organisation	6%
Through a local school	5%
Through a leisure or health club	5%
Other	4%
Don't know	1%

Base: Current or recent learners. Weighted base = 2,228; unweighted base = 2,322.

Note: Respondents could give more than one answer

To compare with the results from previous surveys¹⁴, responses about the location of learning were split into four categories:

- **Work-related**, including: On the job; On a training course at work; On an external training course arranged by my employer; On an apprenticeship

¹⁴ There were some small changes in the answer options included in 2018 and 2019, but these were minor.

- **Independently**¹⁵, including: Independently on my own; Independently with others
- **Formal educational establishment**, including: Through a university/higher education institution/Open University; Through a further education college/tertiary/6th form college; Through a local adult education centre or class; Through a local school
- **Community or voluntary organisation**, including: Through a voluntary organisation; Through local community facilities e.g. library, museum, place of worship, bookshop etc.; Through a leisure or health club

Just over a third (34 per cent) of learners have participated in work-related learning, which is a decline of 11 percentage points compared to 2019 and a decline of nine percentage points compared to 2018 (see Table 4). The survey also indicates an increase in adults accessing learning through community or voluntary organisations (+10 percentage points compared to 2019 and +7 percentage points compared to 2018). This may reflect the increase in learning for leisure or personal interest in the 2021 survey findings; the data shows that respondents who learn for leisure or personal interest are more likely to have accessed learning through a community or voluntary organisation when compared to those who learn for work (20 per cent compared to 11 per cent).

Table 4: Grouped locations of learning, 2018, 2019 and 2021

Group	Percentage 2018	Percentage 2019	Percentage 2021
Work-related	43%	45%	34%
Independently	36%	36%	40%
Formal educational establishment	29%	43%	33%
Community or voluntary	8%	5%	15%

Base: all current or recent learners. Weighted base 2018 = 1,747; unweighted base 2018 = 1,702. Weighted base 2019 = 1,659; unweighted base 2019 = 1,515. Weighted base 2021 = 2,228; unweighted base 2021 = 2,322.

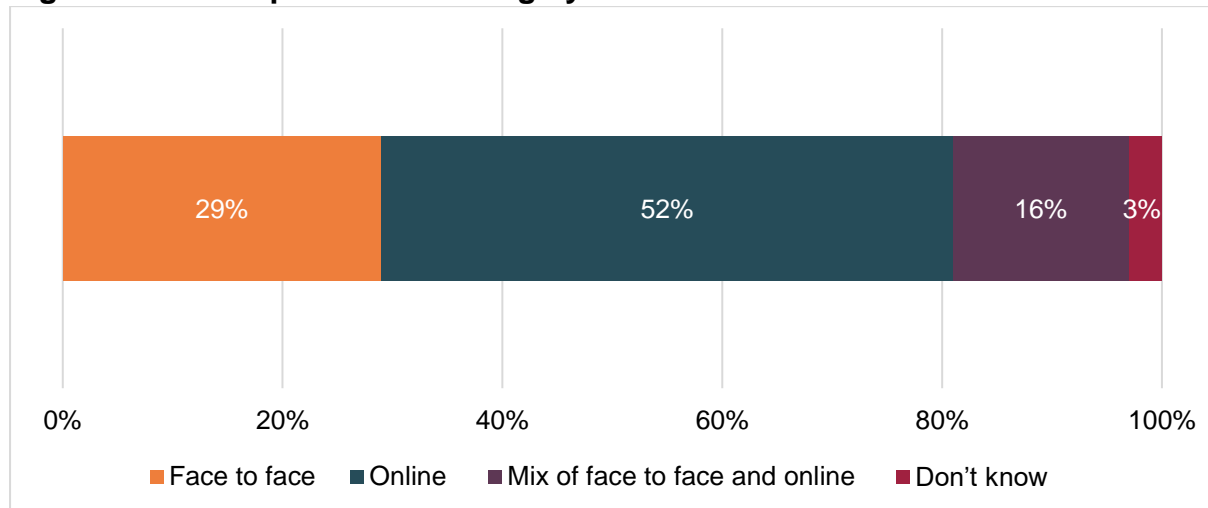
Online learning

Learners were asked whether their main learning took place online or face-to-face (see Figure 12). Around seven in 10 learners (69 per cent) said that at least some of their main learning has been online – an increase from 47 per cent in 2019, reflecting the acceleration in online learning as a result of the pandemic. This year, just over half (52 per cent) of learners said that their learning has been fully online and 16 per cent said that their learning has involved a mix of online and face-to-face learning. Around three in 10 learners (29 per cent) stated that their learning has been entirely face-to-face.

¹⁵ In the 2019 survey, this group included the answer option “*Online including through an app e.g. websites, forums, YouTube.*” This was removed from the 2021 survey, and instead respondents were asked about online learning in a separate question.

Current learners are more likely to be learning fully face-to-face when compared to respondents who have learned in the last three years (31 per cent compared to 26 per cent) and are less likely to say that their learning took place fully online (49 per cent compared to 56 per cent). This finding may reflect a gradual return to face-to-face learning as Coronavirus restrictions ease. However, the continued prevalence of online learning indicates that this will still be an important mode of learning in future.

Figure 12: Participation in learning by method



Base: all current or recent learners. Weighted base = 2,228; unweighted base = 2,322.

The data indicates that some groups of adults are more likely to learn online than others. These include:

- **Women**, of whom 72 per cent have learned at least partly online, and 55 per cent fully online. This compares to 65 per cent of men who have learned at least partly online, and half (50 per cent) who learned fully online.
- **Older adults**, with online learning highest for the 45-54 age group (67 per cent fully online), and significantly higher for the 55-64 (59 per cent) and 65-74 (64 per cent) age groups when compared to the total average.
- **Self-employed and retired adults**, who are more likely than the sample average to have learned fully online (65 per cent and 63 per cent respectively).
- **Adults from white ethnic backgrounds**, who are more likely to have learned fully online when compared to those from BAME backgrounds (55 per cent compared to 42 per cent).
- **Adults who learn for leisure or personal interest**, with 62 per cent of these learning fully online, compared to 45 per cent who are learning for their work or career.

Qualifications

Just over half (54 per cent) of respondents who have taken part in learning in the last three years said that their main learning leads to a qualification. This is a decline from 63 per cent in 2019 and 62 per cent in 2018, which may reflect the increase in respondents learning independently and learning for leisure. The following groups of adults are more likely to have learned for a qualification:

- **Younger adults**, with 81 per cent of those aged 17-19 and 71 per cent aged 20-24 studying for a qualification. This declines to fewer than half (44 per cent) aged 45-54, a third (32 per cent) aged 55-64, and 16 per cent aged 65-74.
- **Adults in full-time employment**, who are more likely to be studying for a qualification when compared to the sample average (61 per cent compared to 54 per cent). Those who are retired (10 per cent) or not seeking work (35 per cent) are least likely to study for a qualification.
- **Adults from BAME backgrounds**, who are more likely to study for a qualification when compared to those from white backgrounds (65 per cent compared to 52 per cent).
- **Parents**, who are more likely to study towards a qualification compared to those without parenting responsibilities (67 per cent compared to 47 per cent).
- **Current learners**, who are more likely to study for a qualification when compared to those who learned in the last three years (59 per cent compared to 48 per cent).
- **Adults who are learning for their work or career**, who are more likely to study for a qualification than those learning for leisure or personal interest (69 per cent compared to 37 per cent).

Benefits of learning

Learning as an adult can have significant benefits for individuals, including those related to health, employment, and social life and community. Each year, survey respondents with current or recent experience of learning are asked to identify the benefits or changes that they have experienced as a result.

In the 2021 survey, the most common benefit identified by respondents is enjoying learning more (30 per cent) (see Table 5). Just over one in five believe that they have improved the skills needed to do their job (22 per cent), with the same proportion saying that their self-confidence has improved. Other benefits frequently cited by respondents include getting a recognised qualification (16 per cent), increased confidence at work (16 per cent), improved health and wellbeing (15 per cent), higher productivity at work/improved work quality (14 per cent) and having more control over their life (14 per cent). Just under one in 10 learners (nine per cent) said that they are yet to experience any benefits of learning. These findings demonstrate the wide-ranging benefits experienced by learners in both their personal and working lives.

Table 5: Changes or benefits experienced as a result of learning

Benefits	Percentage
I enjoy learning more	30%
I have improved the skills needed to do my job	22%
My self-confidence has improved	22%
I have got/expect to get a recognised qualification	16%
I am more confident at work	16%
My health and wellbeing have improved	15%
I am more productive at work/work is of a higher quality	14%
I have more control of my life	14%
I am more understanding of other people and cultures	12%
My work has become/I expect my work to become more satisfying	11%
I have met new people/made new friends/found a new partner	11%
I have got/expect to get a new or different job	9%
I have changed/expect to change the type of work I do/my career	9%
I have got/expect to get a promotion or a rise in earnings	8%
My working relationships with colleagues/my employer have improved	8%
I have moved/expect to move onto a further course of learning	7%
I am more involved in my local community (e.g. through attending events, volunteering)	7%
I have a greater understanding of my child's/children's schooling	5%
Other	1%
I have not yet experienced any benefits or changes	9%
Don't know	2%

Base: all current or recent learners. Weighted base = 2,228; unweighted base = 2,322.

Note: Respondents could give more than one answer

To enable comparisons with previous surveys, benefits were grouped into four categories¹⁶:

- **Work-related**, including: I have got/expect to get a new or different job; I have changed/expect to change the type of work I do; I have got/expect to get a recognised qualification; I have got/expect to get a promotion or a rise in earnings; my work has become/I expect my work to become more satisfying; I am more confident at work; my working relationships with colleagues/my employer have improved; I have improved the skills needed to do my job; I am more productive at work/work is of a higher quality
- **Health and wellbeing**, including: My self-confidence has improved; My health and wellbeing have improved; I have more control of my life
- **Learning and knowledge**, including: I have moved/expect to move onto a further course of learning; I enjoy learning more; I have a greater understanding of my child's/children's schooling; I am more understanding of other people and cultures
- **Social and community**, including: I have met new people/made new friends/found a new partner; I am more involved in my local community (e.g. through attending events, volunteering)

In line with previous years, the most common benefits experienced by learners are work-related, with almost three-fifths (58 per cent) citing these (see Table 6). Forty-three per cent of learners have experienced benefits related to learning and knowledge, while 37 per cent have experienced benefits related to their health and wellbeing. Seventeen per cent of learners have experienced social or community-related benefits. These findings further emphasise the wide-ranging benefits of learning for individuals and also communities.

Table 6: Grouped changes or benefits experienced as a result of learning, 2018, 2019 and 2021

Group	Percentage 2018	Percentage 2019	Percentage 2021
Work-related	57%	59%	58%
Learning and knowledge	53%	54%	43%
Health and wellbeing	31%	34%	37%
Social and community	18%	18%	17%

Base: all current or recent learners. Weighted base 2018 = 1,747; unweighted base 2018 = 1,702. Weighted based 2019 = 1,659; unweighted base 2019 = 1,515. Weighted base 2021 = 2,228, unweighted base 2021 = 2,322.

¹⁶ The list of answer options for this question was reduced for the 2021 survey. As such, while motivations can be categorised in a similar way, there are some slight differences to these groupings when compared to 2018 and 2019.

Barriers to learning

Each year, respondents are asked to identify the barriers to learning that they have experienced. Current or recent learners are asked to state any challenges that they have encountered while learning, and adults who have not participated in learning for at least three years are asked to identify the factors that prevent them from doing so. Together, these provide insights on the types of obstacles that policy and practice can seek to remove to ensure that more and different adults are able to engage in learning throughout their lives.

Current and recent learners

Two-thirds (66 per cent) of current or recent learners indicated that they have encountered at least one challenge while learning (see Table 7). Learners are most likely to identify work and time pressures as a challenge, with almost a quarter (23 per cent) doing so. This is followed by cost (17 per cent), being put off by tests and exams (14 per cent) and lacking the confidence to learn (also 14 per cent). Around one in 10 adults cited feeling too old (11 per cent), difficulties or issues with the course/learning or tutor (nine per cent) and a lack of digital skills/confidence for online learning (nine per cent) as challenges. Just under a third of learners (32 per cent) indicated that they have not encountered any challenges while learning.

Table 7: Challenges experienced while learning

Barrier	Percentage
Work/other time pressures	23%
Cost/money/can't afford it	17%
I am put off by tests and exams	14%
I don't feel confident enough	14%
I feel I am too old	11%
Difficulties or issues with the course/learning or tutor	9%
Lack of digital skills/confidence for online learning	9%
Childcare arrangements or other caring responsibilities	8%
Transport/too far to travel	8%
An illness or disability	8%
I have difficulties with reading, writing or numbers	6%
Lack of digital equipment/broadband for online learning	6%
Other	1%
Nothing/ none of these	32%

Base: all current or recent learners. Weighted base = 2,228; unweighted base = 2,322.

Note: Respondents could give more than one answer

Challenges encountered by learners can be grouped into those that are:

- **Situational**, arising from an adult's personal and family situation, including: Cost/money/can't afford it; Childcare arrangements or other caring responsibilities; Transport/too far to travel; Work/other time pressures; lack of digital equipment/broadband for online learning

- **Dispositional**, relating to the attitudes, perceptions and expectations of adults, including: I feel I am too old; An illness or disability; I am put off by tests and exams; I have difficulties with reading, writing or numbers; I don't feel confident enough; lack of digital skills/confidence for online learning
- **Institutional**, arising from the unresponsiveness of educational institutions, including: Difficulties or issues with the course/learning or tutor

The data indicates that learners are almost equally likely to have encountered situational and dispositional challenges while learning, with 45 per cent and 43 per cent of learners respectively experiencing these (see Table 8).

Table 8: Grouped challenges experienced while learning

Group	Percentage
Situational	45%
Dispositional	43%
Institutional	9%
No challenges encountered	32%

Base: all current or recent learners. Weighted base = 2,228, unweighted base = 2,322.

Adults who have not participated in learning within the last three years

Almost seven in 10 respondents (69 per cent) who have not engaged in learning in the last three years identified a barrier that has prevented them from doing so (see Table 9). The most commonly cited barrier is that they feel they are too old, with almost three in 10 respondents (29 per cent) saying this. This is followed by cost/affordability (25 per cent), work or other time pressures (18 per cent) and being put off by tests and exams (13 per cent).

Almost three in 10 adults (29 per cent) who have not recently taken part in learning said that nothing is preventing them from doing so and they don't want to. This points to the importance of not only removing barriers to learning, but actively promoting the benefits of learning to encourage participation.

Table 9: Barriers to learning

Barrier	Percentage
I feel I am too old	29%
Cost/money/can't afford it	25%
Work/other time pressures	18%
I am put off by tests and exams	13%
I haven't got round to doing it	10%
I don't feel confident enough	10%
An illness or disability	9%
Childcare arrangements or other caring responsibilities	8%
I don't know what is available or how to find out what is	5%
Lack of digital skills/confidence for online learning	4%
I have difficulties with reading, writing or numbers	2%
Lack of digital equipment/broadband for online learning	2%
Other	1%
Nothing is preventing me/I don't want to	29%
Don't know	2%

Base: respondents who had not participated in learning in the previous three years or since full-time education. Weighted base = 2,657; unweighted base = 2,566.

Note: Respondents could give more than one answer

Barriers can be grouped into those that are:

- **Situational**, including: Cost/money/can't afford it; Childcare arrangements or other caring responsibilities; Work/other time pressures; Lack of digital equipment/broadband for online learning
- **Dispositional**, including: I don't know what is available or how to find out what is; I feel I am too old; An illness or disability; I haven't got round to doing it; I am put off by tests and exams; I have difficulties with reading, writing or numbers; I don't feel confident enough; Lack of digital skills/confidence for online learning

Over half (52 per cent) of respondents who have not participated in learning recently raised dispositional barriers that have prevented them from doing so (see Table 10). This compares to two in five (40 per cent) who have raised situational barriers. The prevalence of dispositional barriers is consistent with previous surveys, although the proportion of learners citing situational barriers is higher than in previous years¹⁷.

When compared to the findings for current and recent learners, we can see that adults who engage in learning are more likely to raise situational barriers, while those without recent experience of learning are more likely to raise dispositional ones. This finding is consistent with wider research¹⁸ and indicates that those who

¹⁷ It should be noted that the list of answer options was slightly reduced for 2021, and two new options related to digital skills and digital equipment/broadband were added.

¹⁸ Learning and Work Institute (February 2021) [Decision making of adult learners below Level 2](#)

are furthest away from learning may benefit from support to understand the value of learning and to increase their confidence to learn.

Table 10: Grouped barriers to learning, 2018, 2019 and 2021

Group	Percentage 2018	Percentage 2019	Percentage 2021
Dispositional	42%	59%	52%
Situational	31%	35%	40%
Nothing preventing	33%	28%	29%

Base: respondents who had not participated in learning in the previous three years or since full-time education. Weighted base 2018 = 3,162; unweighted base 2018 = 3,528. Weighted base 2019 = 3,286; unweighted base 2019 = 3,660. Weighted base 2021 = 2,657; unweighted base 2021 = 2,566.

A demographic breakdown of grouped barriers indicates that:

- **Dispositional barriers** are more likely to be raised by women when compared to men (54 per cent compared to 50 per cent). They are also more likely to be raised by those in the DE social grade (60 per cent, compared to 49 per cent across all other social grades), and those who left full-time education aged 16 or below (56 per cent, compared to 50 per cent who left education aged 17-18, 47 per cent aged 19-20, and 48 per cent aged 21+).
- **Situational barriers** are also more likely to be raised by women than by men (44 per cent compared to 35 per cent), indicating that the women sampled are more likely to have experienced barriers to learning overall when compared to men. By age, situational barriers are most prevalent among those aged 25-34 (62 per cent) and 35-44 (58 per cent). Respondents from BAME backgrounds are also particularly likely to experience situational barriers (49 per cent, compared to 39 per cent from white backgrounds). Looking at the age that people were when they left full-time education, those who left later are more likely to experience situational barriers, with 47 per cent of those who left education aged 21 or above saying this, compared to just 36 per cent who left aged 16 or below. By social grade, those in the AB group are less likely to experience situational barriers when compared to all other categories (34 per cent, compared to 41 per cent in C1, 42 per cent in C2, and 41 per cent in DE).

Learning for career change

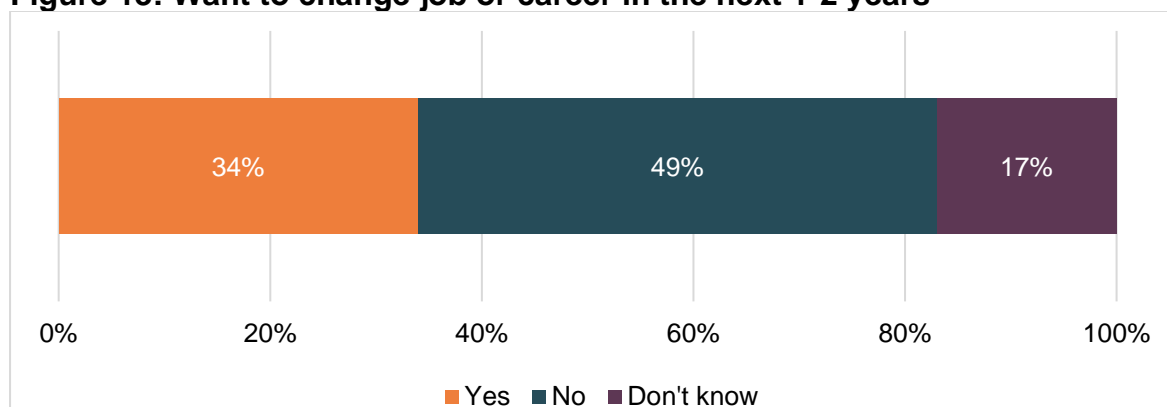
The Coronavirus pandemic had a profound effect on the labour market, with a sharp rise in unemployment and millions of workers being furloughed¹⁹. The economy is now recovering with job vacancies at record levels. However, unemployment remains higher than before the pandemic and a substantial number of workers remained furloughed up until the scheme's closure in September 2021. Many workers will need to reskill into different careers to ensure they can make the most of the opportunities ahead.

Within this context, this year's survey asked adults whether they are planning to change job or career in the near future. The survey also asked adults whether they would need to develop their skills to change job or career, and about what kinds of support or advice they would find helpful if they were looking to change job or career.

Changing job or career

Around a third (34 per cent) of adults indicated that they want to change their job or career within the next two years, while just under half (49 per cent) said that they would not (see Figure 13)²⁰. A substantial proportion of adults (17 per cent) are unsure whether they want to change their job or career, suggesting that there is some level of uncertainty among workers regarding their immediate career plans.

Figure 13: Want to change job or career in the next 1-2 years



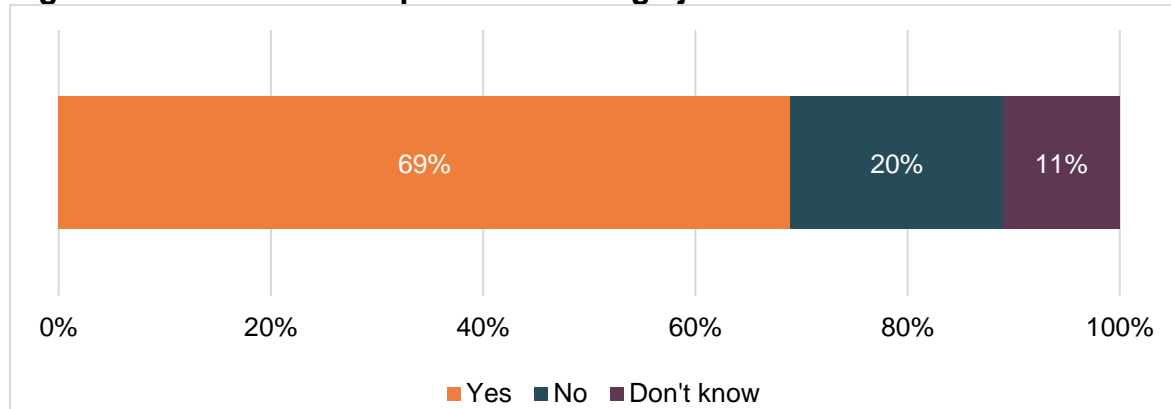
Base: respondents who are employed, self-employed, in full-time higher education, or unemployed and seeking work. Weighted base = 2,964; unweighted base = 3,084.

Respondents who indicated that they would like to change job or career were asked whether they would need to develop their skills in order to do this (see Figure 14). Almost seven in 10 (69 per cent) believe that they would need to develop their skills, while one in five do not think they would need to. Around one in 10 respondents (11 per cent) don't know whether they would need to develop their skills in order to change their job/career.

¹⁹ Learning and Work Institute (October 2021) [Fast Forward? Where next for the labour market](#)

²⁰ Respondents who were retired, unable to work/disabled, not seeking work, or still at school, were excluded from this question

Figure 14: Need to develop skills to change job or career



Respondents who are looking to change job or career in the next 1-2 years. Weighted base = 994; unweighted base = 1,048.

Respondents who have experienced a change to their work status since the start of the Coronavirus pandemic (March 2020) are more than twice as likely to want to change job or career compared to those who have not experienced any changes (44 per cent compared to 20 per cent). This includes around half of those who have already changed the type of work that they do/their career (50 per cent) and those who have started a new job (49 per cent). Respondents who have experienced a change to their work status are also more likely to say that they would need to develop their skills in order to change job or career (73 per cent, compared to 58 per cent of those who did not experience a change to their work status). This highlights an opportunity to engage people whose employment has been affected by the pandemic in learning and support them to change job/career.

Current or recent learners and those who wish to take up learning in the future are also more likely to want to change their job/career, and to believe that they need to develop their skills in order to do this:

- Nearly half (47 per cent) of current learners and 41 per cent of adults who have taken part in learning in the last three years want to change their job or career. This compares to just over a quarter (26 per cent) of respondents who last took part in learning over three years ago, and just 16 per cent of respondents who have not participated in learning since leaving full-time education.
- Around four in five current learners (81 per cent) and almost two-thirds (65 per cent) of recent learners believe that they would need to develop their skills to change job or career. This compares to 55 per cent of respondents who took part in learning over three years ago, and 58 per cent of those who have not participated in learning since leaving full-time education.

These findings highlight the importance of work/career-related goals as a motivating factor for learning.

Support needed to change job or career

Respondents were asked to select, from a list of options, what support they would find helpful if they were looking to change job or career (see Figure 15).

Respondents most commonly indicated that they would find learning or training helpful (31 per cent), followed by financial support, with a quarter (25 per cent) stating that they would find financial support towards the costs of learning or training helpful and one in five (20 per cent) respondents wanting financial support towards living costs. Respondents also indicated that they would find advice useful – to help choose the right job or career for them (23 per cent), to choose the right learning or training for them (17 per cent) and/or to help them get a new job (15 per cent). Seventeen per cent of respondents would value coaching and support when they first start a new job.

Almost a quarter (23 per cent) of respondents indicated that they do not know what support they would find helpful to if they wanted to change job or career. The data shows that respondents who do not wish to change job or career within the next one to two years are significantly more likely to say this (68 per cent, compared to 13 per cent of those who want to change job or career).

Figure 15: Support to change job or career



Base: respondents who are employed, self-employed, in full-time higher education, or unemployed and seeking work. Weighted base = 3,295; unweighted base = 3,419.

Note: Respondents could give up to three answers

Sources of information and advice

Respondents were asked where they would go to for information or advice if they were looking to change job or career (see Table 11). Around two in five respondents (41 per cent) indicated that they would use a general online search to find information or advice if they were looking to change job or career. Twenty-one per cent would go to friends, family or colleagues, while 18 per cent would go to Jobcentre Plus and 15 per cent to professional, sector or trade organisations. Respondents are less likely to say that they would seek information and advice through community providers such as Citizens' Advice (seven per cent); local community, voluntary or religious centres (four per cent); and local or national charities (three per cent).

A substantial proportion (15 per cent) of adults do not know where they would go for information or advice about changing job or career. This demonstrates a need to raise awareness of sources of careers information, advice and guidance for adults.

Table 11: Sources of information and advice to change job or career

Source	Percentage
General online search	41%
Friends, family or colleagues	21%
Jobcentre Plus	18%
Professional, sector or trade organisation	15%
Education provider such as a college or university	12%
National Careers Service	12%
Prospective employers	12%
Social media	12%
Your current employer (e.g. HR, line manager)	10%
Citizens' Advice	7%
Local community, voluntary or religious centre	4%
Unionlearn representative or Workplace Learning Advocate	4%
Local or national charity	3%
Other	1%
Don't know	15%

Base: respondents who are employed, self-employed, in full-time higher education, or unemployed and seeking work. Weighted base = 3,295; unweighted base = 3,419.

Note: Respondents could give up to three answers

These information sources can be grouped into the following categories:

- **Online**, including General online search and Social media
- **Personal or professional networks**, including Friends, family or colleagues; Professional, sector or trade organisation; Prospective employers; Your current employer; Unionlearn representative or Workplace Learning Advocate
- **Careers advisors**, including Jobcentre Plus and National Careers Service

- **Education providers**, including Education provider such as a college or university
- **Community provision**, including Citizens' Advice; Local community, voluntary or religious centre; Local or national charity

The data shows that adults are most likely to seek support and advice either online or through their personal or professional networks (both 48 per cent). Just over a quarter (26 per cent) would go to specialist careers advisors, while 13 per cent would seek advice through other community providers and 12 per cent through education providers (see Table 12). These findings highlight the need for credible and trustworthy information being available and easy to find online, as well as the importance of social networks, including employers, in providing information.

Table 12: Grouped sources of careers information and advice

Group	Percentage
Online	48%
Personal or professional networks	48%
Careers advisors	26%
Community providers	13%
Education providers	12%

Base: respondents who are employed, self-employed, in full-time higher education, or unemployed and seeking work. Weighted base = 3,295; unweighted base = 3,419.

Basic skills learning

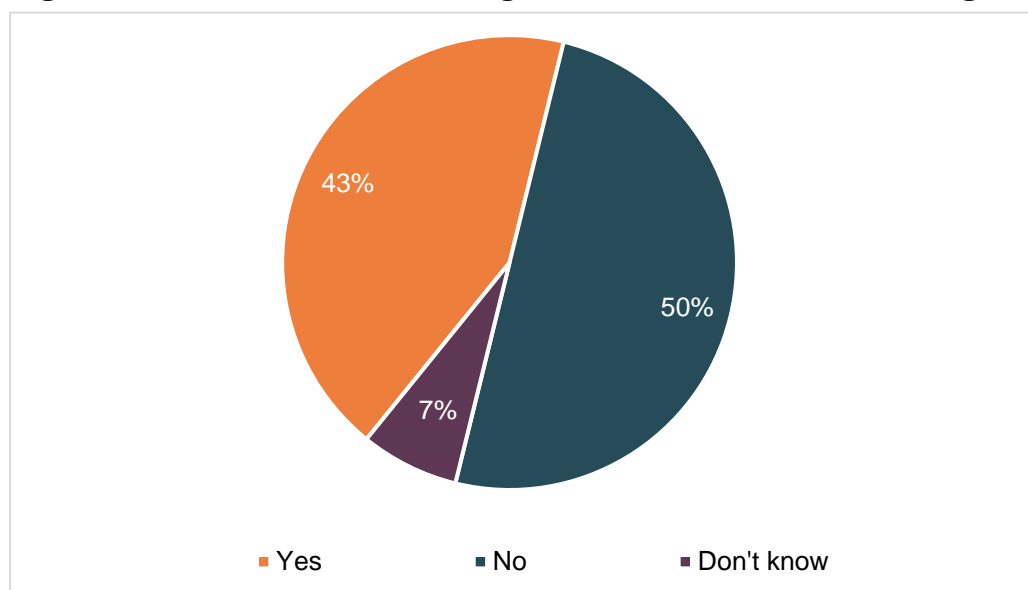
Twenty years on from the government's original Skills for Life strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills, one in five adults across England have low literacy and/or numeracy, equating to nine million people²¹. At the same time, participation in English, maths, and ESOL learning has fallen 60 per cent over the last decade.

Within this context, the 2021 survey included two questions exploring adults' awareness of free English and maths courses in England and factors that would encourage uptake of these courses. These questions were asked to respondents in England only.

Awareness of free English and maths courses

Respondents were asked whether they were aware that adults could access free courses to improve their English and maths skills, including Functional Skills and GCSE qualifications in English and maths. Just over two in five respondents (43 per cent) are aware of the availability of these courses, while half (50 per cent) are not (see Figure 16). Seven per cent of respondents indicated that they do not know whether they have heard of these courses.

Figure 16: Awareness of free English and maths courses in England



Base: all adults aged 17+ in England. Weighted base = 4,253. unweighted base = 4,323.

The following respondent groups are *least likely* to be aware of the availability of free English and maths courses:

- **Adults who left full-time education earlier**, with 38 per cent of those who left full-time education aged 16 or below and 42 per cent of those who left aged 17-18 aware that these courses are available. This compares to half (50 per cent) of

²¹ Learning and Work Institute (2021) [Getting the basics right: the case for action on adult basic skills](#)

those who left full-time education aged 19-20, and 48 per cent who left education aged 21+.

- **Adults with lower-level qualifications**, with just a third (33 per cent) of those who left school at 16 with no GCSEs/O Levels being aware that free English and maths courses are available. This compares to 36 per cent of respondents who left school at 16 with GCSEs/O Levels; 45 per cent of respondents with qualifications up to A Level or equivalent; and half (50 per cent) of respondents with degree-level qualifications.
- **Adults who have not engaged in learning recently**, with just 27 per cent of those who have not participated in learning since leaving full-time education being aware that free English and maths courses are available. This compares to 39 per cent of respondents who last took part in learning more than three years ago, and over half of current (58 per cent) or recent (53 per cent) learners.

These findings suggest that those who may benefit most from free English and maths provision – that is, those furthest away from learning and with no formal qualifications – are the least likely to be aware that such provision is available.

Factors that would encourage take up of free English and maths courses

Respondents were asked what would encourage them to take up a free course to improve their English and maths skills (see Table 13). Flexibility to fit learning around other commitments emerges as a key motivating factor. Around one in five adults (19 per cent) said that they would be encouraged to take up a course if it were delivered entirely online, with the same proportion saying they would be encouraged if the course times were flexible to fit around work or family commitments. Other factors commonly cited include a course location close to their home or work (16 per cent), understanding how the course would benefit them personally (15 per cent) and the course being delivered online with the option of face-to-face support from a tutor (14 per cent).

Two in five respondents (40 per cent) indicated that none of the options listed would encourage them to take up a free English or maths course, while six per cent do not know what would encourage them to do so. Respondents who left full-time education aged 16 or below (46 per cent), who left school without GCSEs/O Levels (46 per cent), and who have not engaged in learning in the last three years (52 per cent) are all more likely than the sample average to indicate that nothing would encourage them to take up a free English or maths course. This suggests that there is a need to proactively promote the benefits of English and maths learning, particularly for adults who have not recently engaged in learning or who lack formal qualifications.

Table 13: Factors that would encourage uptake of free English and maths courses

Motivation	Percentage
The option to take the course entirely online	19%
Flexible course times, for example to fit around work or family commitments	19%
A course location close to my home or work	16%
Understanding how the course would benefit me personally	15%
The option to take the course online, with face-to-face support from a tutor available if I need it	14%
More information about course providers and where I can study	11%
The option to study without the requirement to take an exam or qualification	10%
Help with costs such as childcare or travel	8%
Already qualified/no need	2%
Don't know	6%
None of the above	40%

Base: all adults aged 17+ in England. Weighted base = 4,253. unweighted base = 4,323.

Note: Respondents could give more than one answer

Annex: Methodology

The Adult Participation in Learning Survey deliberately adopts a broad definition of learning, including a wide range of formal, non-formal and informal learning, far beyond the limits of publicly offered educational opportunities for adults. Each year, a representative sample of approximately 5,000 adults aged 17 and over across the UK are provided with the following definition of learning and asked when they last took part in any, as well as how likely they are to take part in learning during the next three years:

‘Learning can mean practising, studying, or reading about something. It can also mean being taught, instructed or coached. This is so you can develop skills, knowledge, abilities or understanding of something. Learning can also be called education or training. You can do it regularly (each day or month) or you can do it for a short period of time. It can be full-time or part-time, done at home, at work, or in another place like college. Learning does not have to lead to a qualification. We are interested in any learning you have done, whether or not it was finished.’

The 2021 Adult Participation in Learning Survey included 5,058 adults aged 17 and over across the UK. This sample has been weighted (generating an effective sample of 5,054) to provide a nationally representative dataset. In addition to overall participation, the 2021 survey explores who participates in learning; motivations and barriers; how learning is undertaken; whether learning leads to a qualification; and benefits experienced as a result of learning. This year’s survey also asks adults about their future job or career plans and their awareness of English and maths courses for adults.

In 2021, the survey was part-funded by the Department for Education. Fieldwork was conducted by Kantar via their UK online omnibus survey, running from 30th September 2021 to 14th October 2021.

2021 is the first year in the history of the survey that fieldwork has been conducted online. Previous surveys have utilised a face-to-face approach, however, a shift in how people are communicating, with more households online than ever before, coupled with the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic creating challenges for face-to-face fieldwork, makes an online approach most appropriate. The shift to an online approach raises some potential issues regarding representation of older, disabled and digitally excluded adults, who we know from previous surveys are less likely to participate in learning. Weighting has been applied to mitigate this impact and to ensure a representative sample; however, year on year comparisons should be treated with some caution. It is anticipated that the Adult Participation in Learning Survey will continue to use an online approach in future. The 2021 results will therefore provide a baseline for future years.

Analysis

Analysis of the survey results predominately involved a mixture of descriptive statistics and the significance testing of demographic and key variable breakdowns. It should be noted that due to space limitations not all results have been included in this report. It should also be noted that all figures, breakdowns and analyses throughout the report are based on weighted data. For further analysis and access to the dataset, please email: Emily.Jones@learningandwork.org.uk

Measuring participation

The survey uses a deliberately broad definition of learning to capture as wide an array of learners as possible, which goes beyond participation in publicly funded provision. The interpretation of the definition is subjective and some individuals with similar experiences may classify themselves differently. An alternative approach was adopted by the National Adult Learner Survey (NALS),²² which uses a different definition and a series of questions to classify respondents into formal learners, non-formal learners, informal learners and non-learners. Participation rates measured through NALS are higher than those captured by the Participation Survey.

While respondents are given a definition of learning, the self-reported nature of the Participation Survey relies on individuals to make a judgement about how it relates to them. This can be influenced by their existing understanding of what learning is, which can relate to a range of factors such as the formality of the learning, duration and/or method of delivery. Respondents may therefore interpret questions differently, and they may provide incorrect information (either deliberately or through misremembering details). However, this risk is mitigated by the large sample size and by the general consistency of responses over the surveys' 25-year history. An alternative approach would be through use of nationally collected statistics on adult education such as in DfE and ESFA statistical releases.²³ However, such statistics are limited to publicly funded provision and are unable to identify qualitative issues such as barriers to learning or motivations.

Regression analysis

Binary logistic regression analyses were conducted to identify which demographic variables are significant predictors of certain binary outcomes (i.e. participation status and likelihood to participate in future learning). Predictor variables are variables found to influence an outcome once other variables have been taken into account. Therefore, a regression analysis helps to identify whether or not differences between demographic groups can be explained by differences in underlying variables. For the regression analyses described in this report, the variables tested were age, social class, working status and age of leaving full-time education.

²² https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/34798/12-p164-national-adult-learner-survey-2010.pdf

²³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/further-education-and-skills-statistical-first-release-sfr>

It should be noted that since working status is a categorical variable, it was necessary to choose one answer option as a reference point for other answers to be compared against. As the most common working status, full-time employment was chosen as the reference point.

A regression analysis produces a model of predictor variables for a particular outcome. The strength of the model is indicated by the proportion of the variance in answers that the model predicts i.e. how accurately a respondent's answer can be predicted from their demographic variables. For this survey, the models account for between 16 per cent and 22 per cent of the variation in participation rate, and between 18 and 24 per cent of the variation in likelihood to participate in future learning.

Definitions

The following definitions are used throughout the report:

- **Current learners** – respondents who are currently learning.
- **Recent learners** – respondents who are not currently learning, but have done so within the three years prior to interview.
- **Participation in learning** – respondents who are currently learning or who have done so in the three years prior to interview (current and recent learners).
- **Participation rate** – the proportion of respondents who are current or recent learners.
- **Main learning** – the primary item of learning in which respondents are engaged, or have been within the previous three years, as self-defined by respondents.
- **Social grade** – based on Office for National Statistics' occupational classification, derived from a set of questions to identify features of respondents' occupation and workplace. Social Grade A includes the upper and upper-middle classes and is generally grouped with Grade B, the middle classes. Grade C1 includes the lower-middle class, often called white-collar workers. Grade C2 mainly consists of skilled manual workers. Grade D comprises the semi-skilled and unskilled working class, and is usually linked with Grade E, those in the lowest grade occupations or who are unemployed.