LEARNING AND WORK INSTITUTE

Thirty years of learning: change without progress?

Adult Participation in Learning Survey 2026

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Executive summary

The 2026 Adult Participation in Learning Survey marks the 30th anniversary of the longest-running study of its kind. Three decades of evidence provide a perspective on what's changed in adult learning, what hasn't, and where progress is still needed. Strikingly, 43% of adults say they are learning currently or have done so in the last three years, only three percentage points higher than the level recorded in the first survey in 1996.

Adult learning has changed considerably over this time. Since the pandemic, learning for leisure or personal interest has become more common, rising from 20% of adult learners in 2019 to a record 46% in 2026. This is mirrored in the benefits reported by adult learners, such as personal development, meeting others, and improving health, with the latter increasing seven-fold since 2019 (3% to 20%). Online learning has also expanded rapidly, with nearly one half of learners reporting doing so online only (48%).

While technology has enabled new ways to learn, government and employer funding cuts mean fewer formal opportunities, unless adults can pay themselves. Adult skills funding in England is £1 billion lower than in 2010, while employers invest one third less training per employee than in 2005. Formal routes can help deepen and embed learning, maximise its social and community benefits, and provide portable skills that benefit people and employers.

Stark inequalities in access to learning remain, shaped by social class, age and prior education. Adults are 3% less likely to engage in learning for every year older they get. More than 3 million additional adults would be current or recent learners if all social grades matched the participation rate of the highest. Barriers such as cost, feeling too old, and a lack of interest are also cited as having an effect, meaning too many miss out on the benefits of learning.

The apparent stability of the long-term participation rate masks two periods of significant change. Participation fell to a record low of 33% in 2019, following years of declining government and employer investment, before rising rapidly after 2021 as leisure-based, independent and digitally enabled learning expanded, reaching a record high of 52% in 2024. By 2026, however, it had returned to 43%, close to its level 30 years ago. This shows that participation can change substantially, but recent increases have not yet been translated into sustained progress.

The central challenge is therefore not only to raise participation, but to sustain increases over time while narrowing inequalities between groups. Achieving this will require action both to widen access to learning and to build on the growth of leisure-based, independent and digitally enabled learning. New ways of learning for a new century.

Introduction

Learning and Work Institute (L&W) has been publishing the Adult Participation in Learning Survey for 30 years. It is the longest running study of its kind, and the definitive annual report on who's learning (or not), how and why.

Each year, a representative sample of around 5,000 people aged 17 and over from every nation and region of the UK are surveyed to produce the findings. The survey adopts a purposely broad definition of learning, extending beyond government and employer funded education and training opportunities for adults:

'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.'

Similarly to previous years, the 2026 survey explores who participates in learning, why and where, as well as benefits, barriers and challenges, and how these intersect with social class, age and prior learning. This year's report also explores how adult learning has changed in the 30 years since the first survey.

Fieldwork was conducted in June 2026 by Kantar, a market research company, via their UK online omnibus survey. The sample has been weighted to provide a dataset representative of the UK adult population. Further information about the methodology can be found in the Annex. To find out about the survey series and explore trend data through our interactive charts, visit www.learningandwork.org.uk.

The findings grant policymakers, commissioners, employers, and learning providers with an opportunity to make informed decisions, grasp the benefits of adult learning, and collectively move the UK towards being an economy and society where every adult has the opportunity to learn throughout life. This is the ambition of L&W's Get the Nation Learning campaign.

Chapter 1: Adult participation in learning – persistent inequalities and limited progress

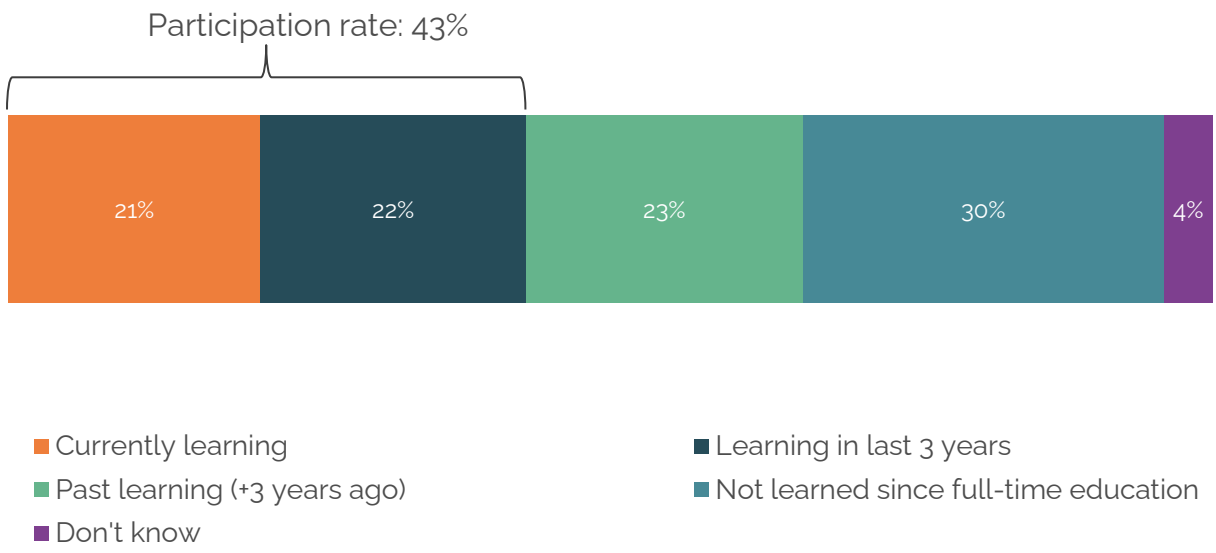
Key points

Levels of adult participation in learning have held broadly stable for 30 years, standing only 3 percentage points higher than in 1996. Inequalities persist across class, when people left full-time education, and age. There would be 3 million more current, or recent adult learners if every social grade had the same participation rate as the highest. UK adults are 3% less likely to learn for every year older they get.

The participation rate in 2026 is similar to 1996 and has largely remained around two-fifths of the adult population

In 2026, just over two-fifths (43%) of adults in the UK say they are currently learning (21%) or have done so in the last three years (22%) (see Figure 1). This is in line with 2025, when the participation rate was measured at 42%, indicating a 'new normal' at a higher level than before the Covid-19 pandemic, but lower than the spike seen at that time.

Figure 1: Participation in learning (2026)

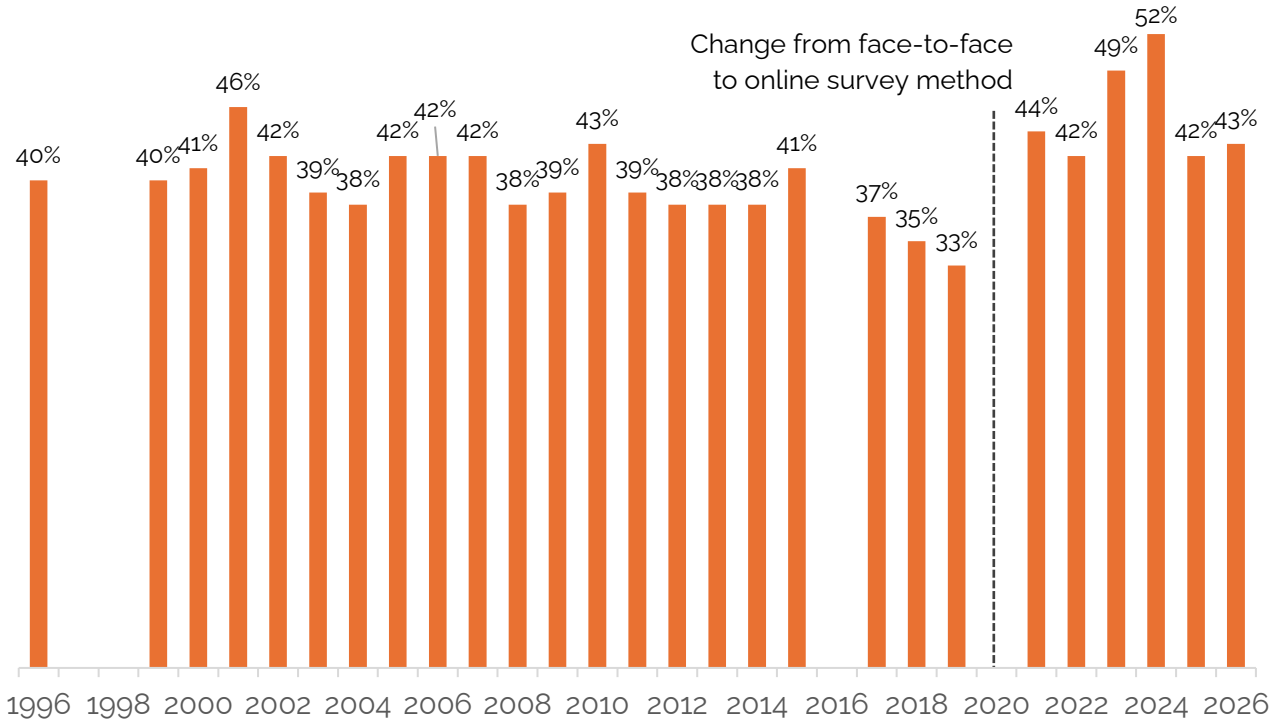


Base: All respondents aged 17 or over. 2026 weighted = 5092, 2026 unweighted = 5091.

Looking across the 30 years covered by Learning and Work Institute's Adult Participation in Learning Survey, the proportion of adults reporting learning currently or in the past three years has generally remained around two-fifths (see Figure 2). Participation stood at 40% when the survey began in 1996 and is only three percentage points higher in 2026. The most striking departure from this long-term pattern was the

fall to a record low of 33% in 2019, followed by a rapid rise to a record high of 52% in 2024.[1]

Figure 2: Participation in learning rate (1996-2026)



Base: all adults aged 17 and over. 2026 Weighted = 5092, 2026 unweighted = 5091.

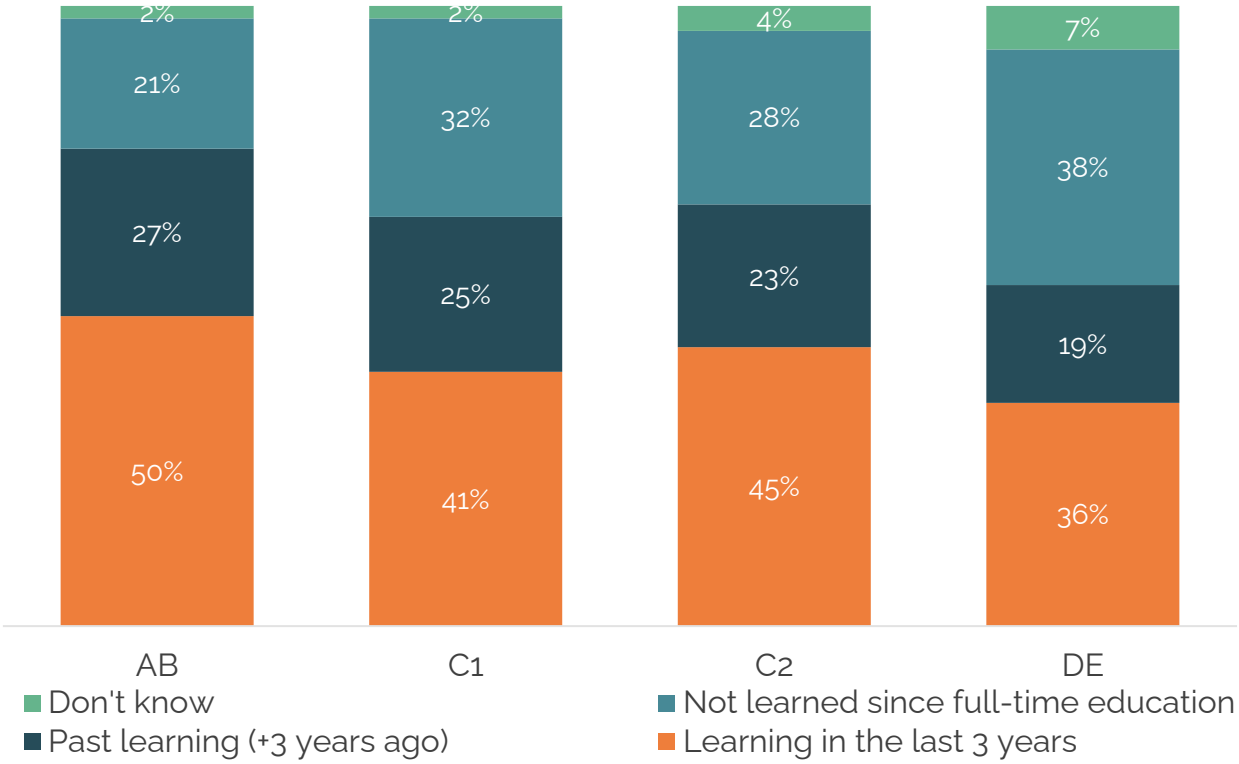
This relative stability in part reflects the stubbornness of inequalities in participation in learning between people with different characteristics, as well as a range of reported barriers. However, there has been some progress in narrowing participation gaps between some groups, while the reasons people learn and the types of learning they engage in have changed considerably.

The participation gap between the highest and lowest social grade remains stark

Social grade, or class, remains one of the strongest predictors of learning. In 2026, one half (50%) of those in social grade AB report learning in the last three years, compared to 36% of those in social grade DE (see Figure 3).

[1] Fieldwork for the survey was first conducted online in 2021. Prior to this, fieldwork was conducted via a face-to-face omnibus, however, a shift in how people are communicating, with more households online than ever before, coupled with the Covid-19 pandemic creating challenges for face-to-face fieldwork, has led to market research agencies shifting to an online approach. This 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 with surveys pre-2021 should be treated with some caution.

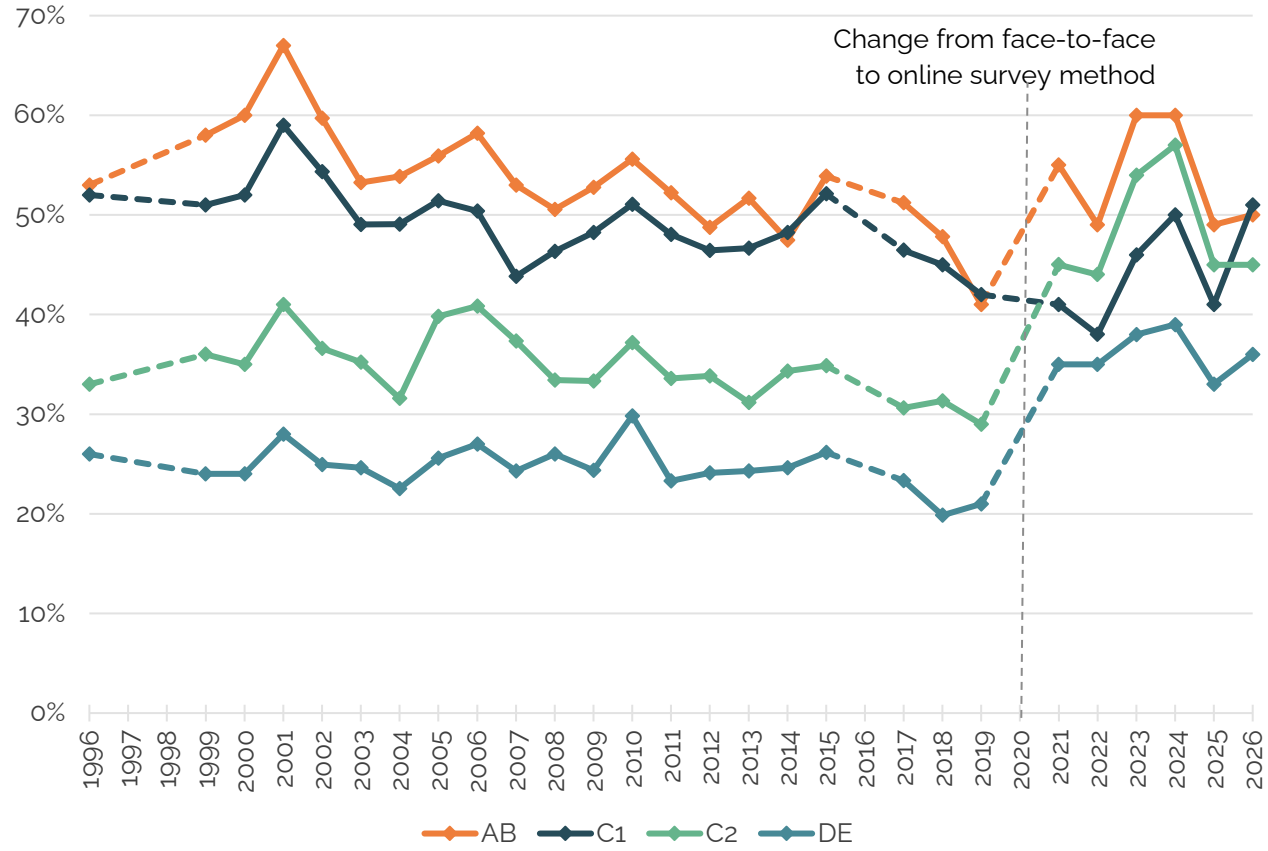
Figure 3: Participation by social grade (2026)



Base: all adults aged 17 and over. Weighted = 5092. Unweighted = 5091.

This participation gap appears to be narrower than in the first year of this survey. In 1996, adults in social grade AB were more than twice as likely as those in DE to report learning currently or in the previous three years (53% vs 26%) (see Figure 4). If we look at the trend over the last 30 years, we see this narrowing occurs from 2021 onwards, although this coincides with the survey switching from in-person to online data collection. The trend should therefore be treated with caution, as it may reflect changes in participation, the survey method, or a combination of the two.

Figure 4: Participation by social grade (1996-2026)



Base: 2026 All adults 17+ weighted = 5092, unweighted = 5091; AB weighted = 1560, unweighted = 1573; C1 weighted = 1116, unweighted = 1107; C2 weighted = 919, unweighted = 927; DE weighted = 1497, unweighted = 1484. Dashed lines represent years where the survey did not take place.

Participation among people who are out of work and seeking work also began to increase sharply from 2021. As nearly three quarters (73%) of those in this category are in social grade DE, this may have contributed to the apparent narrowing of the participation gap between social grades. However, most people in social grade DE are in employment. L&W's wider research has shown graduates are three times more likely than non-graduates to receive learning at work.[2] This risks leaving people who miss out being stuck in lower paid and lower skilled roles.[3] These inequalities are mirrored in our survey results: one half (49%) of adults employed in semi-skilled and unskilled DE occupations report learning at work in the past three years, compared to 61% of those working in higher and intermediate managerial, administrative and professional AB occupations. Further narrowing the participation rate between social grades AB and DE will therefore require wider access to workplace training.

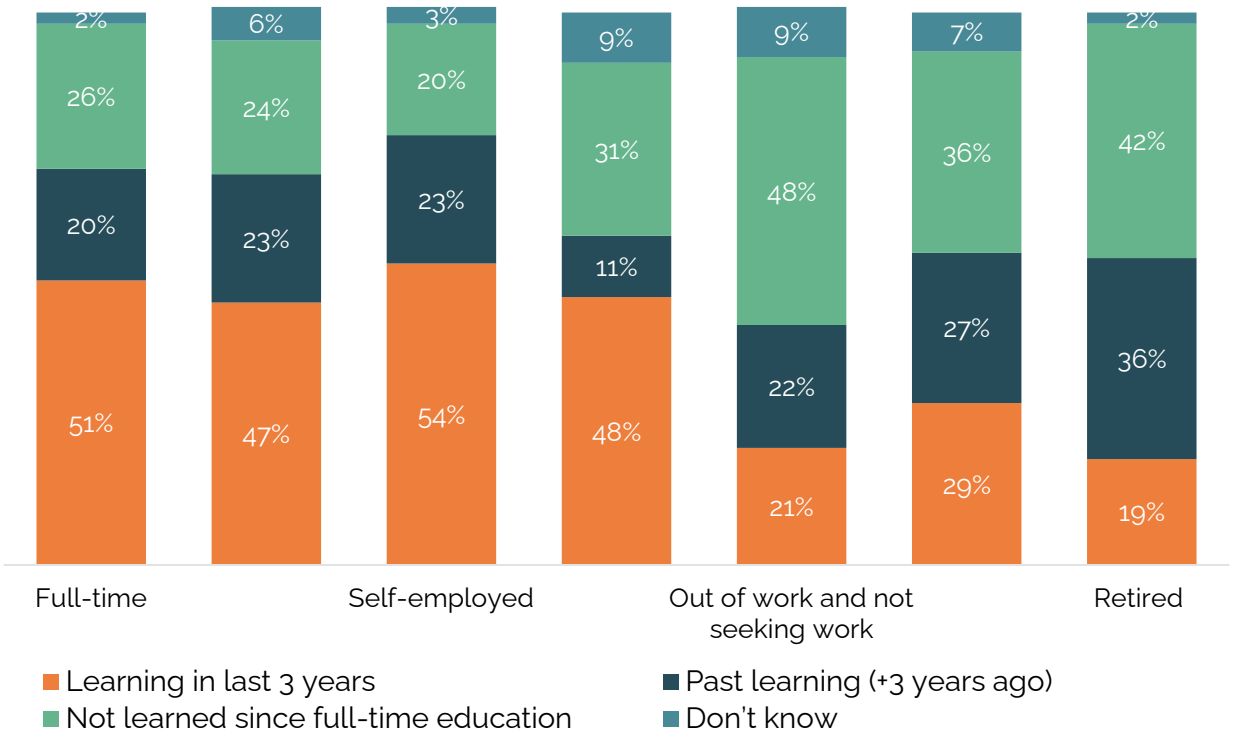
[2] Evans, S. (2022) Raising the bar: Increasing employer investment in skills. Learning and Work Institute.
[3] Revel. A, Vaid. L, Vempalli. S and Evans, S (2025) No train no gain. Learning and Work Institute.

Among adults aged 17 to 64, we estimate there would be more than 3 million additional current or recent learners if all social grades had the same participation rate as social grade AB. This estimate uses ONS data on the number of working-age people in each social grade alongside the participation rates identified in this survey. While this figure should be treated with caution, as it relies upon the results of one survey to make an estimate, it highlights the scale of progress still needed to reduce class-based inequalities in access to learning. Given the benefits learners report, explored later in this report, it also points to the considerable economic and social impact that could be achieved by narrowing these gaps.

Participation in learning among those in employment has remained stable, despite the growing need for upskilling and retraining

Around one half of adults in self-employment (54%), full-time employment (51%), part-time employment (47%), or who are out of work and seeking work (48%) report learning currently or in the last three years (see Figure 5). People in these groups are all significantly more likely to learn than people out of work and not seeking work (21%) or those who are retired (19%).

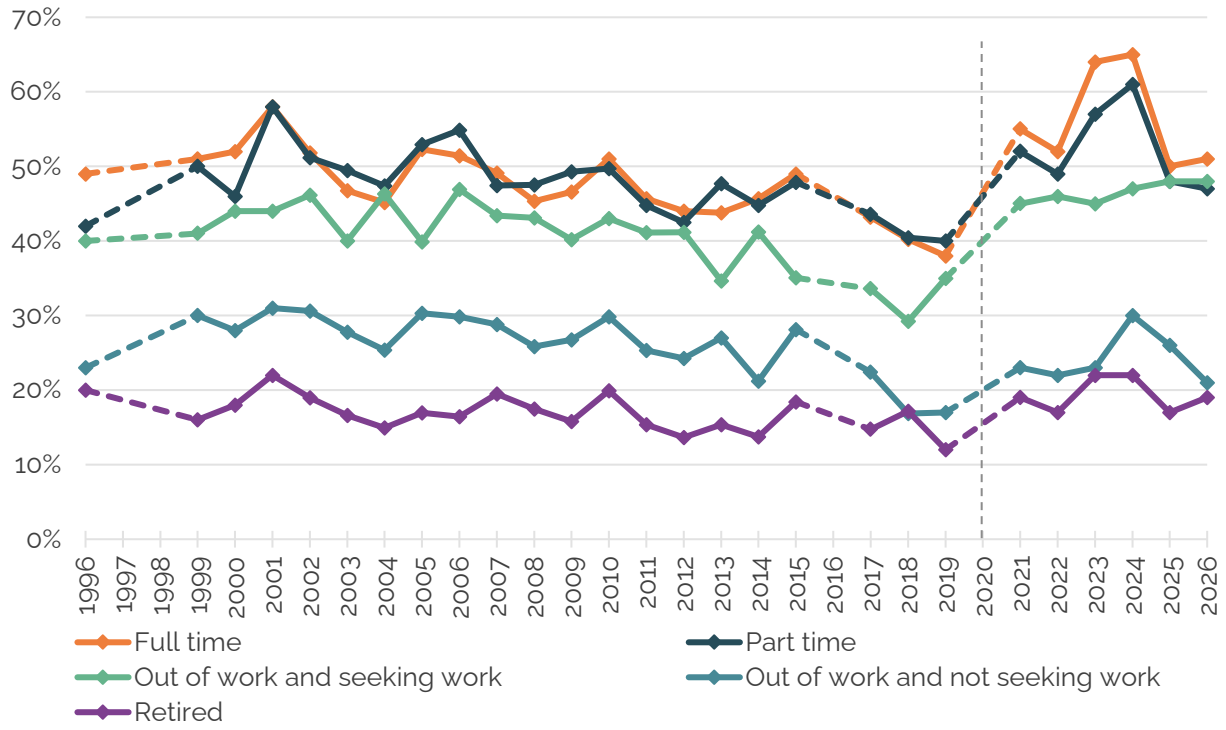
Figure 5: Participation rate by employment status (2026)



Base: all respondents aged 17+. Weighted = 5092, unweighted = 5091. Full-time weighted = 2192, unweighted = 2305; part-time weighted = 684, unweighted = 700; self-employed weighted = 221, unweighted = 225; out of work and seeking work weighted = 213, unweighted = 227; out of work and not seeking work weighted = 242, unweighted = 253; unable to work/disabled weighted = 171, unweighted = 180.

Looking across the full survey series, learning participation by employment status is broadly similar in 2026 to 1996. Rates have changed little among adults in full-time employment, rising two percentage points; among those out of work and not seeing work, falling two percentage points; and among retired adults, falling one percentage point (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Participation rate by employment status (1996-2026)



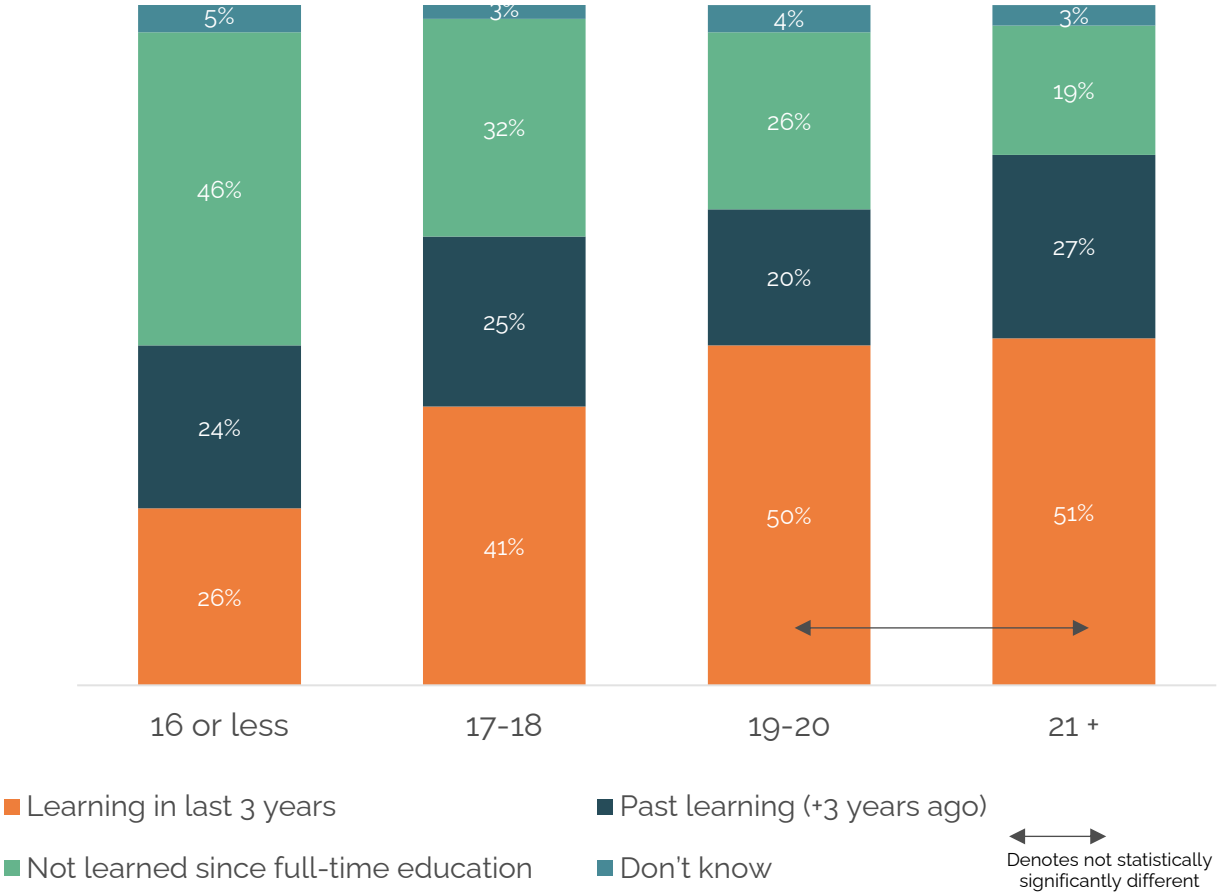
Base: All adults 17+. 2026 weighted = 5092, unweighted = 5091; full-time weighted = 2192, unweighted = 2305; part-time weighted = 684, unweighted = 700; out of work and seeking work weighted = 213, unweighted = 227; out of work and not seeking work weighted = 242, unweighted = 253; retired weighted = 1108, unweighted = 926. Dashed lines represent years where the survey did not take place.

This is mirrored in the proportion of learners reporting motivations related to upskilling and retraining, which is also quite stable. Around one quarter of current or recent learners say that a reason for learning is to help them to do their current job better in 2026 (27%), and this was true in 2015 (23%). Similarly, the proportion of current or recent learners citing 'seeking a new or different job' as a reason have also remained stable, at 17% since 2017. The proportion of current or recent learners who say they are learning to get a promotion or better pay stands at 15%, only four percentage points higher than in 2015. While learning for any reason or none yields a wide range of benefits, these figures contribute to our understanding of the relative scale of upskilling and retraining happening in the labour market.

People who left full-time education aged 16 and below remain significantly less likely to learn as an adult than everyone else

The 2026 survey shows a clear relationship between time spent in full-time education (FTE) and participation in learning as an adult. Barely one quarter (26%) of adults who left FTE aged 16 or under are learning currently or in the last three years. This compares to around one half of those who left aged 19-20 (50%) or aged 21 and over (51%) (see Figure 7).

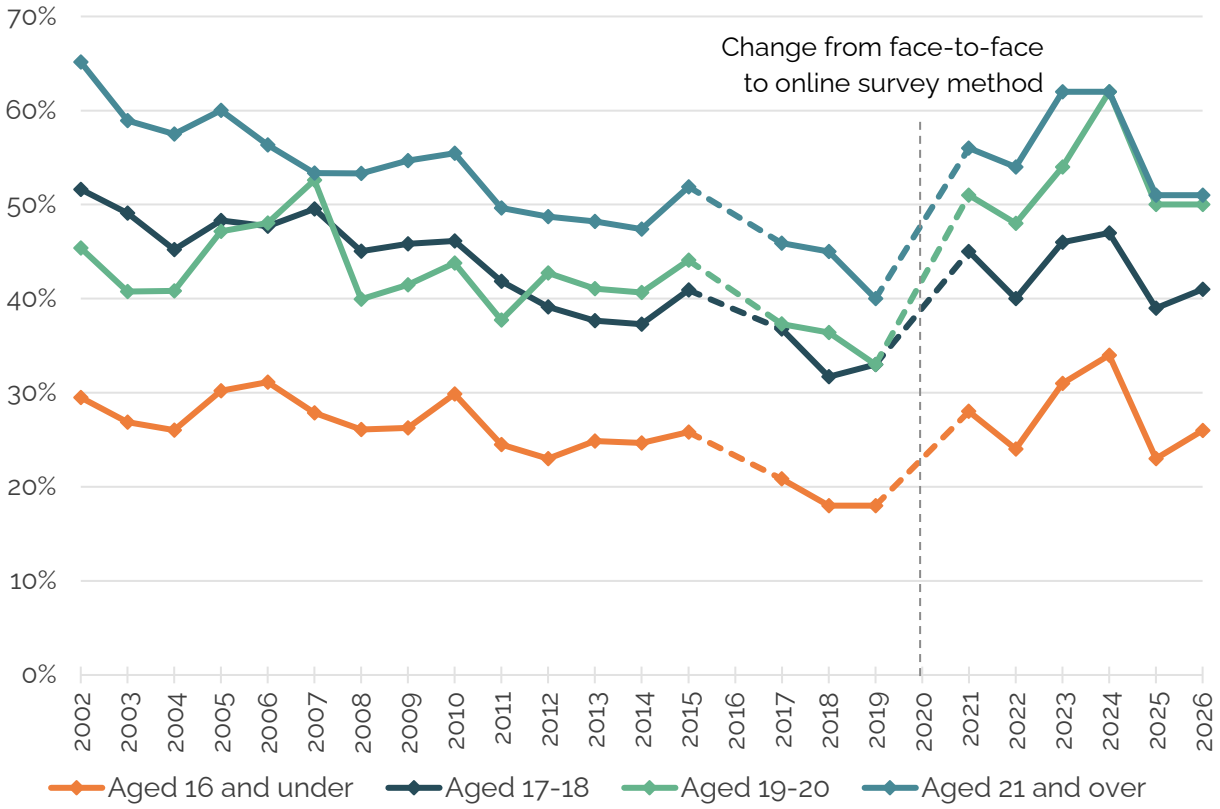
Figure 7: Participation by age of leaving full-time education (2026)



Base: all adults aged 17 and over. Weighted = 5092, Unweighted = 5091.

The survey began recording the age at which respondents left FTE in 2002. At that time, three in ten (30%) of adults who left FTE aged 16 or under reported learning currently or in the past three years, compared with 65% who left FTE aged 21 or over. This 35-percentage point gap is the largest the survey has recorded in the 24 years since (see Figure 8). The gap narrowed in the early to mid-2000s and has remained broadly stable since. Among people who left FTE aged 19-20, participation has increased from 45% in 2002 to 50% in 2026. The gap between those who left FTE aged 19-20 versus aged 21 and above has disappeared, with the surveys in 2025 and 2026 showing no difference between these groups.

Figure 8: Participation rate by age of leaving FTE (2002-2026)



Base: 2026 all adults aged 17 and over. Weighted = 5092. Unweighted = 5091. Dashed lines represent years where the survey did not take place.

Despite some variation between groups over time, one finding has remained consistent: adults who leave full-time education aged 16 and below are significantly less likely to engage in learning than all other groups. Several factors may help explain this.

Firstly, higher education expansion. In 2006-7, 21.1% of 18-year-olds were participating in higher education.[4] This now stands at 30.6%.[5] This means that those who report leaving FTE aged 16 or under are more likely to be from older age groups than previously. This has also been contributed to by legislation requiring those aged 16-18 in England to remain in full-time education at a school or college, start an apprenticeship or participate in part-time education and training while working. As age is a key predictor of learning, a rising age profile among those who left FTE aged 16 or under could be having an effect in limiting progress on participation amongst this group. This analysis would also appear to be supported by the proportion of total survey respondents who report leaving FTE aged 16 and below. In 2003, this was 60%

[4] Department for Education. (2019) Participation Rates in Higher Education: Academic Years 2006/2007 – 2017/2018
[5] Department for Education. (2021) Participation measures in higher education Academic year 2019/20

of total survey respondents. With the expansion of higher education and an ageing profile among this group, this has declined to 28% of total survey respondents in 2026.

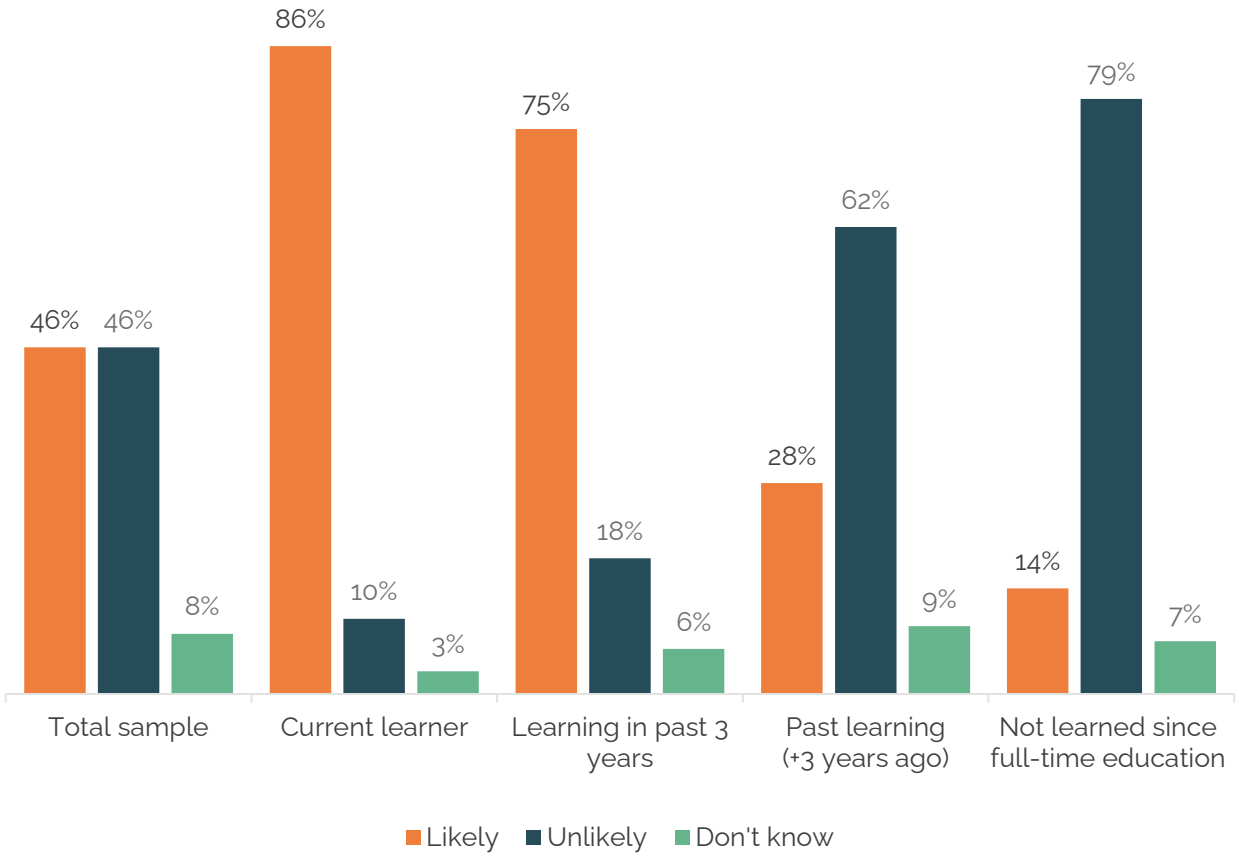
Secondly, only one half (50%) of people who left FTE aged 16 and below report engaging in learning again at any stage in adult life. This makes increasing participation among people in this group even more difficult. While this group tends to skew older, making them less likely to be current or recent learners, an adult life without learning began for around one half of people in this category at age 16, regardless of what age they are now.

Researchers have highlighted[6] the persistence of the 'Matthew effect' of cumulative advantage and disadvantage in adult learning. As a result of non-participation, adults with lower skills proficiency and lower levels of formal educational attainment may find it more difficult to engage in adult learning opportunities than those with higher skills proficiency and education attainment. Our survey findings have also identified a cycle of participation in learning driving further appetite for learning.

The 2026 survey shows 86% of current adult learners are expecting to engage in learning again in the next three years. This compares to just 14% of those who haven't engaged in learning since leaving FTE (see Figure 9). Indeed, among those who left FTE aged 16 and below who have not engaged in learning in the past three years, the biggest reported barrier to learning is not wanting to learn (37%). This group is significantly more likely to report this than the overall average (31%), and particularly those who finished FTE aged 21+ who have not engaged in learning in the past three years (20%).

[6] OECD (2025) Education at a Glance 2025: To what extend do adults participate in education and training?

Figure 9: Likelihood of future learning (2026)

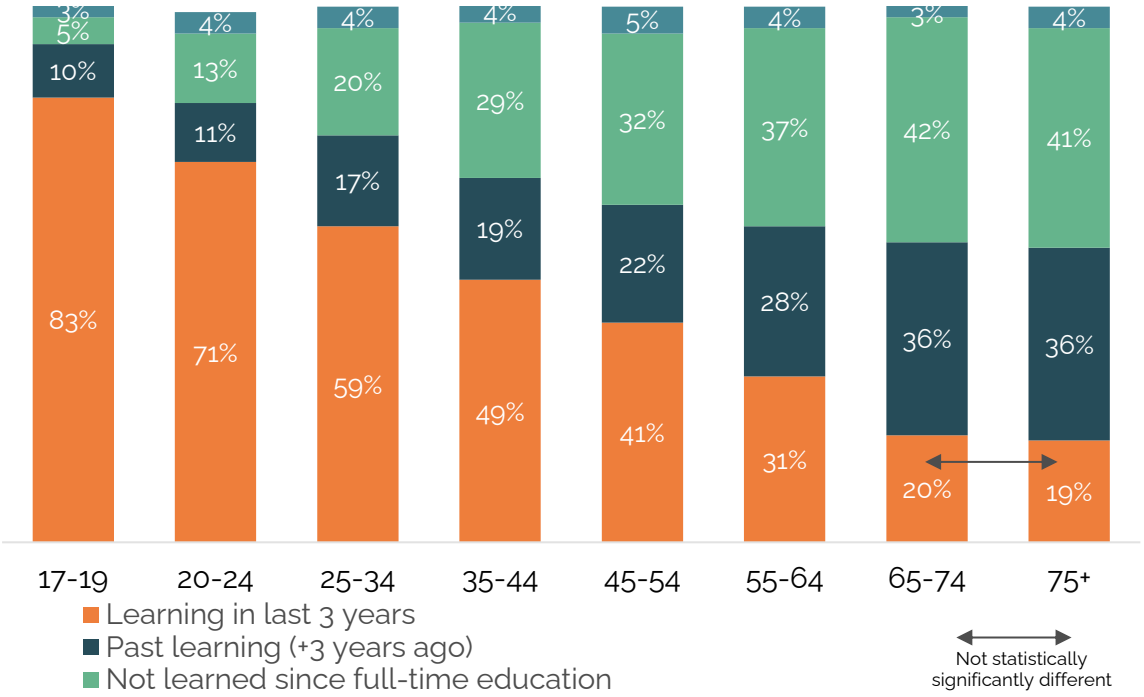


All adults 17+ weighted = 5092, unweighted = 5091; current learner weighted = 1113, unweighted = 1079; learning in past 3 years weighted = 1114, unweighted = 1145; past learning (+3 years ago) weighted = 1191, unweighted = 1148; not learned since full-time education weighted = 1515, unweighted = 1488.

Age remains a key predictor of learning, and UK adults are 3% less likely to learn for every year older they get

The 2026 survey confirms that age remains one of the strongest predictors of participation in learning. Seven in ten (71%) of 20–24-year-olds report learning currently or in the last three years, compared with 59% of those aged 25-34 and 49% of those aged 35-44 (see Figure 10). Our analysis found that participation falls progressively across the age groups, with people being 3% less likely to learn in every year of adult life.[7]

Figure 10: Participation by age (2026)

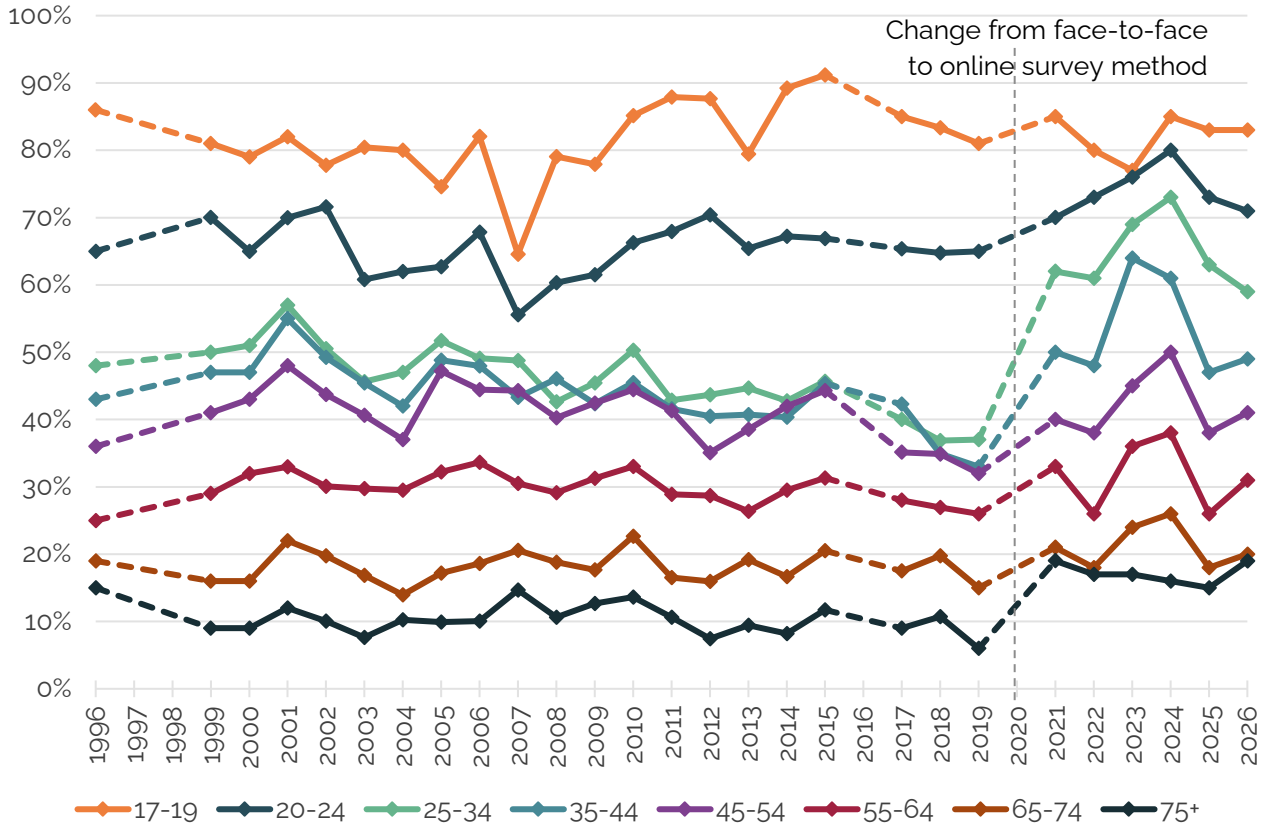


Base: all adults aged 17 and over. Weighted = 5092. Unweighted = 5091.

Participation has increased across all age categories since 1996, broadly in line with the slight rise in the overall participation rate. The largest increase has been among 25–34-year-olds, rising by 11 percentage points, from 48% to 59%. Increases among other groups of working-age adults have been more modest at between five and six percentage points (see Figure 11). Again, this comes with the caveat that these changes may be real or may be the result of the change in survey method.

[7] Our analysis found that, after accounting for factors including region, employment status, age leaving full-time education, social grade and ethnicity, the likelihood of participating in learning decreases with age.

Figure 11 Participation rate by age (1996-2026)



Base 2026: All adults 17+. 17-19 weighted = 199, unweighted = 210; 20-24 weighted = 444, unweighted = 463; 25-34 weighted = 843, unweighted = 901; 34-44 weighted = 802, unweighted = 856; 45-54 weighted = 822, unweighted = 866; 55-64 weighted = 793, unweighted = 838; 65-74 weighted = 838, unweighted = 677; 75+ weighted = 351, unweighted = 280. Dashed lines represent years where the survey did not take place.

The expansion of higher education may have played some role in underpinning increased participation for people aged 25-34, both directly and indirectly. Firstly, the cohort-based higher education participation rate by age 30 was around 30-32% in the mid-1990s. This now stands at 47%[8]. Secondly, with more people remaining in education for longer, early career stages are also happening later for many. With people more likely to receive job related training in the earlier parts of their career as they develop their skills and change roles more often[9], this may have had an effect.

As well as being more likely to participate in learning overall, people in younger age groups are also more likely to be learning for work and career-related reasons than those in middle or older age groups (61% learners aged 19-24, compared to 55% learners aged 25-49 and 53% learners aged 50-64), although the difference between those aged 19-24 and 25-49 is not statistically significant.

[8] Bolton. P (2026) Higher education student number. House of Commons Library.
[9] Revel. A, Vaid. L, Vempalli. S and Evans, S (2025) No train no gain. Learning and Work Institute.

This pattern is likely to need to accelerate further. In the past, structural change was largely accommodated by people retiring from shrinking sectors and new labour market entrants joining growing ones.[10] An ageing population, longer working lives and faster technological change mean this is no longer sufficient: people increasingly need opportunities to upskill and retrain throughout their careers. With more than 80% of the UK's 2035 workforce already having left full-time education[11], work and career-related learning will need to extend more consistently across more working-age groups.

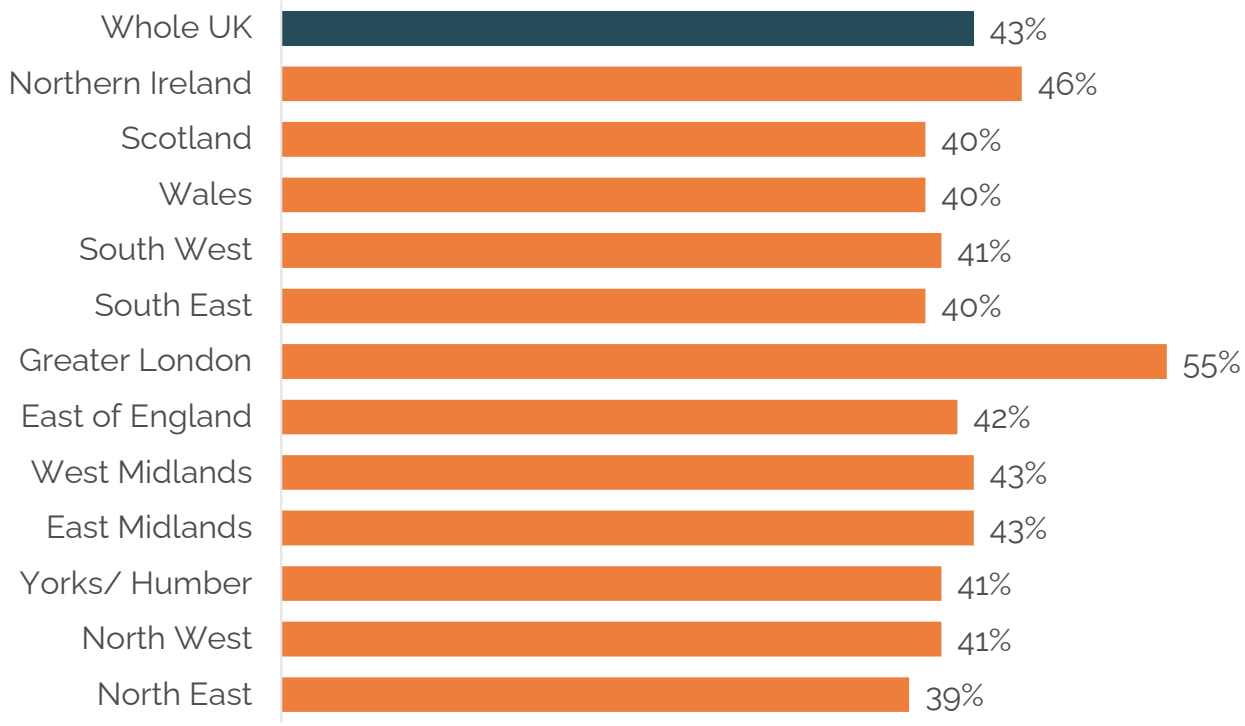
People over State Pension age remain significantly less likely to engage in learning than all other age groups. This is concerning given the role adult learning can play in reducing loneliness and improving connection, health and wellbeing.[12] Nearly one million people aged 65 and over report often feeling lonely[13], while the 2026 survey shows that older people are especially likely to report experiencing wellbeing benefits. For example, learners aged 75+ (32%) and 65-74 (24%) are significantly more likely than the wider sample of learners (20%) to report that their health and wellbeing have improved as a result of engaging in learning. Chapter 2 will explore the benefits of learning and how these have changed over time, as well as the role of feeling too old as a barrier to learning.

[10] Cominetti. N, Costa. R, Eyles. A, Moev. T and Ventura. G (2022) Changing jobs? Change in the UK labour market and the role of worker mobility. Resolution Foundation.
[11] Evans. S and Egglestone. C (2024) The great skills divide: how learning inequalities risk holding the UK back. Learning and Work Institute.
[12] Aleynikova, E. Atay, A. James, J. and Stevenson, A. (2022), Social Prescribing and Adult Education in London, Learning and Work Institute.
[13] Age UK (2024), You are not alone in feeling lonely.

Inequalities across regions broadly reflect wider demographic inequalities

In 2026, Greater London has a significantly higher learning participation rate than other English regions and UK nations (55% compared to an average of 43%, see Figure 12).

Figure 12: Participation rate by region and UK nation (2026)



Base: All respondents aged 17 or over. Weighted base = 5092, unweighted base = 5091.

Across the history of the survey, geographical differences are volatile, likely due to regional sample sizes. However, our analysis has shown that these differences are being primarily driven by the characteristics of people living there, such as age, social grade, employment status, and age leaving FTE.[14] They are about demographics more than geography. It should also be noted that, regional or national averages can mask substantial differences within these areas. However, sample sizes do not allow for analysis at subregional level.

[14] Nermond, O. Egglestone, C. Manetti, L and Jones, E. Adult Participating in Learning Survey 2024. Learning and Work Institute.

Chapter 2: Adult learning delivers benefits but too many adults face barriers

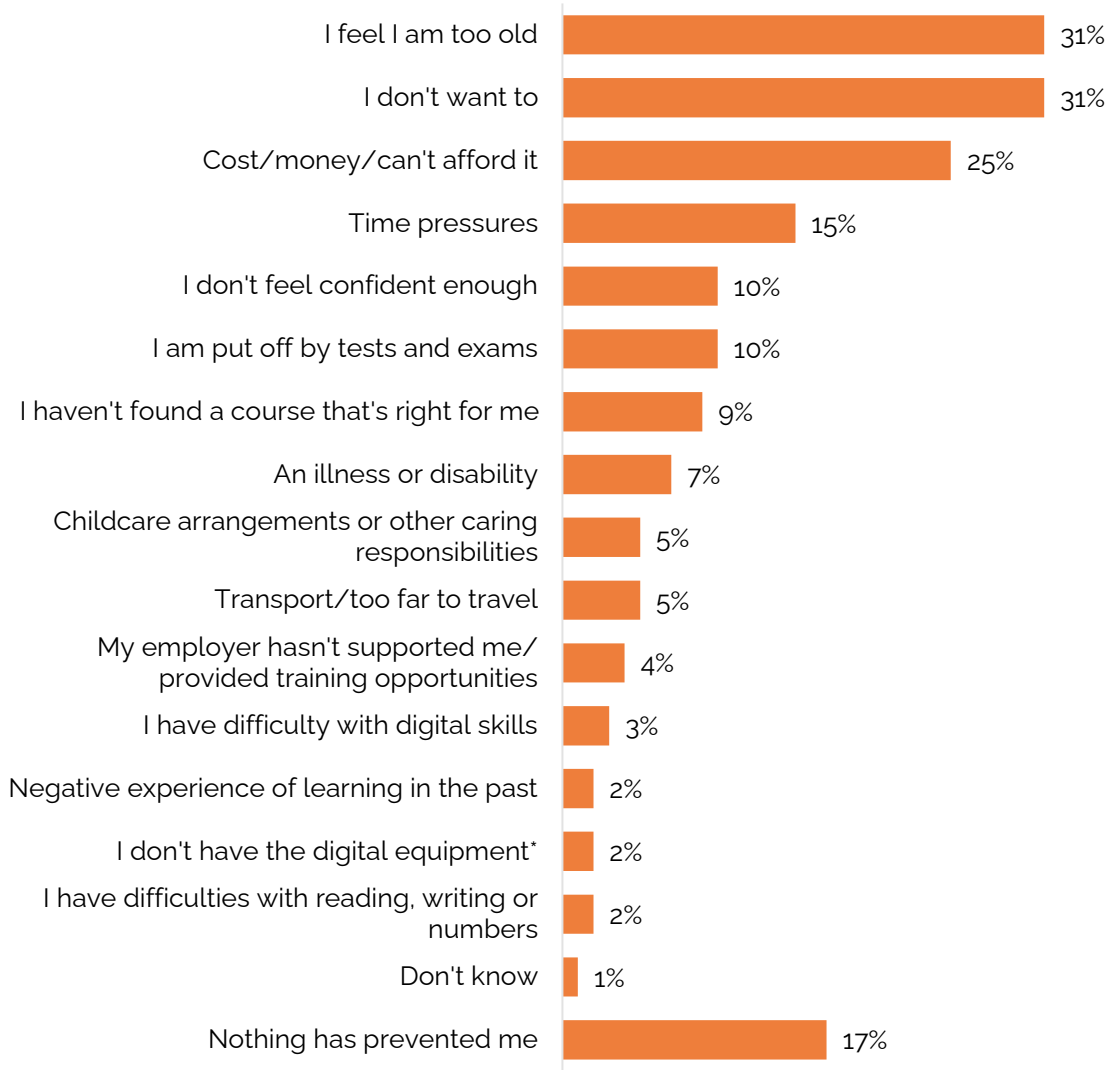
Key points

Feeling too old (31%), cost (25%), and not wanting to learn (31%) are the foremost reported barriers to learning. Challenges reported by learners have remained unchanged, with time pressures (25%), cost (19%), and a lack of confidence (19%) the most cited. Nearly everyone (91%) who engages in adult learning reports benefits.

Increasing participation means tackling barriers

In 2026, feeling too old (31%), not wanting to learn (31%) and cost (25%) are the three most reported barriers among adults who say they haven't learned in the past three years (see Figure 13).

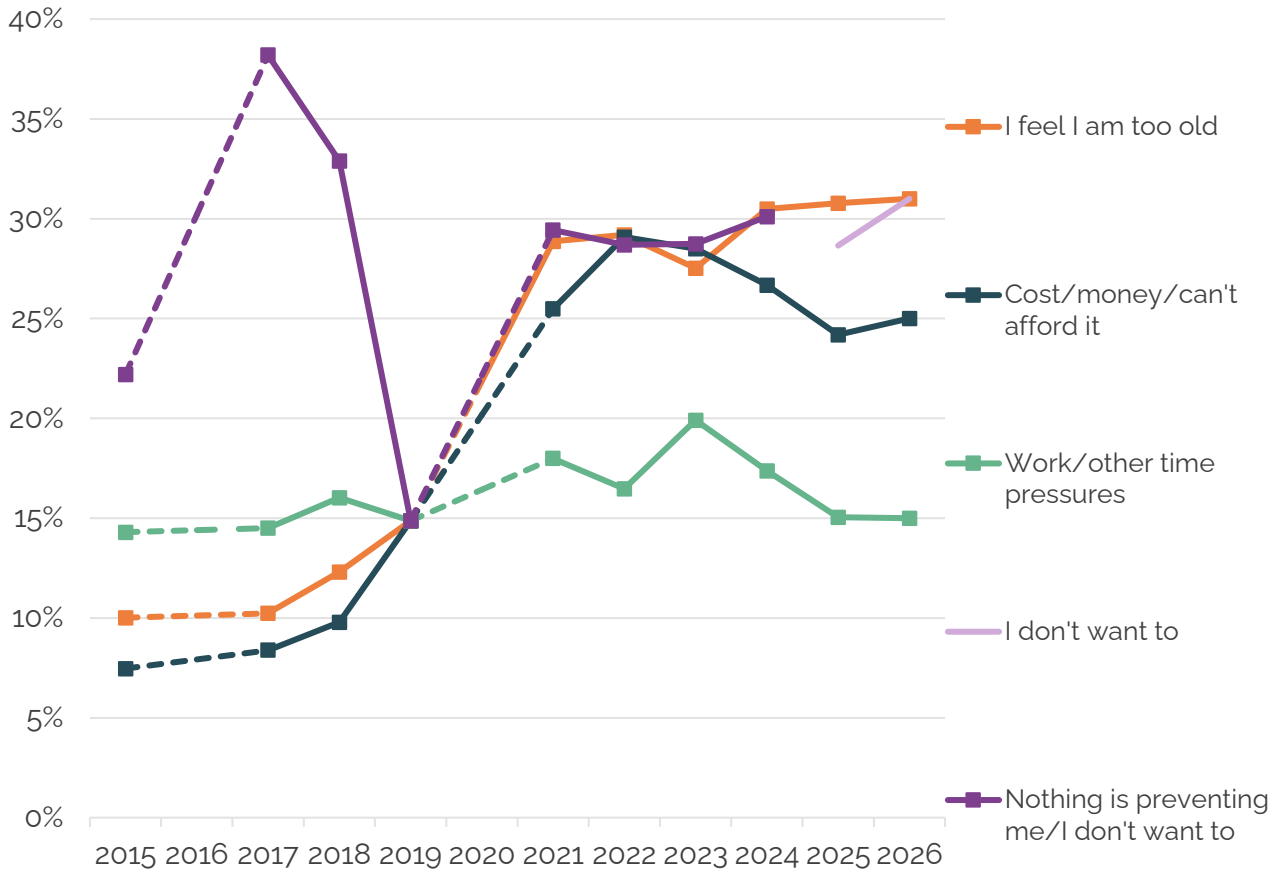
Figure 13: Barriers experienced by non-recent learners (2026)



Base: all who have not studied in the past three years. Weighted = 2705, unweighted = 2636.

Since the question on barriers was introduced in 2015, there have been particularly large increases in the proportions citing cost and feeling too old to learn (Figure 14). It should be noted that these increases occurred from 2021, when the survey method changed, and so these findings should be interpreted with caution. In addition, these reflect what adults are *saying* are barriers in a survey; their underpinning reasons are likely to be more complex and interacting, so it does not follow that just addressing the cited barriers will necessarily lead to higher participation in learning.[15]

Figure 14: Barriers to learn (2015-2026)



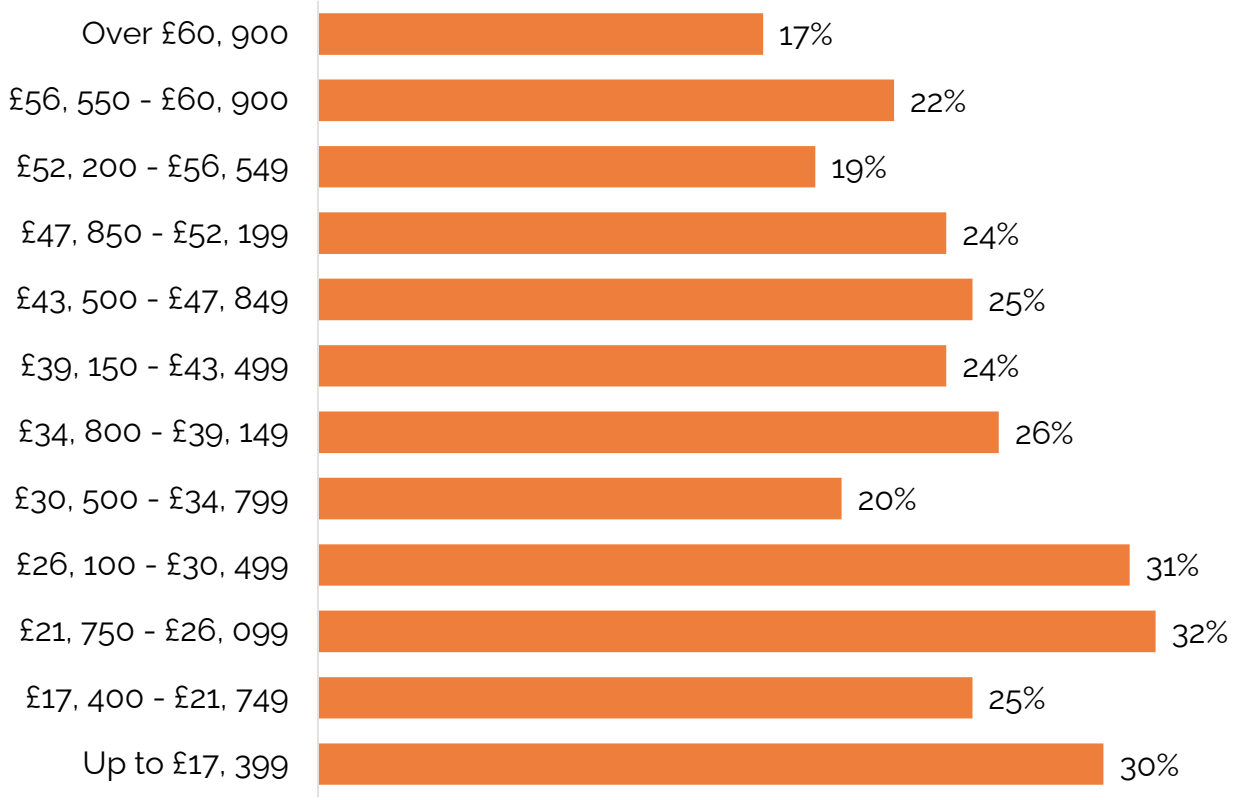
Base: all who have not studied in the past three years. Weighted = 2705, Unweighted = 2636. Dashed lines represent years where the survey did not take place.

Cost may refer either to the upfront price of a course, to income foregone while taking part in training, or any costs associated with participating, for example transport or childcare. In 2015, when this question was introduced, just 7% of adults who had not learned in the previous three years cited cost as a barrier. Since then, this figure has increased nearly fourfold, to 25%, alongside sharp rises in the cost of living.[16] While there is some unevenness across income bands, the broad picture is that people in

[15] Jones, E and Aldridge, F. (2019) Decision making of adult learners. Learning and Work Institute.
[16] House of Commons (2026) Cost of living and inflation

lower income bands are significantly more likely to report cost as a barrier than those in higher income bands (Figure 15).

Figure 15: Cost as a barrier, by income band (2026)



Base: All respondents who have not studied in the past three years. Total weighted base = 2,705; total unweighted base = 2,636. Individual income-band bases vary.

People who are out of work and seeking work are also significantly more likely to cite cost as a barrier (42%). L&W has recommended allowing people on Universal Credit to undertake training of up to one year where their Work Coach agrees, as some currently risk losing their benefits if they enrol on certain courses.[17] Existing Adult Skills Fund entitlements for unemployed adults, including level 2 provision and the level 3 Free Courses for Jobs offer also need effective promotion.[18]

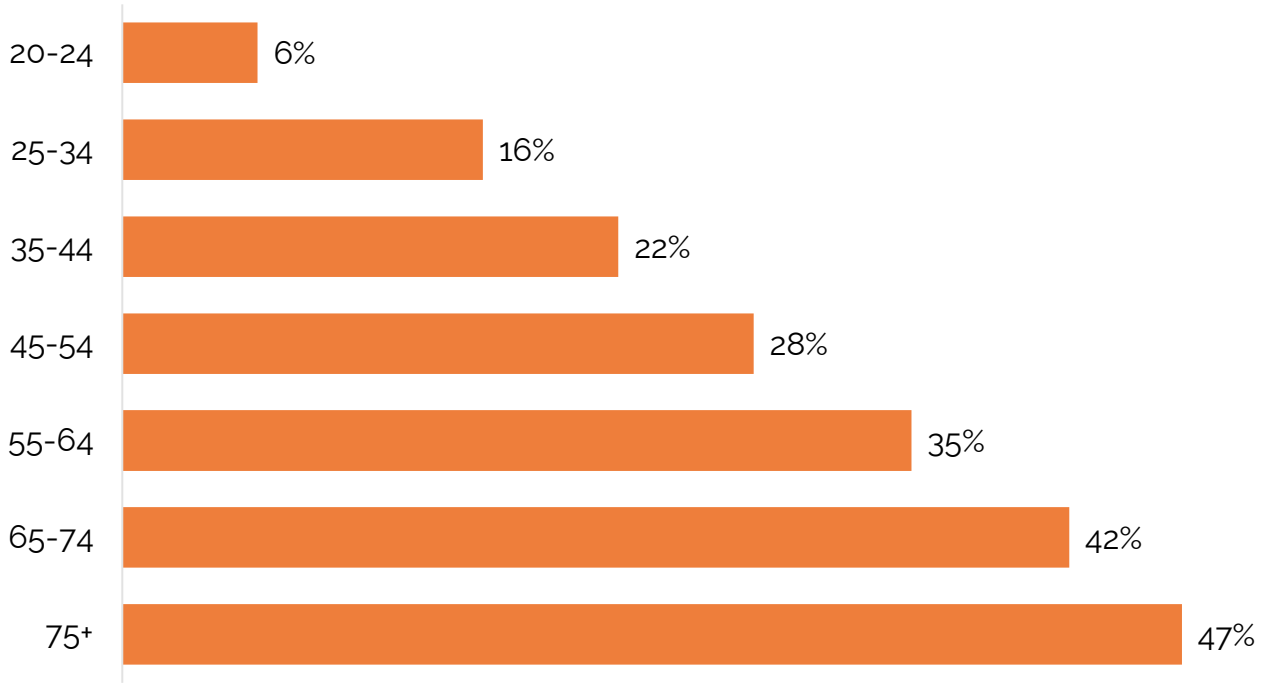
The proportion of non-learners reporting that they feel too old to learn has trebled from 10% in 2015 to 31% in 2026, with this increase accelerating between 2019 and 2021. This could in part relate to an ageing population, as older adults are more likely to report feeling too old to learn and the survey sample has aged alongside the wider

[17] Evans. S (2025) Ambition Skills: toward a lifelong learning century. Learning and Work Institute.
[18] Department for Education and Department for Work & Pensions (2026) Adult skills fund: funding and performance management rules 2026 to 2027.

population. For example, the proportion of respondents aged 65-74 was 6 percentage points higher in 2021 than in 2019 (although 75+ was 2 percentage points lower).

People are more likely to report feeling too old to learn the older they get. Compared to the average of 31% among those who have not engaged in learning in the past three years, 35% of those aged 55–64, 42% of those aged 65–74 and 47% of those aged 75 and over report this as a barrier (see Figure 16). Changing perceptions of when learning should happen and who it is for, alongside stronger backing for lifelong learning from governments, individuals and employers, will be essential if adults of all ages are to engage with education and training that can improve their lives, confidence and careers.

Figure 16: Proportion of respondents reporting they are too old to learn, by age group (2026)

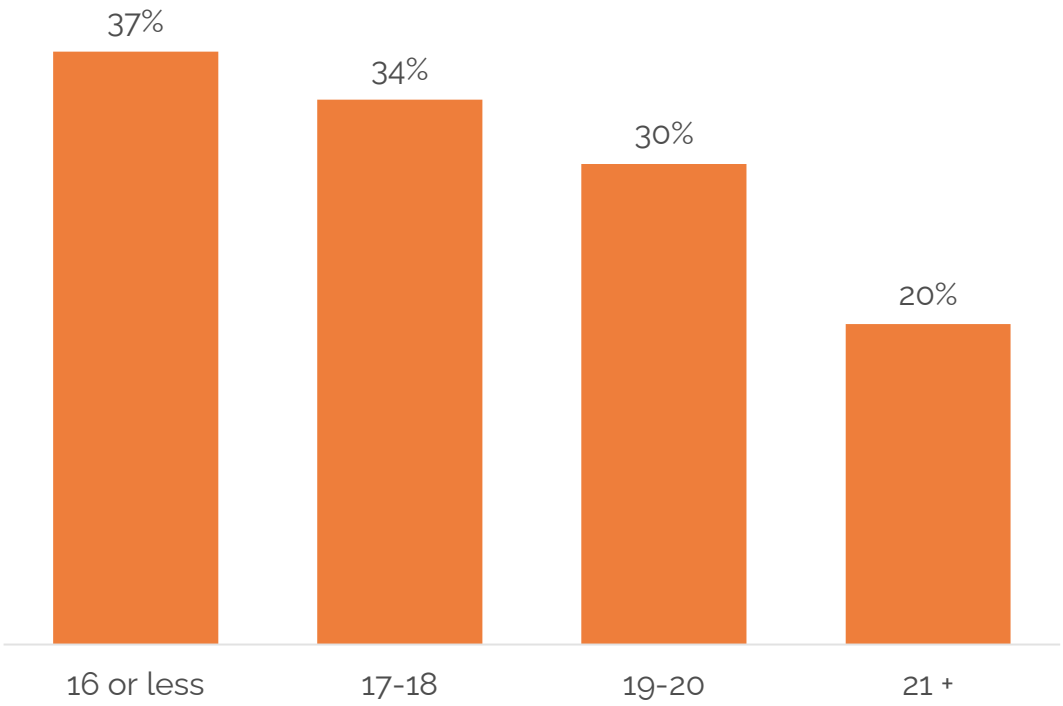


Base: All who have not studied in the last 3 years, weighted = 2705, unweighted = 2636; 20-24 weighted = 109, unweighted = 114; 25-34 weighted = 309, unweighted = 329; 35-44 weighted = 382, unweighted = 408; 45-54 weighted = 443, unweighted = 468; 55-64 weighted = 515, unweighted = 544; 65-74 weighted = 647, unweighted = 525; 75+ weighted = 271, unweighted = 217. The age category 17-19 has been excluded due to low sample size of people in this age bracket who have not studied in the past 3 years (weighted = 29, unweighted = 31).

One in three adults (31%) who haven't engaged in learning recently report not wanting to (see Figure 17). As discussed in Chapter 1, those who left full-time education (FTE) aged 16 or under are more likely to report this, particularly compared to those who left FTE aged 21 and over. This group is also significantly more likely to cite not feeling confident enough (13%, compared with a 10% average) and more than twice as likely to

do so as those who left FTE aged 21 or over. This may indicate a relationship between people's experience of FTE, when they left it, and their appetite for adult learning. However, retired people are also more likely to report that they do not want to learn and are more likely to have left FTE aged 16 or under, indicating that there could be a relationship between not wanting to learn and feeling too old to do so.

Figure 17: Proportion of respondents reporting that they do not want to learn, by age of leaving full-time education (2026)



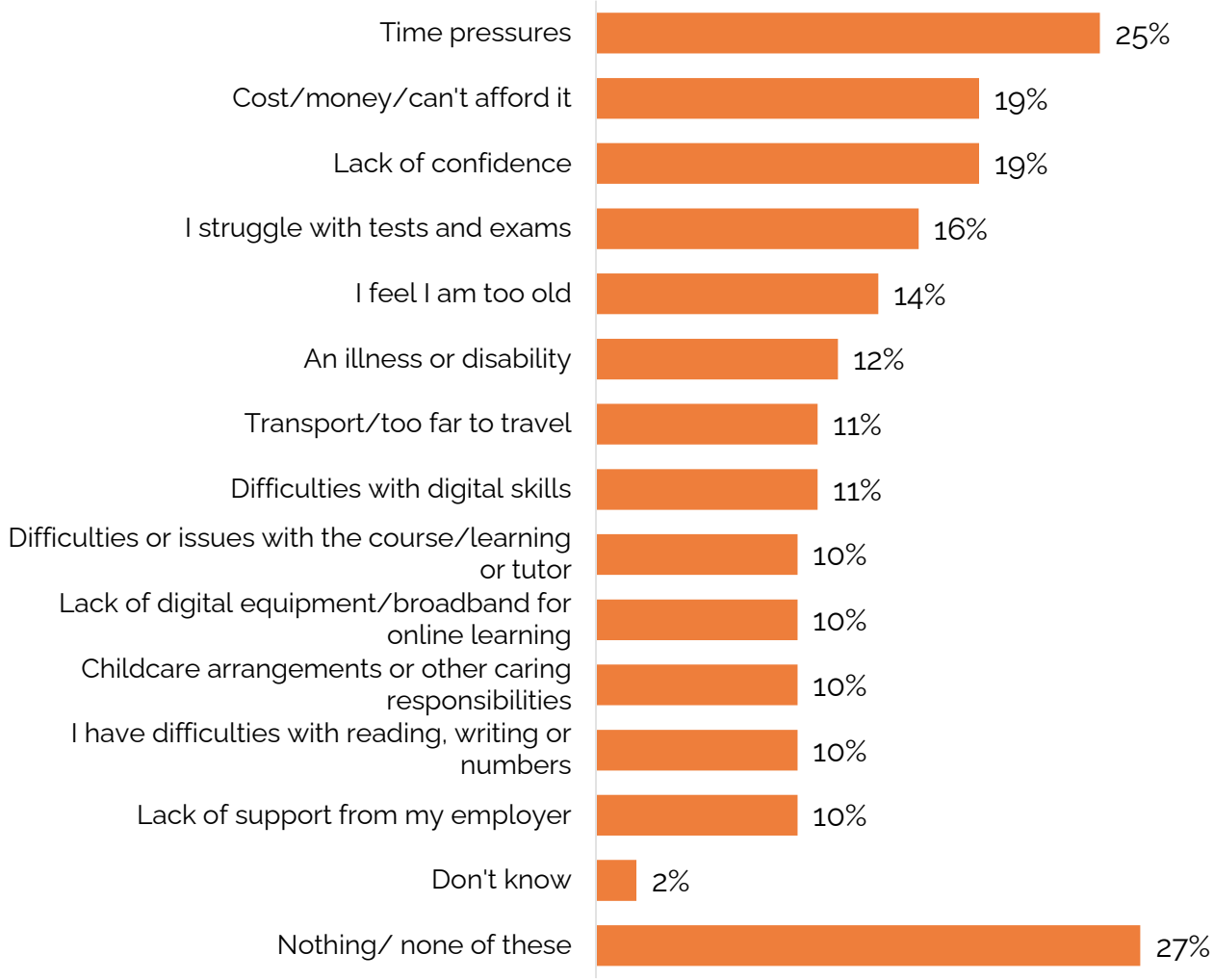
Base: All who have not studied in the last 3 years. Age left full-time education, 16 or less weighted = 974, unweighted = 923; 17-18 weighted = 660, unweighted = 642; 19-20 weighted = 308, unweighted = 309; 21+ weighted = 739, unweighted = 737.

Other barriers also became more commonly reported from 2021 onwards, but have stabilised since (again these may be real changes or related to the change in survey methodology). This includes not feeling confident enough (2% in 2015 vs 10% in 2021 vs 10% in 2026) and being put off by tests and exams (1% in 2015 vs 13% in 2021 vs 10% in 2026).

The challenges learners say they face remain the same

In 2026, time pressures (25%), cost (19%) and lack of confidence (19%) are the most commonly reported challenges among adults who say they are learning currently or have done so in the last three years (Figure 18). Cost and time have been the top barriers since this question was introduced in 2017.

Figure 18: Challenges reported by recent learners (2026)

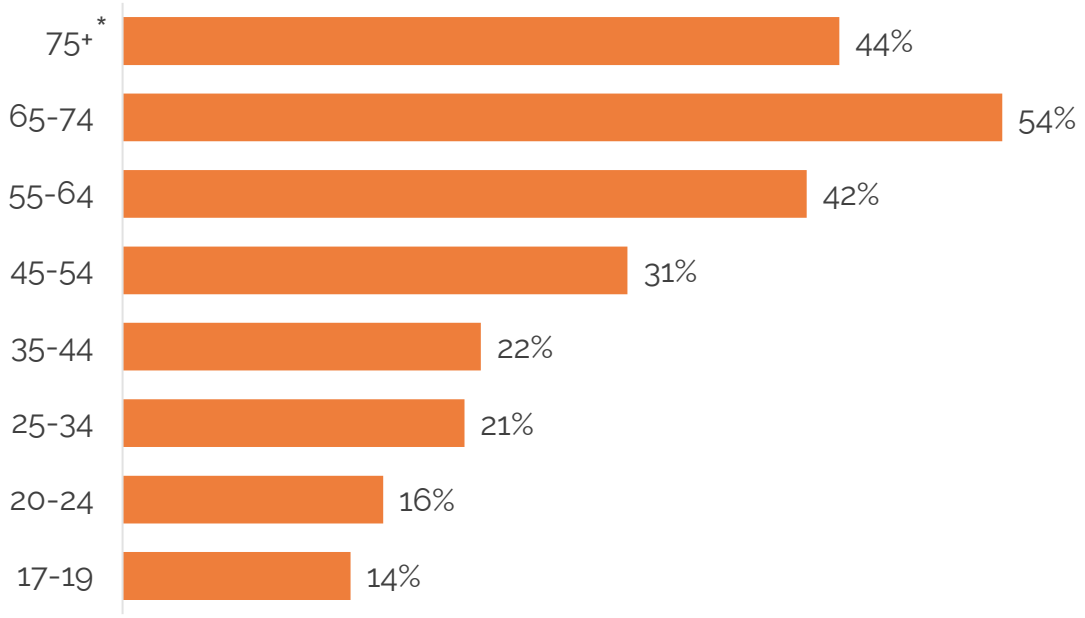


Base: All respondents aged 17 or over who have learned in the past three years. Weighted base = 2192, unweighted base = 2258.

Respondents who are white, older in age, or from a higher social grade are more likely to report not experiencing any challenges while learning. Three in ten (30%) white respondents reported not experiencing any challenges while learning, compared with one in five (20%) learners from an ethnic minority background. Our previous surveys have indicated that differences by ethnicity tend to reflect broader characteristics. For example, those from ethnic minority backgrounds are more likely to be from younger age groups, and younger learners are more likely to report challenges (Figure 19).

This offers an interesting juxtaposition to feeling too old being the foremost reported barrier preventing participation in learning. It indicates that when older people overcome this feeling, take the plunge, and engage in learning opportunities, they are more likely to have an experience without accompanying challenges.

Figure 19: Proportion of recent learners reporting that they have not experienced any challenges, by age group (2026)



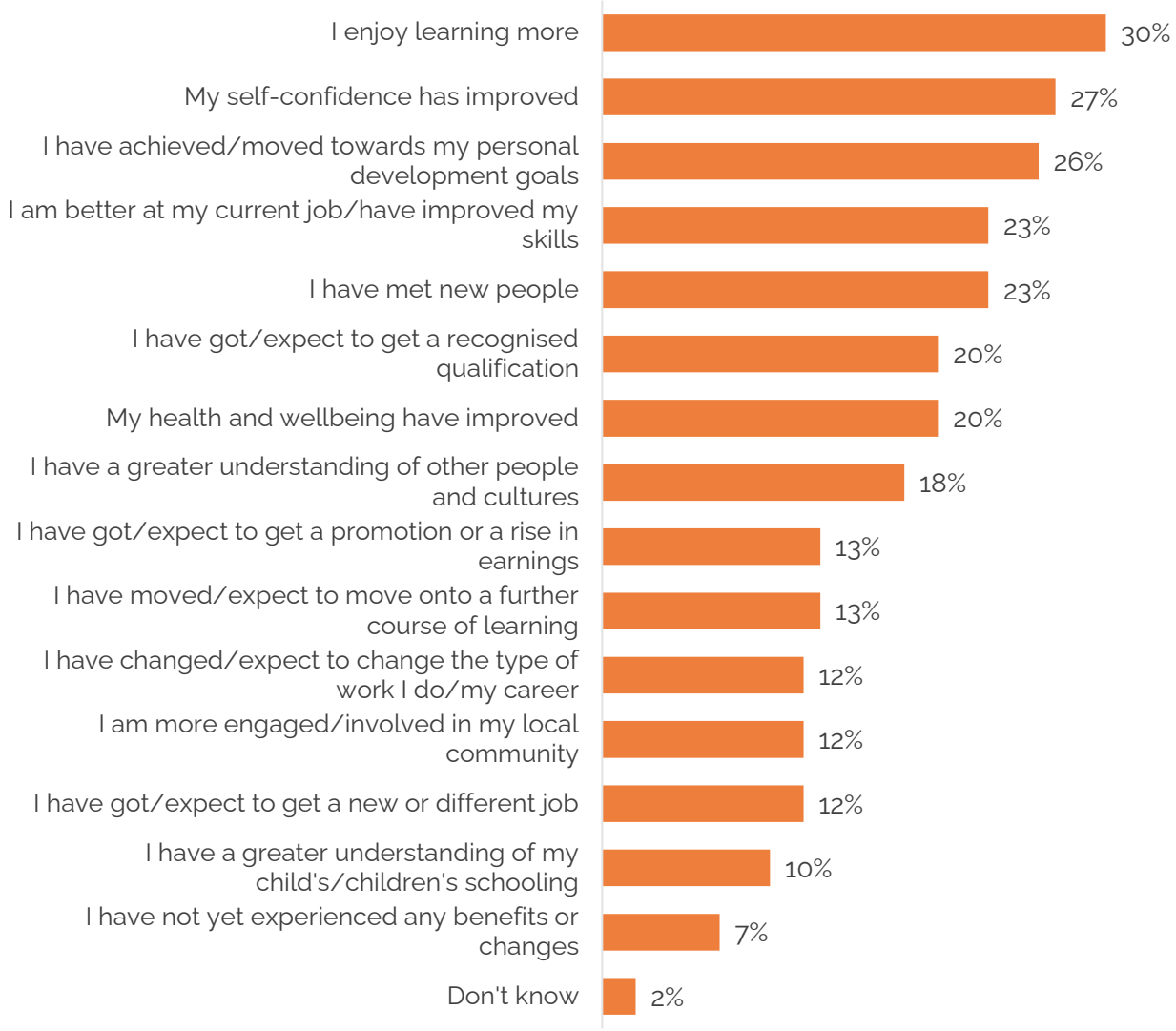
Base: All who have recently done or are currently doing some learning. 17-19 weighted = 164, unweighted = 173; 20-24 weighted = 315, unweighted = 329; 25-34 weighted = 501, unweighted = 536; 35-44 weighted = 391, unweighted = 417; 45-54 weighted = 338, unweighted = 355; 55-64 weighted = 249, unweighted = 263; 65-74 weighted = 166, unweighted = 132; 75+ weighted = 67, unweighted = 53. * Please note that the sample size for this age group is low and the data should be treated with caution.

People in social grade DE are more likely to report experiencing several challenges than the survey average. These include cost (23% vs 19%), feeling too old (17% vs 14%), an illness or disability (18% vs 12%), difficulties or issues with the course (14% vs 10%), and I struggle with tests and exams (20% vs 16%). Those in DE also mention 2.78 challenges on average, significantly higher than the 2.49 survey average.

Nearly everyone says they benefit from adult learning. This hasn't changed

Adults who take part in learning cite a wide range of benefits from doing so. In 2026, the proportion of learners who say they enjoy learning more (30%), their self-confidence has improved (27%), and they have achieved/moved towards their personal development goals (26%), are again the three benefits most commonly reported by learners, the same as in 2025 (Figure 20).

Figure 20: Changes or benefits resulting from learning (2026)



Base: all who have recently done or are currently doing some learning. Weighted = 2192, unweighted = 2258.

Enjoying learning more has been in the top three most reported benefits since 2017 (when this question was first introduced), with the proportion increasing from 2021. This more recent rise may be due to the change in survey method or could in part reflect the growth in people reporting their broad motivation for learning as being for leisure or personal interest (rather than work/career related). Benefits like improved health and wellbeing (3% in 2019 vs 20% in 2026), and meeting new people (12% in 2019 vs 23% in 2026) have also undergone significant increases since learning for leisure became more commonly reported. By contrast, the proportion of learners reporting that they are better at their current job or have improved their skills has declined from 31% in 2017 to 23% as fewer learners report work/career related reasons as their main motivation.

There are also differences in reported benefits by learner characteristics. People aged 65-74 (24%) and 75+ (32%) are more likely to cite health benefits as a result of engaging in learning. People aged 65-74 (41%) and 75+ (39%) are also significantly more likely to report that they enjoy learning more. Meanwhile, those aged 25-49, most likely to be raising children, are more likely than all other age groups to report greater understanding of their child's learning (13%). Learners in the AB social grade (55%) were more likely than average to report any work-related benefit, again hinting to the inequalities highlighted in the previous chapter on who benefits from learning at work.

Regardless of the benefits reported by different types of learners, adult participation in learning benefits nearly everyone, with 91% of current or recent learners reporting at least one benefit. Just 7% report that they have not yet experienced any benefit as a result of learning.

It is no surprise therefore that the 2026 survey shows 86% of current adult learners report that they are likely to engage in learning in the next three years. This compares to just 14% of those who say they haven't engaged in learning since leaving FTE (see Figure 9). This suggests that the biggest enabler to adult learning is adult learning itself, and the biggest barrier is non-participation and the absence of experiencing the benefits on offer.

Chapter 3: Examining periods of profound change and their lasting legacy

Key points

Adult participation in learning fell from 43% to 33% during the austerity era, with government funding decisions and labour market factors both likely playing a role. The Covid-19 pandemic prompted, and in some cases accelerated, big changes in adult learning, many which remain with us today. More people are learning independently on their own (34%), online only (48%), and for leisure and personal reasons (46%). This suggests a 'Duolingo effect', but that doesn't offer the full explanation, with learning providers embracing digital and blended learning.

Adult learning in the age of austerity

Government funding was cut heavily between 2010 and 2019, most notably in England

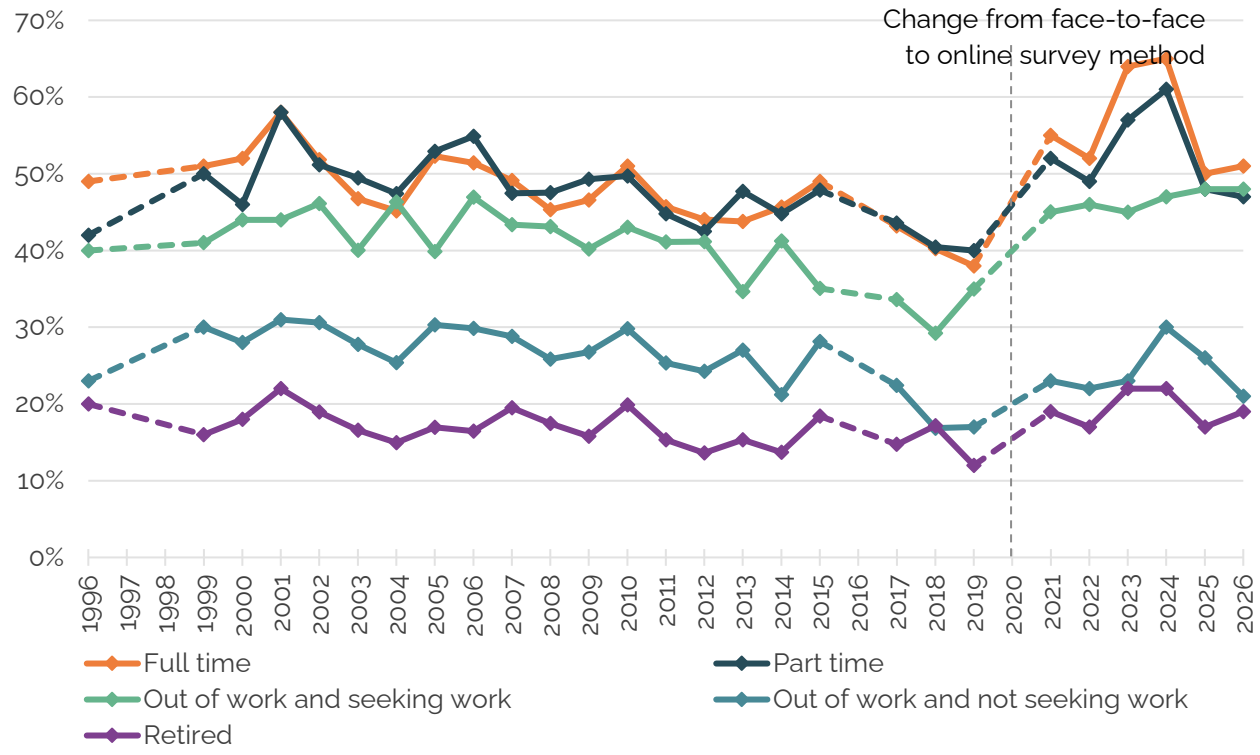
Adult skills funding from the Government underwent a period of austerity from 2010 to 2020, with public spending on classroom based adult education falling by 50% over this period in England.[19] Adult skills policy is devolved, meaning Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland all followed slightly different funding paths over this period. However, changes in public spending by UK Government were fed through to devolved administrations via the Barnett Formula, putting increased pressure on what they had to spend.

While it is important not to presume a direct causal relationship, adult participation in learning fell from 43% to 33% during these years. The three lowest years of participation in learning in our survey followed the biggest in-year decrease in adult skills funding in 2015-16.[20] Wider research from L&W has shown that, if adult skills attainment had remained at 2010 levels, there would have been 7 million more publicly funded qualifications gained by adults in England in the decade that followed.[21]

The survey indicates that participation between 2010 and 2019 declined most among those employed full time (from 51% to 38%) and people out of work and not seeking work (from 30% to 17%) (see Figure 21).

[19] Sibieta. L, Tahir. I and Waltmann. B (2022) Adult education: the past, present and future. Institute for Fiscal Studies.
[20] Foster. D (2019) Adult further education funding in England since 2010. House of Commons Library.
[21] Evans. S and Egglestone. C (2024) The great skills divide: how learning inequalities risk holding the UK back. Learning and Work Institute.

Figure 21: Participation in learning by employment status (1996 to 2026)



Base: all respondents aged 17+ 2026 weighted = 5092, 2026 unweighted = 5091. Dashed lines represent years where the survey did not take place.

Public funding decisions may have played a role here. In England, eligibility for fully funded level 2 and 3 qualifications was removed from people in work and retained only for adults out of work and seeking employment. While those in work and aged 24 and over were eligible for newly expanded Advanced Learner Loans, these made very little difference to overall adult learning spend by government and individuals. Although Advanced Learner Loans increased from £116 million to £182 million between 2010-11 to 2015-16, the non-apprenticeship adult skills budget fell from £2.5 billion to £1.13 billion over the same period.[22]

Meanwhile, limited government budgets were also increasingly orientated towards employability and qualifications, at the expense of learning designed to support a broad range of outcomes. This reprioritisation may have played a role in the rate of decline among people out of work and not seeking work relative to those out of work and seeking work.

[22] Foster. D (2019) Adult further education funding in England since 2010. House of Commons Library.

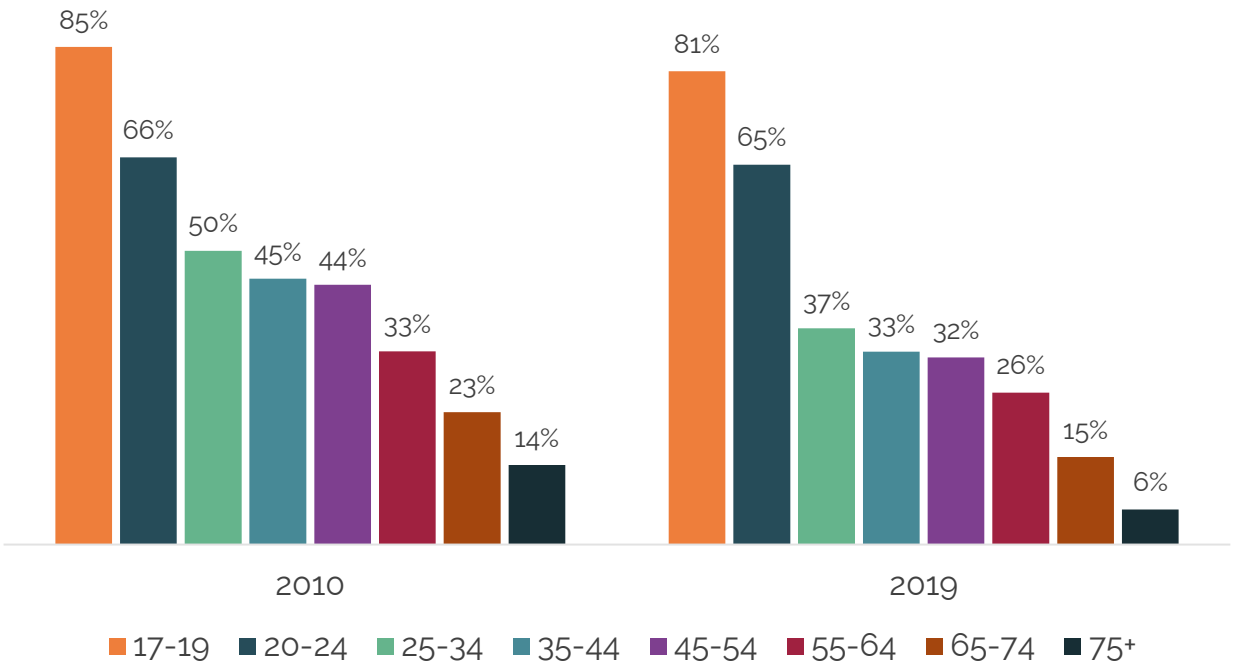
Labour market pressures were also limiting training opportunities for people in employment

Decreasing government spending may offer some but not full explanation for these trends. The 2010s were also a period of depressed investment in on-the-job and off-the-job training by employers.[23] In the years following the global financial crisis, the UK also had a labour market that offered workers fewer new job opportunities in their current sector or in a different sector, with job moves not reaching 2008 levels again until after the pandemic.[24] Fewer job moves would result in less on-boarding training, and less need for employers to upskill existing staff to fill vacancies created by departures. We would expect all of these factors to limit learning opportunities for people in work, with those in employment having the steepest decline in participation over this period.

People aged 25 and over also experienced the biggest falls in learning participation over this period (Figure 23). Participation among young people aged 17-19 and 20-24 decreased by 5% and 2% respectively. This compares to decreases of just over one quarter for people aged 25-34 (26%), 35-44 (27%) and 45-54 (28%). This is also consistent with our analysis of public funding, as the only two age groups that did not experience statistically significant declines in participation (17-19 and 20-24) were those not eligible for funding under the Adult Skills Budget (limited to 24+).

[23] Department for Education and Skills England (2025) Employer Skills Survey 2024.
[24] Revel. A, Vaid. L, Vempalli. S and Evans, S (2025) No train no gain. Learning and Work Institute.

Figure 22: Participation in learning by age (2010 and 2019)



Base: 2019: All adults 17+ weighted base = 5,011, 17-19 = 207, 20-24 = 476, 25-34 = 905, 35-44 = 865, 45-54 = 789, 55-64 = 801, 65-74 = 522, 75+ = 445. Total unweighted base = 5,244, 17-19 = 192, 20-24 = 450, 25-34 = 766, 35-44 =730, 45-54 =728, 55-64 = 759, 65-74 = 880, 75+ = 739. 2010: All adults 17+ weighted base = 4964, 17-19 = 248, 20-24 = 421, 25-34 = 843, 35-44 = 913, 45-54 = 805, 55-64 = 765, 65-74 = 546, 75+ = 423. Total unweighted base = 5192, 17-19 = 222, 20-24 = 397, 25-34 = 828, 35-44 =871, 45-54 =805, 55-64 = 754, 65-74 = 741, 75+ = 574.

Covid-19 and the post pandemic new normal

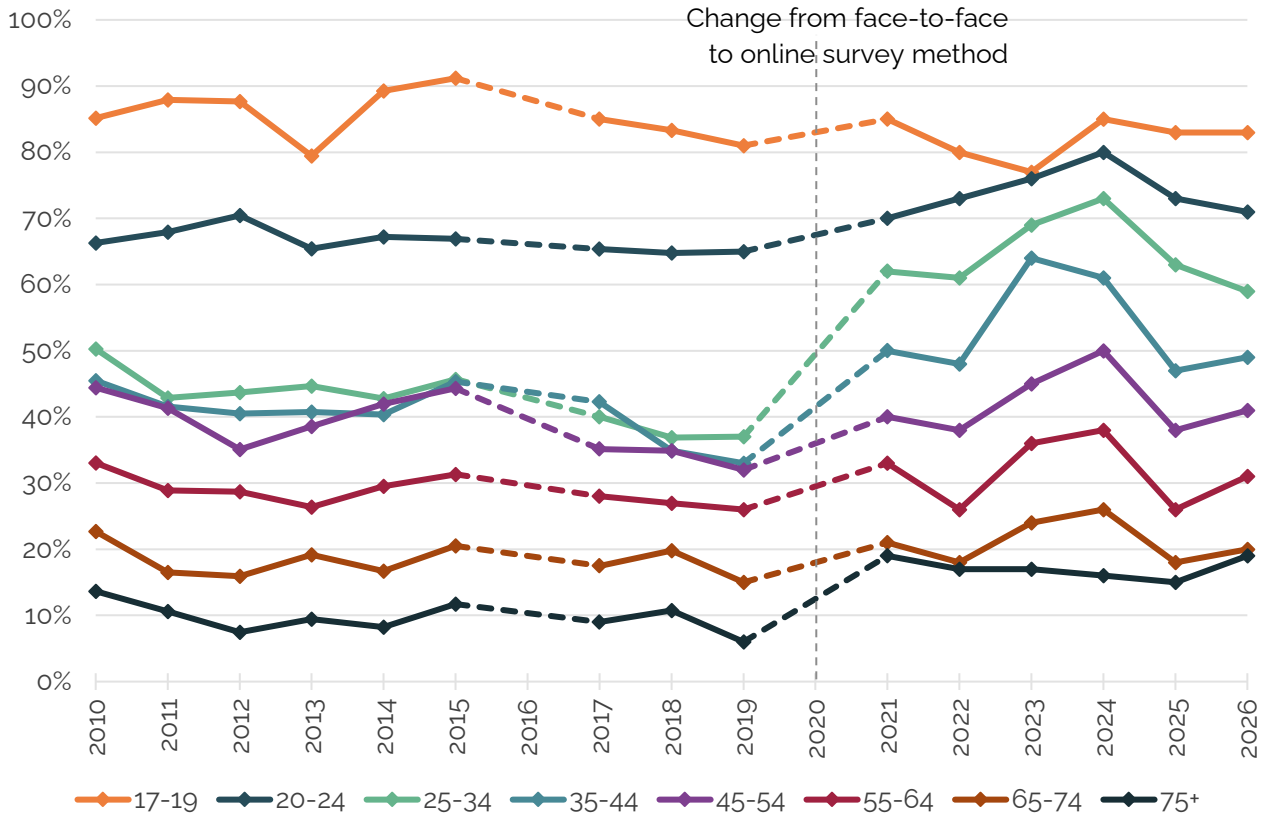
Participation in learning rose sharply following the pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic prompted, and in some cases accelerated, big changes in adult learning, many of which remain with us today. The learning participation rate rose from 33% in 2019 to 44% in 2021, peaking at 52% in 2024. It should be noted that the report's participation measure explores learning being undertaken currently or in the past three years. This means that all survey editions between 2021 and 2024 encompass responses on learning undertaken during periods affected by Covid-19 restrictions. It should also be noted again that the survey methodology was changed (from in person to online) between 2019 and 2021, with unclear effects on how people respond. Nonetheless, increased participation in adult learning was also observed in other countries across Europe.[25]

[25] Eurostat provides data on adult learning across Europe, although using different age categories and definitions. In 2016, across the 27 European countries 44% of adults aged 25-64 took part in formal education and training, 60% in informal training and 35% in job-related non-formal education. These proportions increased to respectively 49%, 64% and 38% in 2022.

Between 2019 and 2024 the participation rate rose most rapidly among those aged 25–34 (+36 percentage points), 35-44 (+28 percentage points), and 45-54 (+18 percentage points) (see Figure 23). As covered in the previous section, these were the age categories which experienced the biggest decline in absolute terms during the period of austerity. It should be noted that the changes by working status, social grade, and the age that people finished full-time education over this period were broadly comparable across different groups.

Figure 23: Participation in learning by age group (2010 to 2026)



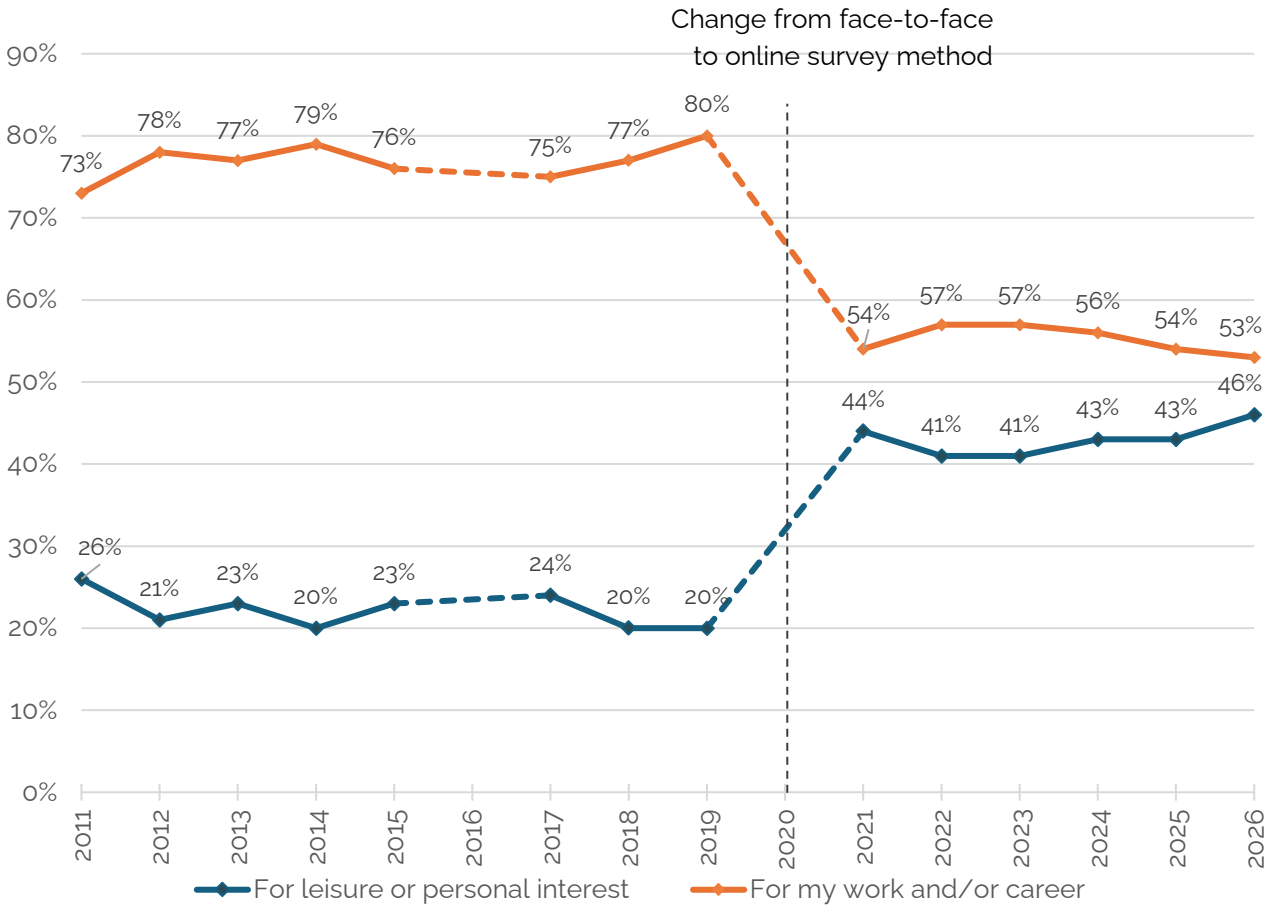
Base 2026: All adults 17+. 17-19 weighted = 199, unweighted = 210; 20-24 weighted = 444, unweighted = 463; 25-34 weighted = 843, unweighted = 901; 34-44 weighted = 802, unweighted = 856; 45-54 weighted = 822, unweighted = 866; 55-64 weighted = 793, unweighted = 838; 65-74 weighted = 838, unweighted = 677; 75+ weighted = 351, unweighted = 280. Dashed lines represent years where the survey did not take place.

Motivations for learning changed dramatically and in enduring fashion

This was driven largely by increasing numbers of people learning for reasons of leisure and personal development. Throughout the history of this survey, the majority of adults have reported their main motivation for learning relating to their work and career (Figure 24). However, the proportion of adult learners reporting learning for leisure or personal interest increased significantly from the pandemic onwards, more than doubling from 20% in 2019 to 41% in 2021. Learning for work or careers fell correspondingly from 80% to 54% over the same period, with respondents only being

able to select one of these two broad motivations. While this may have been sparked by people spending their time differently during the Covid-19 restrictions, the motivation to learn for leisure has endured, rising to 43% in 2025 and to a record 46% in 2026. Again, the change in survey methodology may have had an impact too.

Figure 24: Learning for leisure/personal interest (2011-2026)

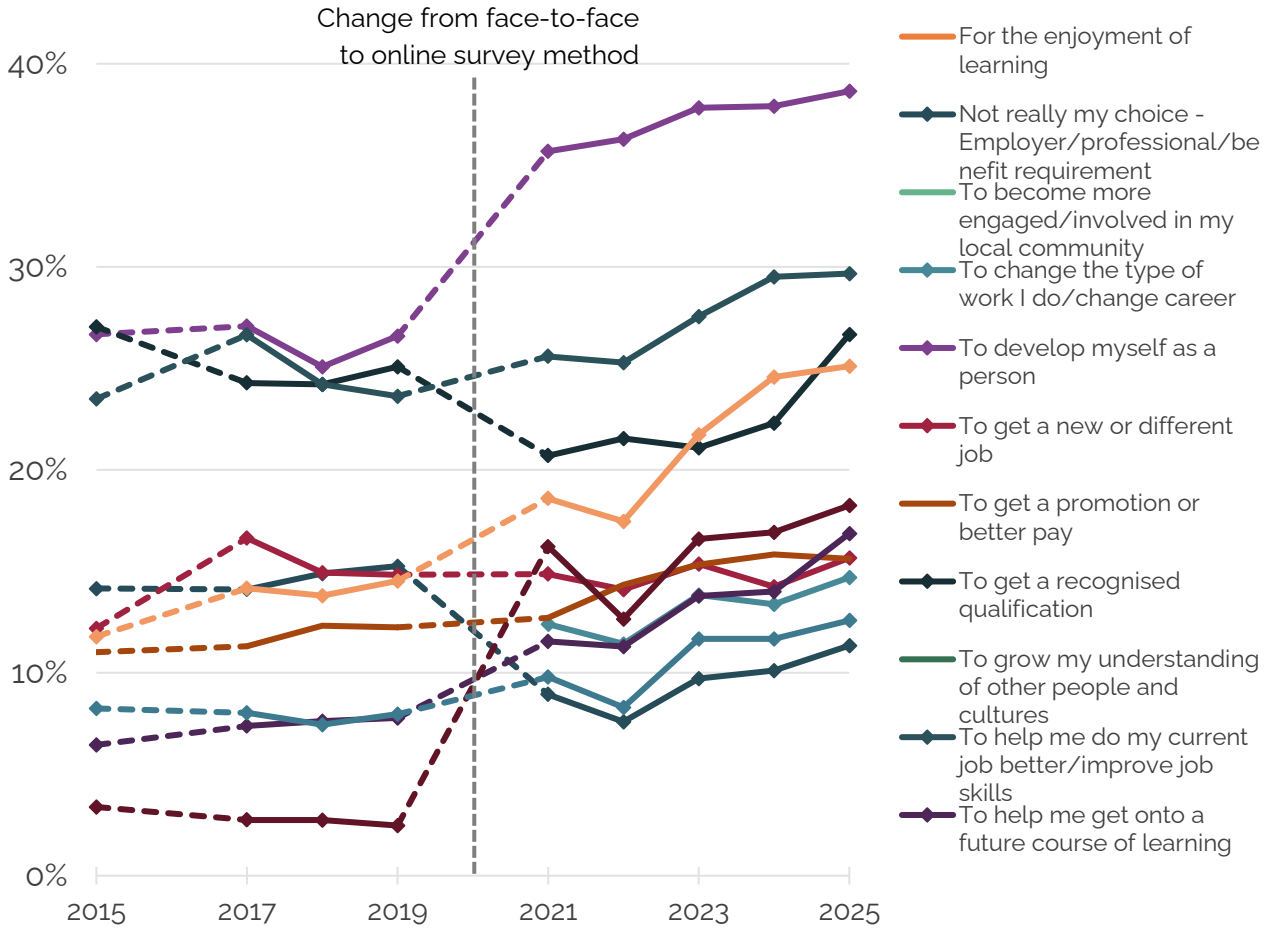


Base: All who have recently done or are currently doing some learning, 2026 weighted = 2192, unweighted = 2258. For leisure or personal interest weighted = 1015, unweighted = 1024; for my work or career weighted = 1152, unweighted = 1208. Not shown: don't know, weighted = 25, unweighted = 26. Dashed lines represent years where the survey did not take place.

Learners can also select from a more detailed list of motivations. In 2026, the two most commonly cited relate to leisure or personal interest. Nearly two in five current or recent learners (38%) cite wanting to develop themselves as a person. This climbed sharply from 27% to 36% between 2019 and 2026, but has sustained its position among learner motivations beyond the pandemic era. Enjoyment of learning, introduced as a response in the 2025 survey, is the second most common motivation, cited by 29% of learners. Improving performance in their work is the third most commonly selected motivation (27%), although this has been broadly stable since 2017 (Figure 25).

The other motivations that have undergone sharp and sustained increases since the pandemic are also personal rather than career related. Pursuing learning to improve my health and well-being (3% in 2019 vs 20% in 2026) is perhaps the most notable example. This near seven-fold increase could indicate growing recognition of the contribution lifelong learning can make to mental and physical health, and more importance being attached to wellbeing in society at large since the pandemic.[26] The proportion of current or recent learners citing the motivation of improving their self-confidence has also doubled from 12% to 23%.

Figure 25: Learner motivations (2015-2026)



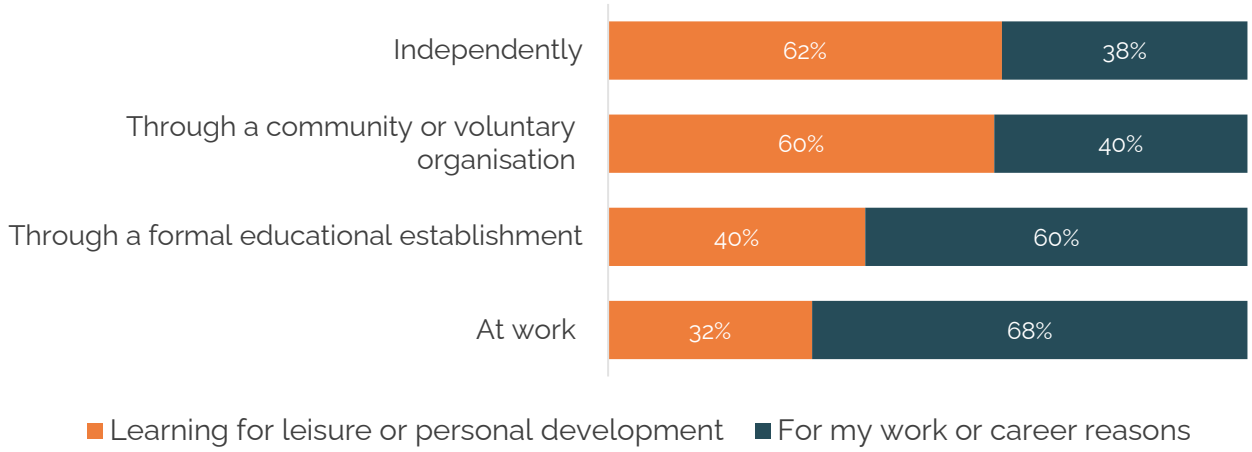
Note: Results for 2020 were impacted by a change in methodology due to the pandemic lockdown and have been excluded. The survey has been conducted online since 2021 (rather than using face-to-face interviews). This change in methodology should be taken into account when looking at trends. Base: all who have done or are currently doing some learning. 2026 weighted = 2192, unweighted = 2258. Dashed lines represent years where the survey did not take place.

[26] Schuller. T (2017) What are the wider benefits of learning across the life course? Foresight, Government Office for Science

This is not just the Duolingo effect

Within the survey, learners select one or more locations of learning. These are then grouped into four categories: work, independently, community or voluntary organisation (CVO), and formal educational establishment.[27] The proportion of people who reported learning independently (either on their own or with others) rose from 36% in 2019 to 40% in 2021. Despite falling back in 2022, this has steadily increased to a record high of 43% in the 2026 survey. Among those learning independently, three fifths (62%) report learning for leisure or personal interest, a higher rate than any other category (see Figure 26).

Figure 26: Learning location and main reason for learning (2026)



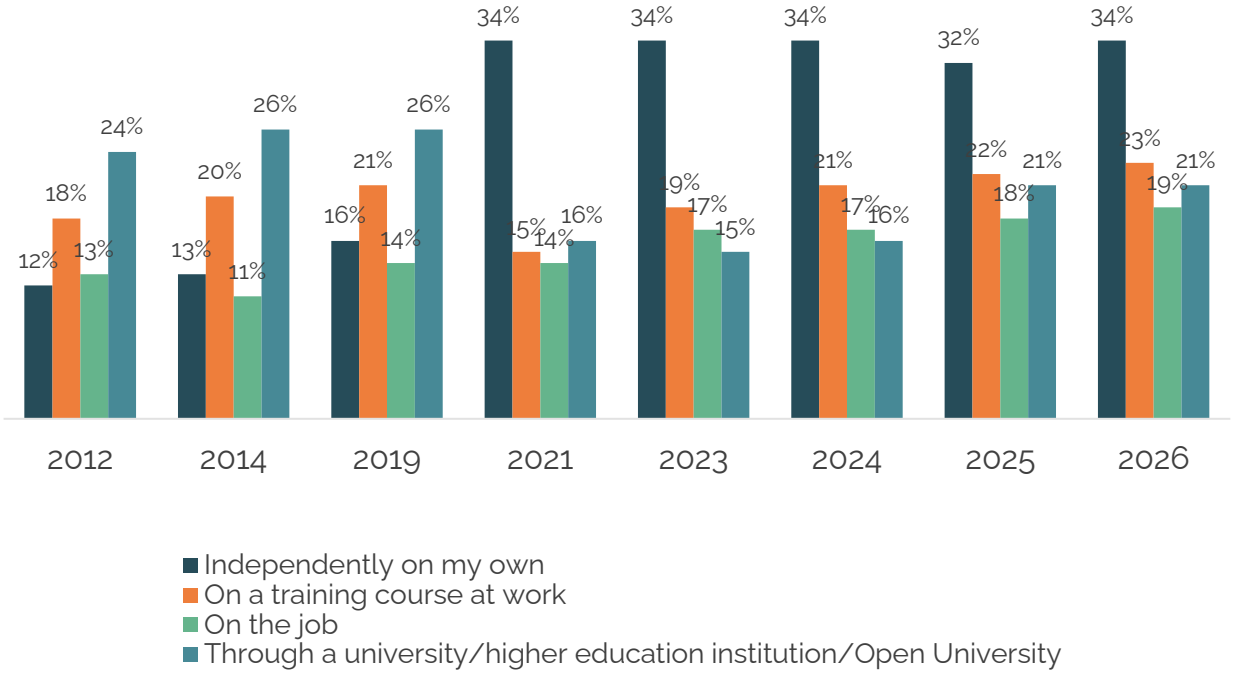
Base: All who have recently done or are currently doing some learning, 2026 weighted = 2192, unweighted = 2258. At work weighted = 1006; Through a formal educational establishment weighted = 657; Through a community or voluntary organisation weighted = 584; Independently weighted = 938.

The proportion of learners who report learning independently on their own nearly tripled between 2012 and 2021, from 12% to 34%, and has stabilised since (Figure 27). The rise of independent and self-directed learning post-pandemic is a trend that has also been observed across OECD countries.[28]

[27] 'Work' includes people who report learning 'On the job', 'On a training course at work', 'On an external training course arranged by my employer', 'On an apprenticeship'. 'Independently' includes people who report learning 'Independently on my own', 'Independently with others'. 'CVO' includes people who report learning 'Through a voluntary organisation', 'Through local community facilities e.g. library, museum, place of worship, bookshop etc', 'Through a leisure or health club'. 'Formal educational establishment' includes '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'.

[28] OECD (2025) Trends in Adult Learning: Who is missing out?

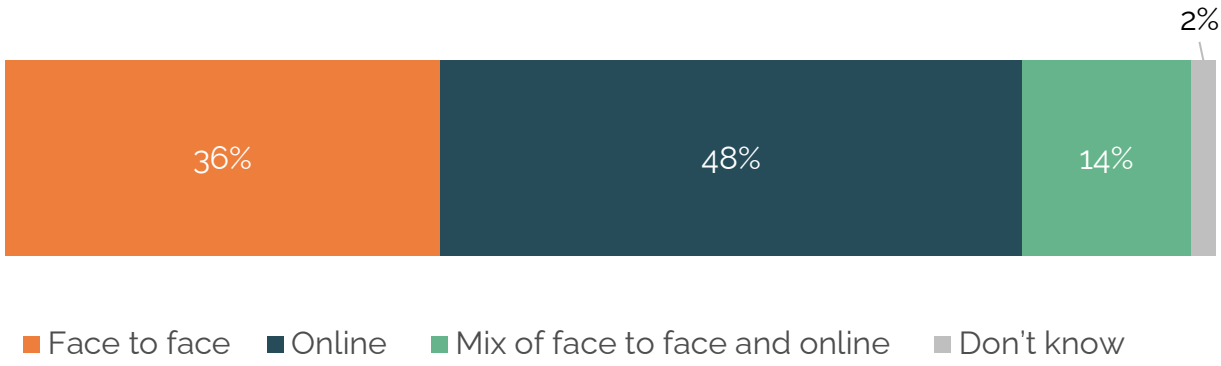
Figure 27: Location of learning over time for the top four most common responses (2012-2026).



Base: 2026 All who have recently done or are currently doing some learning, 2026 weighted = 2192, unweighted = 2258.

This has also been accompanied by a surge in numbers of learners reporting learning online. Over one half of current or recent learners reported their learning took place face to face *only* in 2019 (53%). This is little over a third in 2026 (36%). Nearly one half of learners (48%) now report learning online *only*, a record figure (Figure 28).

Figure 28: Learning delivery mode (2026)



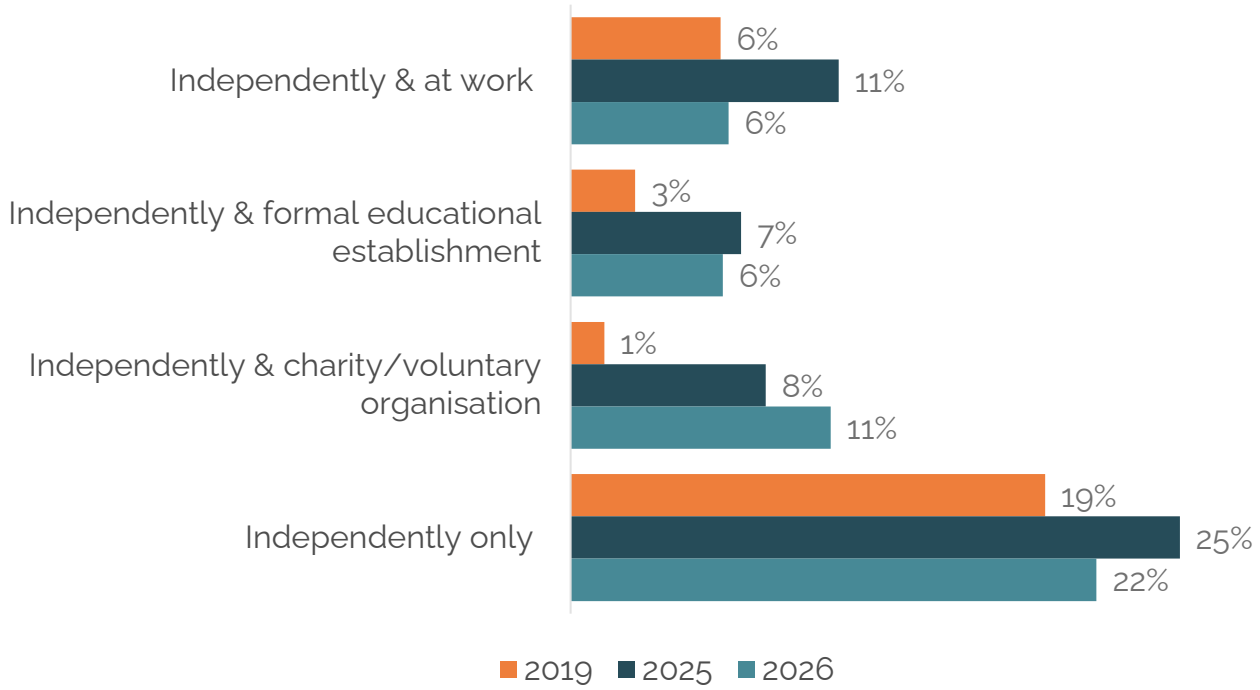
Base: All respondents who are currently learning or have done some learning in the last three years. Weighted base = 2192, unweighted base = 2258.

The explosion of online learning, the rise in people learning independently on their own, and the increase in numbers of people learning for leisure or personal interest may together constitute what we might call 'the Duolingo effect'. That is, people turning to self-directed online/app-based, non-job-related learning options in greater number during the pandemic, and this remaining a major part of the participation picture in the years that have followed. However, this interpretation is complicated by several factors.

Firstly, the proportion of learners who report learning via a community and voluntary organisation (CVO) has fluctuated but increased overall, reaching 27% this year, up from 15% in 2021, and 5% in 2019. The clear majority (60%) of these learners report doing so for leisure and personal development, suggesting these organisations play an increasingly important role in meeting growing demand for this type of learning.

Secondly, a number of those who report learning independently also report learning in other settings. Just 1% of learners reported learning independently and via a CVO in 2019. This now stands at 11%. When we isolate those who select learning independently *only*, we can see that the rise in these numbers since the pandemic is more modest than the rise in those reporting learning independently on their own (22% in 2026 versus 19% in 2019).

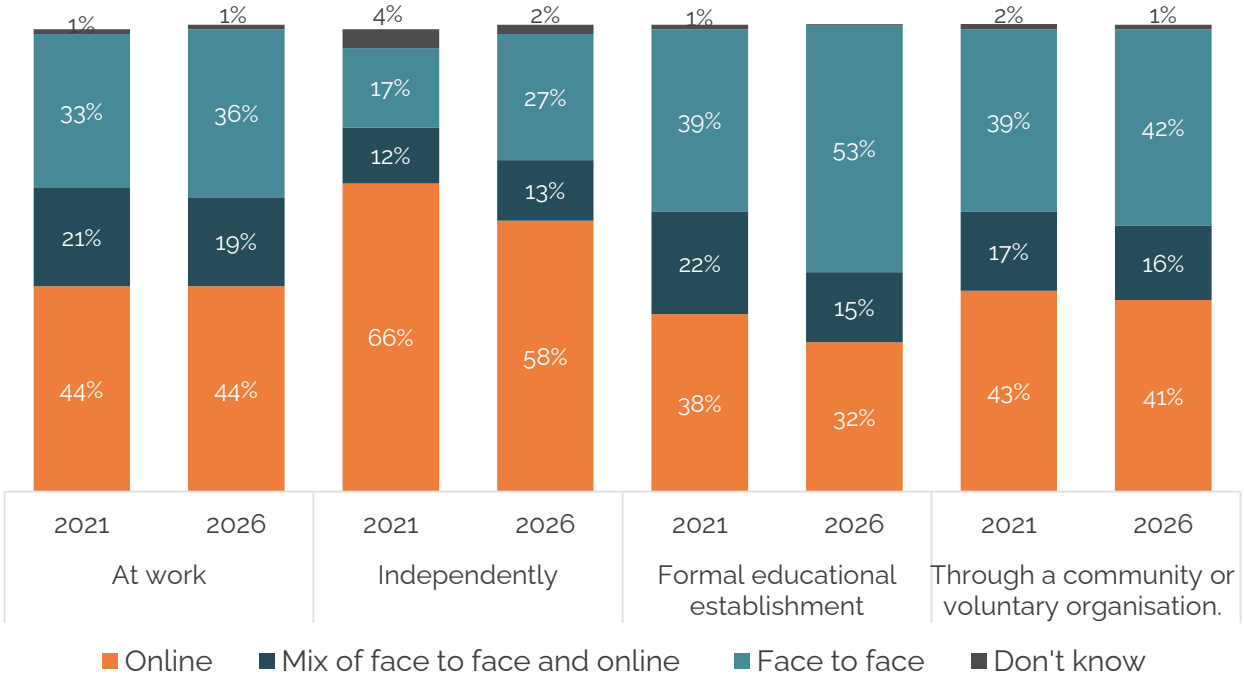
Figure 29: Independent learning combinations (2019, 2025, 2026)



Base: all respondents who have recently or who are currently doing some learning. 2026 weighted = 2192, unweighted = 2258.

Thirdly, this would appear to be consistent with increased digital and hybrid delivery by learning providers and greater numbers of learners reporting doing so online. Two-fifths (41%) of those learning via a CVO are doing so entirely online, rising to 57% when including those learning online in-part (Figure 30). What's notable is that this has barely changed since the period of Covid-19 lockdowns in 2021. While online learning may previously have been happening by necessity, it is now the method of learning delivery by choice in many instances. This can also be seen in formal education establishments like further education colleges and universities. While the proportion of learning that takes place online in these settings has come down since 2021, nearly one half (47%) of current or recent learners report learning online or in a mix of online and face-to-face environments.

Figure 30: Learning location by learning delivery method (2021 and 2026)



Base: all respondents who have recently or who are currently doing some learning. 2026 Weighted: At work = 879, Independently = 641, Through a formal educational establishment = 430, Through a community or voluntary organisation = 438.

Fourthly, the benefits reported by current or recent learners would also appear inconsistent with the enduring dominance of Duolingo style learning among those learning for leisure or personal interest. For example, meeting new people (23%) has increased by nine percentage points since 2024 (the last survey to encompass learning experiences during Covid-19 restrictions), and nearly doubled from 12% in 2019.

The expansion of online learning does not seem to have come at the expense of these benefits, with previous surveys highlighting how digital technologies can enable and enrich learning opportunities.[29] Nevertheless, the pandemic also didn't bring about the end of face-to-face learning undertaken for leisure/personal reasons. The 'Duolingo effect' may be a real, and a lasting legacy of the pandemic era. However, so is a greater willingness of people to learn for leisure and personal reasons in a range of face-to-face and online environments, and a greater embracement of digital technologies and blended learning in the way providers are delivering.

Overall, these changes have helped to lift adult participation in learning from its late 2010s lows, back to around the levels recorded when the survey began and through much of its 30-year history.

[29] Revel. A, Phipps. B, Egglestone. C, Jones. E, Nermond. O and Evans. S (2025) The workforce learning slowdown? Adult Participation in Learning Survey 2025. Learning and Work Institute

Annex: Survey method

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 2026 Adult Participation in Learning Survey included 5,091 adults aged 17 and over across the UK. This sample has been weighted (generating an effective sample of 5,092) to provide a UK representative dataset. In addition to overall participation, the 2026 survey explores who participates in learning; motivations and barriers; how learning is undertaken; and benefits experienced as a result of learning.

Fieldwork was conducted by Kantar via their UK online omnibus survey, running from 9th June 2026 to 18th June 2026. Fieldwork for the survey was first conducted online in 2021. Prior to this, fieldwork was conducted via a face-to-face omnibus, however, a shift in how people are communicating, with more households online than ever before, coupled with the Coronavirus pandemic creating challenges for face-to-face fieldwork, has led to market research agencies shifting to an online approach. This 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 with surveys pre-2021 should be treated with some caution.

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: corin.egglestone@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. The National Adult Learner Survey (NALS)[30] adopted an alternative approach, 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 Adult Participation in Learning Survey.

While respondents are given a definition of learning, the self-reported nature of the 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 survey's 30-year history.

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 completing the survey.

Participation in learning: respondents who are currently learning or who have done so in the three years prior to completing the survey (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: is based on the occupation of the Chief Income Earner in the household. If they have retired, they are asked to provide their previous occupation.

Regions: regional analysis is based on the highest tier of sub-national division in England. There are nine regions in England.

[30] Department for Business Innovation & Skills (2012) National Adult Learner Survey 2010