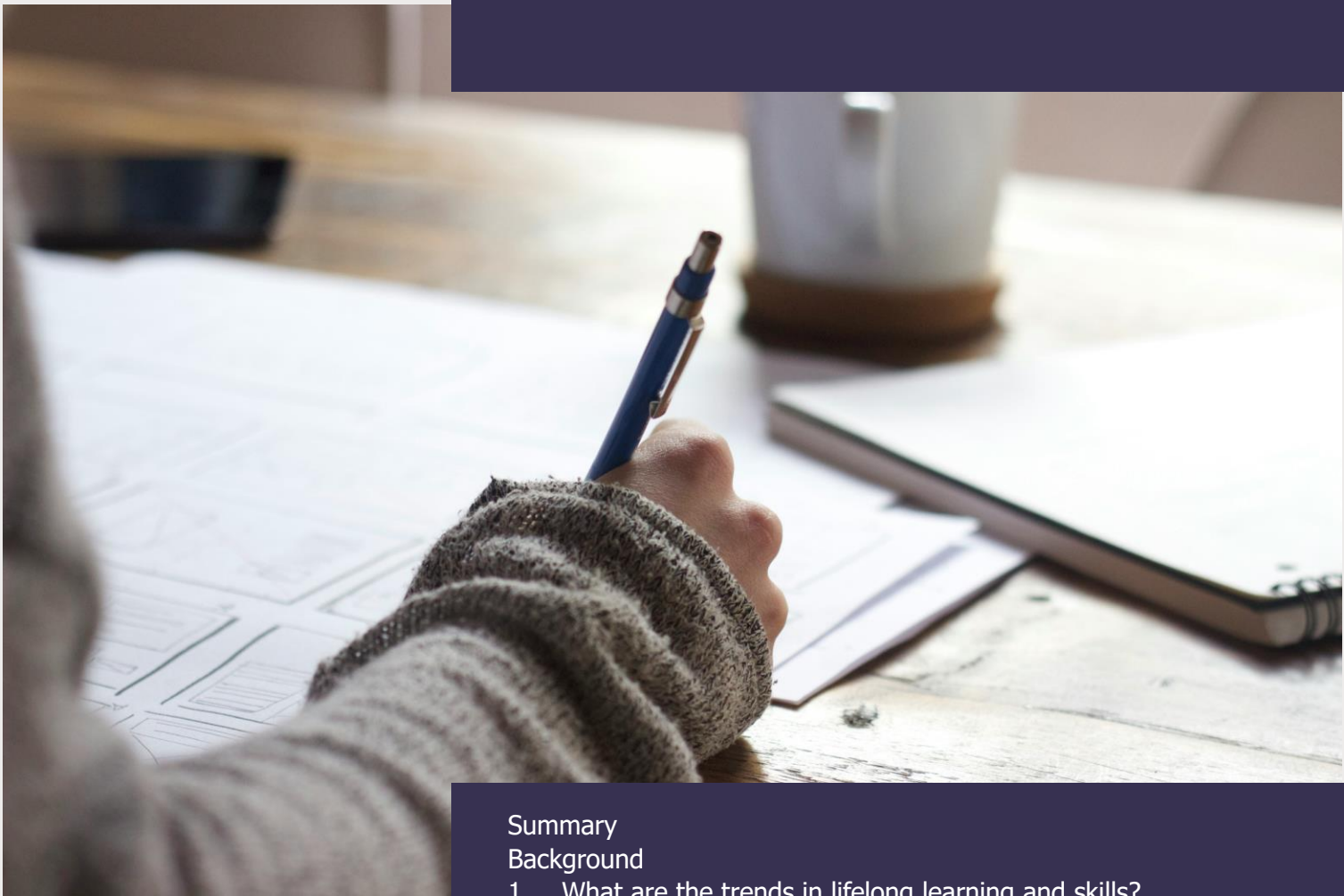


POSTnote 769

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20 May 2026

Lifelong learning and skills



Summary

Background

- 1 What are the trends in lifelong learning and skills?
- 2 Legislation, policy and guidance
- 3 Opportunities
- 4 Challenges
- 5 Wider impacts
- 6 Policy considerations

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Contributors

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Summary

Evidence indicates that lifelong learning helps adults develop their skills. This may become increasingly relevant in the near term:

- Rapid technological change, including advances in artificial intelligence (AI), is reshaping the labour market and may require people to learn new skills.
- The population is ageing and people are retiring later in life, which may increase demand for upskilling and retraining across longer careers.
- Many young people are not in education, employment or training (NEET) and so may need support with skills later in life.

This POSTnote focuses on England for education policy and uses UK-wide data for skills.

Trends

Adult participation in further education and skills development has declined from nearly 3.3 million learners in 2012–13 to nearly 1.8 million in 2024–25. Simultaneously, qualification requirements for jobs have increased and skills shortages have persisted across the labour market. People are more likely to participate in adult education if they are younger, are from a more affluent socioeconomic background, or have previously attained higher qualifications. Trends for some demographic associations, such as gender and ethnicity, appear less conclusive due to disaggregated data collection.

Legislation and policy

Recent policy and legislation measures include:

- [Lifelong Learning Entitlement](#) (LLE), offering a loan equivalent to four years of study at university
- [Growth and Skills levy](#), which replaces the apprenticeship levy
- [foundation apprenticeships](#)
- [AI Skills Boost](#) online courses

- the creation of [Skills England](#) and [standardised skills classification](#)
- the [Adult Skills Fund](#)
- [Local Skills Improvement Plans](#) (LSIPs)

Opportunities and challenges

Lifelong learning may help fill skills gaps, for example, through older adults entering higher education and through regional partnerships that align provision of learning with local skills needs. Further opportunities include remote and modular provision allowing adults to fit learning around their lives and international case studies of skills and lifelong learning policies that provide insights for the UK context.

However, evidence suggests people may not take opportunities for learning because of the cost and because they do not want to take on debt to fund it. They may also have caring responsibilities that limit their availability for learning. Further challenges include the low appetite for lifelong learning, additional support needs of adult learners, and declining employer investment in upskilling.

Benefits for individuals and society

Research shows that participation in lifelong learning is associated with improved health and wellbeing, digital inclusion, financial resilience, intergenerational outcomes, community cohesion and civic participation.

Acknowledgements

This briefing was produced in consultation with experts and stakeholders, who are listed at the end of the briefing. The briefing was co-funded by the Nuffield Foundation. POST would like to thank everyone who contributed their expertise to this briefing.

Background

There is no single official definition of lifelong learning (box 1) or skills.^a In 2020, the UK Government described adult skills and lifelong learning provision as “education, advice and training for adults (19+) who want to upskill, reskill or move into employment”.²

There are different forms of lifelong learning (box 1) and various types of skills. In April 2026, Skills England released the [UK Standard Skills Classification](#), to identify and support effective mapping of labour market trends and skills shortages.^{b 3}

Recent government publications explicitly frame skills development as a means of increasing economic growth.^{4–6} Other reports identify lifelong learning as important for developing skills and improving job quality in the adult workforce.^{c 8,9}

The government’s 2025 [Industrial Strategy](#) identified skills gaps in eight priority sectors, including advanced manufacturing and defence.^{d 10,11} In 2025, Skills England reported that, by 2030, the UK will need 900,000 more skilled workers in these priority sectors.¹²

Several recent trends indicate that lifelong learning and skills may become increasingly important in the near-term.^e Rapid technological change, including advances in [artificial intelligence in employment](#) (AI), is reshaping the labour market and creating growing demand for skills^f particularly in

^a See table on page 18 of [A Skills Classification for the UK](#) for definitions of skills (2023).¹

^b Types of skills include foundational skills, interpersonal skills, and technical skills: see page 19 of [A Skills Classification for the UK](#) (2023).¹ The [2026 UK Standard Skills Classification](#), a unified framework of 3,343 occupational skills and 13 core skills, linked to qualifications and occupational codes.

^c Job quality, in this case, refers to employee engagement, wellbeing and retention.⁷

^d The eight priority sectors are advanced manufacturing, clean energy industries, creative industries, defence, digital and technologies, financial services, life sciences and professional and business services.¹⁰

^e Cross-sector stakeholders indicated a historical precedent during the First World War, when a Ministry of Reconstruction was set up to consider strategies for national renewal; the final report from the Ministry of Reconstruction’s Adult Education Committee (1919) concluded that lifelong learning was central to the nation’s reconstruction.^{13–15} The Centenary Commission on Lifelong Learning drew attention to this conclusion in its report in 2019.¹⁶

^f This POSTnote builds on the 2021 POSTnote [Upskilling and retraining the adult workforce](#).

STEM skills, digital, construction, green skills^g and health and social care.^{8,9,18,19}

According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), in February 2026, 957,000 people aged 16 to 24 in the UK were not in education, employment or training (NEET), which may have implications for future skills supply.^{h 20} As the population ages and retires later in life, people may require upskilling and retraining across longer careers.⁸

This POSTnote focuses on how lifelong learning relates to upskilling the adult workforce, although it also considers wider social and economic benefits of lifelong learning (section 5). It also sits within a wider post-16 context and considers the impacts of 16-19 progression routes.ⁱ

Education is a devolved policy area whereas skills policy is not. This POSTnote primarily focuses on education policy in England and UK-wide skills and employment.

Box 1: Definitions, forms and sites of lifelong learning

Cross-sector stakeholders favour a broad definition of lifelong learning: learning at all ages, in all settings.^{14,22,23} This broad definition views skills development as one part of lifelong learning and captures the wider benefits of lifelong learning (section 5).^{14,22,23}

Despite varying definitions, most groups differentiate between three different forms of lifelong learning: formal, non-formal and informal.^{24,25}

Adults access formal lifelong learning through different routes and at different sites:

- Further education (FE) colleges provide education after age 16 that is below university level.
- Higher education (HE) institutions provide degree-level education.
- Local authority services and other providers offer tailored learning (previously named 'community learning'). The purpose of which is to help adults progress into sustained employment or further learning, alongside wider outcomes.²⁶

Other sites of lifelong learning include the workplace (Section 4.4), prisons, and through Independent Training Providers.²⁷⁻³⁰

^g Green skills can be defined as "the knowledge, abilities...needed to live in, develop and support a society which reduces the impact of human activity on the environment".¹⁷

^h This represents 12.8% of all people aged 16 to 24 years in the UK.²⁰

ⁱ DfE government analysis identified that 16-19 progression routes can impact later adult skills deficits and the need for retraining across the life course.²¹

1

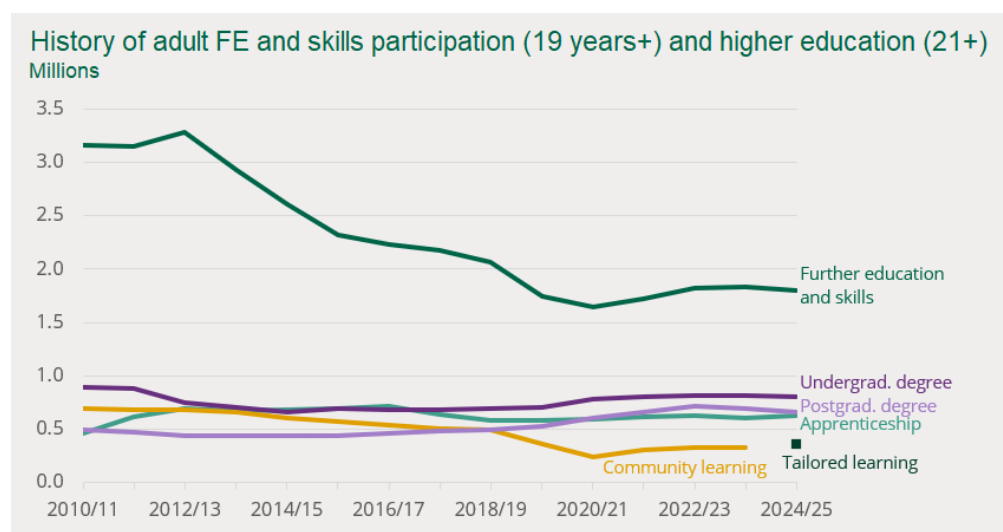
What are the trends in lifelong learning and skills?

Department for Education (DfE) data shows that participation in publicly funded education and training for adults aged 19 and over in England fell substantially during the 2010s, declining from around 3.3 million learners in 2012-13 to around 1.8 million in 2024-25 (figure 1).³¹ Overall participation has stabilised since around 2021, but at a lower level than a decade ago (figure 1).³¹ Over the same period, qualification requirements for jobs have increased and skills shortages have persisted across much of the labour market (section 1.1).^{6,32,33}

At the same time, funding for adult and higher education has changed and employer investment in training has fallen (section 4.4).^{26,34-38} These factors shape both who participates in lifelong learning and the types of learning available.³⁷

Skills and lifelong learning vary in definition and can be broad (box 1). Datasets on skills and lifelong learning are aggregated between different sources.^j This section therefore includes specific trends analysis and does not include analysis on participation for individuals between 16-19 years old. For more, see the Commons Library briefing on [Skills policy in England](#). Unless otherwise specified, this section refers to trends in England.

Figure 1: Participation in lifelong learning (2010 to 2025)



Sources: [HESA, Higher Education Student Statistics: UK, 2024/25 - Student numbers and characteristics Figure 5 \(and previous editions\)](#); DfE & DWP, [Academic year 2025/26, History of Adult \(19+\) FE and skills participation](#). Graph by Matthew Keep, House of Commons Library.

^j Different data sources include DfE data on Further education, skills and Apprenticeships and data from the Higher Educational Statistics Agency (HESA) on higher education.^{31,39,40}

1.1

Skills and labour market trends

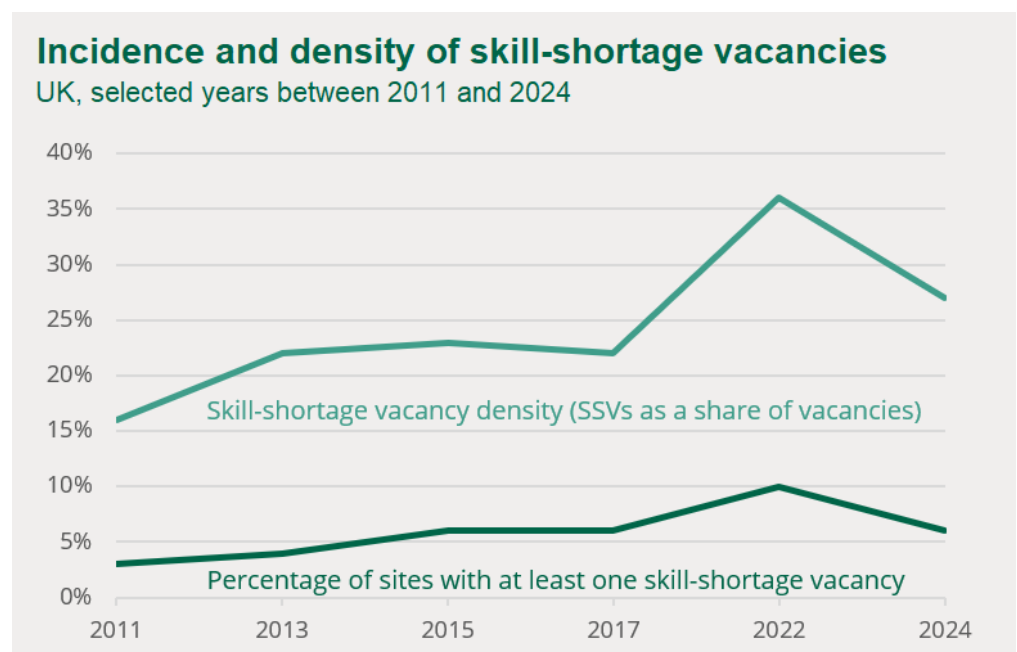
Skills shortages

Data indicates a persistent gap between the skills that are needed by UK employers and the skills held by the UK workforce (figure 2).^{41,42} The 2024 Employer Skills Survey found that 6% of UK employers have a skill shortage vacancy.^{k 33} This represents 27% of all vacancies and is a small decrease since 2022 (10%) but unchanged from 2015 (6%).^l

The survey also found that 12% of UK employers reported skills gaps (at least one member of staff lacking full proficiency), which was lower than in 2022 (15%).³³ A 2025 Open University survey of UK employers found that 54% of organisations faced a skills shortage.⁴⁴

Skills shortages are associated with negative impacts on businesses and employees.⁶ A 2025 Open University report found that 40% of UK employers with skills shortages identified increased workload on other staff as their biggest concern, followed by reduced productivity.⁴⁴

Figure 2: Skills shortage vacancies (2011 to 2024)



Source: Department for Education and Skills England, [Employer Skills Survey 2024](#), Figure 3.4. Graph by Matthew Keep, House of Commons Library.

^k A skills shortage vacancy is a vacancy that is difficult to fill due to a lack of the required skills, qualifications or experience among applicants.

^l The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic may have influenced the data gathered from the 2022 Employer Skills Survey.⁴³

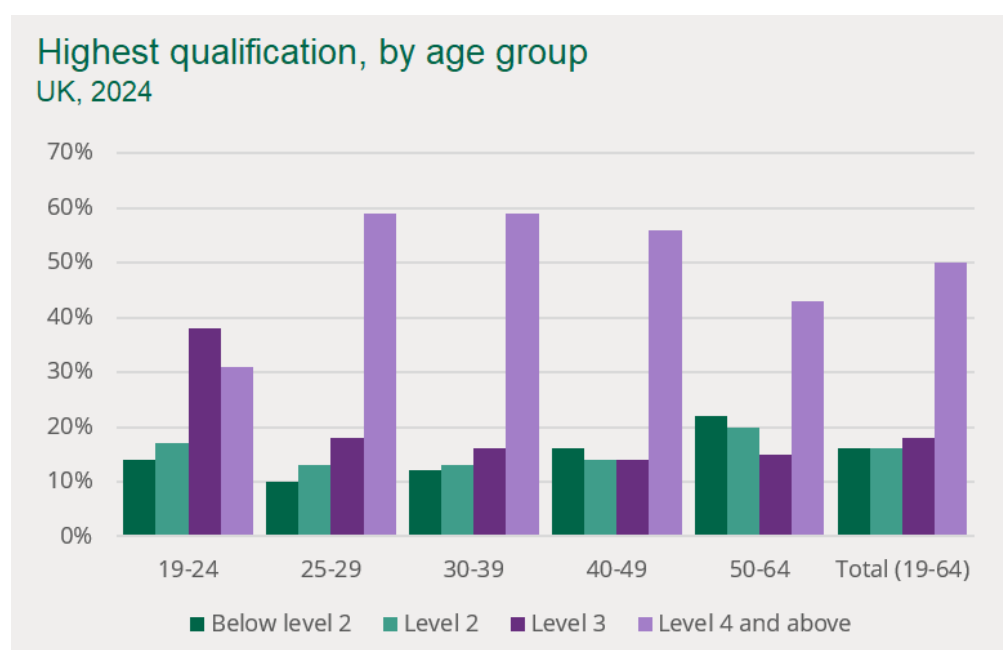
Higher-level qualifications: supply and demand

More UK jobs now require higher level qualifications (box 2). A 2025 report analysing findings from the Skills and Employment Survey observed that in 2024, 46% of workers said a graduate-level qualification would be required for their current job, compared with 20% in 1986.³²

Younger cohorts appear to be entering the labour market with higher qualifications than older cohorts did (figure 3).⁴⁵ Across the UK, 43% of people aged 50 to 64 hold a qualification at level 4 and above (box 2), compared with 59% of those aged 25 to 29.^{m 45} Conversely, 22% of 50 to 64-year-olds have no qualifications or are qualified below level 2, versus 10% of 25 to 29-year-olds.⁴⁵

The proportion of 25 to 29-year-olds qualified to level 4 and above (box 2) rose from 51% in 2020 to 59% in 2024, and the proportion qualified to level 3 rose from 71% to 77% even as the proportion of NEET young people increased.^{20,26} This may highlight an opportunity of mid-career upskilling and retraining across longer working lives.⁴⁵

Figure 3: Highest qualification (UK, 2024)



Department for Education, [Education and training statistics for the UK](#), 13 November 2025. See box 2 for elaboration and examples of qualification levels. Graph by Matthew Keep, House of Commons Library.

^m This analysis focuses on 25-29-year-olds rather than 19-24-year-olds (figure 3) because the youngest group includes many people who will go on to gain higher-level qualifications, but who have not yet had time to complete them (e.g., 19-year-olds who will complete a university degree). The 25-29 group therefore provides a more stable picture of the “highest qualification” for a cohort entering the labour market.

Box 2: Qualification levels

There are nine levels of qualifications accredited in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.⁴⁶ These are listed below, with one or two examples of each qualification. Qualifications in Scotland are different.⁴⁶

- Entry level: entry level certificate (ELC), entry level functional skills
- Level 1: GCSE grades 3–1 and D–G
- Level 2: GCSE grades 9–4 and A*–C, intermediate apprenticeship
- Level 3: A Levels, T Levels, advanced apprenticeship
- Level 4: Certificate of Higher Education (CertHE), higher apprenticeship
- Level 5: Foundation degree, diploma of higher education (DipHE)
- Level 6: Undergraduate degree, degree apprenticeship
- Level 7: Master's degree, postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE)
- Level 8: Doctorate (PhD or DPhil)

1.2

Participation trends by qualification

Qualification achievements (box 2) can indicate trends in lifelong learning and skills development.ⁿ

Low-level qualifications

The Institute for Fiscal Studies has suggested that the decline in participation in lifelong learning is driven by a sharp reduction in take-up of lower-level qualifications (level 3 and below).³⁷ Between 2010 and 2020, the number of adults taking the most basic qualifications (level 2 and below) fell by around 47%.³⁷

This trend may partly reflect rising qualification levels among younger cohorts (section 1.1; figure 2), reducing demand for some basic qualifications later in life. However, it has also coincided with substantial reductions in funding for adult and community learning and changes in eligibility rules, which have made lower-level provision less available in some areas.^{37,49}

ⁿ Qualifications are often used as a way of measuring the skills held across a population, although a 2012 report by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills acknowledged “qualifications are only one, imperfect, measure of skills”.^{47,48}

Apprenticeships

DfE data from 2024–25 shows that 630,600 adults aged 19 and older participated in apprenticeships: an increase of 4.4% on the previous year.⁴⁵ Over half of all starts (51.3%) were for apprentices aged 25 and over.³⁹

The age of those starting apprenticeships appears to be decreasing: under-19s made up 21.2% of starts in 2024–25, rising to 28.1% in the first quarter of 2025–26.^{26,45} This may reflect changes in government policy (table 1).

Undergraduate and postgraduate degrees

Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data shows that the number of adults aged 21 and over enrolled on undergraduate degrees in England increased by 3.6% between 2020–21 and 2024–25.⁴⁰

During this period, there was a clear move towards full-time participation: the number of adults aged 21 and over enrolled on full-time undergraduate degrees rose by 9.1% while the number of adults aged 21 and over enrolled on part-time undergraduate degrees fell by 12.5%.⁴⁰

Similar trends are seen in adults aged 21 and over enrolled on postgraduate degrees between 2020–21 and 2024–25: full-time enrolments increased by 15.7% while part-time enrolments declined by 4.1%.⁴⁰

Multiple reports have linked the decline in part-time enrolments to the 2012 changes in higher education funding.^{o 50–53}

1.3

Demographic trends in participation in lifelong learning

Evidence consistently shows that participation in lifelong learning is unevenly distributed, as outlined below.

Age

Participation in lifelong learning appears to decline with age.³⁴ A 2025 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report found that younger adults (aged 25–34) in England were almost 24 percentage points more likely to have participated in learning in the previous 12 months than older adults (aged 55–65).³⁵

^o For detailed analysis of trends and demographics in higher education, see the Commons Library briefings [Mature higher education students in England](#) (2021) and [Part-time undergraduate students in England](#) (2022).

Socioeconomic status

Multiple sources suggest that socioeconomic background may be a major factor in skills disparities.^{p 9,34} OECD data from 2023 shows that adults in England participated less in formal and non-formal (box 1) job-related learning if their parents had lower educational attainment: 62.5% of adults aged 25–65 who had at least one parent with a university-level qualification participated in learning in the past year, compared to 38.6% of adults of the same age whose parents had not completed upper secondary education.^{35,58}

Region

Analysis of DfE data by the Learning and Work Institute indicated that, between 2015–16 and 2022–23, participation in publicly funded adult education fell by 27% in the most deprived areas but remained largely unchanged in the least deprived areas.⁴⁹

Previous educational attainment

People with higher previous educational attainment are more likely to participate in adult education.⁵⁹ A 2025 report from the Learning and Work Institute (LWI) indicated that 51% of UK adults who completed full-time education aged 21 and over had participated in learning in the past year, compared to 23% of those who completed full-time education aged 16 and under.^{q 34}

Ethnicity

DfE data indicates that the share of people from minority ethnic groups (excluding White minorities^r) participating in adult (aged 19 and over) education and training increased from 2021–22 (31.52%) to 2024–25 (36.6%).²⁶

2021 census data shows that 81.7% of usual residents in England and Wales said their ethnic group was within the “White” category.⁶¹ Data also shows that people from White ethnic groups were older on average than other ethnic groups, which may partly explain why White learners make up a smaller share of participants than their share of the general population.⁶²

^p Socio-economic background refers to the combination of an individual’s income, occupation and social background (which can be assessed using various measures including parental educational attainment).⁵⁴ Some studies and reports provide a more nuanced evaluation of the relationship between socio-economic background, skills and participation in learning, for example illustrating that parental involvement in their child’s education is four times as important as social class in influencing exam performance of young people at age 16.^{55–57}

^q The LWI’s report is based on data from their annual Adult Participation in Learning Survey, which uses a broad definition of learning (box 1).³⁴

^r White minorities can refer to ethnic groups such as Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller groups.⁶⁰

Gender

DfE data shows that women accounted for 62.5% of learners aged 19 and over participating in adult education and training in England in 2024–25.³¹ In the UK, DfE data indicates that men appear to complete further education (box 1) at younger ages than women: in 2023–24, there were twice as many women than men in further education aged 30 years and over.⁴⁵

However, these patterns are not consistent across datasets. For example, a 2025 OECD report illustrated that men and women (aged 25–65) participate in formal and non-formal (box 1) job related learning at similar rates, both in England and internationally.³⁵ Research indicates that men are more likely than women to receive employer-funded training (section 4.4), which may explain these differences.^{63,64}

2

Legislation, policy and guidance

Table 1 summarises recent developments in legislation, policy and guidance related to lifelong learning and skills. Unless otherwise specified, these apply to England only.

Table 1: Timeline of developments		
Development	Description	Date
The Post-16 education and skills white paper (2025) and Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE)	Replaces student finance and Advanced Learner Loan systems for levels 4 to 6 (box 2).⁶⁵ Will provide learners up to age 60 with a tuition fee loan equivalent to four years of study.⁶⁵ Extra funding will be available for longer courses and priority subjects, in alignment with the government's 2025 Industrial Strategy.^{10,65} Relevant legislation includes Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022 and Lifelong Learning (Higher Education Fee Limits) Act 2023.^{66,67} For more, see the Commons Library briefings The Lifelong Learning Entitlement and The post-16 education and skills white paper.	Launched September 2026, with funding for courses beginning January 2027.
Growth and skills levy	Replaces the apprenticeship levy (a tax on employers used to fund apprenticeships) and allows employers to spend the funding on a wider range of training.⁶⁸ It is a UK-wide levy, with devolved nations allocating spending on skills training. In 2026 the government announced its intention to "prioritise youth apprenticeship starts within the Growth and Skills Levy" in response to the "40% decline in apprenticeship starts that has occurred over the last decade".⁶⁹	From April 2026.
Apprenticeship Units	Short, flexible courses funded through the growth and skills levy, as implemented in England. ⁷⁰ Available in "critical skills areas such as digital, advanced AI (Artificial Intelligence) and engineering." ⁶⁸	From April 2026.
AI Skills Boost Programme	Package of free, industry-developed online short courses available to everyone in the UK. ^{71,72}	January 2026.

Changes to level 7 apprenticeships	Funding for level 7 apprenticeships is now restricted to new apprentices aged 16 to 21 at commencement. ⁶⁸ This is intended to “enable levy funding to be rebalanced towards training at lower levels, where it can have the greatest impact”. ⁷³	Announced May 2025, effective from January 2026.
Responsibility for skills-related policy moves from DfE to DWP (UK-wide). ⁷⁴	The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) took responsibility for apprenticeships, skills, training and careers, adult further education, and Skills England. ⁷⁴ Responsibility for higher education, and further education, training, skills and careers for those aged 19 years and under, remains with DfE. ⁷⁴	September 2025.
Introduction of foundation apprenticeships	Foundation apprenticeships are available to young people aged 16 to 21, or to people aged 22 to 24 who have previously been in care, are a prisoner or a prison leaver, or have an Education, Health and Care plan (EHCP). ⁷⁵ Supported by the Apprenticeships (Miscellaneous Provisions) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2025 , which reduced the minimum duration of apprenticeships from twelve to eight months.	August 2025.
Launch of Skills England	An executive agency of the Department for Work and Pensions working to identify and address skills gaps in the economy. ⁵	Fully established in June 2025. ⁷⁷
Adult Skills Fund (ASF)	The ASF provides most public funding for non-apprenticeship adult skills education in England which was worth around £1.4 billion in the 2025/26 academic year. ^{78,79} Funding is devolved to Mayoral Strategic Authorities where they exist; in areas without devolved authorities, the ASF is administered by central government. ^{78,79} Funding is targeted at learners with low skills, including young adults, unemployed people, and employed people receiving low wages. ^{78,79}	Replaced the Adult Education Budget in August 2024.
Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs)	Intended to create the conditions for providers to deliver education and training (across levels 2–8) that improves employment outcomes, by bringing employers, education providers and local stakeholders together to align skills and training provision to local labour market needs. ⁸⁰	Announced in the Skills for Jobs Policy Paper (2021) and supported by the Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022 .

⁵ Skills England took over most of the functions previously carried out by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE).⁷⁶ This occurred through the [Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education \(Transfer of Functions etc\) Act 2025](#).

	Statutory guidance sets out the process for developing and reviewing a LSIP, and provider duties once an approved LSIP is in place. ⁸¹	
Free courses for jobs	Eligible adults aged 19 and older can access funding for a course to gain a level 2 or level 3 qualification. ^{82,83}	April 2021.
Skills Bootcamps	16-week courses intended to help adults aged 19 and over build sector-specific skills (such as digital, construction, and early years sectors). ⁸⁴	Autumn 2020. ⁸⁵

3 Opportunities

3.1 Mature students filling skills gaps in priority areas

Research indicates that mature students^t are more likely than those who start aged 18 or 19, to choose vocational courses that lead directly into employment opportunities.^{86,87} This could provide an opportunity to align mature students' employment-orientated priorities with workforce needs in skills-shortage sectors, for example health professions (box 3).^{10,88}

Box 3: Case study: nursing and higher education

In higher education, mature students account for more than half the student population in nursing, midwifery and allied health provision, many of whom study part-time.⁸⁶

A 2019 Office for Students report showed that numbers of part-time nursing students have declined since 2017, when the NHS bursary was removed.⁸⁹ The Royal College of Nursing called for the government to reintroduce funded nursing degrees after mature entrants to nursing degrees fell by an additional quarter between 2021 and 2024.⁹⁰

The LLE (table 1) will make additional entitlement available for nursing degrees, however, mature students can be more averse to debt than younger students, which could reduce take-up (section 4.1).⁵⁰ The NHS Long Term Workforce Plan sets out a multi-year expansion of nurse training places and apprenticeship routes, which could be attractive to adults seeking "earn-while-you-learn" options.⁹¹

^t There is no official definition of a "mature student", but the term usually refers to students who are aged 21 and over when they start an undergraduate degree, or who are aged 25 and over when they start a postgraduate degree: for more, see the Commons Library briefing [Mature higher education students in England](#) (2021).

3.2

Sector partnerships and regional economic growth

Collaboration between education providers and industry may connect the provision of lifelong learning to employer demand, address skills gaps and increase regional economic growth (box 4).^{92–94} The current place-based policy and locally allocated funding (table 1) present further opportunities for collaboration and programmes designed for local economies.^{95–97}

Industry stakeholders indicate that tools such as techUK's Local Digital Index can help Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) and providers locate digital skills clusters, identify infrastructure challenges and direct interventions at sub-regional levels.^{u 98,99}

Box 4: Case study on midlands skills partnerships supporting regional growth

The midlands seems to be experiencing persistent and widening skills gaps, particularly in advanced manufacturing and digital technology.¹⁰⁰ A 2025 Productivity Institute report indicated that, between 2017 and 2022, the East Midlands saw a 78% increase in job vacancies and a 156% rise in labour-market shortages, indicating acute employer demand for local upskilling interventions.¹⁰¹

The midlands received £36.9 million in Local Skills Improvement Fund (LSIF)^v investment between 2023 and 2025, directed toward aligning FE and HE training provision with LSIP priorities at a regional level (table 1).¹⁰²

For example, Leicester and Leicestershire's LSIF-funded LSIP created green leadership skills courses and flexible digital upskilling, aligning FE provision to employer demand to raise capacity, productivity and accelerate low-carbon regional growth.¹⁰³ This initiative has not yet been evaluated.

Other regional case studies include the UK Government's [Northern Growth Strategy 2026](#) and the [South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority' skills bank](#).

^u techUK's Local Digital Index brings together a wide range of datasets into an interactive online dashboard, allowing users to understand how developed different local and sub-regional digital ecosystems are across the UK.⁹⁸

^v This fund has now been withdrawn, however the LSIP is still active (table 1).

3.3

Remote and modular learning

Modularity is central to both the LLE and the reformed Growth and Skills levy (table 1), these policies could increase opportunities for lifelong learning including upskilling and professional development. Flexible, modular learning^w may support adult learners, who are more likely to balance study with jobs, childcare and caring responsibilities (section 4.1).^{87,104–107}

Evidence shows the mode of learning has also changed, with an increase in [distance learning](#).^x However, evidence on its impact on appetite, engagement and accessibility appears to be limited.^{108–110}

Short courses could also enable experienced workers (aged 60 and over) to update their skillsets, for example in digital skills. While this age group is currently ineligible for the LLE (table 1), the forthcoming apprenticeship units and ongoing skills bootcamp may offer opportunities for upskilling.

3.4

International comparisons

International frameworks and shared skills classifications can provide insights for UK contexts. For example, the European Union's ESCO^y skills classification are used to support clearer identification and comparison of skills across education, training and employment systems.^{111,112} Case studies of skills and lifelong learning policies, such as those produced by [the LWI and Nuffield Foundation](#), compare policy implementation and evaluation also provide learnings for the UK context.^{113,114}

^w Modular learning refers to an educational approach where content is broken into self-contained units (modules) that focus on specific skills or knowledge. Learners study modules independently, often at their own pace, allowing for flexible and personalized learning.

^x Online and hybrid remote learning and education provision.

^y ESCO is the multilingual classification of European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations. It identifies and categorises skills, competences, qualifications and occupations relevant for the EU labour market and education and training in 25 European Languages.

4 Challenges

4.1 Barriers to accessing learning and upskilling for adult learners

A 2025 OECD report found that one in four adults would like to participate in (more) learning, but they experience barriers to doing so.³⁵

Cost of learning

Multiple sources have identified the cost of learning as a barrier for adult learners.^{z 8,35,115} In 2025, the LWI reported that adults identifying cost as a barrier to participation in learning rose from 8% in 2019 to 24% in 2025.^{aa 34}

Debt aversion and at-risk groups

Student loans can deter some prospective students.^{50,118} Multiple sources have suggested that mature entrants to higher education are less willing to take on debt.^{50,51,118,119} Evidence from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) suggests the 2012 increase in maximum tuition fees in England coincided with a marked fall in mature and part-time entry (section 1).¹²⁰

Research also suggests that debt aversion is higher among marginalised groups, including those from less affluent socioeconomic backgrounds.^{121–124} This may affect take-up of the LLE (table 1).¹¹⁸

Caring responsibilities

Research suggests that caring responsibilities (whether for children, parents or partners) pose an additional barrier for adult learners.^{34,35,106,115,125} Qualitative research has suggested that this may be a particular barrier for women.^{115,126}

^z The cost of learning includes the fee for the course as well as additional costs, for example purchase of a laptop computer, commuting costs for in-person courses and internet connection for online courses.

^{aa} This is based on the LWI's annual Adult Participation in Learning Survey, of 5000 people.³⁴ The report findings reflect the rising cost of living, however, the survey methodology has changed since the pandemic (moving from face-to-face interviews to online) which may also explain the increase, as participants may be less likely to express sensitive details face-to-face.^{34,116,117}

4.2 Low appetite for lifelong learning

A 2025 OECD report found that approximately half of all adults across participating OECD countries neither participate in nor want to participate in adult learning.³⁵ Similarly, almost one in three respondents to the LWI's 2025 Adult Participation in Learning Survey said they have not engaged in learning in the past three years because they "don't want to".³⁴

This low appetite for learning may stem from adults' attitudes to learning.^{35,115} Qualitative research suggests that some adults lack self-belief and confidence in relation to learning, often because of negative prior learning experiences.^{115,127,128} Research also suggests that attitudes to learning, shaped in childhood, may affect later engagement with lifelong learning.^{55,115,129,130}

4.3 Additional support needs of adult learners

Multiple sources indicate that mature students are more likely to disclose a self-reported disability than students who enter higher education at age 18 or 19.^{bb 131,132} Office for Students data shows that full-time mature undergraduate students are less likely than students under 21 years to complete their course and less likely to achieve a first- or upper-second-class degree.¹³³ This indicates that tailored support for this cohort might be needed.¹³⁴

DfE data indicates that more than one in five adults participating in further education and training in 2024–25 declared a learning difficulty and/or disability.^{cc 26} Almost one in four learners participating in tailored learning (box 1) in 2024–25 declared themselves as having a learning difficulty or disability.²⁶ This indicates that there may be systemic additional support demand across adult education, particularly in tailored learning provision.⁷⁹

4.4 Declining employer investment in upskilling

Research indicates that employer-funded training can increase job satisfaction and productivity, provide skills to manage conflict in the workplace, and make employees feel valued by their employer.^{135–139} Multiple reports have suggested that upskilling existing employees could help to address skills shortages and mismatches in the workforce.^{8,41,140,141}

^{bb} See CBP [Mature higher education students in England](#) (2021).

^{cc} This figure represents an increase on the previous academic year: 22.9% of learners participating in adult education and training in 2024–25 declared a learning difficulty and/or disability, compared with 21.8% in 2023/24.

However, employer investment in training appears to be declining in the UK.³⁸ In the UK Employer Skills Survey, published by the DfE, employers reported training expenditure of £53.0 billion in 2024, an 18.5% decrease in real terms since 2011.³³

A 2026 report by the LWI found that, where training is provided by UK employers, it is often short: 58% of UK training episodes last a single day or less, which is the highest of all OECD member countries.^{dd 142}

Small and medium enterprises

Evidence suggests access to employer-funded training varies by firm size and sector.^{33,43,142,143} A 2024 survey conducted by the Open University and British Chambers of Commerce reported that larger firms and the public, health and third sectors are far more likely to run targeted training initiatives, while many small and medium enterprises (SMEs) have limited capacity to upskill their employees.¹⁴⁴

The charity Enginuity's 2025 SME Snapshot report suggests that this may be underpinned by rising employment costs;^{ee} almost one in five advanced manufacturing SMEs in its survey planned to offset costs by reducing their training budgets.^{ff 145}

Evidence compiled by Skills England suggests SMEs can find it harder to access apprenticeships because they lack administrative capacity.¹⁴⁰ This feedback has informed reforms such as the development of shorter and foundation apprenticeships (table 1).¹⁴⁰

Unequal access to employer-funded training

Access to employer-funded training may be unequal.⁴⁹ A 2026 LWI report found that employees with qualifications at level 4 and above are twice as likely to receive training as those with level 2 qualifications, both in the UK and internationally.¹⁴²

The Open University and British Chambers of Commerce reported in 2024 that a majority (63%) of employers lack targeted initiatives, including for training, for under-represented groups such as disabled and neurodivergent people.¹⁴⁴ This may have consequences for inclusive workforce development.^{49,147}

^{dd} This compares to an OECD average of 44%.

^{ee} Enginuity's 2025 SME Snapshot report found that almost 9 in 10 (89%) SMEs identified labour costs as a source of pressure to raise prices; utilities and energy costs (57%) were the second most commonly cited source of pressure, followed by raw materials (55%).¹⁴⁵

^{ff} For a more detailed discussion of the financial circumstances of SMEs on an international level, see the OECD's Financing SMEs and Entrepreneurs 2024 report.¹⁴⁶

5 Wider impacts

Alongside skill acquisition, lifelong learning is associated with a variety of beneficial impacts on individuals and society, illustrated in table 2.

International reports emphasise the importance of building on [longitudinal](#) research and datasets, to better understand the impacts of upskilling and lifelong learning, including both economic and wider associations such as those listed below.^{41,148,149}

Table 2: Wider impacts of lifelong learning on individuals and society

Impact	Description
Health	Research suggests that participation in lifelong learning may have benefits for physical/mental health and wellbeing, including: - encouraging healthier behaviours (exercising, stopping smoking)^{150,151} - building cognitive reserve and supporting healthy ageing, potentially reducing dementia risk^{152–154} - increasing confidence and self-esteem^{136,155–157} - reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression^{155,157,158} - improving self-management of health conditions^{151,155,157} - decreasing visits to health services.^{155,157}
Digital inclusion	Reports indicate that digital-skills provision may reduce digital exclusion and loneliness amongst older adults. ^{99 159,160}
Financial resilience	Studies have found a link between adult financial education (including as delivered through community learning) and improvements in saving, budgeting and debt management. ^{161,162}
Intergenerational advantages	Multiple reports identify improvements in children’s educational attainment and health when their parents participate in learning. ^{151,163,164}
Community cohesion	Research suggests that participating in lifelong learning can strengthen social networks and community development. ^{165,166}
Democratic engagement	Evidence indicates a correlation between engagement in learning and participation in civic life, including volunteering and voting in elections. ^{150,157,167}

⁹⁹ See POSTnote [Digital disengagement and impacts on exclusion](#) (2024).

6 Policy considerations

6.1 Financial incentives for employers to invest in training

The LWI (2024) has proposed financial incentives for employers to upskill their workforce, by means of a skills tax credit.^{168,169} Modelled on the existing research and development tax credit, a skills tax credit would allow businesses to deduct training costs from their corporation tax liabilities.^{168,169} Anecdotal evidence shows that, although some employers may face concerns on losing return on investment due to staff who undergo training or upskilling leaving, it is rarely recorded as a core obstacle to training provision and it can improve employee retainment.^{170,171}

The LWI says that a skills tax credit could allow taxpayer investment to be focused on those with the lowest qualifications and would potentially reduce the financial risk to employers of investing in training, recognising that employers themselves do not always reap all the benefits of upskilling their employees.^{168,169}

6.2 Public understanding and awareness

Cross-sector stakeholders indicate that prospective adult learners are unaware which courses are available and how to access funding.^{99,172} These stakeholders caution that adult learners are turning to [generative AI](#) to find training courses, which can provide inaccurate information.^{99,172}

Expanding and promoting a centralised search engine for providers and government to share initiatives and opportunities may support prospective adult learners to access reliable information.¹¹⁴ A similar initiative exists in Germany, where the 'ProfilPASS' online tool allows individuals to self-assess their skills and suggests learning opportunities verified by the German government.¹¹⁴

The Department of Work and Pensions' proposed new Jobs and Careers service, alongside the [UK Skills Explorer Tool](#), could provide an opportunity to expand on information, advice and guidance (IAG) on opportunities and establish skills categories.^{3,173,174}

HESA data indicates that mature graduates outnumber younger graduates in courses including medicine, dentistry and subjects allied to medicine (section 3.1).¹⁷⁵ However, a 2019 report indicated that mature students cluster

around a small number of courses (such as nursing) and have little awareness of many health professions.⁸⁶ A 2021 Office for Students report found that targeted IAG could direct prospective students toward less obvious skills shortage roles in the health sector.¹⁷⁶

Research suggests that adults may be most open to learning during key life transitions (including redundancy, bereavement, divorce, new parenthood) and that targeting IAG at transitional moments may increase participation in lifelong learning.^{55,115,177,178}

A 2013 report indicated the importance of ensuring communications are inclusive of prospective learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, including publicising the support available to them.¹⁷⁹

6.3

Holistic approach to lifelong learning

Academic and third sector stakeholders indicated the potential for an integrated, cross-departmental national strategy for lifelong learning that aligns education, skills and health policies.^{180,181} Research suggests that such a vision could be led nationally and delivered locally with providers and industry in collaboration.^{14,182} In South Korea, each city has its own lifelong education council. Additionally, the Ministry of Education reviews lifelong learning trends and adjusts its policy every five years: current priorities emphasise reskilling opportunities for working adults aged 30-50.¹¹⁴

Cross-sector stakeholders stated that such an initiative could capture the wider benefits of lifelong learning (table 2) alongside near-term job-related skills, to produce economic and social benefits.^{180,181} A pilot study by Rochdale Borough Council found that investment in preventive, place-based support (including lifelong learning) reduced demand for high-cost services, producing a return on investment of £3.68 for every £1 spent.¹⁸³

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