Barriers to learning for disadvantaged groups

Report of qualitative findings
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Executive summary

Research shows that participation in learning can have a host of positive benefits for the individual and society, including improved health, wellbeing and productivity. Increasing and widening access to learning is crucial to our future prosperity, fairness and inclusion as a nation. Despite this, the UK has seen a recent decline in the number of adults participating in skills training and publicly-funded learning. If we are to engage more adults in learning, it is vital that we understand patterns of behaviour, adults' motivations for learning, and any barriers they face to their engagement in learning.

Learning and Work Institute (L&W) was funded by Department for Education (DfE) to undertake qualitative interviews to explore the barriers, motivations and triggers for learning amongst adults. The aim was to draw out potential levers for engaging adults in learning. Thirty-seven in-depth interviews were undertaken with current and recent learners, and non-learners. These included participants with demographic characteristics typically associated with lower participation in learning to provide insights on how policy and practice interventions can best target these groups.

Key Findings:

- Motivations for learning amongst adults are wide-ranging and influenced by personal, social and economic circumstances, as well as past experiences. Extrinsic motivations for learning, particularly in relation to job progression, were discussed. Intrinsic motivations were particularly strong across accounts, and were connected with health and wellbeing, confidence, and the enjoyment of learning.

- Adults face a range of situational, institutional and dispositional barriers as they navigate learning opportunities. Whilst all participants were able to discuss at least one barrier they faced to taking up learning, the most disadvantaged learners were more likely to describe the cumulative effect of multiple barriers to learning. These groups included: people in receipt of benefits; people with disabilities and health conditions; single parents; and participants whose first language is not English.

- A set of practical and circumstantial factors often need to be in place to facilitate learning. These are connected with overcoming some of the barriers to learning, such as cost, childcare, awareness of opportunities and employer support.

- Being motivated to learn, and learning being made easy or easier, is not always sufficient for learning to happen. Participant portraits show that learning is often triggered at the intersection between larger shifts – life changing and traumatic events such as a bereavement – and smaller, pragmatic, situational experiences such as the discovery of an affordable course. 'Trigger' refers to the tipping of the balance where motivations for learning outweigh any barriers that are faced. Learning is triggered at the point in time when it becomes apparent, sufficiently accessible and worth it.

- Participants suggested a range of avenues for supporting more adults to learn. These included overcoming practical barriers such as cost and childcare, and strongly and inclusively conveying the value of learning. Participants advocated awareness raising campaigns which highlight that learning is for everyone. They also advocated making information available on the internet but also in public forums so that people encounter it as they go about their everyday life.

Considerations for policy and practice

- The barriers to learning experienced by adults are multi-layered and interrelated. Interventions seeking to engage adults in learning should therefore seek to **address more than one type of barrier**.

- Dispositional barriers, such as a fear of learning or low levels of confidence, can prevent adults from taking steps towards learning. While this is very personal, **learning provision should be designed to build confidence**, for example through bite-sized courses or discrete units, which can be extended as learners' progress.

- Adults are motivated to learn if the potential outcomes are clear and valued. **Evidence on the positive outcomes and potential impact of learning as an adult should therefore be widely communicated**. This could include high-profile awareness raising campaigns and/or better availability of information about the potential returns on learning.

- The perceived benefits of learning are complex, indirect and wide-ranging including improved health, well-being and social relationships, in addition to work and career progression. **It is important that outreach and engagement with adults taps into different motivations they may have**, which can change throughout the life-course.

- Learning as an adult is predominantly a voluntary activity. Opportunities need to be visible and accessible, and accompanied by good quality information. **Information about learning opportunities should be shared and communicated proactively in a variety of ways**, including the internet and in public spaces so that people come across them in everyday life.

- Many adults experience competing priorities such as work, family and caring responsibilities. **Learning provision therefore needs to accommodate this and offer flexibility**, for example outside of working hours, online and/or blended learning.

Introduction

Learning has positive benefits for individuals, communities and the wider economy[1]. Increasing and widening access to learning is crucial to future prosperity, fairness and social inclusion in the UK. Despite the strength of this evidence, the UK has seen a recent decline in the number of adults participating in learning and training[2]. To address this challenge the Government is developing a National Retraining Scheme to ensure the UK remains competitive in a global economy and to improve social mobility. If we are to engage more adults in learning, it is vital that we understand patterns of behaviour and adults' motivations and the barriers to their engagement.

Learning and Work Institute (L&W) is an independent policy and research organisation dedicated to promoting lifelong learning, full employment and inclusion. For over 20 years, L&W (previously NIACE) has undertaken an annual survey of adult participation in learning. The survey, which draws on data from a national representative survey of 5,000 adults across the UK (or Great Britain in 2017), provides a rich evidence base on who participates in learning, their motivations, and any barriers and benefits experienced. The 2017 survey and this qualitative study were funded by the Department for Education (DfE).

In 2017, for the first time, in-depth qualitative interviews have been undertaken with a sample of survey respondents, including those who are currently, or have recent experience of, learning and adults who have not participated in learning for at least three years. These interviews explored the barriers to learning, motivations to learn, events or circumstances that triggered learning, facilitators that support access to learning, and potential levers to engaging other adults in learning. Interviews were sought with people with demographic characteristics typically associated with lower participation to provide insights on how policy and practice interventions can best target groups who are currently underrepresented in learning provision.

This report presents the findings from the interviews, including illustrative case studies of individual's experiences, and sets out considerations for policy aimed at engaging more and different adults in learning.

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[1] Healthy, Wealthy and Wise: The impact of adult learning across the UK
https://www.learningandwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/LW-EU-Report-Nov-2017-V8-1.pdf
[2] Further Education and Skills in England – November 2017 (SFR 62/2017)
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/660580/SFR62_Nov_2017.pdf and Green, F et al. (2015) "The declining volumes of workers' training in Britain", British Journal of Industrial relations 52(2) pp.422-488

Context

Policy challenge

The UK economy faces a number of critical challenges[3]: advances in technology and the changing nature of work suggest that an estimated 10-35 per cent of UK jobs are at high risk of replacement in the next 20 years; an ageing population is increasing the need for adults to reskill throughout their extended working lives; the UK economy has an entrenched productivity gap relative to other advanced economies; and social mobility is low by international standards and does not appear to be improving[4].

As outlined in the government's recent Industrial Strategy[5], if we are to successfully address these issues, improving both productivity and social mobility, then adults will need to upskill and retrain throughout their working lives.

There is strong evidence on the economic value of formal qualifications, with no apparent disadvantage if these are obtained after the age of 25[6]. In addition, research shows that participation in learning can have a positive impact on health and well-being, as well as upon our families and communities[7]. Increasing and widening access to learning is crucial to our future prosperity, fairness and inclusion as a nation.

Despite the strength of this evidence, the UK has seen a recent decline in the number of adults participating in skills training[8] and publicly-funded learning[9]. In order to tackle this decline, the Conservative party manifesto committed to the creation of 'the best programme of learning and training for people in work and returning to work' and to roll out a National Retraining Scheme.

As part of a £40m commitment to test innovative approaches to lifelong learning, DfE have launched Career Learning Pilots, including a Flexible Learning Fund to explore a range of innovations in delivery and Outreach and Cost Pilots to develop the evidence base on how more adults can be engaged and supported in learning. In addition, a number of research studies are currently underway, including a review of Level 4/5 qualifications and a qualitative study on the decision-making of adult learners.

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[3] Foresight Review into the Future of Skills and Lifelong Learning
https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/future-of-skills-and-lifelong-learning
[4] 7 key truths about social mobility, the interim report of the APPG on social mobility
https://www.raeng.org.uk/publications/other/7-key-truths-about-social-mobility
[5] Industrial Strategy White Paper
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/664563/industrial-strategy-white-paper-web-ready-version.pdf
[6] Foresight Review into the Future of Skills and Lifelong Learning
https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/future-of-skills-and-lifelong-learning
[7] Healthy, Wealthy and Wise: The impact of adult learning across the UK
https://www.learningandwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/LW-EU-Report-Nov-2017-V8-1.pdf
[8] Green, F et al. (2015) "The declining volumes of workers' training in Britain", British Journal of Industrial relations 52(2) pp.422-488
[9] Further Education and Skills in England – November 2017 (SFR 62/2017)
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/660580/SFR62_Nov_2017.pdf

Key insights from available evidence

The 2017 Adult Participation in Learning Survey provides an up-to-date view on who is most or least likely to be learning, what their motivations are and what barriers adults experience when seeking to take up learning. It shows the lowest participation rate[10] in the history of the survey, at 37 per cent, indicating considerable challenges for engaging adults who are least likely to learn.

Different approaches have been taken to measuring participation in learning. The Adult Participation in Learning Survey uses a deliberately broad definition of learning to capture as wide an array of learners as possible, which goes beyond participation in publicly-funded provision. The interpretation of the definition is subjective and some individuals with similar experiences may classify themselves differently. An alternative approach was adopted by the National Adult Learner Survey (NALS),[11] which uses a different definition and a series of questions to classify respondents into formal learners, non-formal learners, informal learners and non-learners. Participation rates measured through NALS are higher than those captured by the Participation Survey. An alternative approach to these self-reported surveys would be to use nationally-collected statistics on adult education such as in DfE and ESFA statistical releases[12]. However, such statistics are limited to publicly-funded provision and are unable to identify qualitative issues such as barriers to learning or motivations.

While the different measures result in variations of the level of participation in learning, they all consistently show that patterns of participation are not evenly distributed across the adult population. As learning is associated with personal, social and economic benefits, inequalities in learning create inequalities to experiencing these benefits. It therefore remains important to measure levels of participation and understand who participates in what form of learning and why, and who does not. Adult learning can help tackle wider inequalities but will only do so if inequalities in participation change.

Who participates?

Available evidence identifies groups that disproportionately face barriers to accessing learning, and maps changes over time. Through this literature, a number of long-standing trends are apparent:

- **Parental experiences of learning:** The likelihood of participating in learning in adulthood is strongly influenced by family experiences and attitudes towards education and learning[13]. This has been a consistent factor over time and parental

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[10] The participation rate is the proportion of adults who are currently learning, or have done some learning within the last three years

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

[12] https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/further-education-and-skills-statistical-first-release-sfr

[13] Tuckett & Field. (2016). Factors and motivations affecting attitudes towards and propensity to learn through the life course

involvement in school has been found to be more than four times as important as social class in influencing performance of young people at 16[14]. Research shows that learning as a family, and learning across generations, could increase the overall level of children's development by as much as 15 percentage points for those from disadvantaged groups[15] and provide an average reading improvement equivalent to six months of reading age[16]. Evidence also demonstrates that improving the education and qualification level of adults is not just about them but also about their children. Upgrading adult skills can bring large returns for their children[17].

- **Initial experiences of education:** Learning identities are shaped early, influenced by family expectations and initial education[18]. Adults who have experienced early successes in education are more likely to continue to learn throughout adulthood. This early positive educational experience provides "cumulative advantage" throughout the life course[19]. Conversely, learners who do not experience success in compulsory education are less likely to engage in learning as adults. Whilst "positive learning experiences engender a desire for more learning, building identity, social and human capitals. Negative experiences of education have the reverse effect" [20]. Those who leave education at the earliest opportunity are less likely to engage in learning later in life[21].

- **Age:** National measures of participation, including L&W's Participation Survey and NALS, consistently show that rates of learning decline with age. This is despite the rise in life expectancy in the UK and longer working lives. There is therefore an economic and social case for ensuring access to learning for people aged 50 plus[22]. The 2017 Participation Survey found a nine percentage point drop in participation among learners aged 45-54 compared to the 2015 survey[23].

- **Social Class:** The most salient feature of data over time is that social grade is a key predictor of participation in learning. Occupational status, parental education level and experiences, income and level of qualification all shape the likelihood of participating in learning as an adult, and are all interrelated with social class[24]. Over the last two decades, the Participation Survey has found that the higher the socio-economic group someone is in, the more likely they are to be engaged in

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[14] Ibid (p. 5)
[15] Sheffield City Council, analysis of foundation stage pupil data, 2011–2012.
[16] NRDC/NIACE (2012) Family learning: a review of the research literature.
[17] NIACE/Sebates, R. (2008) The Impact of Lifelong Learning on Poverty Reduction.
[18] Tuckett & Field. (2016). Factors and motivations affecting attitudes towards and propensity to learn through the life course.
[19] Schuller and Watson. (2009). Learning Through Life: Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning. NIACE.
[20] Tuckett & Field. (2016). Factors and motivations affecting attitudes towards and propensity to learn through the life course (p. 6)
[21] NIACE. (2012) Adult Participation in Learning Survey (p. 6).
[22] NIACE/McNair, S. (2015) Older people, learning and education: what do we know?
[23] Learning and Work Institute. (2018). Adult Participation in Learning Survey 2017
[24] Savage, M. (2015). Social class in the 21st Century. London: Pelican.

learning. The 2017 Participation Survey showed that people in the AB grade are twice as likely to participate as people in the DE grade (51% compared with 23%). In contrast, twice as many adults in the DE grade have not participated in learning since leaving full-time education as those in AB (53% compared with 22%).

- **Connection to the labour market:** Those with no connection to the labour market have lower participation rates in learning. Being employed in a low-skilled job, or being registered unemployed provides more opportunities to learn than being unconnected to the labour market[25]. More educated people are more likely to be in employment contexts where they can take advantage of further learning and training[26]. People in lower paid and lower skilled roles receive the least training in the workplace.[27] Work-based training is also more likely in public sector roles rather than the private sector[28]. Work is important, both as a place where learning takes place, and as a motivating factor for undertaking learning[29].

- **Gender:** Participation in learning as an adult is interrelated with gender in complex ways. Those who initially do well in the education system, both men and women, are more likely to participate in learning as adults. In 2009, Schuller and Watson found that women were more likely to participate in learning as young adults but by 50 the rates equalised[30]. The 2017 Participation Survey indicated that women have a significantly higher participation rate than men; in total, 39 per cent of women are participating in learning compared with 35 per cent of men.

- **Ethnicity:** Headline figures from participation measures indicate that participation is higher overall among adults from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds. For example, the 2017 Participation Survey found that respondents from BAME backgrounds are significantly and substantially more likely to be participating in learning than respondents from White backgrounds (48% compared with 35%) [31]. Grouping individuals from BAME backgrounds into one masks differences between different ethnicities. A 2008 study found that individuals with Black African heritage or mixed heritage had significantly higher rates and were in stark contrast to individuals from Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds[32].

- **Having a disability or learning difficulty:** People with a disability are less likely to participate in learning[33]. They are also less likely to participate in the labour market, which is related to lower rates of participation in learning. A lack of mobility

[25] Schuller and Watson. (2009). Learning Through Life: Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning. NIACE.
[26] Ibid
[27] Ibid
[28] Ibid
[29] NIACE. (2012). Adult Participation in Learning Survey.
[30] Ibid
[31] Learning and Work Institute. (2018). Adult Participation in Learning Survey 2017
[32] NIACE (2008) Briefing on participation in learning by adults from minority ethnic groups
[33] OPM and Ipsos MORI. (2014). Removing barriers, raising disabled people's living standards.

may make it difficult to access some learning venues, where they have not been made into inclusive and accessible learning spaces. People with disabilities may also face additional barriers resulting from negative experiences of compulsory education, intimidation and being labelled, and people having lower aspirations for them[34].

- **Being a 'slower adapter to technological advances':** Slower adapters to technological advances experience greater barriers to learning. They are more likely to be: people in social housing; people with lower incomes or who are unemployed; people with disabilities; rural populations; older people; traveller communities; homeless people; NEET young people; and people with 'no recourse to public funds', although this list is not exhaustive[35]. Access to technology has been found to have a modest impact on the propensity to learn,[36] and one which has remained fairly consistent over time, despite continual changes in the way the internet is used as a learning resource.

What barriers to learning do adults face?

Evidence shows that adults face a wide range of barriers, which affect the likelihood of them participating in learning. These have been classified within the literature[37] as:

- **Situational barriers:** arising from an adult's personal and family situation, such as time pressures and financial constraints;

- **Institutional barriers:** arising from the unresponsiveness of educational institutions or a lack of flexibility in the provision on offer, such as inappropriate scheduling or content of provision; and

- **Dispositional barriers:** relating to the attitudes, perceptions and expectations of adults, such as believing that they are too old to learn or lacking confidence or interest.

Analysis of data collected through the 2017 Participation Survey found that, among adults who have *not* taken part in learning for at least three years, barriers differ across different demographic groups[38]. Adults citing situational barriers are more likely to be working part-time, women, have higher level qualifications, and are less likely to experience multiple disadvantage in employment[39]. Adults citing institutional barriers are

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[34] OPM and Ipsos MORI. (2014). Removing barriers, raising disabled people's living standards.
[35] NIACE. (2012). Adult Participation in Learning Survey
[36] Tuckett & Field. (2016). Factors and motivations affecting attitudes towards and propensity to learn through the life course.
[37] Cross, K. P. (1981). *Adults as learners*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
[38] Learning and Work Institute. (2018). Adult Participation in Learning Survey 2017
[39] Index of multiple disadvantage is a measure of disadvantage in employment prospects. It is based on five characteristics that are each independently associated with higher levels of non-employment. The index is calculated by adding together the number of these characteristics the respondent has; the higher the number of characteristics the higher the level of disadvantage in employment. See https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/multiple-disadvantage-employment

most likely to be women and individuals furthest from employment. Adults citing dispositional barriers are most likely to be unemployed people, including those seeking work and those who are not, and adults who have a higher index on the index of multiple disadvantage in employment. Respondents with higher qualification levels were less likely to cite dispositional barriers.

This demonstrates that interventions aimed at engaging adults in learning need to address different barriers and to take targeted approaches depending on the demographic characteristics of potential learners. If adults who are least likely to take part in learning – and those who have benefited least from previous education – are to be successfully engaged, dispositional barriers need to be addressed, in addition to wider situational and institutional barriers.

What motivates adults to learn?

For most adults, participation in learning is voluntary and therefore interventions to engage adults in learning need to tap into their motivations and aspirations.

Motivations for learning are formed and changed in the context of individual dispositions, personal and familial situations and wider socio-cultural and institutional environments[40]. These include external motivations such as: supportive social networks; availability of appropriate learning; access to effective information, advice and guidance; opportunities for progression at work; availability of funded or free learning; and national campaigns raising awareness of the outcomes of learning. Meanwhile, intrinsic motivations may stem from: personal dispositions for learning; enjoyment of learning that may connect with previous experiences; a desire to make new friends and expand social networks; and a desire to use learning as a route to improved wellbeing, mental health and physical health. Tuckett and Field argue that motivations to learn can arise from transitions throughout the life-course. Significant life events can encourage reflection on past experiences and what might be possible in the future, which can motivate the take-up of learning[41].

The 2017 Participation Survey found that three-quarters (75%) of learners were motivated to take up learning for work or career related reasons, and just under a quarter (24%) for leisure or personal interest. Some groups of adults were more likely to learn for work or career related reasons than others including:

- Younger respondents, with each age group below the age of 35 significantly more likely to do so than each age group over the age of 45.

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[40] Yap, Chao Jr Roger. (2009). Understanding the Adult Learners' Motivation and Barriers to Learning. European Society for Research on the Education of Adults.
[41] Tuckett & Field. (2016). Factors and motivations affecting attitudes towards and propensity to learn through the life course.

- Adults in C2 and C1 social grades, with four out five individuals learning for work or career related reasons (81% and 80% respectively); both significantly higher than adults in social grades AB (71%) or DE (67%).
- Full-time workers, who are significantly more likely than respondents with all other types of working status to have learnt for work or career related reasons (85%); followed by part-time (under eight hours) and self-employed, with respective figures of 78 and 70 per cent.

In contrast, adults who are more likely to be motivated to learn by leisure or personal interest are more likely to be:

- Older respondents, with more than nine out of 10 (94%) learners aged 75+ and 78 per cent of 65-74 year-olds identifying leisure or personal interest as a reason for starting learning. This drops significantly to just a third (34%) of 55-64 year-olds and as low as 12 per cent for respondents aged 17-24.
- Retired adults, at 86 per cent compared with 14 per cent of full-time workers, 22 per cent of part-time workers and 30 per cent of self-employed workers. More than a quarter (29%) of unemployed adults undertaking learning are doing so for leisure or personal interest, which suggests that tapping into these motivations could be an effective way of engaging adults who are seeking work.

Contribution of this study

This qualitative study, undertaken immediately after the 2017 survey, provides a deeper understanding of the nature of these challenges, as well as the motivations and triggers for learning. The findings contribute to the evidence base on barriers and motivations to learning, to inform policy development aimed at engaging adults who have the most to gain from learning and training.

Methodology

To accompany the 2017 Adult Participation in Learning Survey, qualitative interviews were undertaken with a sample of survey respondents. These interviews aimed to complement the quantitative findings of the survey and provide deeper insights on adults' barriers to learning and potential levers to successfully engaging more and different adults in learning.

Between December 2017 and February 2018 in-depth telephone interviews were conducted with 37 adults, aged 17 and above, living in Great Britain. Participants were sampled through the 2017 Participation Survey, which included a 'call-back' option for people willing to participate in a follow-up interview. During interviews, participants were asked about:

- Current learning
- Experiences of learning during and since full-time education

- Motivations and triggers for learning

- Views on adult learning and plans for future learning

- Recommendations for the government, employers, learning providers and other agencies on how more adults could be supported to participate in learning.

Participants were read a broad definition of learning at the beginning of the interview and asked whether they were currently learning or had done so in the last 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. I am interested in any learning you have done, whether or not it was finished.'

This is the same definition given to survey respondents before they are asked about their learning status. The survey deliberately adopts a broad definition of learning, including a wide range of formal, non-formal and informal learning, far beyond the limits of publicly offered educational opportunities for adults. In some cases, through taking part in the qualitative interview, interviewees gave different responses about their learning status than the one they gave during the survey fieldwork.

Interviewees overwhelmingly focused their commentary on experiences and attitudes towards formal education, although the range of informal education and learning was also discussed, including: reading books and professional journals; doing puzzles; and learning new skills through a voluntary role.

About the participants

Through the qualitative interviews the aim was to hear from two groups of participants:

- **Group A Participants:** Adults with recent experience of learning, particularly from groups that are typically underrepresented in learning. These are survey respondents who said that, according to the broad definition of learning offered, they were currently learning or had done so in the past three years.

- **Group B Participants:** Adults without recent experience of learning, but who may benefit most from learning, for example those with low/medium skills, those who could benefit from retraining and returners to the labour market. These are survey respondents who said that, according to the broad definition of learning offered, they were not currently learning and had not done so for at least three years.

Across all participants, interviews were sought with people with demographic characteristics typically associated with lower participation to provide insights on how

policy and practice interventions can best target groups who are currently underrepresented in learning provision.

Our analysis of interviews showed that participant experiences and perspectives were not always differentiated according to the Group A and Group B distinction, with some Group B participants explaining they had done some learning. This lack of differentiation may also be because this was an opt-in sample, and therefore consists of people who were willing to take part in an interview about learning. We have therefore analysed and reported the findings together, making it clear where relevant whether someone is a learner or non-learner. Anonymised quotations have been included throughout the report to illustrate key findings. In each case we have specified whether the participant being quoted was from Group A or from Group B.

While quotas were not set for the interviewees, recruitment activities aimed to secure participants with a range of demographic characteristics. The final sample included:

- Twenty-six women and eleven men
- Three people who reported being a single parent
- Six people who reported having an impairment or disability
- Two people who were caring for a family member or friend with a disability or a long-term health condition
- Four participants from an ethnic minority group
- Two people aged 20-24; nine aged 25-34; thirteen aged 35-44; 7 aged 45-54 and six aged 55-64
- Five people in social grade[42] AB; 17 in C1; 5 in C2 and 10 in DE.

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[42] Based on Office for National Statistics' occupational classification, derived from a set of questions to identify features of respondents' occupation and workplace. Social Grade A includes the upper and upper-middle classes and is generally grouped with Grade B, the middle classes. Grade C1 includes the lower-middle class, often called white-collar workers. Grade C2 mainly consists of skilled manual workers. Grade D comprises the semi-skilled and unskilled working class, and is usually linked with Grade E, those in the lowest grade occupations or who are unemployed.

Findings

The evidence gathered through interviews indicates that adults make decisions about participation in learning through a process of evaluating:

- the risks associated with taking up learning;

- the value and opportunities gained through learning; and

- their priorities at a specific point in time.

This process was often implicit in participants' accounts and highlights the existence of both conscious and unconscious drivers of behaviour around the decision to learn as an adult.

Motivations for learning

For most adults, participation in learning is voluntary and therefore interventions to engage adults in learning need to tap into their motivations and aspirations. This chapter presents the range of motivations for learning that participants discussed in interviews.

Motivations are distinguished from facilitators and triggers, which are dealt with separately in the following sections. Motivations are the reason why people want to learn, and any aims or expectations that underpin this. Facilitators are those circumstances or resources that enable learning; that make it easy or easier. Triggers are the ultimate cause for taking up learning at a particular point in time. They are the response to the question 'why now?' and seek to ascertain why learning has not been undertaken earlier or postponed to a later date.

Participants spoke of a range of motivations for learning. These included extrinsic motivations, particularly connected to employment and pay progression. There was a particularly strong focus on intrinsic benefits of learning across participant accounts, particularly connected with health and wellbeing, confidence, and the enjoyment of learning.

What appeared most important in terms of motivation was that participants perceived learning to be a way of **achieving goals and outcomes they had reason to value**. In some cases, expected outcomes of learning were predicated on an individual's prior learning experiences. This suggests that perceiving learning to be valuable is a key motivator for participating in learning. However, 'value' is understood in disparate and multifaceted ways across participants. For some, value is direct, pragmatic and tangible. It is about pay and progression. For others, value is intrinsic or related to health and well-being goals.

Learning for career progression

Learning can support career progression in a number of ways, including getting a job, achieving a promotion, getting higher wages, and higher levels of job security. Career progression was a primary motivation for some participants to take up learning. Connected with this were aims of getting a pay rise and receiving a certificate to exemplify being qualified for a certain job:

> "I'll get the certification. That's really important… So, then I'll be qualified for the job." (B6)

One participant noted that she was motivated to contribute towards the cost of learning because she could see that it would lead to a recognised qualification, which she perceived to be a tangible outcome of learning.

For some participants the motivation to learn was connected to a desire to improve their basic literacy, numeracy and employability skills. This was positioned as a way of improving prospects and options for future employment, but in a less immediate or tangible sense, since it was linked to progression into an unknown job and/or at an unknown point in the future:

> "Personal interest and make life better, because at the moment I'm not working, I thought just broaden my skills, so I'm not just headed in one direction, you know, I can branch out a bit." (A6)

> "I just wanted to better my knowledge and stuff, so obviously, in time, I can get a better job to support my little boy… It's obviously widened my opportunities." (A9)

Learning was positioned as a route to having greater control over future employment. It was a way of having more options to choose between, and of insuring against future unemployment.

> "I had another qualification under my belt. So, if anything happened, like it has, then I can go to a different place and say, 'I've got my NVQ.'" (A11)

> "It's [learning] an insurance plan in case my business doesn't quite go where I want it, but also… skills I can use within the business…it's trying to be a little bit forward-thinking and keeping myself relevant in case I ever do need to go back into the jobs market." (A26)

Social relationships

Participant accounts highlighted the way motivations for learning can connect to relationships with others. These can be motivating in the sense that existing relationships can be a source of inspiration for taking up learning. Mixing with new people, who have different educational and work histories, was an example of how a participant could be

motivated to learn through relationships with others. One participant described new ambitions for learning that arose from broadened social networks:

> "Yes, motivations. By then I think I was meeting people, I'd moved area and I was meeting people through the children, but I was meeting them. All the people I was meeting were professional people. They'd all been to university, got professions. I became friends and I think I was just stimulated intellectually by them and I wanted to do something. I just wanted to do something to, you know, I just wanted to learn. I wanted to do something. Not with a view to a career but something that made me think and I could talk about." (B7)

This participant wanted access to similar learning experiences to those of her new peer group, and wanted new topics of conversation to bring to these interactions. Forming new social networks, away from existing family and friends, motivated others to learn.

One participant said that taking up her Teaching Assistant training has been a way of making new friends, but also of giving her something else to focus on, aside from her role as a mother:

> "It just keeps me going. I'm not just 'mum', I am actually me, and I can do things...Yes, I've got a name, and it's not just, 'Mum, mum, mum.' So, I was like, 'Right, that gets me out the house...it was just something for me." (A2)

Here learning constitutes time away from being a carer, and this is simultaneously an opportunity to inhabit another identity, described here as being more than "just mum". In this example, and that of participant B7, the motivation for learning was the aim of occupying a different position or identity. Learning was positioned as a means of altering participants' sense of self. In these examples, a learner identity was equated with capability. For instance being someone who can do this or who can converse with professional or intellectual people.

Improving and strengthening family relationships was a motivation for learning, as it invited additional and different opportunities to interact with family members. One participant, for example, did a sewing course with her daughter to develop their relationship, as it gave them the opportunity to develop a shared interest:

> "I suppose it was something nice that we could do together, me and her, to spend a bit of time together…It is nice to have a shared interest with your older children and spend time with them." (A3)

In some cases, learning as a family took on a particular nuance where the subject of learning was selected in order to be able to support a child with difficulties, for instance a learning difficulty or disability:

> "This one is very personal…both of my children are on the Autism Spectrum…So I'm doing the course purely to try and help them." (A10)

Health and well-being

While health conditions can act as a barrier to learning, there is also substantial evidence of the health benefits to learning[43]. Indeed, participants identified a range of health benefits that acted as motivations for them to take up learning. Some participants were motivated to learn because of a perception that this would be beneficial to their mental health and well-being. In part, this was connected to the social aspects of learning, and a sense that meeting other people and having something 'just for them' is useful for their life, well-being and happiness. Learning was also positioned as a means of preventing longer-term health problems such as Alzheimer's and dementia. It was associated with keeping alert and maintaining brain health into old age. This was particularly important to older participants and those who had health difficulties or disabilities:

> "I think if you're able to remain more active, you're less likely, so one reads, to suffer things like dementia and Alzheimer's." (A12)

> "I have worked, let me think, full-time all my life until four years ago, when I was taken ill. I've got cancer, okay, and I went through two off years, then I was able to start being more mobile, and I wanted to do something instead of my brain going dead. So, I wanted to do that. I'm up for a challenge any time…you go from sixteen, eighteen hours, sometimes, in the day, to going down to doing nothing, sort of, lets your brain go, 'Oh dear, what's going on here?' I'm not one that can sit around all day just doing nothing and watching daytime TV. I need to be doing something, I need to be motivated to go and do something." (A1)

Participants alluded to intrinsic benefits of learning that they were motivated by. These were often intangible or difficult for interviewees to pinpoint, but appeared to connect to a wider sense of well-being and purpose and to the enjoyment of the process or feeling of learning something new.

> "It would give you confidence. It would help you make new friends. That would give you a new outlet of something that would make your evenings happier, if your daytime is not hugely happy or whatever." (A22)

In some cases, these feeling stemmed from a desire to 'be useful' or 'do something useful', or its antithesis, a desire to 'not waste my time/opportunities'. This shows that learning can also be motivated by a desire to avoid a particular status or way of life; the motivation for learning can arise out of what a participant does not want to be like or how they do not wish to be seen:

> "I would like to do more education and something in the life...It's better than sitting home and just wasting your time doing a normal house job. It's better to go

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[43] Healthy, Wealthy and Wise: The impact of adult learning across the UK
https://www.learningandwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/LW-EU-Report-Nov-2017-V8-1.pdf

outside and learn something, make your brain useful…So, you have to have some kind of dreams, so you can achieve them, don't waste your time just like a stupid thing, you have to have a good education." (B9)

Other intrinsic experiences of learning included enjoying the experience of digesting new information, which was conveyed through words such as "buzz" and "spark". In this way, interviewees depicted the motivation for learning as enjoyment, which stems from interest in the topic, curiosity, and an enjoyment of intellectual challenge. In such cases the experiences and emotions tied up with the process of learning are the motivation, rather than learning being connected to external goals or outcomes.

"It's the brain sparking. That great feeling. You know that." (B7)

"Ideally what I'd like to do is a physics degree. Yes, that is what I would like to do, it just interests me, so it would just, push myself that little bit harder, and go and do a physics degree." (A4)

"Whatever it is you're learning, it's going to enrich your life one way or another. That outweighs what you go through." (B8)

Another learner noted that finding a course very challenging and being "pushed in at the deep end" was motivating for him, and so he sought out courses that would stretch him intellectually.

Across these accounts learning is regarded as an escape from boredom or the ordinariness of day-to-day life. It is linked to occupying time in a rich way, in order to prevent loneliness and feel energetic:

"I just wish I had a bit more going like I used to, because I used to be so full of energy and it gets you down a little bit because you can't do as much as you used to." (B1)

Well-being outcomes that emerge from learning include improved confidence and an improved sense of self-pride. In some cases this was connected with a qualification being passed:

"Well, I think it did help, you know, going to the classes, with my confidence a little. Yes. Obviously, I did learn something, because I managed to pass the English." (B5)

"It's just boosted my confidence, because now I am confident that I could go to a job interview and be able to tell them everything I already know about it, which is going to help my chances." (A9)

"I think I did feel a bit better about myself, because I feel like I had more to offer a new job." (A25)

A number of interviewees explained that their confidence stemmed from the shift in identity and status that they connected with being a learner, particularly in relation to how

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they would be seen by other people, such as their children. In some cases learners were motivated by the positive message about learning they would pass on to their children.

> *"I didn't have any self-esteem. I was the kind of person that was just at home looking after the kids. It has made a massive difference on me, and on the kids as well, especially the younger one. The younger one would go to school and he would find out from his friends that most of his friends' dads they go to work. He would come to me and say, 'Daddy, what do you do?' So, I would find, like, excuses, 'Oh no, I do this, I do that,' but that's not doing anything. You have to be doing something. The moment I started the university then I started telling him with confidence, 'You know what? I'm going to university now.' So, I took him to the university. He knows that's what I do. So, it has given me some self-esteem."* (A24)

> *"I have to show him [her son] that, no matter what, you can achieve what you want to achieve."* (A11)

Such outcomes motivated people to continue to engage with learning. Some participants reported having a negative experience of learning at school but had grown in confidence as adults because they could connect learning with clear outcomes, because they had chosen to learn, and because they had developed strategies for being a more confident learner. Again, this may link to the self-selecting nature of the sample. These are people who consider learning important enough to engage in an interview on the topic, despite negative experiences of learning during school:

> *"I had no support whatsoever through school. I was just left to muddle through on my own…People have always shown me ways of dealing with it [dyslexia]. Now I feel more confident that I can actually do it. I can actually write."* (B8)

> *"Working helped me to develop the discipline to learn more effectively...I probably just matured a bit and developed self-discipline...I was thinking, 'This will actually help me get a job. This will help me in my career. I'd chosen to do this."* (B11)

> *"I didn't enjoy school because I think the things that I was into, and the things that I found interesting, weren't interests and things shared with my peers. You know, I was in the air cadets, and that wasn't cool. I was into gaming, and that wasn't cool. I had a hard time because of it. Now, you know, I could explore those things, and I can learn for the sake of learning. Who cares what people think about me?"* (A23)

Summary

This chapter has summarised the evidence concerning motivations for learning that were discussed during the interviews. It supports the existing literature on the motivations for learning among adults; that these are wide-ranging and influenced by personal, social

and economic circumstances, as well as past experiences. Extrinsic motivations were present in the desire to achieve qualifications to enable progression into particular jobs. Learning was also presented as a form of insurance, with qualifications positioned as a way of reducing the risk of future unemployment.

Intrinsic motivations were particularly strong across accounts, and were connected with health and wellbeing, confidence, and the enjoyment of learning. Learning was depicted as an escape from the monotony of everyday life, and as a route to achieving more positive self-perception. Given this diversity of motivations, targeted approaches for different groups of adults will need to be used to successfully engage more and different adults in learning.

Barriers to learning

Part of the risk of taking up learning is that individuals often have to negotiate a range of distinct and interrelated barriers. This section documents the most common barriers across participant accounts. These include situational, institutional and dispositional barriers to learning. These examples elucidate some of the relationships between particular participant characteristics and the barriers that are experienced. The relationships between different barriers are also explored to illuminate the ways these may have a cumulative impact on individuals, reducing their likelihood of taking up learning.

Cost

Cost is both a situational and an institutional barrier to learning since it relates to: household income and priorities; any direct or indirect costs incurred through learning; and the availability of external sources of financial support. Participants were asked about the financial costs attached to learning. In cases where support had been offered to cover these costs, participants were asked whether the learning would have been possible without this support. Through this set of questions, cost emerged as a significant barrier to participation in learning:

> *"Because I'm in a family…if it ended up being down to me to pay for it, that would be a problem". (A5)*

Where participants had received financial support to contribute to, or cover, the costs of learning they said that this learning would not have been possible otherwise. This included examples where grants or loans had been received or where learning was paid for or provided by employers.

In cases where financial support was not available, and course fees were perceived to be out of financial reach, people did not participate in learning:

> *"I think for me the money would be the main thing that would stop me from learning...I think that's the only thing...that would stop me." (A6)*

> *"I read all the stuff about it, it sounded really interesting, and then obviously I went onto the next page of how you would do it and what the cost would be, and then it wasn't something I was going to be able to do." (A21)*

Cost was a particularly salient barrier for those on lower incomes. Two participants who were benefit claimants felt that cost was a substantial barrier to pursing their preferred learning, rather than mandatory learning through Jobcentre Plus (JCP):

> *"The biggest block is finance. Of course, the fact that, you know, whatever the media might tell you, the benefits for disabled people are very much less than*

generous and every penny counts. So, the last thing you can do is spend money on education, however much you might like to." (A12)

Cost was also a barrier to a participant with English as an Additional Language, and prevented her from accessing basic English language learning:

"I did Entry Level 3 [at college] for a part-time course. Then after that I was expecting to do a Level 1 and Level 2, but it was quite expensive and I couldn't afford it." (B9)

In these cases there were important implications for inclusion and citizenship, with cost being a barrier to learning for some of the most disadvantaged adults. This included people with disabilities and those with low-level English language competency. Some participants expressed feelings of being stuck and dissatisfied with their quality of life. Learning was one of the things that they thought could improve this situation, but they faced cost-related barriers that, for now, appeared insurmountable.

The cost of learning does not necessarily reflect the value or perceived return on investment. For a number of participants, cost was a barrier due to the lack of money available, but it is also possible that when weighing up the relative value of competing priorities, household income is not spent on learning.

Family

Having a family is a catalyst for a range of other distinct barriers to learning. After cost, a lack of support with childcare was the most cited barrier to learning by women. It raised situational barriers, such as people having reduced flexibility and money to learn, particularly when they had small children. It raised institutional barriers, in cases where courses operated outside of school hours, or where there was limited support with childcare cost or provision.

"I think the biggest support that I could have at the moment is childcare, because it's just finding time to do it." (A26)

"If it was just me on my own I'd be doing courses here, there and everywhere." (A2)

Cost and childcare emerged as interrelated barriers. For a participant who was claiming benefits, the cost of childcare in school holidays was prohibitive at £16 per day for each of her three children. This meant that she would only be able to access term-time learning.

Childcare was necessary during the contact hours for formal learning, but it was also important for making time available for independent study, to make learning more fulfilling. Having young children raised dispositional barriers because it interfered with the quality of interactions with learning. Participants described a reduced ability to

concentrate on course material, to get into suitable study habits and to get the most out of learning opportunities:

> *"I would advise the government to put in place some measures, especially for parents who have got several children, because parents who have got several children have got so much in their head already." (A24)*

> *"I think I picked a bad time, I think if I didn't have so many commitments on. I didn't do as well as I wanted to do, if you understand...I did find it quite hard and I think it's because I was working and I was fetching three children up, and I found my concentration wasn't as much as I would like because I always felt tired." (B1)*

In a bid to take up learning in-spite of these barriers, one participant was exploring course options that would fit with her childcare, rather than being guided by her interests and aspirations:

> *"I had even looked at hairdressing or a nail course, because they were the right times, but it's like, 'I don't actually want to be doing that, though, but it starts at the right time'…I don't want a course that finishes at 4:00pm when my kids finish school at 3:15pm." (A2).*

> *"I wanted to do a degree, but I just couldn't fit it in. I wanted to do a teaching degree, but…I couldn't justify the time away from home with all the travelling that was involved. So, I did the nursery nursing."* (B7).

The wider family context raised other barriers to accessing learning. Feeling a duty and responsibility for household income was a barrier to taking up learning. Participants spoke of having to depend on friends and family, particularly for childcare and financial support:

> *"Right now, it's family and friends that are helpful." (A24)*

Depending on other people could put participants in difficult situations. One participant was reluctant to ask her husband to support with the cost of learning:

> *"I couldn't ask my husband because he's just supporting us and paying all the bills and everything on top of that. I couldn't ask him to pay extra for my education." (B9)*

In this example, financial and family-orientated barriers cumulate to prevent this participant from learning. This participant cannot access JCP support because her husband earns too much, yet she feels unable to ask him whether the household income can be used to pay for her learning. Another participant stated that there is more pressure on individuals to achieve a qualification from learning when their family is supporting them:

> *"You're under real pressure to pass, you know, when my family were paying for me…I felt an intense pressure then to get that year done and do well." (A23)*

Other family-orientated barriers discussed were adjusting to a health condition and changes in family circumstances. One participant was not able to access learning because he was caring for his terminally ill wife, and then later adjusting to his new situation as a widower and sole carer for his children.

Awareness, information, advice and guidance

A lack of awareness of what learning opportunities were available was cited as a barrier to taking up learning. This connected with not having appropriate Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG)[44]. Participants described a lack of accurate up-to-date information that is easy to navigate. This was particularly the case for participants without recent experience of learning, and particularly in relation to the financial aspects of learning:

> *"It wasn't particularly great information when I looked at it. The other thing is, there seems to be ...a lot of different organisations offering learning, offering business support. There just doesn't seem to be one central point of contact where you can-, so, you know, going back in the past, probably in the past ten years I've asked various organisations whether there'd be support for grants or even maybe some sort of form of learning as it always seems to be a bit of a maze. That's probably the best way of explaining it, to get to the bottom of it. It didn't seem to be easy. It maybe is, but to me it didn't" (B2).*

Meanwhile, there was a lack of advice on the possible routes into and outcomes of this learning and of in-depth and personalised guidance for participants who were attempting to learn but facing complex barriers. There was an issue with tailoring advice to make it usable and clear to learners with different language abilities, cultural backgrounds and previous experiences. One participant with English as an additional language had been to local community venues to get information and advice: Jobcentre Plus, the library and the local college. None of these had been able to provide her with information or advice that she could understand, and guidance that was tailored to her personal situation was absent:

> *"Everywhere you go they tell you a different story. If you go they say, 'Oh, no, you need a Childcare Level 1,' or somebody says, 'You need a Childcare Level 3 or 2.' So, you can't make your mind because you don't know where you're standing at the moment and you don't know where to start…everybody doesn't understand, really, because I'm not from here... They have to give more support to the people... sometimes you get fed up and you don't understand what you need to do*

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[44] Nicoletti, C and Berthoud, R. (2010). The role of information, advice and guidance in young people's education and employment choices. Department for Education.

in life, what you need to do education-wise...It is more information and guidance, step by step." (B9)

In this case the barrier was not a lack of ambition for learning, but not understanding what steps needed to be in place for these ambitions to be operationalised. This suggests participants require factual information about courses, but to also understand what difference any learning would make and whether it would lead to progression opportunities. This participant was not enrolled in learning because she did not understand the culture and systems by which learning opportunities lead to training and to jobs in England. Through her account, this participant positioned the locus of control as external to herself. She felt prevented from learning and unable to get clear answers about how to find the right course. Those offering advice appeared unable to convey this in a way the participant understood.

A lack of tailored guidance was also an issue for a participant who was a benefit claimant. This participant was accessing mandatory courses through JCP, but these were not a positive experience for her because she did not enjoy or value the courses she was doing. These were mainly IT courses:

"If there was just really something good instead of computers, computers all the time, you know? To me, there's really nothing. It's just an existence, really. You're going to the Jobcentre and you know that's all they're going to throw at you, you know?   There's no enjoyment…half the time, I think, when you go down to the Jobcentre, they're just pleased to get shot of you when they send you on these courses…I just wish the Jobcentre would throw something at me that I would be interested in, you know?" If something takes my interest I would be quite happy to learn something new…They sort of have control over my life, really, if you know what I mean?" (B1)

In these examples, a lack of personalised IAG contributed to participants' feelings of powerlessness, of being stuck in a situation, and of 'the system' being opaque. Although they have a desire to learn, and ambitions for learning, they did not feel that the IAG they received helped them to cultivate these.

The course or learning offer

Some participants presented the organisation and delivery of learning as a barrier to participation in, or completion of, learning. This related to personal dispositions around learning. For example, one participant spoke of finding it difficult to self-motivate because his learning was not sufficiently structured:

"I tried to sign up to do [online course] but I wasn't very self-motivated. So I just didn't bother with it. I need a bit more structure I think than that. Deadlines are good." (B12)

"Sometimes doing stuff at home…it's sometimes not the best because you have to get out of that environment and go into more of a learning environment and it motivates you a bit more… So, yes, I would say the other thing that makes it difficult is self-motivation." (A18)

Several participants commented on finding the level of work too difficult. This increased the pressure they felt, particularly where they also felt they received insufficient support:

"When I was in college, I didn't get that much help [and] I didn't carry on after that… It was really difficult, because …I wasn't interested in it…and it was a bit difficult as well…it was a higher level, which I believe I shouldn't have been in." (B6)

Another participant found the level of maths more advanced that she was expecting:

"I just struggled with my maths a bit, really, because, like I said, I'm not the best at maths." (B5)

There are clear connections with IAG here, as in these cases participants had been entered for a level of education that was either too advanced for them, or where there was not sufficient support available. In both cases, this had a knock on effect in terms of confidence for future learning.

Self-belief and confidence

In some cases, difficulties were experienced with learning due to a lack of confidence and self-belief, with some participants presenting themselves as unconfident in their abilities:

"I feel very under-confident in anything to do with numbers now." (A3)

This lack of confidence was often attributable to prior learning experiences and to having a long break from learning. For one participant, a lack of confidence with maths could be traced back to unsatisfactory experiences during secondary school. For another participant it was the experience of being bullied at school that contributed to negative perceptions of learning.

Age surfaced as a concern for another participant who felt that she was not being given feedback when she applied for jobs, and was unlikely to find work because of her age:

"I mean, there's no getting away from the fact that age…I mean, surely the government know this already, you know...with this little problem I have, at my age, I'm not getting a lot of feedback." (B1)

This reinforced some of her negative perceptions about the mandated learning she was doing through JCP, since this was not achieving its stated aim of helping her to gain employment.

Disability, health conditions and mental health problems

Participants identified barriers to learning that related to disabilities and health conditions, mainly which affected their ability to physically access learning. One participant spoke of his difficulties of accessing physical learning spaces, as in his experience these are not adapted for him to do fundamental things, such as using the toilet:

> *"Very few places have the right toilet facilities and all that sort of stuff. Then, when you take all that into account, the feeling of, 'Well, is it really worth the bother?' comes to mind. You know, it nudges you in the wrong direction. Even when I go to various disabled loos, I find that most of them are set up for people who aren't like me. Even where I use a disabled loo I still need help to use it, which is a bit absurd but it's true...It is demotivating because it's like climbing Everest then, every time you try and do something like that." (A12)*

This participant also spoke about the wider, cumulative impact of his disability, in terms of being able to organise his time and set time aside for learning. His itinerary and priorities could shift at short notice, which was not always conducive to engaging in formal learning:

> *"When you're disabled, things happen. Like this morning when I fell over, you have the ambulance round and they get here and scrape you off the floor, and then that's a day out of circulation." (A12)*

This participant's personal capacity for learning is also reduced by the time he spends worrying about benefit assessments and possible changes to his benefit levels.

Four participants explicitly referred to having mental health problems, and some drew explicit links between these and their capacity for learning:

> *"I've had mental health problems in the past, which have stopped me before."* (B6)

Learning was ventured as a way of overcoming isolation and depression amongst adults. In more complex cases, for instance where mental and physical health conditions combined, there was an emphasis on the need to have high-quality, flexible provision, such as online learning:

> *"I have both mental and physical health problems, so it's difficult for me to get out to places. Being able to do it at my own leisure as well…it's just easier for me to learn from home." (A14)*

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Social norms

People's participation in learning can be affected by social norms and some learners were encouraged down a particular route of learning due to their peers or family. One participant said he 'followed the crowd' and enrolled in a course his friends suggested. Not only did he not enjoy this course, he also lost time and his opportunity for free tuition. This had a knock-on effect of reducing his confidence. For another participant, his experiences growing up had put him off learning. He was deterred from enrolling on courses because he believed that people were going to be arrogant about their knowledge and expertise, as his father had been:

> *"My father, he's very much one of those people who thinks they know everything and, because I was growing up with him thinking he knows everything, you don't question what he knows, even though you should. I think that would be the only thing that would put people off. I mean, that's the thing that always put me off, just the thought of people thinking they know better than you." (B4)*

This highlights the impact of early interactions with learning, and of the family environment, on assumptions and expectations about learning.

Interrelating barriers

This section has described barriers separately, but in reality, barriers are interrelated and individuals often experience a complex combination of them. The examples of barriers outlined above were more frequently drawn from participants who have not undertaken learning for at least three years. These participants appeared to face the most complex barriers to learning. Wider factors that heightened the impact of barriers to learning were: being a benefit claimant; having a long-term physical and/or mental health difficulty; not having English as a first language; and having caring responsibilities including for children with special educational needs, and partners with health conditions. Across some of these participants an overarching theme of powerlessness emerged; the locus of control was often felt to be external to them when it came to being able to take up learning.

Participants typically faced more than one barrier to learning. The relationships between, and cumulative effects of, these barriers emerged as significant through participant accounts. Three examples are developed in the participant portraits below.

Imran's story

Imran is a 22-year-old man from the North of England. He works full time and is not currently learning, although he has plans to begin learning in the near future. Imran's most recent learning was not a positive experience. He followed his friends onto an electronics course because he was not sure what else to do: *"I didn't really have anything else to do…I didn't want to be at home doing nothing".* Imran's learning at this time was driven by social impulses to be with friends, by difficulties in forming an alternative plan, and by his dislike of the idea of not doing anything.

Once he started the course, however, Imran found it too difficult and he thought the course was at a level higher than he could achieve. During this time, he experienced mental health problems, for which he did not access support at college. This led to Imran dropping out of the course, which has reduced his confidence for future learning. Imran thinks that his time at college was not as good as at school, where he felt more supported.

Imran is hoping to do a Motor Vehicle course this year. Cost is an important factor in Imran's ability to take up this learning, yet he is unclear about the cost implications of the course: *"well we don't know at the moment…well, they said it might be free for the first year"*. Imran's account highlights a lack of clarity about cost, although he has received IAG from the college. English is not Imran's first language, which may be an additional barrier in the receipt of clear IAG. In turn, this may impact on his ability to do the motor vehicle course. There is also a question over whether Imran would be able to continue with the course if he had to pay for it beyond the first year. Receiving clear IAG is crucial for Imran, not just for his ability to start the course, but also to inform his assessment of whether he will be able to afford to finish it.

Imran's account illustrates a set of interrelated barriers to learning. His mental health difficulties and low confidence mean the need for support is heightened. The affordability and accessibility of learning were both crucial barriers to overcome to enable this learning to be a more positive experience than previous learning. Imran viewed the Motor Vehicle course as a route to improved confidence. However, this depended on receiving personalised and transparent IAG, which did not appear to be in place.

Susan's story

Susan is 61 and lives in the North of England. She worked as a Butcher's assistant and cook for 16 years before leaving to care for her terminally ill brother. Since then Susan has been unemployed and in receipt of out of work benefits.

Susan returned to college approximately 15 years ago to do an English and maths course. She found this experience challenging because she was a single parent, however she enjoyed the course and was pleased to pass the exams. All of Susan's recent learning has been mandated through JCP and has included a lot of basic ICT training. Susan does not enjoy this learning and does not see the value of it. She believes her age is a barrier to finding gainful employment in an area that would require digital skills. Susan enjoys informal learning at home, including reading books and doing puzzles. However, she would really like to do some formal learning that would enable her to get a job that she is good at and enjoys, such as being a cook. Susan will not receive her pension until she is 66 and she is therefore very keen to get a job so she can break the routine of JCP attendance. She feels this would be a way to get back some autonomy over her life. Susan feels that she has no capacity to learn away from JCP mandated courses as she worries about the implications of missing a job interview.

There are several interconnecting barriers at play here. Susan does not value the mandated courses she is required to take through JCP because they have not enabled her to gain paid employment and to be free from claiming benefits. A perception of 'being too old' was prevalent throughout Susan's account. She feels her skills are outdated. She said that her English and math qualifications are *"worthless…I have been told they're not any good now".* Susan's portrayal is of a world progressing without her, as she struggles to keep apace and find her place in an employment context where her qualifications are not recognised and where she is receiving training for a job she does not want and does not believe she would ever get.

For Susan, being a benefit claimant is the locus of a range of other barriers to learning. It means that money is reduced for spending on learning. It means that capacity for learning outside of JCP mandated courses is reduced. Susan also described reduced motivation for learning because her recent experiences have not been positive. Her perception of 'being too old' mediates these barriers, reducing inclination for learning because of a sense that it is pointless as no one will employ her.

Peter's story

Peter is a 43 year-old student with two children. He is currently studying for a full-time masters in internal auditing. Peter has wanted to study this course for some time, but had to overcome a multitude of barriers in order to learn. Previously Peter was not able to afford the course. He was also classed as an international student which increased the cost of the fees. Another significant barrier affecting Peter's ability to do this course earlier was that his wife was terminally ill, and he was caring for her. Now Peter is the sole carer for his two children, one of whom has autism. These interrelating barriers meant that Peter was not able to do the masters until this year: *"Everything was just against me doing it, so I couldn't…I have had some really drastic bad times".* Peter recounts past struggles with mental health and low self-esteem.

Peter is now four months into his masters. Now that his children are older, and attending school, Peter has less difficulties to overcome with childcare. He has been able to register as a home student and apply for a student loan, which has helped with the financial aspects of learning. Peter puts this perseverance with pursuing this learning down to the value he places on education. He was brought up to see education as crucial and as a form of survival; as something to fall back on at times of difficulty. This is not just in terms of progression through work and pay, but also about having an understanding of the world and being able to look beyond the immediate situation. However, Peter also sees the masters as a route to a professional career in auditing.

Peter has already seen many benefits of learning, including improved self-esteem. Peter struggled with this when he spent all of his time as a care-giver, and now feels proud that he can tell his children that he is at university. It is important to him to be able to pass on the importance of education to his children, as he learnt from his own parents:

"*Yes, that's the reason that I really needed to do it, because my parents are also studious. So, they passed it on to me, but when it reached to me I started feeling that I couldn't pass it on to my children".*

Peter is determined to be seen as someone who can manage and can balance his commitments, and this comes with a sense of personal pride. He recounts people being concerned that he would not be able to care for his children whilst doing a degree, and says that he tries to manage everything: *"I want to have a normal life just like any other. I don't want to be given excuses that because I'm all by myself, I can't do anything".* However, Peter acknowledged that he does struggle with childcare sometimes, and that this may prevent him from doing further learning in the future.

The participant portraits highlight the interrelations between situational, dispositional and institutional barriers to learning, and their relationship with the perceived value of learning. For the most disadvantaged participants, these barriers were cumulative, and dispositional barriers such as fear of learning and a lack of confidence, had arisen out of situational and institutional barriers. This suggests that overcoming situational or institutional barriers alone will not enable some of the most disadvantaged adults to participate in learning; there is also a need to overcome dispositional barriers. These are intimately connected with being motivated to learn and seeing the value of learning. They are also connected with learning being made easier. The next section discusses facilitators for learning to frame a discussion of how barriers to learning might be overcome.

Summary

This chapter has recounted the most prevalent barriers across participant accounts. It reaffirms evidence that a range of situational, institutional and dispositional barriers face adults as they navigate learning opportunities. These include cost and family-orientated barriers; barriers related to mental health and disability; and a lack of tailored IAG. At their most significant, barriers to learning perpetuated feelings of powerlessness amongst participants. Through participant portraits, the interrelated and cumulative nature of barriers to learning have been highlighted, extending the existing literature.

Facilitators to learning

Motivations provide the reason why people want to learn. Participant accounts suggest that, alongside motivations, a number of practical and circumstantial factors also need to be in place for learning to happen. These are often connected with overcoming some of the barriers to learning discussed above. Understanding facilitators to learning – what needs to be in place for learning to happen – is important to ensure that adults' motivations for learning translate into action.

Cost was identified as a significant barrier to learning. In cases where learning was free, funded, or covered by a loan or grant, this could facilitate learning. Shifting family finances were a connected means of facilitating learning:

> *"I think I am privileged because I can do something I love because my husband has got to the point where we can just about manage it." (A19)*

Similarly, the availability of cheap or free childcare was a significant facilitator of learning for people with families. In some cases, having childcare to cover study time as well as course contact time was particularly helpful because it provided people with the space and energy to engage with independent study. Supportive family members were key to this, and shifting family contexts could also be facilitative, for instance where children got older and work became less demanding:

> *"Well, actually, I've got my little one, but my family would help out, so, I think I'd be alright." (B5)*

> *"the children are getting older now…so I had thought about joining a choir actually…as they get older…I have more time and I don't have to be with them, they could be left in the house by themselves, then I would." (A21)*

> *"I've more time on my hands, because I'm not involved in the business as much now. So, to be quite honest the business is, sort of, running down. So, obviously something more. I mean, I'm only 53 but obviously I need to be learning something as well, so it's something for me to do as well." (B2)*

For some participants the option to learn online facilitated learning because it overcome mobility issues. For others it meant that childcare was not an issue:

> *"No, I just did it online…It was just something to do while I was at home with my little boy…It's because it was the most convenient for me, at the time of doing it. I was going to go to college to do it, but there's no childcare. They've actually closed the crèche at the college." (A9)*

> *"Yes, literally just time…I think once everything settles down…and I don't have to work weekends and I have a lot of my evenings free, I would be able to maybe do*

something part-time in the evening. It's just more sustainable to do it online for the moment." (A18)

In some instances it was a particular learning format that facilitated participants to engage with, and complete, learning. One participant noted that they found face-to-face learning helped them to complete a course because, in contrast to online learning, it is difficult to say 'I don't want to do it today'. This participant needed the impetus of face-to-face interactions to remain invested in learning.

Awareness and accessibility of information about learning is a key facilitator. The internet plays an important role in this. Participants identified the internet as a crucial tool for raising awareness of where learning is taking place, providing an outline of course content, and providing related practical information and guidance. This is important because awareness – that is, having easy access to the knowledge that a particular course exists – was positioned as a key facilitator of learning through participant accounts.

Employers were described as key facilitators of learning. This included making time available for learning and covering costs. It also included awareness raising, for instance some employers send out regular course options. These were typically tailored to specific job roles so they were most facilitative to people who have a job or career where progression options are available:

> *"When I identified that as something I wanted to do, so, yes, they were quite good at putting courses or regular training on, but when some people did sort of show an interest in doing something, they would get other people in." (B7)*

> *"Well actually our university do have full learning vouchers. So I think every staff member is eligible. You can just apply to them and that can go towards online classes, or language classes, or something like that, but I think that rather than having to pay for it, I think the financial contribution helped. A token system might encourage more learning among employees: Yes, you can either use them for the sports centre or you can use them for, I think they do an online course in counselling or something, or you can do language classes." (B12)*

Employers typically facilitated learning that related to participants' job roles, rather than wider learning that may be for intrinsic benefits.

In other cases, voluntary sector employers facilitated learning by offering it free of charge, or as part of 'on the job' training. For some participants voluntary work was a key opportunity to refresh skills, and to learn new skills:

> *"I was volunteering with the health centre and the community centre, they normally put us on courses, and they paid for the courses. So, this was one of the courses they offered to us, and it was if you wanted to do it." (A6)*

"I probably have more knowledge and refreshed learning...through my volunteering than maybe even my [paid] *work...There were a handful of courses offered through the volunteering…and they were offering six courses. I just thought, 'Well if they're free and if I've got leave to take before the end of the year I'm going to go and avail myself of these'."* (A16)

Evidence gathered through the interviews highlights the importance of momentum in facilitating and motivating individuals to learn. Where participants were progressing to the next level of a course, this was depicted as being more straightforward. Many of the initial barriers to learning - assessing feasibility and proximity, feeling comfortable in the learning environment, and adjusting to tutors and delivery styles - had already been overcome. Momentum could be disrupted, however, if a new barrier emerged, for example, if the next level up had cost implications:

"Entry Level 3, I did that, but I paid for my examination fees myself for that. When I went to ask for Entry Level 1, because I'm not on any benefit, they said I have to pay... they said to me nearly £1,000."

Dan's story

Dan is in his mid-forties, he has three children and works in a specialised IT role. Dan did not have a positive experience of learning at school. He felt he could not shake his reputation of being a 'bit of a joker' and so when he wanted to be serious about his studies he did not get the support he needed. After school he did not know what he wanted to do and lacked direction. He worked in warehouses for four years. When he got sacked from this job it provided him with an opportunity to reflect on what he actually enjoyed doing. It was at this point that he decided to pursue a career in IT and he has worked in the sector ever since. This career has been an ongoing motivating factor for Dan to learn, and he has become an ardent and continuous learner both through formal courses and informal learning at home.

Dan's working environment is one where it is necessary to continually learn and update knowledge. The nature of Dan's role means that he has to undertake annual training to keep up-to-date with changes to software. There are often qualifications attached to this learning. Ongoing learning is facilitated by regular emails that are sent around at work listing new courses. Dan selects three per year, specifying which would be his priority, and typically gets one of these funded per year as long as the course has relevance for his job. He thinks his employer has tapped into the value of investing in staff skills, which ultimately increases the rate at which work gets done.

Dan feels more confident in his abilities at work as a result of this learning. He thinks these courses have made him better at his job and have enabled him to look at problems from different perspectives. He sees these skills as useful for life in general; it provides him with a structured thought-process for approaching problems. Aside from

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formal courses he is always learning in his role. New problems emerge all of the time and he engages with IT forums to assist him to address these.

Dan has accessed his most recent course online. He praised the online set up, whereby he can remotely join a classroom and carry out practical computer labs whilst listening to the lecturer. Although these computer labs are difficult, there are lots of opportunities to try things out until you get it right. Dan values the opportunity to try things out for himself whilst he is being taught, and prefers this practical learning approach to courses he has taken in the past where he sits and listens to a lecturer:

"*they got really tedious, because you weren't actually getting involved in getting to do, like, the stuff that you were learning, you switched off quite quickly and it goes over your head because you just lose interest.*"

Online learning is convenient because Dan has three children. It means that he does not have to build in time to travel back from a course to be with them when they get back from school.

Dan would not be able to access these courses if they were not paid for by his employer. He says this would not alter his attempts to learn about the software through other means, such as his own research online. However, he also said that this learning would not be as valuable, and he appreciates the opportunities he is given to continually learn, upskill and progress. Dan's motivation for learning has translated into his wider life. He enjoys learning about gadgets and researching new recipes.

Summary

Participant accounts highlighted the importance of a set of practical and circumstances factors being in place to facilitate learning. Most prevalent across the interviews were: having costs covered; having learning available in varied formats (online, face-to-face, blended) to suit different learner circumstances and preferences; being made aware of learning opportunities; and having employers who promote, and make time for, engagement in learning. Several of these factors were present in the portrait of Dan, which provided a detailed explication of how these factors made learning easier for this particular participant.

Triggers for learning

Being motivated to learn, and learning being made easy or easier, are not always sufficient for learning to happen. Often, learning is triggered by a specific event or change in circumstance that leads people to take action at that point in time. Although all 37 participants thought learning was worthwhile and valuable, they were not all learning. The question of what triggers particular learning to happen at a particular point in time is complex to unravel because the decision to take-up learning is influenced by the relationship between barriers, motivations and facilitators.

Triggers for learning are complex because it is often the very existence of multiple experiences or circumstances that culminate to be a trigger for learning. Larger shifts – life changing and traumatic events – often intersect with smaller, pragmatic, situational experiences to trigger learning. This means that producing the environment for learning is complex. In order to explore these links, and elucidate these relationships and how the balance can be tipped to make learning happen, we draw on participant portraits.

June's story

June is a 36-year-old female who moved to the UK with her husband a few years ago. She teaches piano and guitar from her home and is a performing singer and songwriter. This is a second career for June, who did a degree in astrophysics and worked as a researcher in the USA. She was fascinated by the field and continues to be driven, in her learning and employment, by curiosity and intrinsic satisfaction rather than money or progression.

June has recently enrolled on a four-day free course through the internet concerning how to book more gigs. The course has daily homework, daily webinars and community interaction through a Facebook group. Prior to this she had not done any formal learning in the last three years although she describes herself as *"constantly in a state of learning, if you mean reading at home and self-educating".*

June's account exemplifies the interrelationships between motivations and triggers for taking up learning at a particular time. The partner in June's band died suddenly last year, and this triggered her motivation to learn. June spoke of a renewed sense of the importance of pushing herself to do music and of making it a success, partly due to a sense of the shortness of life and partly out of respect for her friend and music partner.

"Definitely I've been way more focused on opportunities available to be able to get myself to build my business stronger and take it completely seriously. When I see an opportunity, instead of being like, 'Oh, yes, maybe I'll do that,' I do it".

This traumatic life event triggered a renewed sense of motivation for learning, but it was not until a few months later that the learning could actually happen. June had to

wait until half term, when she had a break from her teaching role, to have the physical time and mental space to engage in the online course she had wanted to take.

In June's story an emotional and traumatic trigger led to renewed motivation, but then the final trigger was a very practical one to do with having the time to learn. This example shows the ways in which motivations and triggers – that span circumstances and dispositions - culminate to facilitate learning.

Diane's story

Diane is a 64-year-old retiree who is currently travelling in Asia. She recounted a long and complex relationship with learning across her life. Diane enjoyed learning at school but her first experience of post-compulsory education was not a positive one. She left her childcare course after one term because she did not enjoy it. After this Diana worked and had a family.

The next time Diane participated in learning was to do a playgroup course to support a role running a playgroup. At 30 she decided to return to education to do maths and sociology GCSEs at a local college. Diane was motivated to do this because she had moved into a new area and was mixing with professional people who had university degrees. She was stimulated intellectually by them and wanted to undertake further learning so she would have things to talk about with them. They encouraged her with this learning:

"I suppose it was peer influence as well. I talked about these things. I got a lot of encouragement from my friends at the time to look into these kinds of things".

After completing O Levels Diane wanted to do a degree to become a teacher but this course was not available part time, and because she had small children she felt she could not commit to a full-time course. At the same time a change in Diane's family situation triggered her to take up a different kind of learning, and she trained to be a nursery nurse:

"one of the things was my husband had been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, so, I knew that I would soon have to be the major breadwinner in the house. So that motivated me to go to college at that time… I probably would have waited a bit until the children were a bit older, but I thought, no, I've got to do it now".

These examples suggest that the trigger for learning is best understood as the relationship between what is making learning difficult, what is making learning a desirable activity, and what is making learning easier. These barriers, motivations and facilitators are in constant flux and interrelate. The trigger is connected to each of these; it is cumulative and relational. 'Trigger' refers to the tipping of the balance in the direction of learning.

These participant portraits suggest that learning is triggered at the point in time when it becomes apparent, sufficiently accessible and worth it. This is often not a straightforward linear relationship; change one thing and learning can happen. In these examples learning is triggered by a shift in the relationship between barriers, motivations and facilitators that is meaningful to the participant. What makes this meaningful depends on the value the participant places on learning.

In the first example, the traumatic experience of a friend dying was a significant motivation for learning, but without the facilitative circumstances of half term and the availability of an online course, learning would still not have been possible. The trigger for learning lies at the intersection between these circumstances.

In example two, the discovery that a partner had a degenerative health condition was a trigger for learning sooner rather than later, because the participant was aware that in future she would be the main breadwinner, therefore it would be difficult to take time off to learn. There was a shift in the value of learning here, which became more associated with direct outcomes around pay and progression. However, without the participant's overall motivation to learn at this time, learning would not have taken place. This motivation stemmed from recent shifts in social networks, but also from thwarted ambitions to train to be a teacher, which was not feasible at this time. The barriers faced for one type of learning – teacher training – were part of the facilitative conditions for the nursery nurse course to happen because this participant wanted to identify as 'a learner' at this point in time.

Summary

This chapter has brought together the previous chapters on motivations, barriers and facilitators to learning to explicate what triggers adults to take up learning at a particular point in time. Through participant portraits, this chapter highlights the interrelationships between motivations for learning, facilitators for learning and barriers to learning, offering examples of how the balance may be tipped in favour of learning. It adds to the literature by explicating the processes through which adults decide learning is worth it.

How can more adults be encouraged to participate in learning?

Interviewees were asked to offer their recommendations for how more adults could be supported to participate in learning. Recommendations were targeted at government, employers, learning providers, and other community-based organisations. Participants were also asked what information sources they are aware of and interacting with, and about the appropriate content and tone of any messaging to encourage adults to learn.

Cost

The cost of learning was, or had been, prohibitive for some interviewees. Many respondents identified increased funding as a key mechanism for supporting more adults to learn:

> *"More financial support, because a lot of people think, 'I'm not going to be able to afford it'... It puts a lot of people off, the price of studying." (A13)*

Better funding was positioned as crucial to making learning more accessible for groups who are less likely to participate in learning, such as single parents and those with low incomes. Participants highlighted how difficult it can be to set aside money for learning when the cost of living is rising, particularly for those in rented accommodation. Taking out loans and credit cards to cover the cost of learning was identified as one potentially problematic outcome of adult participation in learning for those who had insufficient money to pay upfront:

> *"Okay, you could do it, but then you'd either have to take out a loan, or people just don't want to be adding to their debt. There's so much debt now, credit cards, and stuff like that." (A15)*

Participants noted that funding was not necessarily something that learning providers, such as colleges, could control:

> *"It's not always down to them (colleges) really, the costs of providing it...It's how they're funded really it boils down to…I think they (the government) should fund the courses properly." (A3)*

Employers were perceived to have a role to play in funding learning. One proposal was that employers could offer to fund training up-front and then recoup the money through a salary sacrifice scheme. Where learning can be paid for in small installments it might be more inclusive of people without the money to pay upfront. On the job training, provided by employers, was perceived to be a useful way of overcoming cost-related issues. In such cases, there was recognition that larger employers may be better able to contribute to funding learning than small and medium sized businesses, who would require greater support from the government to be able to do this.

"Anyone with, yes, massive profit margins should definitely, but I don't know about the small employers, like independents. They find it hard enough as it is…the government's got, definitely, a bigger part to play in it." (A15)

Across participant accounts joint working between the government and employers was advocated as a route to more affordable, sustainable and inclusive learning opportunities for adults.

Childcare

The provision of consistent, quality, time-appropriate childcare was another recommendation that emerged. Where courses operated outside of school hours there were calls for more childcare places so that parents are able to participate. Another option would be for more courses to be designed to fit in with school hours. In such cases, a range of courses might need to be encouraged to avoid the situation of one participant of signing up for a course just because it fit with the practicalities of childcare. Learning providers also have a role to play in recognising the need to be flexible around start and finish times so that people can leave in time to pick up children from school. One participant recounted how her class had collectively decided to miss one of their breaks so that they could finish earlier in order to pick children up from school. This was crucial to being able to engage with the course, and the participant recognised and valued the flexibility of the course tutor in this situation.

Rectifying aspects of childcare policy that work against learners was another recommendation that was made. A participant who had returned to study for a degree lost 15 hours of free childcare when she moved from full-time employment to being a full-time student:

"That can put many families and adults off going back to education. If they're studying, they've got to leave the children somewhere, therefore there's just one income from their husband's or their wife's side. Then they've still got to pay for childcare, which they're not getting any support towards. So, that's the only thing I can say or suggest to improve." (A8)

Another suggestion was for more opportunities for families to learn together through the creation of more community learning environments. Family-friendly learning venues would overcome the requirement for separate childcare provision, and could also enable more people to experience the social and relational benefits of learning with their children, as noted by participants earlier in the report.

Information

Across participants there was a consistent call for more thorough, regularly updated and consistent information about local learning opportunities. This was connected with the

idea that awareness of learning opportunities often plays a significant role in triggering learning to happen:

> *"A couple of the ladies I was on the course with were completely changing career, because they saw this advert for the course and they were like, 'Actually, I hate my job, I'm going to try it,' and they did." (A2)*

However, there were diverse views about what was considered the best forum for communicating this information, and participants suggested a number of different settings for advertising learning. For some participants the internet was the best source of information. It was readily available at any time, and typically held all relevant information in one place:

> *"I'd say online. You get so much information online nowadays. You just need to type something in, and you get a world of information which is really, really good." (A13)*

> *"I would want to see this online, as this is where content is easily and readily available." (A3)*

Whilst some participants preferred to research learning on the internet they recognised that it was only a useful tool for people who had internet access and knew how to use the internet as a tool to search for, and refine, information:

> *"I would go online, but not everybody would be able to do that kind of search quickly, where I know the kinds of things I'd be looking for. I can usually pin things down quite quickly…Obviously, the Internet has everything, so that is a good place to look, but not if you don't know what you're looking for." (A22)*

> *"There's so much available online...and my job has involved investigation as well as bringing in money, so I'm a natural....I'd probably just go online and search." (A16)*

Other forums were highlighted as a first port of call to find out about learning. Many saw the benefits of learning opportunities being advertised in places that are accessible to people as they go about their everyday lives or in places where they go for advice. For example, courses being advertised in GP waiting rooms, dentist waiting rooms, JCPs, local schools and colleges, and other community spaces. These 'everyday spaces' were perceived to be more inclusive:

> *"I'd want to see it where people are, not hidden away, and not, you know, 'You've got to know the password before you can find it,' but in public places, so libraries are good…in our local supermarket, they've got a community room, and they always have signs up about, 'There's this toddler group on this day,' and, 'There's this craft afternoon on this day,' things like that, that anybody can see at any time." (A22)*

Local libraries were consistently mentioned as a key space for gaining information about learning. They were a place where leaflets and posters could be left, but also a place where it might be possible to speak to someone about learning:

> *"The librarian sometimes has so much information and can tell you where to go, point you in the right direction..." (A6)*

Aligned with this, participants recommended continued funding and support for libraries.

Those who were keen that methods other than online were also used to advertise learning also suggested the following forums:

- Leaflets and newsletters, both posted through doors and left in community spaces. This could include posting a local course guide to people: *"I think sending out an adult education programme locally to households. I think that's a good idea. We don't always get them." (A14)*

- Advertising in the local press, including television, radio and newspapers. Free papers that people read on the way to work were perceived to be a useful forum for promoting courses locally.

- Job Centre Plus, particularly in the waiting room.

- National campaigns through social media and television advertisements.

- Local college open days, where people can seek face-to-face advice that is tailored to their needs and interests.

- Schools were perceived to be a key route to getting information to parents about learning opportunities as leaflets could be taken home by children, or placed in areas of the school where parents go.

Participants recommended that the initial goal of this information is raising awareness. Another goal is reassurance that this learning is possible for them:

> *"That's the first step. Letting people know what's out there and where it is. I think reassuring them about costs, that there's funding available for people. Again, I think the childcare thing is a major thing." (A14)*

> *"To be honest, I don't know. I don't really see a lot of, not advertising, but I don't really see much about the government encouraging adults to learn, I don't think. Obviously, I work in advertising so…I'm just probably being quite biased. I think the more you see something, or the more someone does see something, it goes into your head a little bit more, so you think about it more. Whereas, if you walk around and you never see anything about adult education or you never see any reasons or benefits to it, it's just something you don't think of. It's not ignorance, but people go ahead with their day-to-day lives, don't they?" (A18)*

It is also important that any source of information directs people to where they can find out further information.

The experiences and views of these 37 participants suggests that the messaging around adult learning needs to be balanced to include the diversity of motivations for why adults learn, and the barriers they may face. Messaging needs to connect with the aims or intentions that underpin learning, and the perceived value of learning. For some, the focus on getting work, on progressing in work, and on becoming qualified for a particular role, were the motivation for learning. Messages that articulate clear progression routes from learning were important to these participants so that the outcomes of any learning are tangible. Learning could also be presented as a route to being better at a job and therefore as a route to improved confidence at work:

> *"I'd just talk about some of the benefits to them and how it would help them to feel better about themselves and provide a better a level of service. Whether it's in a shop or whether in a school or whether it's in a hospital." (A7)*

Other participants recommended broadening the messaging around adult learning so that this not only connects learning with work and progression, but also with a wider set of intrinsic and well-being outcomes. The social aspects of learning, and connections with health, were felt to be underplayed in existing messaging around adult learning:

> *"It would be great to see, you know, coming up, adverts on television saying, 'Don't get a degree, because it can provide you with a well-paid job, get a degree to find out what you're good at and what you would like to do for the rest of you life,' but you never get to see anything like that, or a poster or anything." (A8)*

> *"Just that it will benefit them, even if it doesn't benefit them in their job. Even if it doesn't directly go with the skills that they need to have in their jobs, it will benefit them in a way. Learning is all a form of personal development, isn't it?" (A18)*

There were also recommendations about how messaging could be more inclusive. Some participants felt that learning campaigns were targeted at younger learners or those in continuous education, rather than at older adults and those returning to learning.

> *"I think I'd also be put off by going into colleges because I see them as young people places. If they knew that there were adult learners going in, or people on the same sort of level as them, so they were all learning together, and they weren't going in feeling like, 'I can't do it,' or, 'I'm going to be the only person there who doesn't know anything,' it would be helpful to know." (A14)*

One recommendation was for testimonials to be used to represent a variety of learners of different ages, with different experiences, and from different backgrounds to show that learning is available for everyone:

"More video testimonials and more different kinds of people. Not necessarily all young, because it's very often young people. I mean, I know that I'm still young, but, you know, I think older people, yes, definitely encourage people to go back and study." (A20)

Advice, Guidance and Support

Participants recommended that more and different forms of support be in place to encourage adults into learning. There was a call for tailored IAG for all potential learners. Some participants argued that personalised support only appeared to be available for benefit claimants, and that the current focus seems to be on getting those who are not in work into work, rather than a wider remit of supporting people to progress into better paid or more stable or rewarding work.

"I think it's the idea of people already being in jobs, and thinking, 'Oh, that's okay,' because they're already in a full-time job, it doesn't matter whether they're working in Asda, or whether they're a doctor, you know, they're in a job, they're okay. I think it's that mentality, but there might be someone that works in Asda that's been dreaming of being a midwife for the past ten years but hasn't got the confidence to be able to do it." (B13)

"The people that are on low income, who work and want to make a difference, get very little help." (A19)

One recommendation was for more tailored IAG for those in low-paid or precarious work. However, it was also the case that the three participants who were in receipt of benefits reported that their IAG had not been very well-tailored or supported them to learn. There was also demand for tailored IAG for older people particularly around opportunities like apprenticeships.

Participants highlighted a potential role for an intermediary who facilitates people to navigate further and higher education. Personalised IAG about learning opportunities emerged as particularly important for people who lacked the language skills, knowledge or confidence to navigate the further education and training sectors.

In addition to IAG to encourage the take-up of learning, support during learning was perceived to be important for ensuring adults continued to engage throughout a course. One participant, who had not completed his first adult learning course, partly due to mental health difficulties, advocated more holistic support especially for learners at risk of dropping out:

"I mean, there are loads of people dropping out, you know, of college and university...So, I just think there should be more advice and more help." (B6)

Both personal tutors and support staff were recommended as a way of providing more support for adult learners:

"People who can facilitate, who aren't necessarily doing the teaching, but perhaps mentoring or coming alongside people, checking that they are engaging with it positively. ...Knowing that there's somebody that they can talk to about that, or have a coffee with or whatever. I think there are ways of learning that don't require teachers to necessarily be doing that, but having learning supporters." *(A22)*

"More learning for young people in schools…more follow on for young people leaving school who don't necessarily go straight into university or into a job... more modern apprenticeships...money into internships. but not necessarily for graduates...I would like it to be inclusive and I'd like the young care leavers to be included in that." *(A16)*

Available Learning

Other recommendations surfaced that concerned the availability of different kinds of learning, and the quality of learning available to adults. Participants noted that continuing to make learning available online was crucial. This is the only way some people are able to access learning, particularly those with full-time jobs, children, caring responsibilities, and health or mobility difficulties. The internet was viewed as a facilitative tool for independent learning. Online learning was also viewed as a way of trying out particular learning, without risking too much time or money if it did not turn out to be the appropriate course:

"I actually had a look because I would like to eventually become a writer…I wanted to actually do a creative writing course at university but I thought I better maybe do some online before committing to something long term and more expensive." *(A18)*

Others advocated the availability of group learning, which may be preferable to adults who seek the social and relational outcomes of learning. Whether learning was online or face-to-face, the demand for flexible learning was a consistent theme amongst those with family commitments. More part-time and evening courses were recommended as part of this flexible learning offer. Having courses available at a variety of levels was also recommended as an inclusive policy, making learning accessible to people at a range of levels:

"If opportunities were available of all kinds of levels, that that would be a real help for anybody wanting to engage with something." *(A22)*

"At my university they did this thing where you could either study full time or part time, so basically people who had to work only did, like, half the courses, so it was easier to split the time between studying and working. I think if more universities did that, it would be easier for people who are adults that have a ... job to study while they are working, because, normally if there are, like 40

hours a week you're supposed to study, then that's hard if you have a job"
(A25)

Employers

Several participants argued that employers are not generally supportive of learning unless it is directly related to their business:

"*I'm not sure if they're incredibly supportive to employees to go out on higher education, unless they've got a long-term engagement with the individual to gain a whole higher degree, or Masters or whatever." (A8)*

Those that had benefitted from a working culture where learning was supported spoke positively about this:

"Give them time to learn in the workplace. That's what we had, and it was unbelievable. Like, every Wednesday morning was time to get our paperwork in order, and also time to spend on ourselves and our own advancement." (A14)

Wider learning, not necessarily directly connected to a job, was highlighted as having a host of indirect benefits that employers should take more notice of:

"I think when we do learn, and when we get a sense of satisfaction from what we're learning, we actually do better in all aspects of our lives... it gives you confidence. It makes you think, 'Oh, well, if I can learn that, then perhaps I can learn this as well.' I think having some way in which people can be released to learn within their working lives, you know, not for days, and days, and days, but kind of, having an option of doing that. I think that would actually be really good, rather than saying, 'I can't learn unless I do it in my own time, and in my own time, I'm too tired." (A22)

Voluntary work emerged as an area of informal learning that was integral to some participants, although this was not explicitly acknowledged. It highlights the voluntary sector as an area where it might be possible for employers to encourage volunteers to capitalise on their skills development while at work:

"I would say that my learning…has been heavily linked to my volunteering, and I feel privileged not only to volunteer, but to be invested in, in that way. If employers had the money to invest in their employees the way volunteering organisations invest in their volunteers....I think I've been given more opportunities as a volunteer in learning than maybe in my workplace." (A16)

Summary

This chapter has summarised participant recommendations for how more and different adults could be supported by the government, employers and providers to engage in

learning. It highlights avenues for support aimed at: overcoming practical barriers such as cost and childcare. It also highlights policies and practices for raising awareness of local and national learning opportunities and for overcoming dispositional barriers. Advertising campaigns promoting an inclusive and diverse picture of adult learning were advocated. These should utilise mixed communication channels to ensure internet users and non-users can be reached.

Conclusions

The responses and narratives captured through this research reinforce aspects of the existing literature on the barriers, motivations and facilitators to learning. Participant accounts suggested that long-standing barriers continue to affect adult propensity to learn. Situational barriers such as cost and childcare remained core concerns, and were often the first barrier participants commented on. Cost was particularly salient for those on a low income and who did not have a family network to rely on for financial support. Childcare was a prevalent concern for adults with families, and particularly for single parents. Institutional barriers, such as difficulties in accessing quality, transparent and tailored IAG remained a barrier, and was heightened for people who had English as an additional language, and for people who had had negative initial experiences of education, who felt they required additional support and guidance. Intrinsic barriers, such as a lack of confidence and a perception of being 'too old' were present in accounts. Disability and health conditions saw a fusing of dispositional and institutional barriers: a perception of learning being off-limits due to a disability and past experiences of institutional barriers such as poor access, combined to increase the magnitude of this barrier in some cases.

In addition to confirming long-standing trends in adult participation in learning, the qualitative nature of this research enabled a more detailed explication of the way barriers are connected. It shows that the factors affecting whether or not adults participate in learning are complex and multi-layered[45]. Situational, dispositional and institutional barriers often interrelate. Furthermore, this can have a cumulative effect: the very presence of multiple barriers strengthens the overall sense of difficulty participants face. One of the aims through this research was to identify groups that disproportionately face barriers to accessing learning. Whilst all 37 participants were able to discuss at least one barrier they faced to taking up learning, the most disadvantaged learners were more likely to describe the cumulative effect of multiple barriers to learning. These groups included: people in receipt of benefits; people with disabilities and health conditions; single parents; and participants whose first language is not English.

These findings suggest that removing situational barriers alone may not be enough to encourage adults to learn. Where cumulative barriers exist, people may require support to overcome situational barriers, but also to re-evaluate the possible benefits of learning. Unless adults feel they can overcome enough barriers to tip the balance in favour of learning, they will be unlikely to participate.

The question of value is intimately tied to motivations for learning, because people are motivated to learn when they perceive this to be a route to outcomes that they have reason to value. Participant accounts showed that extrinsic motivations continue to be an

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[45] Tuckett & Field (2016) Factors and motivations affecting attitudes towards and propensity to learn through the life course.

important driver, with job progression and pay being a common reference point. Intrinsic motivations were also important to participants. Interest in the topic, curiosity, and an enjoyment of intellectual challenge all featured across accounts, reflecting the wider evidence base that shows that 'learning for learning's sake' is a dominant motivating factor for adult participation in learning[46]. Learning was also positioned as a route to health and well-being outcomes, and several participants made reference to growing awareness that learning can prevent Alzheimer's and dementia, and can be beneficial for mental health. This suggests that the perceived benefits of learning are complex and often indirect[47]. Participant accounts also revealed that, alongside motivations, a number of practical and circumstantial factors also need to be in place for learning to happen. These are connected with overcoming some of the barriers to learning, such as cost, childcare facilities, awareness of opportunities and employer support.

What this research also highlights is that being motivated to learn, and learning being made easy or easier, is not always sufficient for learning to happen. All 37 interviewees described learning as worthwhile and valuable, yet they were not all learning. The question of what triggers learning to happen at a particular point in time was elaborated through extended participant portraits. These showed that larger shifts – life changing and traumatic events – often intersect with smaller, pragmatic, situational experiences to trigger learning. These examples suggest that the trigger for learning is best understood as the relationship between what is making learning difficult, what is making learning a desirable activity, and what is making learning easier. These barriers, motivations and facilitators are in constant flux and interrelate. 'Trigger' refers to the tipping of the balance where motivations for learning outweigh any barriers that are faced. Learning is triggered at the point in time when it becomes apparent, sufficiently accessible and worth it.

Participant accounts highlighted possible avenues for supporting more adults to learn. These included overcoming practical barriers such as cost and childcare, but also tapped into the underlying point that the value of learning needs to be strongly and inclusively conveyed to encourage more adults to learn. Participants advocated awareness raising campaigns which highlight that learning is for everyone, with particular efforts being made to include older learners. The importance of adopting inclusive approaches to awareness raising was also highlighted. Thus information about learning should be available on the internet but also in public forums so that people could encounter it as they go about their everyday life. This ensures that less confident internet users are also encouraged to participate in learning.

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[46] Schuller, Tom. (2017). What are the wider benefits of learning throughout the life course? Foresight: Government Office for Science.
[47] Schuller, Tom. (2017). What are the wider benefits of learning throughout the life course? Foresight: Government Office for Science.

Considerations for policy and practice

The evidence from this study highlights the following considerations for policy and practice, aimed at engaging more and different adults in learning:

- The barriers to learning experienced by adults are multi-layered and interrelated. For example, participants on lower incomes cited the cost of learning as a significant barrier to their participation and some of the same participants said that a lack of confidence also prevented them from accessing learning. Interventions seeking to engage adults in learning should therefore seek to **address more than one type of barrier**.

- Dispositional barriers, such as a fear of learning or low levels of confidence, can prevent adults from taking steps towards learning, or more formal learning. While this is very personal, **learning provision should be designed to build confidence**, for example through bite-sized courses or discrete units, which can then be extended as learners progress.

- Adults are motivated to learn if the potential outcomes are clear and valued. For example, participants reported that they are motivated by opportunities to progress their career. **Evidence on the positive outcomes and potential impact of learning as an adult should therefore be widely communicated**. This could include high-profile awareness raising campaigns and/or better availability of information about the potential returns on learning. Raising the perceived value of learning could help to overcome barriers associated with the cost of learning – if individuals understand the potential benefits of learning, they may be more willing to financially invest.

- The perceived benefits of learning are complex and indirect. Those discussed by participants were wide-ranging and included improved health, well-being and social relationships, in addition to work and career progression. Just as it is important to address multiple barriers to learning, **it is also important that outreach and engagement with adults taps into the different motivations they may have**. This can change throughout the life-course, depending on personal circumstances and past experience.

- Learning as an adult is predominantly a voluntary activity. Opportunities therefore need to be visible and accessible, and participants discussed the importance of good quality information when making decisions about whether and what to learn. **Information about learning opportunities should be shared and communicated proactively in a variety of ways**, including the internet and in public spaces so that people come across them in everyday life.

- Many adults experience competing priorities such as work, family and caring responsibilities. **Learning provision therefore needs to accommodate this and offer flexibility**, for example outside of working hours, online and/or blended learning.