

In partnership



Rebalancing adult learning

REPORT

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Contents

	Page no:
i. About the RSA and Ufi	2
ii. Foreword	3
1. Executive summary	4
2. Introduction	8
3. Primary research methodology	11
4. Research findings	15
Learner needs and capabilities	16
Confidence to learn	17
Motivations to learn	20
Barriers and disruptors to learning	24
5. Triggers to learning	28
6. Learner personas	33
7. Conclusions and recommendations	45
8. Appendix	49
9. Acknowledgements	57

About the RSA

We are the RSA. The royal society for arts, manufactures and commerce. We're committed to a future that works for everyone. A future where we can all participate in its creation.

The RSA has been at the forefront of significant social impact for over 250 years. Our proven change process, rigorous research, innovative ideas platforms and diverse global community of over 30,000 problem solvers, deliver solutions for lasting change.

We invite you to be part of this change. Join our community. Together, we'll unite people and ideas to resolve the challenges of our time.

Find out more at thersa.org

We define our ambitions as:

Our vision

A world where everyone is able to participate in creating a better future.

Our purpose

Uniting people and ideas to resolve the challenges of our time.

We are

A global community of proactive problem solvers.

About Ufi

Ufi VocTech Trust is an independent charity. Our aim is to help improve vocational skills in the UK's workforce by funding digital solutions for vocational learning. We do this by providing funding and expertise to organisations developing and deploying tech for use in adult vocational education.

We are a charity which has provided over £24m to over 250 organisations and invested over £3m in ventures developing technology and digital tools for adult learners. In the last year, our funding has impacted over 1,000,000 learners in sectors across the entire breadth of the UK's economy.

We champion the power of technology to improve skills for work and deliver better outcomes for all. We act as a funding partner and advocate for innovators in skills development, looking to help people progress in the workplace. We want to see a fundamental shift in how individuals, employers, and UK society view, embrace and benefit from vocational skills development through digital innovation.

With the UK facing an unprecedented skills crisis, we know that technology has the capacity to improve how adults across the country get the skills they need now and for the future.

Find out more at ufi.co.uk

In 2018, when the RSA and Ufi VocTech Trust first worked together to develop the Cities of Learning, it would have been hard to imagine the changes and challenges the UK skills landscape would face over the next four years. Acute and chronic skills shortages have come to define the labour market, and despite the demand, participation rates in adult learning remain stubbornly low, particularly for those people who are socially and economically furthest from learning.

In 2021, Ufi pledged in our [VocTech Challenge White Paper](#) to commission research that addresses the “challenges facing those most impacted by the digital divide” and understand how we can better design learning and use digital tools to overcome confidence and motivation barriers. Working with the RSA we have been able to produce an actionable series of recommendations that provides concrete steps for policy makers, businesses, educators, and UK society as a whole.

This report shows how we need to shift the debate away from specific industrial skill needs towards a wider understanding of adult learning that is more inclusive and speaks to the real motivations of adults who have not, up to now, engaged in

formal learning. In particular, the report sets out how at the core of achieving greater participation in adult learning is the need to develop and deploy the very best technology to support people in gaining new skills.

This research sits in a wider context of socio-economic issues that sit at the core of the RSA and Ufi’s missions. As Andy Haldane points out in the [Scaling Digital Innovations in Lifelong Learning report](#), “there is no greater challenge to UK growth than in the area of skills”, the figures are stark and left unaddressed they have the potential to grow into a deep-rooted problem. By focusing on how people are motivated to gain and develop their skills, we have a chance of engaging those who have stayed away from learning.

Our report demonstrates that by addressing foundational access to technology and digital skills, by improving learning confidence and by speaking to people’s real motivations to learn, we have the capacity to address the UK skills crisis. After all, it is only by getting more people learning that we will be able to extend opportunity to those further from traditional provision and achieve greater levels of more equitable growth.

**Rebecca Garrod-Waters,
CEO, Ufi VocTech Trust**

Chapter 1

Executive summary

RSA and Ufi Voctech Trust (Ufi) have partnered on this research to better understand how our organisations can help address the UK skills emergency and contribute to building a society that enables, recognises and values learning for everyone, throughout life, to promote economic security, social equity and individual wellbeing.

This research paper seeks to shed light on the needs, motivations and barriers to learning of those furthest from traditional education provision.

We aim to rebalance the debate around adult learning away from industrial skills needs and towards wider inclusion and participation in learning, that, in turn, can support equitable economic and wellbeing outcomes for individuals and wider society. Simply put; the more people we can engage in learning, the more chance we have of meeting societal skills needs.

The focus on those furthest from traditional learning context, stems from the insight that those most likely to be engaging in adult learning already have the most education. Adults who left schools at 16 or younger are less than half as likely to participate in adult learning as those who stayed within formal education until the age of 21. It's especially important then to understand adult learning journeys for those who left education at level 3 or earlier.

Key findings



Digital access and digital skills are foundational needs for learners

Literacy and numeracy are considered foundational capabilities for adult learning participation. To these we must add digital literacies. Exploring interests and learning options online were a part of every learner persona we explored.

More than 50 percent of our survey respondents identified access to broadband and digital devices as vital to access learning.



Confidence and learner identity

One quarter of adults (24 percent) do not identify as confident learning new things (survey data).

Learner confidence is a product of self-identity as a capable learner, confidence in social supports to learn (eg peer or family support) and trust in learning institutions.

Learning experiences that build identity and social capital are vital to learner confidence to engage in courses that develop economic human capital.



Motivation to learn

'Skills for jobs' narratives do not match the motivations of learners. Our survey showed that personal interest and personal development was twice as important to our survey respondents as employment or professional development.

Adult learning was seen by most as a way to explore and exercise agency over one's interests – and that this was different to school where the learning parameters were defined by others. Learning was also seen as a route to building a new kind of life; a life that is built around individual interests and values. Financial security is only a part of that motivation.

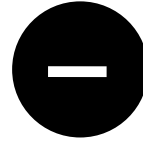
The most effective triggers to participating in adult learning were socially driven. Of survey respondents, 32 percent of identified 'recommendation from a friend' as a trigger to learning.



Learner personas

Through qualitative research the RSA has developed seven learner personas to help inform learner-centred design of products, policy and programmes for adult learners who have not thrived in traditional education.

We found learners moved in non-linear journeys from specific problem solving through exploration and experimentation to committed practise and development.



Barriers to learning

Our research looked at situational, institutional and dispositional barriers to learning.

Situational barriers: arise from an adult's personal and family situation, such as time pressures and financial constraints; eg not having a quiet space to work or study - 51 percent of survey respondents cited this as necessary condition for learning.

Situational barriers around parenting and care disproportionately impact women.



Men and women have on average equal participation rates [in learning]... Men's participation is clearly stronger in formal job-related settings... Looking at the barriers, we notice that women have greater difficulties in combining family life with other life spheres.¹



Institutional barriers: arise from the unresponsiveness of educational institutions or a lack of flexibility in the provision on offer, such as inappropriate scheduling or content of provision.

Dispositional barriers: relate to the attitudes, perceptions and expectations of adults, such as believing that they are too old to learn or lacking confidence or interest, eg, a 'lack of interest in learning' was cited as a barrier to taking up learning by 17 percent of our survey respondents. This percentage was higher among younger people (18-34) with nearly a quarter of respondents identifying interest as a barrier.

¹ Boeren, E (2011) Gender differences in formal, non-formal and informal adult learning. *Studies in Continuing Education*. 33:3, pp333-346. DOI: 10.1080/0158037X.2011.610301.

Key recommendations

Recommended steps to rebalance adult learning towards the needs of learners.

Build foundational skills by providing universal access to foundational skills hubs within community settings.

Improve access to digital learning participation by implementing a 'minimum digital living standard'.

Build learner identity by using quality assured validation (such as digital badges) to recognise non-accredited learning.

Provide social supports and triggers by ensuring in-person support for people accessing or transitioning between learning.

Support blended, flexible and non-linear learning by funding 'hybrid by default' adult learning provision.

Chapter 2

Introduction

Over the last year, the RSA, supported by Ufi VocTech Trust, has conducted research across the landscape of lifelong learning to better understand how our organisations can contribute to building a society that enables, recognises and values learning for everyone, throughout life, to promote economic security, social equity and individual wellbeing.

To understand the breadth of the lifelong learning landscape, the RSA has conducted a critical literature review of more than 50 reports, to understand the many decades of work in this space that have gone before, and to identify international case studies of inspiring change. We have also conducted a 'listening tour' interviewing 18 leaders across the landscape of lifelong learning research and practice.

We discovered that across the adult learning sector, and in more than a century of literature, there is remarkable consensus over what is needed and what works to create a 'learning society'.

There is also a sense of urgency. The UK has one of the highest shares of under-qualified workers among OECD countries.² The workers most impacted by the forces of automation and the pandemic are often those furthest away from accessing lifelong learning opportunities. According to the Learning and Work Institute, unemployed adults (seeking work) are approximately 30 percent less likely to participate in learning compared to full-time workers.³ Existing vocational training

pathways overwhelmingly benefit already highly educated individuals;⁴ and the most disadvantaged learners are those who are more likely to encounter multiple barriers to learning.⁵

The UK faces a skills emergency. We do not have enough people with the digital, environmental or social care skills to meet the industrial challenges of today, let alone the future. The skilled people we need are unevenly distributed across the country. Many places have fallen into a low skill equilibrium.⁶ The much-vaunted high skills, high wage economy seems very far away.

There have been major policy interventions over the last 12 months, including the publication of two government white papers: Skills for jobs: lifelong learning for opportunity and growth, and the landmark Levelling Up paper.

This investment in adult learning is very welcome, but our expert interviews revealed widely held concerns that adult learning was being viewed solely as a subset of industrial strategy; that the economic and industrial need for skilled people is so stark that it has overshadowed every aspect of adult learning policy.

One risk of the policy mantra 'skills for jobs' is that the notion of 'skills' becomes divorced from the people learning them, and that the other benefits of adult learning (eg improved mental health, lower crime rates, civic engagement, confidence) are ignored.

2 OECD (2021) United Kingdom. Economic Policy Reforms 2021: Going for Growth. Available at: www.oecd.org/economy/growth/United-Kingdom-country-note-going-for-growth-2021.pdf [Accessed 05 May 2022].

3 Hall, S (2021) Adult participation in learning survey – five key takeaways from our 25th year. [online] Available at: www.learningandwork.org.uk/news-and-policy/adult-participation-in-learning-survey-five-key-takeaways-from-our-25th-year/ [Accessed 10 May 2022].

4 Wallace-Stephens, F (2018) Sizing up the good work gap. [online] London: RSA. Available at: www.thersa.org/blog/2018/07/sizing-up-the-good-work-gap [Accessed 05 May 2021].

5 Pennacchia, J (2018) Barriers to learning for disadvantaged groups: Report of qualitative findings. Social Science in Government. Available at: www.assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/735453/Barriers_to_learning_-_Qualitative_report.pdf [Accessed 11 May 2022]

6 Shafique, A and Dent, A (2019) Adopting global skills innovation for the UK. RSA [PDF] Available at: www.thersa.org/globalassets/pdfs/reports/rsa-adopting-global-skills-innovation-for-the-uk.pdf

In order to rebalance the discourse on adult learning, the provocation for this paper is

How do we rebalance learning provision away from ineffective narratives of skills for jobs and towards the needs and motivations of learners in order to increase participation among people who haven't thrived in traditional education?

Learning begets learning

In this report we focus on how to encourage greater participation in all adult learning rather than looking towards a specific subset of skills outcomes. Research shows that previous participation in learning, and confidence in learning are key indicators of how likely a person is to engage with professional skills development.

Fewer than half of adults in lower socio-economic groups have engaged in any learning in the last three years. Adults who left school at 16 or younger are less than half as likely to participate in learning as those who left education at 21 years old.⁷ The very people who have the most to gain from adult learning are the least likely to participate.

Learning begets Learning...
The more highly educated adults are, the more likely they are to continue with adult education and learning.⁸

The people most likely to participate in adult learning already have level 6 qualifications (eg Bachelor's degree), and most have full time jobs. These people already have the confidence to pursue learning projects and the structures in

place to support their activity. Almost by definition, the education system already works for them.

We focused our primary research on adults who left education at level 3 or earlier. Our aim was to understand the needs of people who had not excelled through the traditional or formal education system and to identify factors that affected their participation in adult learning.

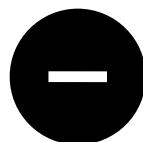
We looked at:



Confidence to learn



Motivation to learn



Barriers to learn



Triggers to learn

⁷ Learning and Work (2021) Adult participation in learning survey 2021. [online]. Available at: www.learningandwork.org.uk/resources/research-and-reports/adult-participation-in-learning-survey-2021/.

⁸ OECD (2014) Learning begets learning: adult participation in lifelong education [online] Paris: OECD Publishing. Available at: doi.org/10.1787/5jxsvvmr9z28n-en.

Chapter 3

Primary research methodology

Research aims

The RSA and Ufi's research aim was to develop a deeper understanding of what might encourage learners to take up opportunities and overcome potential barriers, and provide practical recommendations that can influence future policy, programmes and product or service design.

Quantitative Survey

We designed a public opinion survey with YouGov to understand how the Covid-19 pandemic and national lockdowns since March 2020 may have affected the confidence and attitudes of adults towards learning online and in face-to-face settings and what influences the decisions learners make when choosing to learn something new. Participants were asked to respond using a mix of closed questions, Likert scale and open text boxes. Questions focused on:

- Confidence learning new things.
- Access to, and support for, learning.
- Triggers and motivation for engaging with adult learning.
- Barrier to engaging with adult learning.
- Impact of the pandemic on the above factors since March 2020.

For the purpose of the survey, we used a broad definition of learning:

Acquiring a new skill or knowledge through instruction, practice and feedback. This could include learning where you receive a formal qualification at the end or not. It could be a professional skill or personal skill, including things like music, baking or exercise. It could also include a range of different learning formats or methods such as a taught course, or learning from a book, app or online.

YouGov conducts public opinion surveys online using Active Sampling from YouGov's panel of registered users to ensure a good cross-section of demographics from adults across the UK.

The total sample size was 2,071 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 28-30 January 2022. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK adults (aged over 18).

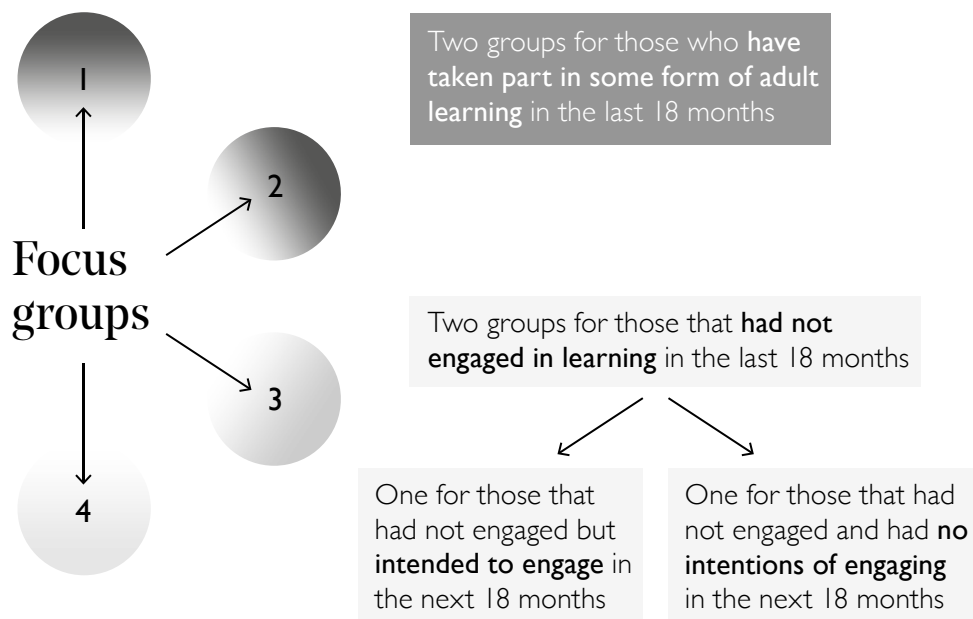
Focus groups

The survey data was also used as the basis for further focus groups to explore the themes in more depth and to inform the development of a series of 'learner personas' based on levels of confidence, motivations, triggers, enabling factors and potential barriers.

We worked with Roots Research, market research recruitment agency, to identify 32 participants to take part in four online focus groups. Participants were recruited to include a wider range of demographics including region, ethnicity, social economic status, employment status (including those who were unemployed or seeking employment), education level, and gender. Participants were screened on the basis that they were:

- Between the ages of 25 – 45.
- Not currently full-time higher education students.
- Did not have an existing Level 6 qualification.

We recruited participants into four focus group sessions, grouped further by two sessions for participants who had taken part in some form of adult learning in the last 18 months. We used the same definition for learning as the survey. The final two sessions were grouped by those that had not engaged in learning in the last 18 months but split further by: those that had not engaged but intended to engage in the next 18 months; and those that had not engaged and had no intentions of engaging in the next 18 months.



Primary research methodology

Within each session we wanted a representative group of the different demographics included above, as well as a mix of learning in different areas, learning approaches, informal, non-formal and formal opportunities (including a mix of qualification levels if they did receive a formal qualification through their learning). In reality, the broad definition of 'learning' we used meant that during the focus groups some learners who had originally categorised themselves in the 'not engaged in the last 18 months' had in fact taken part in some form of learning, or had already started to act on their intentions to engage. This somewhat blurred the boundaries between groups but still led to fruitful discussions.

Each focus group session included between seven to nine participants. The sessions took place online over Zoom between 6-7 April 2022 with each session lasting around 90 minutes.

The session questions focused on:

- Learner experiences.
- Motivations and trigger for learning.
- Barriers for learning and strategies for overcoming these.

Participants were also provided with an online form to provide any further feedback in relation to the focus group questions in case they wished to contribute something they did not feel comfortable sharing in the group setting. Five participants included further feedback via this form.

A mixture of demographics, attitudinal and behavioural reflections from focus group participants were used as inputs to create the personas featured in this report.

Digital limitations

Both the survey and focus groups were conducted online (partly due to social distancing). As a result, our participants all had reasonable digital fluency and access. This creates limitations for our research as it excludes the views of learners who may be most impacted by the digital divide.

Data from our YouGov survey shows that a lack of digital access is one of the greatest barriers to adult learning. Around half of respondents indicated that having their own device or sufficient internet connection to access online learning was a facilitating factor to successful learning.

To compensate for the lack of digitally excluded voices in the primary research we held additional research workshops and interviews with leaders from national digital inclusion organisations and with local services working directly with digitally excluded individuals.

Chapter 4

Research findings

Learner needs and capabilities

Foundational capabilities

Foundational skills in English, maths and digital are essential for lifelong learning.

Sue Pember, policy director for HOLEX, commented that:

Of government post-18 education and skills funding... only 7 percent is spent on those with poor basic skills even though there are 17 million adults without a level 2 qualification and 1 in 5 of our adults struggle with maths and literacy.⁹

To be able to learn new skills, people must be able to access and understand learning materials. This requires competency in spoken English comprehension, basic literacy, basic numeracy and digital fluency. Twenty percent of adults struggle with

maths and literacy and 11.8 million adults do not have basic digital skills.

People that do not have these foundational skills often have feelings of shame and anxiety around learning. Many also have additional learning needs that have not previously been recognised. Accessing traditional learning environments, particularly environments where they expect to face any sort of formal assessment, can be prohibitively daunting.

Community learning providers have told us about the importance of informal access to learning support and linking those opportunities to other day-to-day activities to promote access. For example, All Saints Church in Bradford provides English as a second language and digital skills support connected to their community food bank provision.

Access to digital learning

The number one need to successfully access learning, identified in our survey, was digital access. Twice as many of our survey respondents cited digital access (to appropriate devices and stable broadband) as cited access to quality in-person courses.

This was confirmed by our qualitative research, where digital learning was seen as absolutely fundamental to adult learning participation. Access to search, social

support, video and written instructional materials and online courses and apps was key to the learning experience of every member of our focus group at every stage of their learning.

Digital inclusion programmes are not enough to tackle the divide in access to learning materials. FutureDotNow's report, *The hidden middle*, points to the difference between digital inclusion – people having access to digital devices – and the essential digital skills to use those devices fluently.¹⁰

⁹ Dr Sue Pember, RSA interview, 2021. For more information see: *Adult skills and lifelong learning inquiry: Written evidence submitted by HOLEX. Session one ASL0003 [PDF]* Available at: committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/7472/pdf/.

¹⁰ For more information see: futuredotnow.uk/about-us/the-hidden-middle/

For people with low digital fluency, identifying, downloading and navigating trusted apps or content can be fraught

with fear. Complex learning management systems can also provide a barrier to learning.



Confidence to learn

Will I be able to complete this course and do what is asked of me in terms of ability and time constraints around family life?

Edward, 36

Confidence in one's learning ability is a key factor affecting participation in adult learning. Those who have a good previous experience of learning or who have had adult learning positively modelled to them in the home and workplace are more likely to feel able to learn new things.

An adult's past experiences of education are key determinants in their self-belief and identity as a capable learner, and of their likelihood of actively contemplating learning. Perception of education as a tool for empowerment is derived from positive past educational experiences.¹¹

A poor experience at school or absence of a social context for learning can lead to a lack of confidence in one's ability to learn.

A factor often cited is the anxiety, low self-esteem and general lack of confidence of many adults from traditional non-participant backgrounds on returning to learning.¹²

Our survey suggested that almost one quarter of adults (24 percent) do not identify as confident at learning new things. Our qualitative research revealed

a complex picture of factors that relate to confidence, and influence decisions over learning.

The Learning and Work Institute define confidence as 'self-belief and identity as a capable learner'. Personal assessment of learning capability only forms part of that picture. We propose that confidence is a product not only of belief in oneself, but also trust in learning institutions and in social support.

Learners felt confident when they:

- Believed in their ability to learn new things.
- Believed that they could complete a course in the time available.
- Trusted that the learning institution would welcome and support them.
- Had support and encouragement from loved ones or peers.
- Could see that someone like themselves had succeeded in learning.
- Could access instruction and learning materials based on their personal needs.

Finding confidence is for many people a process of overcoming the fears that learning isn't for them, that they won't finish, that they don't belong. Confidence is built by experience. Learners without positive experiences must find personal bravery to even begin participating in adult learning.

¹¹ Department for Education (2018) Decisions of adult learners. Kantar Public and Learning and Work Institute (L&W) [PDF] Available at: files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED590017.pdf

¹² Norman, M, Hyland, T (2003) The Role of Confidence in Lifelong Learning, *Educational Studies*, 29:2-3, 261-272. DOI: [10.1080/03055690303275](https://doi.org/10.1080/03055690303275)

Self-belief and identity as a capable learner

In our focus groups, no one was entirely removed from learning. Even those in the group who claimed they had 'not engaged and had no intention to engage with learning in the next 18 months', disclosed experiences and interests that could be identified as learning. However, their identity as a capable learner was very low.

Positive learner identity can be nurtured by helping learners feel secure, with regular feedback and encouragement, recognising accomplishment outside of formal qualifications. The RSA's Cities of Learning programme has used digital badges to recognise learning accomplishments in non-formal and informal settings. These digital badges provide learners with approbation for what they have achieved, and also a lexicon for describing their skills and learning that enables a sense of learner identity.

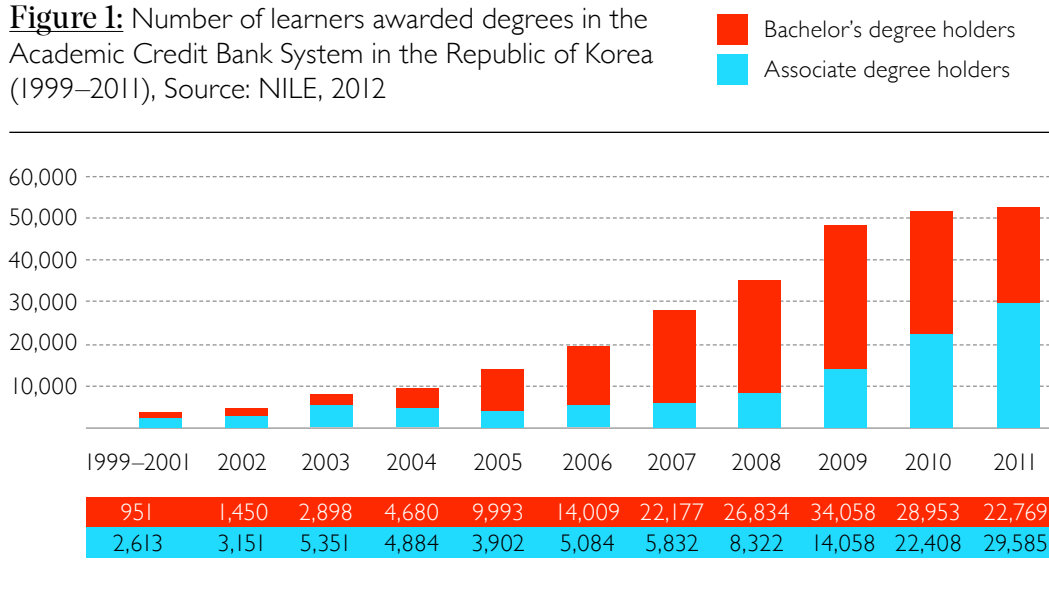
They [digital badges] have helped improve my knowledge and confidence. *Vicky, 17*

In Korea and Singapore, government-backed micro-credentialling has played a big role in developing their strategies for building a learning society. In Korea, learning activities as short as one hour can be recognised with an Academic Credit Bank credential, and add up over time to an Associate degree equivalent to a level 6 qualification.

... it informs learners of their specific achievements, provides measurements of non-formal learning and gives learners proof of achievement that is formally recognised by the government. This increases learners' motivation¹³

In ten years, the number of Associate degrees issued increased by a factor of ten.

Figure 1: Number of learners awarded degrees in the Academic Credit Bank System in the Republic of Korea (1999–2011), Source: NILE, 2012



¹³ Yang, J and Yorozu, R (2015) Building a learning society in Japan, the Republic of Korea and Singapore. UIL publication series on lifelong learning policies and strategies: No 2 [PDF] UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning. Available at: www.files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED564132.pdf

Confidence from support

Support to access or transition into adult learning is important to enable wider participation. The Learning and Work Institute's recent work on social prescribing and adult learning showed how important the role of link workers could be in signposting learning opportunities and reassuring people that they were able to participate.

Clients can be reluctant to take up adult education, due to a lack of confidence or negative experiences of education. In some cases when GPs or link workers believe that the client would benefit from adult education, they need to provide clients with additional reassurance.

From my experience, that was not that easy to convince people to actually start doing any sort of adult education thing, because of many different reasons. From, 'I'm not feeling confident enough. I feel too stupid to start.' [...] through to people who were like, 'Yes, I would like to, but next week'.

*Social prescribing link worker*¹⁴

The RSA and Ufi are also exploring the ways that peer learning networks and learning coaching, both in the community and online, can provide learners lacking in confidence with support to make the leap into learning.

¹⁴ Learning and Work (2022) Social prescribing and adult education in London [online] Available at: www.learningandwork.org.uk/resources/research-and-reports/social-prescribing-adult-learning/.

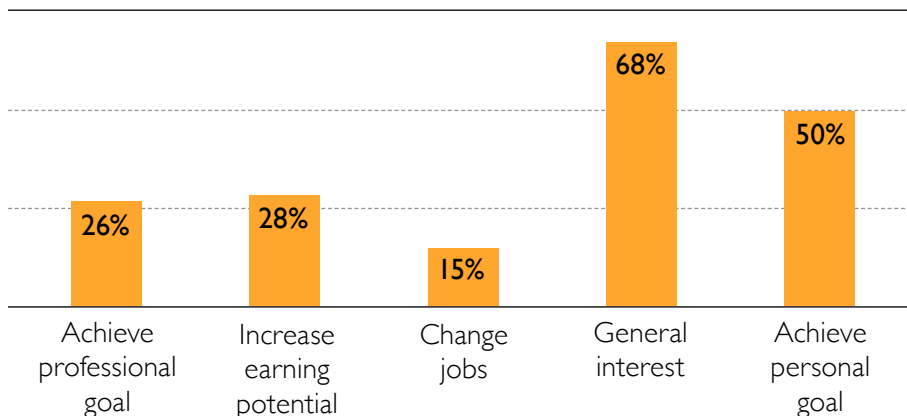


Motivations to learn

The skills for jobs narrative does not match the motivations of learners. Our survey showed that personal interest and personal development was twice as important to our survey respondents as employment or professional development.

Framing skills as an extension of industrial / economic strategy presupposes that people are primarily motivated to learn by extrinsic factors: the desire to gain employment or build their earning power. We found this to be true of only half our learning personas.

Figure 2: Motivations to learn



Nesta's 2018 report, What Motivates Adults to Learn? A rapid evidence review of what drives learning new skills in the workplace,¹⁵ showed learner motivation on an axis of intrinsic and extrinsic reward.

Table 1: Types of motivation

	Motivation	Goals
Intrinsic	Individual undertakes activity because it is internally rewarding	Goals are internalised, the outcomes anticipated to satisfy basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness
Extrinsic	Individual undertakes the activity in order to get an external 'reward' in return	Goals are focused on external outcomes, rather than the satisfaction of an individual's basic psychological needs. Goals may involve external gains, such as money, fame, avoiding consequence

¹⁵ For more information see: www.nesta.org.uk/report/what-motivates-adults-learn/.

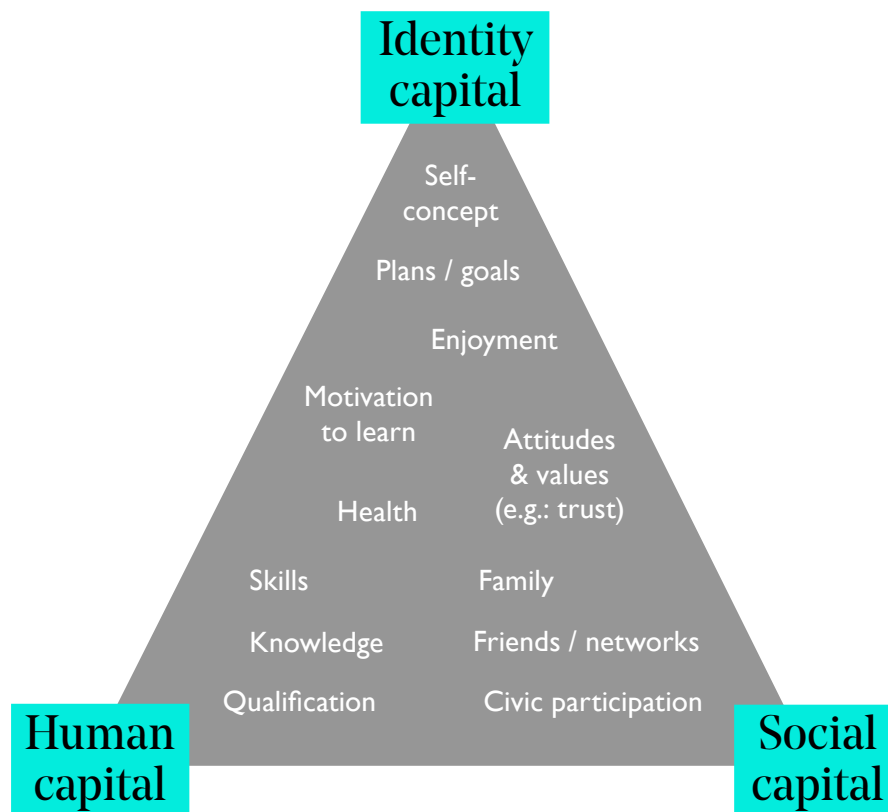
Research findings

Our focus groups showed that the relationship between intrinsic and extrinsic reward was one of balancing priorities. In many cases the motivation to learn a skill was intrinsically led but came with a desire to move one's intrinsic interests towards extrinsic rewards.

Learning Capitals

Perhaps a more nuanced view of motivation is found in Tom Schuller's work, which posits that learner motivation is triangulated between three 'capitals' earned by learning: identity capital, social capital and human capital.

Figure 3: Three 'capitals' by Tom Schuller



Broadly, human capital refers to knowledge, skills and qualifications; social capital to norms, networks and relationships; and identity capital to self-esteem, self-efficacy and a sense of purpose or direction in life.¹⁶

¹⁶ Schuller, T, Byrner, J and Feinstein, L (2004) Capitals and capabilities [online] Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning. Available at: www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/8584338/capitals-and-capabilities-tom-schuller-centre-for-research-4

Identity capital

The focus groups we talked to were primarily motivated by building identity capital; learning as a route to greater levels of self-expression and actualisation.

Adult learning was seen by most as a way to explore and exercise agency over one's interests – and that this was different to school where the learning parameters were defined by others. Learning was also seen as a route to building a new kind of life; a life that is built around individual interests and values.

In Schuller's terms, people were motivated to learn by identity capital, and hoped by doing so to increase social and human capital at the same time.

Social capital

Learning participation is closely tied social norms, networks and relationships. Our research identified positive social feedback as a powerful motivator to participate in learning. A friend or trusted colleague's praise and encouragement was clear trigger to participating in learning. The desire to impress family and peers was also raised. We heard of direct motivations to learn coming from seeing a family member or friend succeed in a learning project.

Positive social feedback and extending social networks also had an impact on motivation in both online and offline settings. Offline, one in five respondents (aged 18-34 years) to our YouGov survey, identified 'meeting people with similar interests' as a primary motivation for learning. In terms of online social networks our focus group provided several examples of TikTok or Instagram communities inspiring learning exploration.

Human capital

Knowledge, skills and qualifications as route to financial or extrinsic reward, was seen more as an outcome than a motivator for learning. Participants who were interested in developing and furthering their existing careers through Continuing Professional Development (CPD) were predominantly male and full-time employed. Among other participants we saw an entrepreneurial urge to make money or build businesses

that reflected the interests they were exploring in learning projects.

“ I'm eager to learn anything and everything. I am motivated by money. I'll pick up a hobby then if I think I can do it well, I'll master it. Like baking, I've mastered making cakes and then sold them. *Kelly, 42.* **”**

Motivating learners

Both our qualitative and quantitative research suggests that calls to action to fill skills gaps that are solely around routes to work and skills for jobs will not speak to the motivations of potential learners. Commitment to learn comes from the desire for greater agency over one's future and improved social interactions.

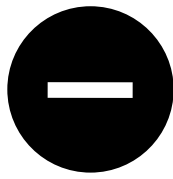
Campaigns or brochure material that promote adult learning should lead with the impact of learning on positive lifestyle outcomes and social identity. It is also important for less confident or under-represented learners to see the 'social proof' of people with relatable experience thriving through learning.

Confidence, learning capitals and motivation

The correlation that we see between learner confidence, academic success and participation in learning can be viewed through the lens of learner capitals. Confident learners who thrived in formal education have already built identity capital. Learners with support from friends, family or colleagues already have social capital.

It is likely that people who have not experienced formal training since leaving school and who do not have strong social support will need to build identity and social capital before committing to develop their human capital through training.

It is important, therefore, to support the kind of learning activities that build identity and social capitals, but also to help non-formal and informal learning (clubs, short courses, community centres etc) to map the skills that their participants gain through participation. This will make it possible to create visible pathways from informal to formal learning and help individuals progress their skills towards professional outcomes as their levels of confidence and motivation increase.



Barriers and disruptors to learning

Barriers to learning are often divided into three categories: situational, institutional and dispositional.

- **Situational barriers:** arise from an adult's personal and family situation, such as time pressures and financial constraints.
- **Institutional barriers:** arise from the unresponsiveness of educational institutions or a lack of flexibility in the provision on offer, such as inappropriate scheduling or content of provision.
- **Dispositional barriers:** relate to the attitudes, perceptions and expectations of adults, such as believing that they are too old to learn or lacking confidence or interest.¹⁷

Dispositional barriers to learning

We have discussed dispositional barriers relating to confidence and identity in the previous chapter.

A 'lack of interest in learning' was cited as a barrier to taking up learning by 17 percent of our survey respondents. This percentage was higher among younger people (18-34) with nearly a quarter of respondents identifying interest as a barrier.

Other dispositional barriers include feelings of guilt or conflicts of interest when learning. These barriers strongly relate to situational barriers.

... fear of being a 'selfish parent' could be [a] significant barrier to contemplating learning. Taking time for oneself away from family life was internalised as unjustifiable by many women. Participants from lower income households are more likely to view education as a privilege, with financial investment in education running contrary to the need to provide a stable financial environment for the family.¹⁸

¹⁷ Cross, KP (1981) *Adults as learners*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

¹⁸ Department for Education (2018) *Op cit*.

Situational barriers

Situational barriers, by definition, vary greatly depending on the lives and needs of individuals. Time poverty was an issue for almost everyone in our focus group. Many viewed learning as an optional extra to the other time-commitments of adulthood, such as paid work and caring responsibilities.

Situational barriers around parenting and care disproportionately impact women.

...men and women have, on average, equal participation rates [in learning]... Men's participation is clearly stronger in formal job-related settings... Looking at the barriers, we notice that women have greater difficulties in combining family life with other life spheres.¹⁹

Male participation in adult learning is more likely to take place in the workplace, and benefit from the structures, supports and validation of work. Continuous professional development opportunities are most frequently afforded to full-time members of staff, which again disproportionately favours

male workers (particularly male workers who already have higher education).

People with degree-level qualifications are three times as likely to get training at work than those with no qualifications.²⁰

Female participation is higher in non-formal and informal learning environments. But these less formally structured or financially validated forms of learning are more likely to be disrupted by caring responsibilities or competing time demands.

Other situational barriers include not having a quiet space to work or study, 51 percent of survey respondents cited this as a necessary condition for learning.

Individual accessibility needs were considered a barrier to 20 percent of survey respondents. This also came through strongly in our focus groups – differences in physical abilities and neurodiversity were perceived as significant barriers to participation in traditional learning environments.

Institutional barriers to learning

Lowering institutional barriers to adult learning is vital to improve wider participation, particularly for those who haven't previously thrived in formal education settings. During the Covid-19 pandemic a lot of work was done to improve uptake of (or participation in) vaccine programmes around the world among reluctant communities. The consultants McKinsey identified a 'six A framework' to ensure maximum participation:²¹

- **Availability.**
- **Administrability.**
- **Accessibility.**
- **Acceptability.**
- **Affordability.**
- **Accountability.**

¹⁹ Boeren, E (2011) Op cit.

²⁰ Department for Education (2018) Op cit.

²¹ McKinsey & Company (2020) The COVID-19 vaccines are here: What comes next? [online] Available at: www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/the-covid-19-vaccines-are-here-what-comes-next.

Each of these 'As' represents a potential institutional barrier to learning.

Availability: learning opportunities must be widely available and discoverable. Finding high quality learning experiences within local reach is a significant barrier to entry. The rise of place-based and community learning programmes such as Rochdale's Community Curriculum show the impact of bringing learning opportunities closer to disadvantaged communities. The availability of higher education opportunities also has an impact – the 2017 Social Mobility Commission showed the correlation between availability of university education and local learning outcomes.

...many of the worst-performing areas are about an hour each way from the nearest university by public transport – and often even further from a selective university.²²

Administrability: learners and teachers need the sufficient tools and equipment to deliver learning outcomes. Lack of books or digital equipment can be a significant barrier to participation.

Accessibility: learning provision that cannot meet diverse accessibility needs of learners will prevent wider participation in learning. Many people who have not thrived in school environments and lack qualifications have additional learning needs, physical disabilities or English as a second language.

Acceptability: adult learning provision can be variable in quality. Poor experiences of adult learning can present a barrier to further engagement. Difficulty in assessing the quality of learning provision is also a barrier for learners choosing whether to participate.

Affordability:

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.²³

The cost of adult learning is a major barrier to participation. The skills act provides a welcome increase in funding options for level 3 qualifications and level 6 vocational courses. However, the Lifetime Skills Guarantee has very narrow criteria to its application. It is highly targeted to meet specific industrial targets rather than enable wider learning participation. It also does not benefit the people who have struggled most with formal education. People without level 2 qualifications cannot access the funded courses.

I really like the idea of a lifetime skills guarantee - but that's not what we've got, we've got an entitlement to a level 3 qualification - if you haven't already got one, and you want to do one from a pre-approved government list - which it's not quite the same.²⁴

Accountability: variable quality of provision and value of different credentials can be a barrier to participation. Prospective learners can be discouraged if they do not have confidence that a learning provider will provide the best service or if there are conflicting offers without a way to navigate choice. Learners would benefit from an easy-to-use quality assurance of courses.

22 Social Mobility Commission (2017) State of the nation 2017: Social mobility in Great Britain. [PDF] Available at: www.assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/662744/State_of_the_Nation_2017_-_Social_Mobility_in_Great_Britain.pdf

23 Pennacchia, J, Jones, E and Aldridge F (2018) Barriers to learning for disadvantaged groups [PDF] Department for Education and Learning and Work Institute (L&W). Available at: www.assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/735453/Barriers_to_learning_-_Qualitative_report.pdf

24 Dr Fiona Aldridge, RSA interview, October 2021.

Disruptors

Road-bumps

Barriers are not simply one-time hurdles to be jumped. For many people these barriers constitute a headwind to learning that must be navigated throughout the duration of a programme of adult learning. Our qualitative research showed that frequently the barriers learners faced were not just to initiating a course, but to completing it without being knocked off course.

We called these barriers road-bumps. An illness, a change in childcare provision, a temporary increase in working hours – these events were enough to prevent learners from keeping up with the progression of their learning and frequently prevented them from re-joining the learning programme.

“ I started an education degree with the OU five years ago. There wasn't much information made available about the structure of the course beforehand and I ended up struggling to keep up with the course and deadlines around family. I paused it five years ago due to feeling overwhelmed and have not revisited it since. *Harriet, 38* ”

We saw that many people's learning experiences are interrupted and discontinuous. Supporting modular and non-linear learning experiences will lower barriers to successful participation.

Friction

A barrier does not need to be insurmountable to discourage participation in learning. People with low confidence or conflicts of interest can be easily put off from pursuing their learning ambitions.

We heard stories of people giving up plans for reasons including: the right course was on the wrong day, the forms were too complicated, routes to funding were unclear or the college was perceived as unwelcoming.

“ I tried searching online but it was a minefield. I spoke to local colleges for advice on grants but their knowledge was patchy. The process was stressful and I was put off. *Katie, 35* ”

Better support to identify, enrol and seek funding for learning opportunities could prevent learners losing confidence at the point of enrolment.

Chapter 5

Triggers to learning



Triggers

Learner motivation and interest is not always acted upon. Often the trigger to act on the motivation to learn and to commit to overcoming any friction or barriers, comes from an external event or circumstance that is meaningful to the learner.

The RSA's qualitative research identified four major triggers to take the leap into learning:

Personal prompt

Of survey respondents, 32 percent identified 'recommendation from a friend' as a trigger to learning. This was borne out during our qualitative sessions. A trusted third-party offering praise or encouragement is one of the most impactful prompts to learn.

I was always an agony aunt figure to friends and they encouraged me to take an OU course in counselling and hypnotherapy.
Helen, 38

Professional recommendations for CPD from a boss or trusted colleague is also effective.

In the army there is a lot of CPD opportunities. Sometimes they'll push you when you don't want to be pushed but that's sometimes what you need. *Paul, 35*

Social proof

Seeing someone you identify with successfully completing a learning experience makes it seem viable and desirable.

I saw a friend complete the course, and I was so inspired, I booked the same one. *Alice, 29*

This inspiration to learn is usually found via a friend or family member but para-social relationships through online networks can also be effective, particularly for

younger learners. More than 13 percent of 18-34-year-olds acknowledged that recommendations from social influencers could trigger a learning commitment.

Signing up to learning something as a group can also trigger learning participation. Working with known others de-risks learning experiences and provides the promise of a community of support through difficult patches or while navigating road-bumps.

Life change

Significant moments in our lives can cause us to re-evaluate our priorities or be more open to changing our behaviour. Of survey respondents, 31 percent identified a life change as triggering learning. This could be an event such as birth, death, marriage or divorce, but also significant calendar event such as a meaningful birthday or anniversary.

*I'm turning 40 next year... it's got me thinking what could I do better? I'm not over the hill yet.
Harriet, 39.*

Research shows that associating decisions with an important calendar date or anniversary can improve uptake or effectiveness of campaigns.

Circumstantial change

Some triggers are born of circumstance more than motivation. Necessity and opportunity can both be triggers to learning. Of survey respondents, 32 percent said that a change in financial circumstances, such as a job loss, or a health condition could provide a trigger to learn new skills.

I was working as a chef but had to give up due to spinal problems. I'm now training to do wrap and I was working as a chef but had to give up due to spinal problems. I'm now training to do wrap and design work for motorcycles, which I'm passionate about and is less physical. Stephen, 40

Sometimes the necessity was more direct, for example the need to fix a broken piece of equipment or complete a job in the home. This could trigger a short learning project to master a specific skill.

Discontinuous learning

Our education system favours a continuous vision of learning that moves from breadth to depth: a student undergoes instruction for a set number of years with increasing levels of specialisation until they move into a job. Adult learning on the job is supported to build specialist skills and professional development. Adult learning outside of work is course designed to help learners specialise enough to get a new job. Everything else is dismissed as hobbies.

Our qualitative research showed people experiencing learning as a very discontinuous process. Exploration and

experimentation, dipping in and out of a number of different subjects and skills across extended periods of time were seen as an important part of building a learner identity.

*As an adult, you can choose your learning and I can delve in on a bit of a whim because I'm interested in it at the time. This has given me confidence in myself as I've got older to try lots of different things.
Becky, 38*

Triggers to learning

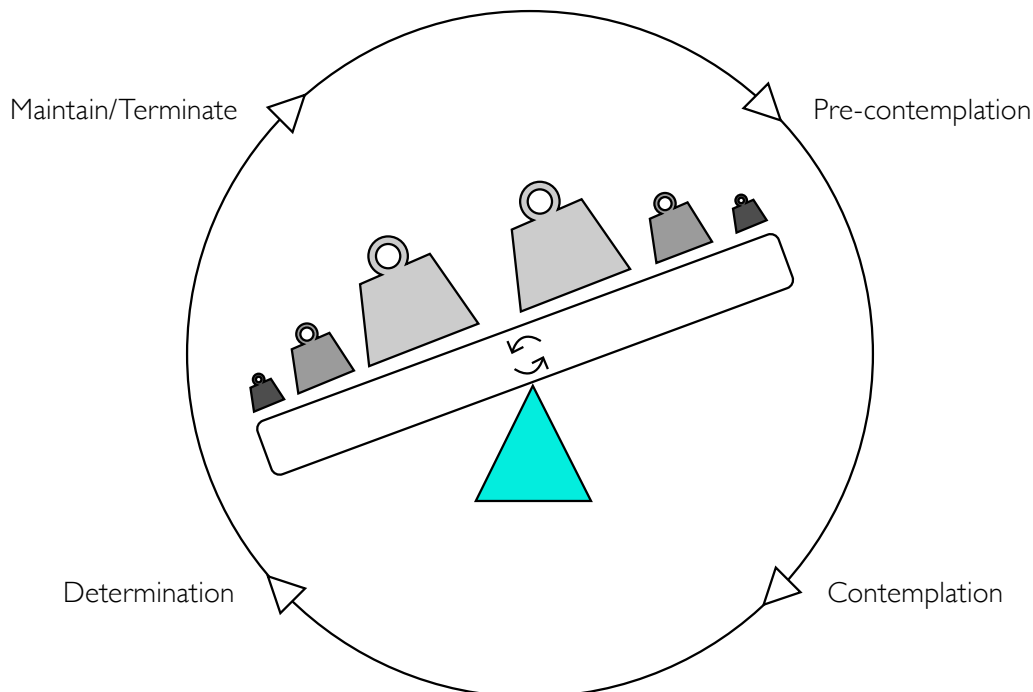
Subjects and skills might be explored in some depth for a specific project outcome and then put down for months or years, possibly to be explored again with another project. As the projects get closer together, so the specialism grows. The social capital built through learning projects also grows over time.

“ I'm driven by a sense of achievement, seeing progress ... and wanting to improve my cooking skills. My friend is a very good cook and I wanted to emulate this (maybe even have a bit of friendly competition) Cedric, 35

The move to more continuous study towards a formal qualification or structured professional course can require a leap of faith; the belief that it is possible and desirable to overcome the necessary barriers, friction and road-bumps to complete a course. The promise of developing human capital (and extrinsic rewards) is important to make this leap – but it only becomes viable once the learner has already built identity and social capital to support that move.

This insight reframes the Transtheoretical Model of Change²⁵ that the Learning and Work Institute adapted for their excellent 2018 report, Decisions of adult learners. The report suggests the decision to learn comes at the point of determination to enrol on a course and to maintain or terminate participation.

Figure 4: Transtheoretical Model of Change



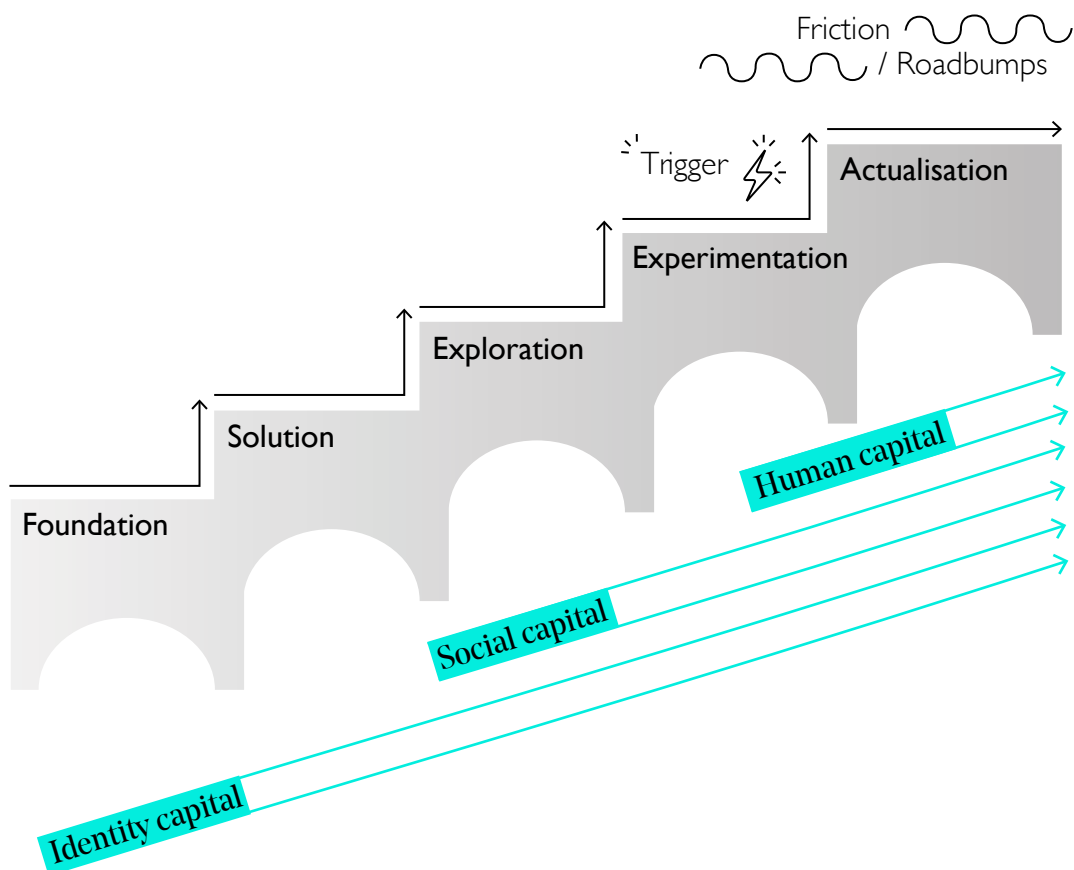
²⁵ Diclemente, CC, and Prochaska, J (1998). Toward a comprehensive, transtheoretical model of change: Stages of change and addictive behaviors. DOI:10.1007/978-1-4899-1934-2_1

Triggers to learning

The RSA proposes that learning participation does not start at the point of course enrolment, but that discontinuous engagement and experimentation with learning is a vital part of adult learning journeys. Even the period which could be described as pre-contemplation has early learning exploration.

In this model interests and expertise gradually consolidate over time as learners build their learner identity towards the point at which they commit to those interests as a vehicle to develop human capital.

Figure 5: Adult learning progression



Chapter 6

Learner personas

Designing learner personas

The five stages of adult learning we have identified were informed primarily by qualitative focus groups and interviews conducted with adults who have no formal qualifications beyond level 3 (eg A level).

The five levels of adult learning

Foundations: gaining the skills and capabilities to access mainstream adult learning materials and content (eg learning basic literacy skills).

Solutions: reactive learning accessing learning resources to solve an immediate concern (eg using YouTube to work out how to re-wire a plug).

Explorations: accessing multiple information sources for the pleasure of knowledge without committing to a specific challenge or discipline (eg subscribing to factual podcasts to explore a social media interest).

Experimentation: completing short courses or practical projects or deeper levels of study in finite sprints of effort. Constructive feedback received from teachers or peers (eg short cookery course).

Actualisation: committing to a structured continuous learning experience to deepen skills towards a personal goal or ambition (eg enrolling in a college evening course towards a formal qualification).

The personas map a process of becoming

No learning type is fixed. How we learn, what we learn, and why we learn is constantly evolving as we adapt to changing circumstances in our own lives and the world around us, discover new things within ourselves, and our motivations change.

Learning is not simply about developing skills, knowledge, and interests. It is also about transitions, a continual 'process of becoming'. We have framed the final stage of this learning progression as 'actualisation' (rather than 'specialisation' for example) because the focus groups we worked with clearly demonstrated to us that the motivation for learning was the development of a renewed sense of self identity, agency and purpose; learning as a process of becoming.

These personas reflect different motivations, triggers, and rhythms of learning. At the same time, they speak to the enabling and challenging factors that learners may face.

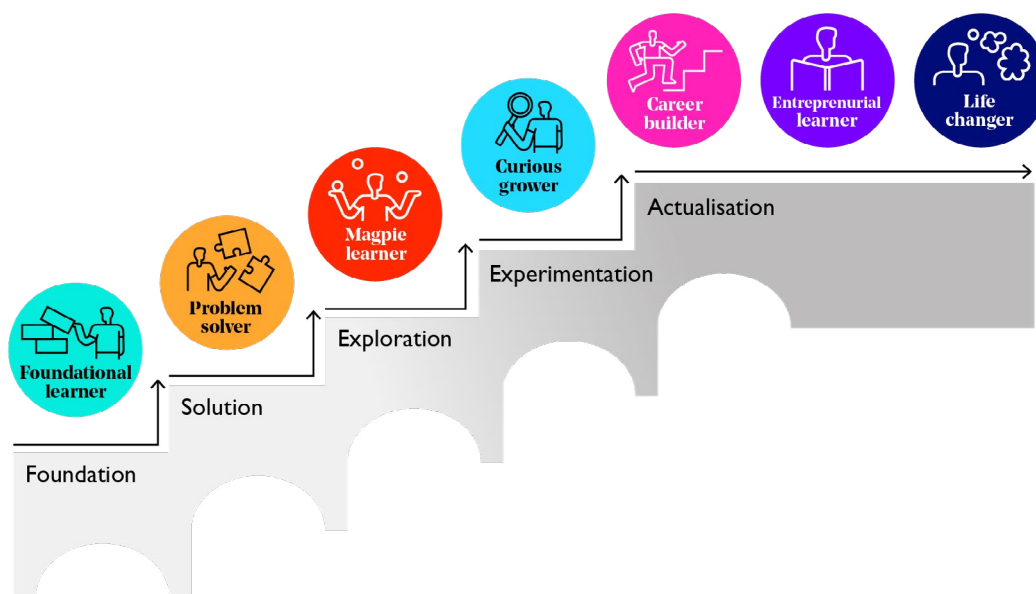
As learners develop, they may find that they transition between personas at different points on their journey, or may even occupy more than one persona at the same for different kinds of learning.

Whether they are becoming more accomplished in their chosen career or more self-confident, all our personas are in the process of becoming a version of themselves they would like to see, and believe that they can achieve this through learning.

Learner personas

We have developed seven learner personas to illustrate the different stages of learner progression and motivation. There are three different personas at the actualisation level of adult learning. This reflects the different motivations we found for commitment to continuous accredited learning – both professional and personal, as well as somewhere in-between.

Figure 6: Persona learning progression



We have deliberately steered clear of specifying demographic, gender or identity characteristics for each persona. We have, however, included a pen portrait with each persona, based on lived testimony from a focus group member and their learning experience. Names have been changed to protect privacy. These case studies include examples of indicative barriers, enablers and triggers to learning for each persona group.

Glossary for learner persona profiles



Enablers

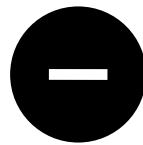
Enablers are the factors that make it possible or easier for learners to engage with learning. Just like barriers, these could be related to situational, institutional, or dispositional factors.



Trigger

A trigger can be both an external or internal shift that prompts the learner to act on the motivation to learn and to commit to overcoming any friction or barriers.

- **Personal prompt:** a trusted third-party such as a colleagues or friends offering positive reinforcement and encouragement.
- **Social proof:** seeing someone you identify with successfully completing a learning experience makes it seem viable and desirable and may inspire others.
- **Life event:** significant moments in our lives can cause an internal shift to re-evaluate our priorities or be more open to changing our behaviour.
- **Circumstantial change:** some triggers are born of external circumstance more than motivation as it becomes a necessity to respond to these changes.



Barriers

Barriers are the factors that create roadblocks and friction on a learner's journey.

- **Situational barriers:** arise from an adult's personal and family situation, such as time pressures and financial constraints.
- **Institutional barriers:** arise from the unresponsiveness of educational institutions or a lack of flexibility in the provision on offer, such as inappropriate scheduling or content of provision.
- **Dispositional barriers:** relate to the attitudes, perceptions and expectations of adults, such as believing that they are too old to learn or lacking confidence or interest.



Motivation

- **Personal identity:** learning as a route to greater levels of self-expression, self-esteem and self-actualisation. Learning is motivated by building a life following individual interests and values.
- **Social capital:** learning motivation is closely linked to social norms, networks and relationships. Learners may be motivated to engage in learning for social validation and the social connections learning brings.
- **Human capital:** motivated to acquire knowledge, skills and qualifications sometimes as a route to extrinsic or external reward.

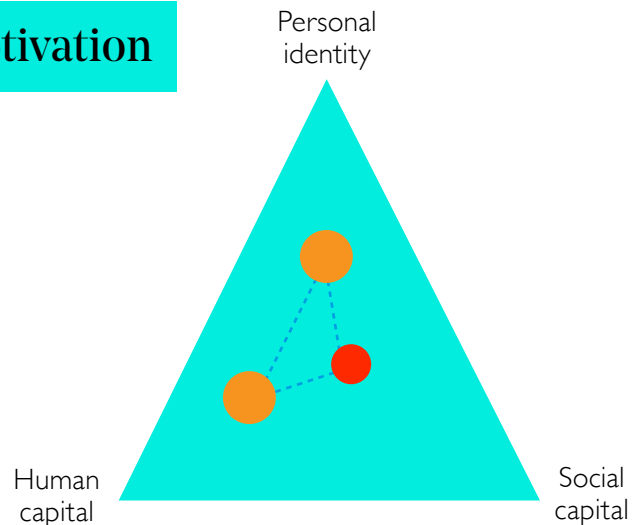


Foundational learner

Foundational learners have unmet learning needs that form barriers to engaging in mainstream learning settings. Foundational learners lack key capabilities such as reading, writing, spoken English, basic numeracy or digital literacy, that would enable them to explore their own learning interests. Foundational capabilities are often nested, for example lack literacy prevents the development of digital fluency. In many cases the lack of foundational capabilities is rooted in special educational or emotional needs (eg dyslexia or ASD) that prevented engagement in mainstream learning. English language is sometimes a learning barrier to foundational learners. They are often highly suspicious of formal or traditional learning environments, relationships and institutions. Poor school memories can trigger fear around feelings of negative assessment or tests. Additional one-to-one support and high levels of personal trust are essential to make progress.

Motivation

Scale key:



Case study Alex the Foundational learner

While at school Alex struggled to engage with learning in the classroom due to his dyslexia.

⊖ This has so significantly impacted on his learning that he left schools with difficult memories of education and without the skills needed to be able to read or write.

⚡ Despite the challenges that Alex faces when trying to engage with learning, Alex would like to take up learning as an adult to learn how to play music as this is an area of interest and enjoyment in his life. However, knowing how or where to access information about adult learning is made more challenging by being unable to read or write.

⊕ Alex also worries that even if he were able to access this information, that the structure and content of the courses would further preclude him as he would need more one to one support to order to access any written instructions.

Alongside this Alex has struggled with his own personal mental health. ➔ If Alex were able to receive support for his mental health, alongside learning to read and write, he would feel enabled and inspired to follow his interest in music. Alex feels that more support is needed for people to access learning that can be tailored to their individual needs, which should include academic and mental health support.

⊖ Barriers

Mindset and self-belief in ability.
Lack of capabilities in basic skills.

⚡ Triggers

Triggered to engage comes from personal interest.

⊕ Enablers

Accessible learning support and encouragement from others.

➔ Transitions

If learning is enabled and a focus grows Foundation learners could become Problem solvers.

Access to learning

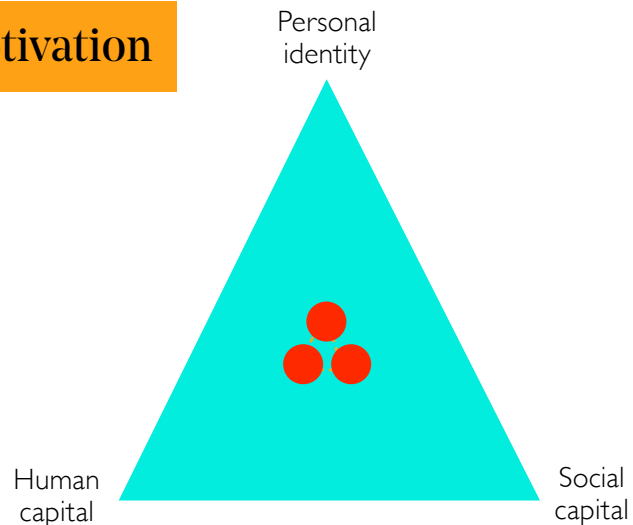
- Mediated learning with friends or family.
- Informal community settings.



Problem solver

The Problem solver learner is pragmatic, and goal orientated. They approach learning with a particular focus on learning something to help them problem solve in their life. They enjoy the process of learning something new and the sense of achievement they get from being able to arrive at the solution to their problem through newly acquired skills, knowledge or talents. However, the learning must have a purpose for them to feel motivated to engage with the learning in the first instance. They are less likely to seek out 'learning for learning's sake' and are more likely to dip in and out of learning as problems are solved and new problems arise.

Motivation



Case study Matthew the Problem solver

A couple of years ago Matthew and his family started building their own home. ⚡ Matthew decided to carry out as much of the work as possible himself by learning a wider range of new skills including basic carpentry, tiling and decorating.

Matthew describes feeling that learning is important to him but that it must be 'necessity based', where it is purposeful. - Matthew is unlikely to engage in learning purely out of curiosity, he wants to know that it will be useful to him in some area of his life.

➔ The build often threw up new problems which required learning new skills to get the job done before moving on to the next challenge. The build had a limited budget which meant that learning the skills needed to carry out the task himself presented a solution to a potential problem for Matthew.

To learn the necessary skills Matthew often sought to learn directly from trades people within his networks. + The expansion of platforms like YouTube have also made it possible for Matthew to learn from others at no cost and made it easy to search out instructions to help him with a specific problem.

⚡ Triggers

Triggered to engage and disengage as problems are solved and new problems arise.

- Barriers

Mindset that learning is necessity based. Lack of motivation to learn something for reasons beyond this.

➔ Transitions

Could become a Magpie learner.

+ Enablers

The growth of free, informal learning opportunities through platforms such as YouTube and TikTok to learn from others.

Access to learning

- YouTube instructional videos / TikTok 'hacks'.
- Peer-based advice and instruction.

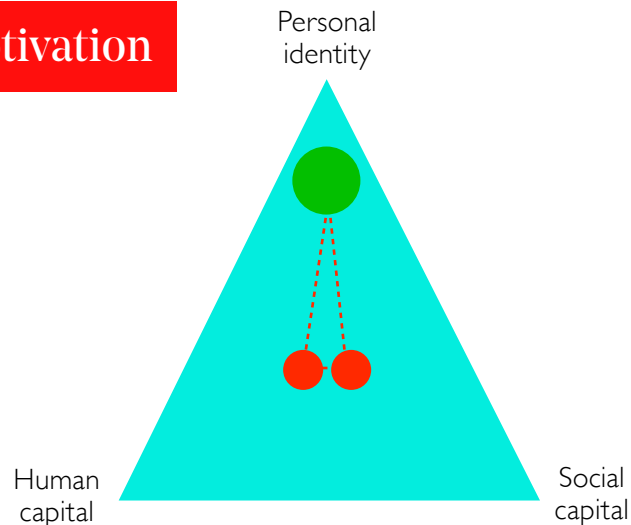


Magpie learner

The Magpie learner is an intellectually busy learner that is drawn to lots of learning opportunities. They are strong supporters of adult learning for the love of learning and feel highly confident acquiring new skills and knowledge. They are likely to have been continuously involved in some form of adult learning throughout their life, often moving between a wide range of subjects, interests and learning routes. However, much like a magpie, they are most attracted to 'new and shiny' learning opportunities and will often dive straight in and flit between learning. As a result, they are sometimes less interested in mastery and may not always see-through learning to an end goal before moving on to another opportunity. If a Magpie learners' attention can be channelled for long enough, they may transition to other types of learners including a Entrepreneurial learner or Life changer where they may wish to develop a greater level of mastery of a skill.

Motivation

Scale key:



Case study Vicky the Magpie learner

Vicky can remember always enjoying the learning experience. **+** She is constantly looking for things to delve into on a bit of a whim. Vicky enjoys learning so much she has even taken on the role as educator by choosing to home educate her own children.

Vicky enjoys this role as it allows her as a parent to encourage her children to follow their own learning interests freely. **⚡** Particularly as she has grown older, Vicky has also had the opportunity to discover and indulge in new and varied interests. Her adult learning experience has ranged from continuous professional development linked to her role as a personal fitness instructor to learning multiple languages via apps for pleasure.

- Vicky calls herself a 'bit of a course jumper'. Recently a friend commented that Vicky has a lot of hobbies but seems to have difficulty sticking with them. This observation has provided Vicky with a new resolve to revisit previous learning by re-engaging with an online Spanish language course which she previously did not finish.

Vicky would usually find that her flitting attention span is her biggest barrier. She often finds that she throws herself into learning opportunities one after the other in an all-consuming way to start with, and then loses momentum.

→ However, she has enjoyed committing herself more intentionally to her Spanish once a week as a means of proving to herself and others that she can stick with a particular form of learning.

+ Enablers

Opportunistic learners, so need to have opportunities advertised but will then willingly take them up.

⚡ Triggers

Triggered to engage in learning when they find an area of interest. Our survey shows 68% of learners are motivated to learn something new out of curiosity/general interest in subject learning.

- Barriers

Like a magpie, they are most attracted to 'new and shiny' learning opportunities so a short attention span may mean they don't see through learning to an end goal before moving on to another opportunity.

→ Transitions

Could become a Life changer or Entrepreneurial learner as they develop focus.

Access to learning

- Social media, YouTube, apps.
- Audiobooks, podcasts.
- Community workshops and events.

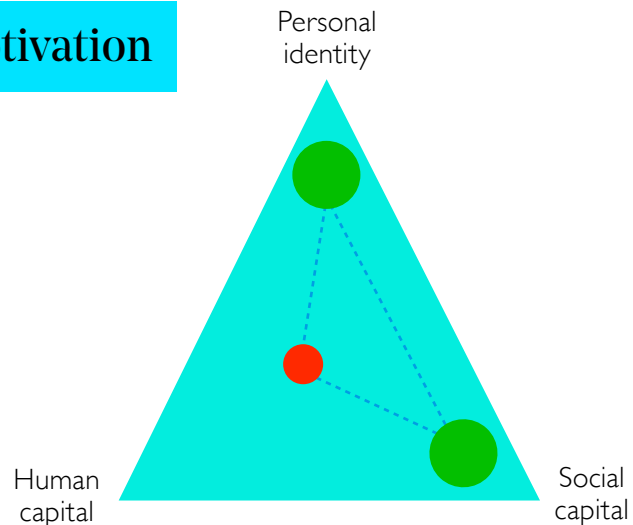


Curious grower

The Curious grower is intrinsically motivated to deepen their knowledge and expertise. By following learning related to an interest or hobby they hope to explore different parts of their identity and support positive sense of self or wellbeing. The Curious grower may face barriers such as low confidence or self-efficacy when learning something new. They are likely to start small to dip their toe in and build their confidence. They especially need the encouragement of a close network and positive feedback to support them on their learning journey. If the Curious grower does engage in learning they are highly driven by intrinsic reasons and a sense of personal achievement and enjoyment in learning.

Motivation

Scale key:



Case study Liz the Curious grower

Liz was nervous to re-engage in learning. She had a negative experience at school where she often felt that teachers didn't have much faith in her. She internalised this lack of confidence in her ability to learn.

⚡ However, during the Covid-19 pandemic Liz started volunteering in her community and took an interest in working with services supporting wellbeing and mental health. Despite reservations about returning to formal learning, Liz enrolled in a short online mental health awareness course to help her in her volunteering role.

➖ Starting from a point of very low confidence, Liz found that, with the support of her personal network, she was able to complete the course and all the required assessments to her surprise.

⊕ For Liz, the support of friends and family was about building confidence in herself rather than the validation of others. The most important discovery on her learning journey has been proving to herself that she could achieve something that she has a passion for.

'I wanted to get more out of life, more enjoyment through learning'. This growth in confidence in one area of learning has inspired Liz to take up further learning opportunities based on her interests including a poetry writing course.

➡ Liz wants to see this small seed of confidence grow and hopes to one day undertake further learning with the aim of becoming a community mental health worker in time.

Triggers

Take up learning as a way to promote positive wellbeing.

Barriers

Internalised lack of trust and self-confidence in ability to learn something new.

Enablers

Emotional support network to start and continue learning.

Transitions

A curious grower may transition to a life changer if they have a particularly positive experience where they can grow in confidence and recognise how their unique skills, talents and interests could be translated into bigger life changes.

Access to learning

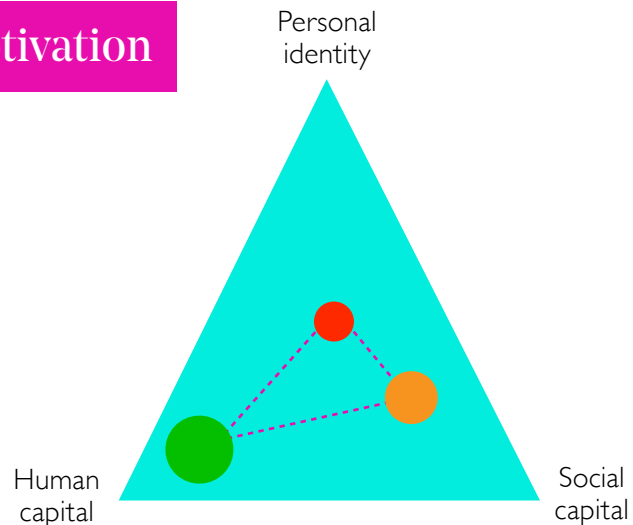
- Short courses in FE and community settings.
- App and video-based projects.
- Social media interest groups / forums to share progress.



Career builder

The Career builder commits to learning to advance their professional career within their current role, organisation or sector. They are interested in developing specific skills that will be advantageous in their professional lives and will often seek to do this through formal qualification and on the job training. Learning tends to be centred around building an existing skillset, knowledge or professional interest they already have. A Career builder may transition to a life changer if they are seeking to radically change tracks in their professional lives which would require learning outside of their familiar areas.

Motivation



Case study George the Career builder

George has had a long career as a quality controller within a large manufacturing company. ⚡ During his career George has undertaken multiple continuous professional development courses through his workplace including an ILM for Advance Management most recently.

Adult learning has mainly taken place within the domain of George's working life. + To do so has been easily accessible, and even encouraged, by his employer, including signposting to opportunities and providing the necessary funding.

- However, this also presents a challenge when balancing time for learning alongside still being committed to fulfilling your responsibilities at work.

For George the benefits to potential career progression if you're seen wanting to learn by your employer and already have the skills needed for the next opportunity, outweigh the barriers. He is highly motivated by the potential of adult learning to advance his career further and increase his potential earnings in the long term.

George is also aware of the rapidly changing requirements within his industry and that potential automation may pose a threat to his role. → As a result, George has started to think about what training with transferable skills he might need to take advantage of in order to future proof himself for potential changes in his career.

Triggers

Career builders may be triggered by identifying a specific professional goal they want to achieve or their employer has identified. Our survey showed 26% of learners are motivated to start learning to achieve a professional goal.

+ Enablers

Continuous opportunities and support through work.

- Barriers

Juggling time.

→ Transitions

Life changers aim to become Career builders as they want to change careers and focus on a passion.

Access to learning

- Workplace professional development courses
- Corporate online learning and microcredentials.
- FE vocational skills courses.

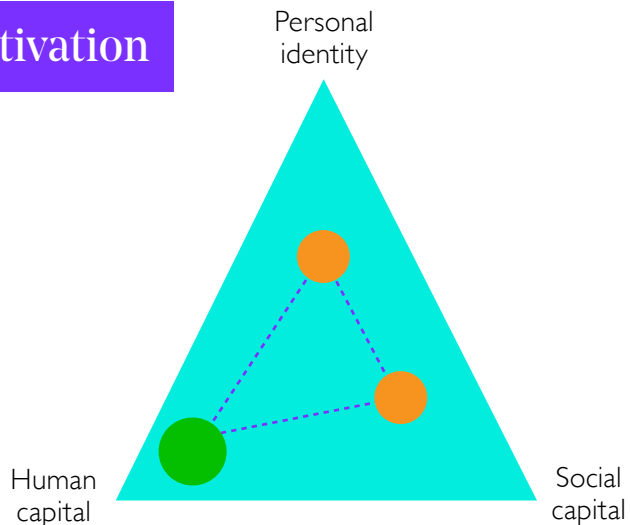


Entrepreneurial learner

The Entrepreneurial learner seeks to develop new or hone pre-existing skills, talents, and interests with the aim of turning a private hobby into a professional endeavour. The goal of the Entrepreneurial learner is to acquire the relevant skills and knowledge to help them achieve success as an entrepreneur. Entrepreneurial learners may start as Problem solver or Magpie learners where their main motivation is simply to learn something new out of curiosity or by necessity. The trigger for transitioning to Entrepreneurial learner is the realisation that these developing skills can be monetised, offering a new source of flexible income alongside intrinsic rewards. This then becomes the primary motivation for further engaging in learning to master and professionalise their skills.

Motivation

Scale key:



Case study Kaia the Entrepreneurial learner

Kaia is a single parent to two young children and works part-time as a sales advisor. → Kaia knew that she had always been good at applying her own make-up and was regularly asked by friends to do theirs. ⚡ Initially Kaia took up learning as an adult to save money as she was pregnant with her second child and wanted to save on the cost of going to a nail technician. She started a short course on gel nails at a local beauty college that was recommended by a friend as a first venture. Having seen friends undertaking training with the learning provider, Kaia had a high degree of trust in the institution to make the leap to enrolling in the course.

— After seeing friends undertake professional beauty training and start their own businesses, Kaia realised that learning to professionalise her natural skills wasn't just an opportunity to save money but an opportunity to build a flexible childcare friendly 'side-hustle' while on maternity leave.

She has since been back to the same educator to do further beauty courses and established herself as a self-employed nail and eyelash technician alongside her part-time job.

+ Kaia was able to find readily available courses that were affordable to get started. The courses were attractive because they were often local and only one day in length so she could manage this commitment to learning around existing childcare arrangements.

→ Transitions

May start as a Problem solver or Magpie learner.

⚡ Triggers

The realisation that skills can be monetised offering a new source of flexible income. Our survey showed 28% of learners were motivated to start learning to increase earning potential.

— Barriers

The Entrepreneurial learner is often women looking to create a flexible business through learning. Childcare around learning can be a barrier to engaging.

+ Enablers

Grants or loans to support with course fees which could be repaid once you start earning an income (similar to a student loan).

Access to learning

- YouTube instructional videos / TikTok 'hacks'.
- Online courses and learning apps.
- Short community courses.

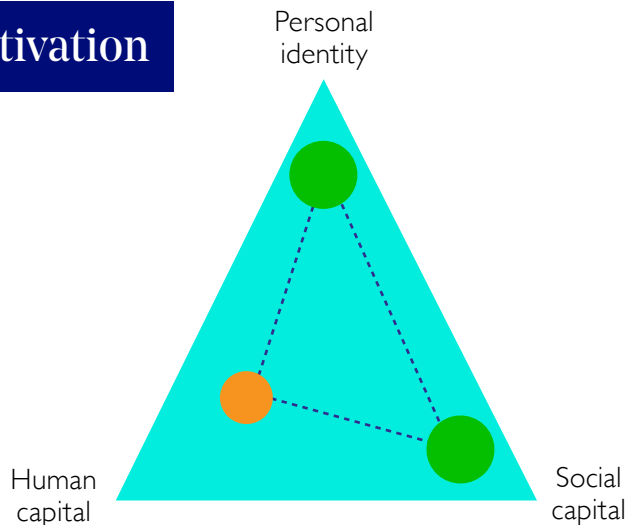
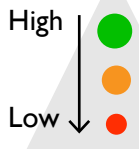


Life changer

The Life changer as a learner is motivated by a desire to learn something in order to navigate a big change in their life. Often this will relate to pursuing to a totally new career or following a long-held dream. The life changer will usually contemplate engaging in adult learning for a long time before making the leap to pursue it. The trigger to making this leap is usually brought on by a key milestone or life transition such as a 'big birthday', job loss or changes in their personal circumstance at a period where they are looking to make a change. The life changer learning journey usually involves undertaking formal learning which can create financial barriers and require long-term commitment. Someone may wish to become a life changer but if these barriers feel insurmountable, they may not make the big leap to life changer and instead pursue a learning journey that feels more achievable for their circumstance.

Motivation

Scale key:



Case study Darrel the Life changer

As a professional musician, Darrel suddenly found his work disappear overnight when the pandemic enforced the temporary closure of all live music venues. With no income Darrel had to move back to his family home which prompted him to reconsider his long-term career.

⚡ Darrel was aware that he was approaching a 'big birthday' and felt he needed to make a change in his life. He decided that adult learning would offer him an opportunity to change tracks in his career at this critical juncture.

Darrel decided to look to his weekend hobby for his new career – cycling. He initially started with watching YouTube tutorials and informal online learning on bike maintenance whilst practicing on his own bike. Eventually he made the decision to enrol in a formal intermediate course with a professional company. ➖ Since successfully completing the course Darrel has managed to secure his 'dream job' working with a well-known cycling company.

Previously Darrel's biggest barriers to learning had been not having a clear sense of career aspirations. ➡ He felt at the point he'd discovered this as an adult, there were fewer opportunities to make a career change later in life which was further compounded by more complex personal circumstance such as financial and family commitments.

The high cost and time intensive nature of formal courses often required to transition to a new career can create barriers. ➕ Had it not been for the security of being able to move back to the family home, he feels he would have been under pressure financially to take the first job he could rather than engage with adult learning, and as a result would have missed out on his dream career.

⚡ Triggers

Triggered usually by a key milestone or life transition at a period where they are looking to make a change, such as a 'big birthday', job loss or changes in their personal circumstance.

➡ Transitions

Could become a Career builder, when in career change.

➖ Barriers

Barriers may be complex and compound one another, eg childcare, costs, family responsibilities that make the dream feel unattainable.

➕ Enablers

Support on how to actualise their dream into reality with clear learner pathways and advice.

Access to learning

- FE or professional development courses.
- Open University and MOOCs.
- Online courses or masterclasses with community support.

Chapter 7

Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

To meet the economic challenges of automation, digitisation, and net zero transformation we need more learners. To meet the social challenges of declining mental health and increasing polarisation, we need more learners. To overcome entrenched inequalities and disadvantage gaps, we need more learners.

To get more learners we need to expand our understanding of adult learning and extend the provision of learner support to increase access and participation. This begins with understanding that adult journeys into learning and towards higher order skills and qualifications do not start at the point of enrolment into an accredited course.

In fact, the confidence and capability to enrol in formal learning is itself the product

of a learning journey; a journey that begins with foundational skills and gradually builds towards a sense of identity, agency and social security – enabling the learner to take a leap into actualising their dreams for personal or professional development.

Most adults who take accredited courses have built their learner identity through traditional system supports at school or in full-time employment. Those who did not thrive within traditional systems take a more winding and discontinuous route back into learning. A route fraught with friction, road-bumps and barriers.

Understanding the needs, motivations and challenges of these non-traditional learners can help us to develop policies, programmes and products to increase overall participation in adult learning.

Our research and persona development has shown five stages of adult learning:

Foundations: building the digital, literacy and numeracy capabilities to access adult learning material.

Solutions: seeks out solutions to present problems.

Explorations: engages with learning materials across a wide range of subjects, enjoying new knowledge without.

Experimentation: completes distinct learning projects. Receives feedback.

Actualisation: choosing to engage with formal courses to realise a personal or professional ambition.

Conclusions and recommendations

Access to digital learning resources and opportunities are key to all these stages of learning. But more online courses are not enough to ensure participation. Less-confident learners need community-based learning opportunities, social reinforcement, and human feedback to progress on their journey.

The RSA and Ufi believe that there is an enormous opportunity to create a learning society that can transform outcomes for learners who have not benefited from the current system. To do this we need to change how we think about learner confidence and motivation. Throughout the system, there needs to be a rethink about how learners access learning and are inspired and motivated to learn.

The future of learning is a blend of digital content, in-person learning support and recognition for non-linear learning journeys. It differentiates less between formal and non-formal provision and more on providing clear pathways of progression.

We have used a series of personas to understand how different motivators, barriers and triggers to progress affect people at key stages within their learning journey.

Core themes have emerged across the personas that lead us to five key policy recommendations leading us towards the vision of a learning society.

Further recommendations for actions that can be applied to policy, programme and product design can be found in the appendix to this report.

Recommendations

1 Build foundational skills by providing universal access to foundational skills hubs within community settings. Literacy, numeracy and digital literacy are vital to accessing wider learning. Formal learning environments and assessments are likely to scare off the people in greatest need. Embed learning support and infrastructure within community settings such as libraries, churches, supermarkets or community centres, where there is high foot-fall and fewer trappings of formal provision that may put off those furthest from learning.

2 Improve access to digital learning participation by implementing a 'minimum digital living standard'.²⁶ Access to stable broadband and digital devices enables learning. Search engines, articles, online publications, instructional videos, apps and MOOCs are vital to learners at early stages of their learning journeys. They can find solutions, explore subjects and experiment with different learning styles and communities in safety. In 2022 Ofcom found that two million people can't afford broadband. Equality of digital access is vital to equitable skills development.

26 Good Things Foundation (2022) Developing a new benchmark: A minimum digital living standard [online] Available at: www.goodthingsfoundation.org/insights/developing-a-new-benchmark-a-minimum-digital-living-standard/

Conclusions and recommendations

3 Build learner identity by using quality assured validation (such as digital badges) to recognise non-accredited learning.

Many people engage in recreational learning and skills development activities without always realising that what they learn has value. They do not identify as learners. Using standardised validation for non-accredited learning (the RSA uses standardised digital badges in its Cities of Learning programme) enables learners to see the skills behind their activities and build identity as a person who learns.

4 Provide social supports and triggers by providing in-person support for people accessing or transitioning between learning.

Fund local adult learning champions / coaches to help and support people to explore learning offers and find information and guidance on funding and free resources. This builds on good practice in programmes such as social prescribing link workers and the digital champions movement.

5 Support blended, flexible and non-linear learning by funding 'hybrid by default' adult learning provision.

Wherever possible, government funded accredited courses should be designed to be accessed in person and online. This lowers barriers to participation, particularly for women who face disproportionately high situational barriers to learning. Courses should be designed in modular increments with microcredentials so that learners who fall out of a course before completion (due to life disruptions), do not leave empty handed and are incentivised to continue with study at a later date.

The 2008 recession precipitated a massive 40 percent decline in adult learning participation. This was in part due to declining investment in work-based learning provision and austerity measures impacting adult and community learning provision. As the United Kingdom enters a period of economic uncertainty, we must not lose sight of the value of adult learning.

New skills are the route to economic growth. Purposeful progress, social interaction and self-expression are routes to mental health.

Rebalancing learning provision towards the needs and motivations of learners, in order to increase participation will help individuals, society and the economy to thrive.

The RSA and Ufi want to work with policy makers, place leaders, product designers and programme leads to identify, test and scale interventions and infrastructure that can rebalance adult learning and help build a learning society.

Chapter 8

Appendix

Appendix: Recommended actions and leading practice

Rebalancing Adult Learning was written with the aim to inform policy, product and programme design around the needs of non-traditional learners, in order to widen participation in adult learning. In this appendix we detail promising ideas and interventions for action that have surfaced in our wider research, in Ufi's VocTech directory and in RSA's ongoing programme design.

We have framed these ideas and intervention under three categories:

1 Identity:
building learning identity, motivation and confidence

2 Access:
supporting accessible, affordable, non-linear learning journeys

3 Social supports:
providing social supports, timely triggers and managed transitions into learning

1 Identity:
building learning identity, motivation
and confidence

Ambition	Policy	Products	Programmes (RSA)
<p>Support strong learner Identity at school beyond academic success.</p> <p>No student should leave school feeling like they have failed at learning.</p>	<p>Expand the scope of Gatsby Benchmarks (or provide a similar framework for schools and colleges) to meaningfully validate and recognise non-academic skills and achievement gained through extra-curricular and additional activities.</p>	<p>Digital portfolios, skills validation and records of achievement are already an established market. E.g. Springpod.²⁷</p> <p>Use open standards and APIs to ensure interoperability between systems. E.g. the RARPA (recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement) Framework.²⁸</p>	<p>RSA's Cities of Learning partnership (with Badge Nation and Navigatr) has worked with schools and colleges to digitally badge extra-curricular activities, work experience and non-accredited skills.</p>
<p>Support online and offline learning communities</p> <p>Building learner identity requires social feedback and support. This is true in online and offline learner communities.</p>	<p>Provide dedicated funding to support community learning activities and spaces, that is not dependent on changing skills priorities.</p> <p>Impact should be assessed on widening learner participation and supported onward journeys to structured courses.</p>	<p>Support active social sharing and social reciprocity within product design.</p> <p>Features such as joint streaks, gamification, private leaderboards and peer feedback prompts encourage social accountability. Ufi has seen this effectively used in the waste management training product WastEd.²⁹</p> <p>Contribute to wider subject learning communities in social media spaces and celebrate your diverse learners.</p>	<p>RSA develops peer learning communities and learning journeys for fellows, students and pupils.</p> <p>As part of our connected learning pilots (in partnership with Ufi) we are working to connect digital learning communities both online and offline in Bradford.</p>

²⁷ <https://ufi.co.uk/voctech-directory/springpod/>

²⁸ <https://ufi.co.uk/voctech-directory/rarpa-the-next-generation/>

²⁹ <https://ufi.co.uk/voctech-directory/wasted-wamitab/>

<p>Validate non-formal and informal learning with employer-endorsed skills and learning frameworks</p>	<p>Government to endorse flexible learning and skills frameworks for non-formal activities.</p>	<p>Use open digital badges to recognise learning on digital platforms. Digital Skills platform iDEA³⁰ has issued 10 million badges.</p>	<p>The RSA and City Guilds developed a standards framework for recognising learning in non-formal and informal settings.</p>
<p>Much of adult learning takes place outside of formal courses and qualifications. Without validation, those skills remain invisible to employers (and often to the learner themselves).</p>	<p>All learning, cultural engagement and sports activities funded through public budgets (e.g. Shared prosperity fund) to be required to detail and validate the skills learned.</p>	<p>Author digital badge content with reference to recognised and transferrable standards e.g. RSA Badge standards, Skillsbuilder Universal Framework, Futuredotnow essential digital skills framework.</p>	<p>With our partners Badge Nation we support all types of learning providers to validate skills.</p>
<p>Basic literacy and digital skills as a right</p>	<p>Fund community-based walk-in centres where anyone can access direct support to develop their basic skills without registration or paperwork.</p>	<p>Optimise products for use with screen readers and use simple, clear English.</p>	<p>RSA and Ufi are working with online and community centres in Bradford to support development and validation of basic digital skills.</p>
<p>Basic literacy, numeracy and digital literacy are fundamental to developing any self-directed learning.</p>	<p>Basic skills centres should be co-located with community infrastructure to ensure footfall (and lack of shame in approaching) – e.g. supermarkets, food banks, churches, libraries.</p>	<p>If your digital product might benefit those struggling with literacy, ESOL or numeracy, connect with online centres and digital champions networks to introduce your product, so it can be recommended to clients developing their basic skills. UFI has a growing network of numeracy projects and champions.³¹</p>	
<p>Every person of any age should have the right to develop their basic skills for free.</p>			

³⁰ <https://ufi.co.uk/voctech-in-action/idea/>

³¹ <https://ufi.co.uk/voctech-directory/numeracy-champions-in-the-workplace/>

2 Access:
supporting accessible, affordable,
non-linear learning journeys

Ambition	Policy	Products	Programmes (RSA)
<p>Availability: Support learning in different settings</p> <p>Reluctant and underconfident learners may not be willing to travel to learn and are wary of accessing learning in formal settings (schools, colleges)</p>	<p>Local Skills Improvement Plans should include strategies for developing and recognising community-based skills development beyond colleges. To include community centres, parks, libraries, cultural institutions and commercial establishments (shops, cafes, pubs).</p>	<p>Digital products are by their nature used across different settings.</p> <p>Consider how products can be accessed both remotely and in blended learning settings.</p> <p>E.g. Ufi has invested in Social Care Training solutions such as CTC and Cuppacare.³²</p>	<p>RSA's Cities of Learning programme convenes learning providers in different settings to map formal and non-formal learning across cities and regions.</p> <p>The Cities of Learning programme is piloting use of the Navigatr platform to map badged learning opportunities across a place.</p>
<p>Administrable: Provide digital devices and broad-band for digitally excluded learners.</p> <p>It is not possible to access free online learning or blended learning courses without an appropriate digital device or stable broadband connection</p>	<p>Pilot digital device lending schemes in local libraries for adults who sign up to online courses (e.g. Open Learn, Coursera).</p> <p>Support and extend the National Databank Scheme</p> <p>Provide stable public wifi hotspots in all buildings receiving public funds.</p>	<p>Where possible, offer downloadable and offline access to digital learning material so that it can be accessed away from public hotspots.</p>	<p>RSA is working with Online Centres in Bradford and partners in Cambridgeshire to improve digital access for inclusion in learning.</p>

³² <https://ufi.co.uk/latest/ufi-funded-project-makes-social-care-training-more-accessible/>

<p>Access: design adult learning courses as flexible, blended, modular, non-linear by default.</p>	<p>The DFE should establish a modular learning and micro-credentials commission connected to the Unit for Future Skills. The commission should explore how to map skills development across multiple course modules and different careers pathways.</p>	<p>Ensure digital learning content is modular with detailed skills development and learning context information for each module.</p>	<p>RSA-standard digital badges provide validation for the content, context and contribution of learning experiences.</p>
	<p>This work should inform the administration of the Lifelong Loan Entitlement for modular courses</p>	<p>Where possible use established skills frameworks and taxonomies to ensure transferability between platforms and courses and to enable pathways thinking.</p>	<p>These badges are designed to support development of flexible learning pathways that recognise skills across different learning providers and contexts.</p>

<p>Affordability: to make learning more affordable provide learners financial support beyond course costs.</p>	<p>Expand and simplify learner childcare support provision. Learners accessing Lifetime Skills Guarantee courses or Lifelong Loan Entitlement should receive childcare vouchers that match the hours plus travel of chosen course.</p>	<p>Trial freemium or deferred payment models for online learning content.</p>	<p>RSA is currently investigating living stipends for adults participating in future Design for Life Skills and Entrepreneurialism learning journeys.</p>
<p>Aim to lower situational barriers to learning participation such as caring responsibilities or access to transport.</p>	<p>All adult learners should receive discounted travel on trains / buses.</p>	<p>CAPSLOCK cyber security bootcamps offer a range of finance plans including innovative share income models for graduates.³³</p>	

³³ <https://ufi.co.uk/voctech-directory/capslock/>

3 Social supports:
providing social supports, timely triggers
and managed transitions into learning

Ambition	Policy	Products	Programmes (RSA)
<p>Develop networks of face-to-face support to help people transition into learning.</p> <p>Providing support on where to find opportunities, how to manage alongside other commitments and how to access loans or funding.</p>	<p>Build on the successes of link workers in social prescribing and digital champions networks to provide direct, independent, face-to-face support to adults who are interested in exploring learning options.</p> <p>This could be co-funded between public health and community education budgets.</p>	<p>Provide 'social proof' instructional videos of diverse people registering and navigating your product. E.g. Code Your Future has success stories and videos from refugees in tech jobs on their home page.³⁴</p>	<p>RSA is piloting targeted face-to-face learning coaching support for digitally excluded communities to help them access quality online learning content and communities.</p>
<p>Support open directories and products that map learning pathways from informal to formal skills and towards employment</p> <p>Finding local learning opportunities and understanding how those skills could fit into a learning or employment pathway.</p>	<p>The Department for Education (DfE) DWP and BEIS should provide up-to-date course, training and labour market information (including the National Careers Service database) as open APIs and support development of platforms to explore local learning opportunities and how they link to careers.</p>	<p>Where possible ensure course directories and credentials are built on open standards or accessible via API to allow inclusion in complex learning pathways or digital directories.</p>	<p>RSA supports the development of products that support learning pathways.</p>

³⁴ <https://ufi.co.uk/votech-directory/guided-coding-journey-code-your-future/>

Use calendar-based calls to action to promote learning opportunities	Pilot the use of targeted individual learning accounts for adults with level 2 or 3 qualifications (or below). Direct calls to action to activate accounts on key birthdays (30, 40, 50, 60) or as part of new year celebrations.	Promote enrolment in courses with targeted social media campaigns around key dates and anniversaries.	RSA may use calendar-based calls to actions for fellowship learning journeys.
Offer social proof for learning benefits	Create a lifelong learning ambassador role with a public face of Lifelong Learning to encourage non-traditional learn foundational skills and progress towards their ambitions.	Encourage and enable friend referrals, build champion networks (e.g. Digital Unite ³⁵) and offer group subscriber discounts.	RSA supports peer learning, alumni and feedback networks across its programmatic work.

³⁵ <https://ufi.co.uk/voctech-directory/digital-aspire/>

Chapter 9

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9

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