

Making lifelong learning central to university strategy



carringtoncrisp



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Introduction

The evolution of universities throughout history mirrors the shifting needs of society, from their origins educating clerics in Europe in the Middle Ages to their pivotal role in equipping professionals for successive waves of industrial revolutions. However, in the face of today's lightning-fast technological advancements, the question arises: can universities sustain their relevance?

The accelerating pace of change demands a re-evaluation of traditional educational paradigms to ensure they can meet the evolving demands of the world of work. Additionally, demographic shifts such as longer life expectancy and aging populations in many nations further underscore the imperative to reevaluate traditional approaches to education and meet the needs of lifelong learners.

The concept of lifelong learning is far from novel; continuing education, adult education, and in-company programmes have been pursued for decades. Moreover, numerous professions have mandated ongoing Continuing Professional Development (CPD) to maintain the right to practice. However, in contrast to the past when learners were often limited to local providers, the internet has revolutionised learning, offering opportunities that were previously unimaginable.

UNESCO defines lifelong learning as being 'rooted in the integration of learning and living, covering learning activities for people of all ages (children, young people, adults and the elderly, girls and boys, women and men), in all life-wide contexts (family, school, the community, the workplace, and so on) and through a variety of modalities (formal, non-formal and informal), which, together, meet a wide range of learning needs and demands.'¹

CarringtonCrisp, in association with the Universities Association for Lifelong Learning (UALL), UPCEA and EUCEN, has conducted an international study to explore the perspectives of both employers and individual learners on the current state and the future of professional learning and development.

The purpose of the study was to ascertain what it is that learners and employers are looking for from educational providers; what universities would need to do to fully meet these demands and to benefit from these emerging opportunities; and what government might do to facilitate such changes, and hence bring about the sort of advance in lifelong learning and skills that they are seeking, and which will be required to achieve their stated missions.

Two surveys were conducted in November 2024 to explore attitudes towards lifelong learning - one involving individual learners and the other employers. Interviews were also conducted with university providers, employers and others. Details of the methodology used in creating this report are in the Appendix.

Particular thanks go to the following institutions who supported the study financially and gave their time for interviews:

Aberystwyth University	London South Bank University	University of Liverpool
Bangor University	Middlesex University	University of Oxford
Cardiff University	The Nation Building Institute, Thailand	University of St Andrew's
Goldsmiths, University of London	Newcastle University	University of Sussex
Hong Kong Metropolitan University	Oxford Brookes University	University of West London
Imperial College	University College London	University of Wolverhampton
	University of Hertfordshire	

Executive Summary

In an article titled 'The English higher education market is broken' in the Financial Times, Philip Augar, author of the 2018 Augar Review into post-18 education and funding, devoted a single line to lifelong learning as part of his solution, 'A commitment to lifelong learning would restore a slump in adult education'.²

Lifelong learning continues to grow in importance for universities, individuals, employers and communities. For individuals and employers, demand is shaped by two overarching themes: flexibility and value for money. For learners, the motivation to engage in further study stems from a desire for skills development and personal growth, with many also choosing to learn for enjoyment. For employers, learning is increasingly seen as a strategic tool to manage change, address skills shortages, and drive productivity.

Individuals expect to engage in education more frequently and to continue learning into retirement. Their preferences are shifting towards shorter, more flexible learning formats, delivered in blended or online formats. While universities remain respected for their academic quality, research contributions and employer recognition, they are also viewed as costly and sometimes limited in the types of learning they offer and they face tough competition from commercial providers. Learners are open to paying for learning, but also expect financial support from employers and government. There is strong interest in technology subjects, but soft skills are also in high demand. Individual learners increasingly expect high-quality video content, accessible at anytime and anywhere.

Employers, meanwhile, are navigating a period of rapid change. They are looking for training solutions that are adaptable, efficient, and capable of helping staff adopt new technologies and ways of working. Flexibility is critical, not only in course content and delivery, but also in provider location, with many employers working with international institutions.

Universities are acknowledged as credible providers, but are often not the first choice, with employers leaning towards private training firms and professional bodies that can tailor offerings to their needs. Online providers are gaining traction, particularly those offering

2) <https://www.ft.com/content/7514ea72-70f8-469c-ac06-dbc82c993b39>

For universities, lifelong learning is not new, but the way it is being sought by individuals and employers and the way it is being delivered by competitors beyond higher education, means systems and strategies need to change

robust data on learner progress and impact. Across the board, value for money remains a key consideration, along with the need for providers to understand employers' unique challenges and to be an effective learning partner.

For universities, lifelong learning is not new, but the way it is being sought by individuals and employers and the way it is being delivered by competitors beyond higher education, means systems and strategies need to change. The future of lifelong learning lies in innovative delivery models that harness technology, foster partnerships (both between universities and with external providers), and embrace flexible, demand-driven solutions.

One of the drivers for universities engaging in lifelong learning will inevitably be revenue, but it also offers much more. Offering lifelong learning may provide an opportunity to support a civic mission, to build relationships with alumni, and to engage employers in curriculum design, creating internships and supporting research. Imaginative thinking is required to see the full potential of lifelong learning.

Through lifelong learning, universities' connections with their communities can go far beyond current students and alumni, opening up higher education to wider audiences. Whether it is young people who might otherwise be unable to access

higher education, adults who missed out on education earlier in their lives, or the elderly who simply enjoy studying something new or benefit from being part of a learning group rather than becoming isolated, lifelong learning can embed a university in its community in the widest possible sense.

For learners and employers, the findings from the report point to a learning landscape in transition, more learner-centred, more agile, and increasingly shaped by the demands of both personal ambition and organisational change. As universities develop and implement strategies for lifelong learning, place, partnership, policy, people and priorities will all play a part in future provision.

Graeme Atherton, Associate Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Regional Engagement at the University of West London, Vice-Principal of Ruskin College, Oxford and now leading the Ruskin Institute for Social Equity (RISE), sums up what needs to be done to secure the future of lifelong learning: 'It's important that those who believe in lifelong learning and its role work closely together to ensure that we have the right messages and evidence, and that we also look to try and build collaborations across sectors where we can do so, even if it's at an institutional level, even if it's within institutions. I think the landscape overall is a challenging one, but that there's plenty we can do'.

Survey insights from employers and learners

The learner survey gathered responses from 10,210 individuals across more than 40 countries. Participants represented 21 employment sectors, with the largest numbers working in education, finance and insurance, information and communication, and manufacturing.

The majority (73%) were currently employed, while 9% were retired. In terms of educational background, 39% held an undergraduate degree, 19% had completed a Master's degree and 27% had a high school or equivalent qualification. Respondents were spread across four age brackets: 21–35, 36–50, 51–65, and over 65. Occupationally, 12% were skilled manual workers, 17% mid-level managers and 19% worked in administrative roles. Among those aged over 65, 20% are still working. The sample was relatively balanced by gender, with 48% male and 51% female participants.

The employer survey included 1,255 respondents from 32 countries. The three largest industry groups represented, comprising 35% of the total, were manufacturing, finance and insurance, and information and communication. The largest proportion of respondents (16%) came from organisations employing between 501 and 1,000 staff, though over half (51%) were from smaller organisations. Most participants held senior roles, with 34% in mid-level management and 64% occupying more senior positions. Notably, 56% had decision-making authority regarding the selection of training programmes and providers for their organisation.

51%
FEMALE
PARTICIPANTS

48%
MALE
PARTICIPANTS

56%
HAD DECISION-MAKING
AUTHORITY REGARDING
THE SELECTION OF
TRAINING PROGRAMMES



Key Insights from Employers

Drivers, budgets and activities

learner survey gathered responses from 10,210 individuals across more than 40 countries. Participants represented 21 employment sectors, with the largest numbers working in education, finance and insurance, information and communication, and manufacturing.

Change and strategy

- To improve productivity and efficiency 46%
- To introduce new working practices 28%
- To enter new markets 24%

Technology and innovation

- To introduce new technology 39%
- To deal with the implications of AI 33%

People and talent

- To develop high potential staff 38%
- To build a workforce fit for future business needs 35%
- To help our staff reskill 34%
- To help retain key staff in our organisation 31%
- To support the personal development of staff beyond work 30%
- To enhance equality and diversity among our staff 28%
- To support staff recruitment in local markets 20%

Sustainability

- To build a more sustainable operation 31%
- To transform our environmental impact 22%

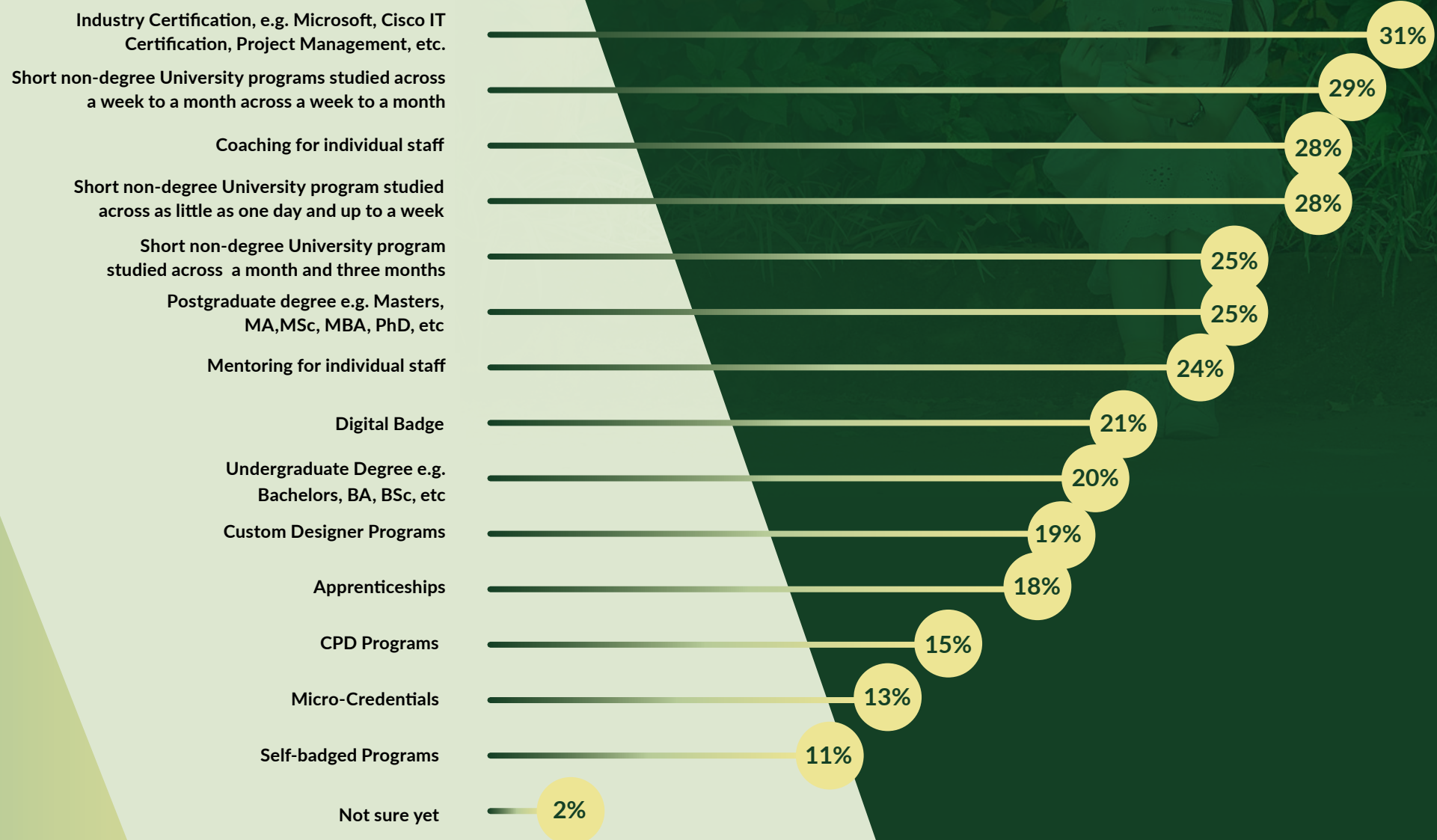
Compliance and standards

- To maintain professional standards/competencies 38%
- To meet statutory/regulatory requirements 26%

Looking ahead, learning and development activity is set to increase, with 51% of employers planning to boost their training budgets over the next two years, up from 38% in the previous two years.

There is a strong emphasis on short non-degree university programmes, industry certifications and coaching, although a quarter of employers continue to express interest in postgraduate qualifications. When it comes to programme types, employers demonstrate a flexible approach: 36% use a blend of credit-bearing and non-credit options, while 30% focus exclusively on credit-bearing programmes, and 26% rely solely on non-credit bearing formats.

LEARNING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES EMPLOYERS ARE LIKELY TO MAKE USE OF IN THE NEXT TWO YEARS



Working with universities

Employers place a strong emphasis on value for money, preferring courses that enable staff to continue working while learning and favouring providers that offer a broad range of options.

The most frequently used providers are:

- Private training providers (40%)
- Professional, industry or trade bodies (37%)
- Universities (32%)

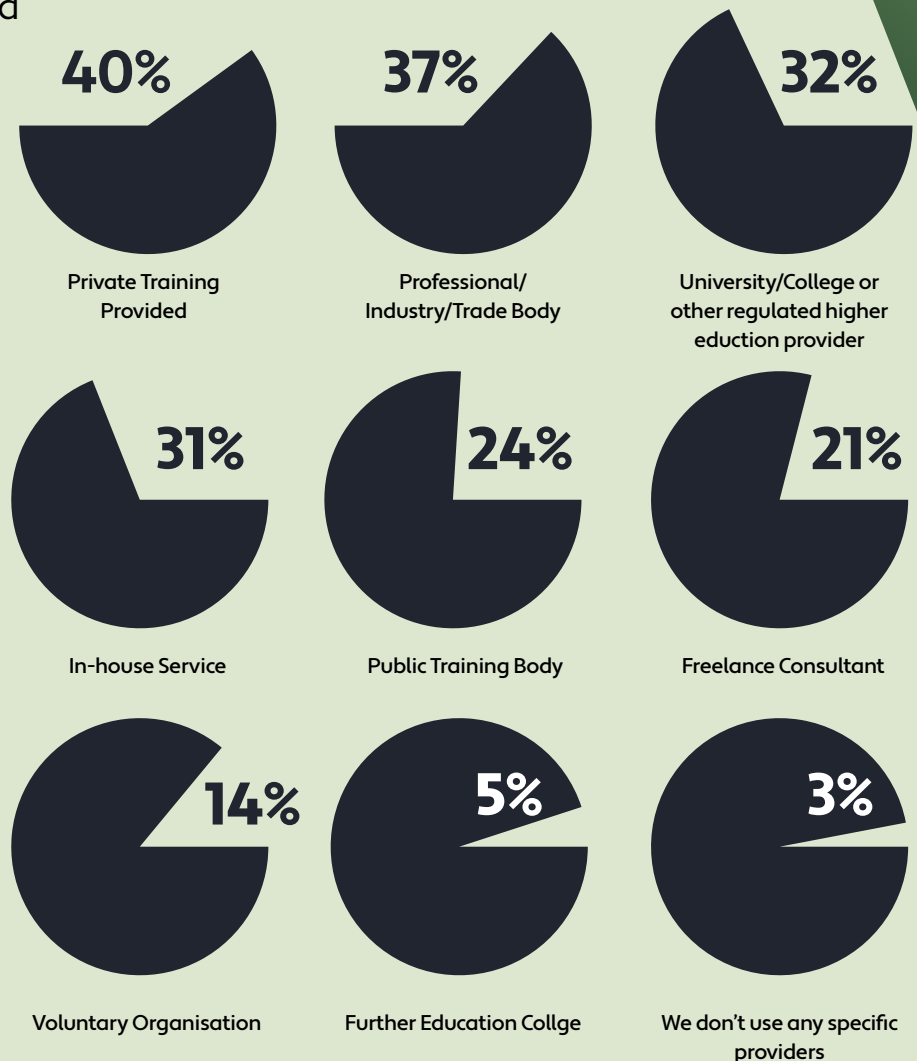
When universities are chosen, it is typically due to:

- their reputation for developing knowledge
- qualifications that are widely recognised by employers
- research activity that adds value to the learning experience
- the quality of faculty delivering the courses

However, there are several reasons employers may choose not to work with universities. These include:

- Perceptions that universities are too theoretical and not closely aligned with real-world business challenges
- The view that other providers better meet specific development needs
- A belief that universities lack the specialised expertise required for certain topics

Providers used for learning and professional development



Skill demand

To better understand future learning and development priorities, employers were asked to identify both technology and non-technology skills they consider essential but that are difficult to find when recruiting. In the non-technology category, responses revealed a broad and varied set of needs, with 23 different skills mentioned and only nine percentage points separating the top and bottom-ranked items. This highlights the diverse priorities across organisations and underlines the value of working with providers who offer a wide portfolio of courses. The most commonly cited areas of shortage included agility, change management, and decision-making in uncertain and complex environments.

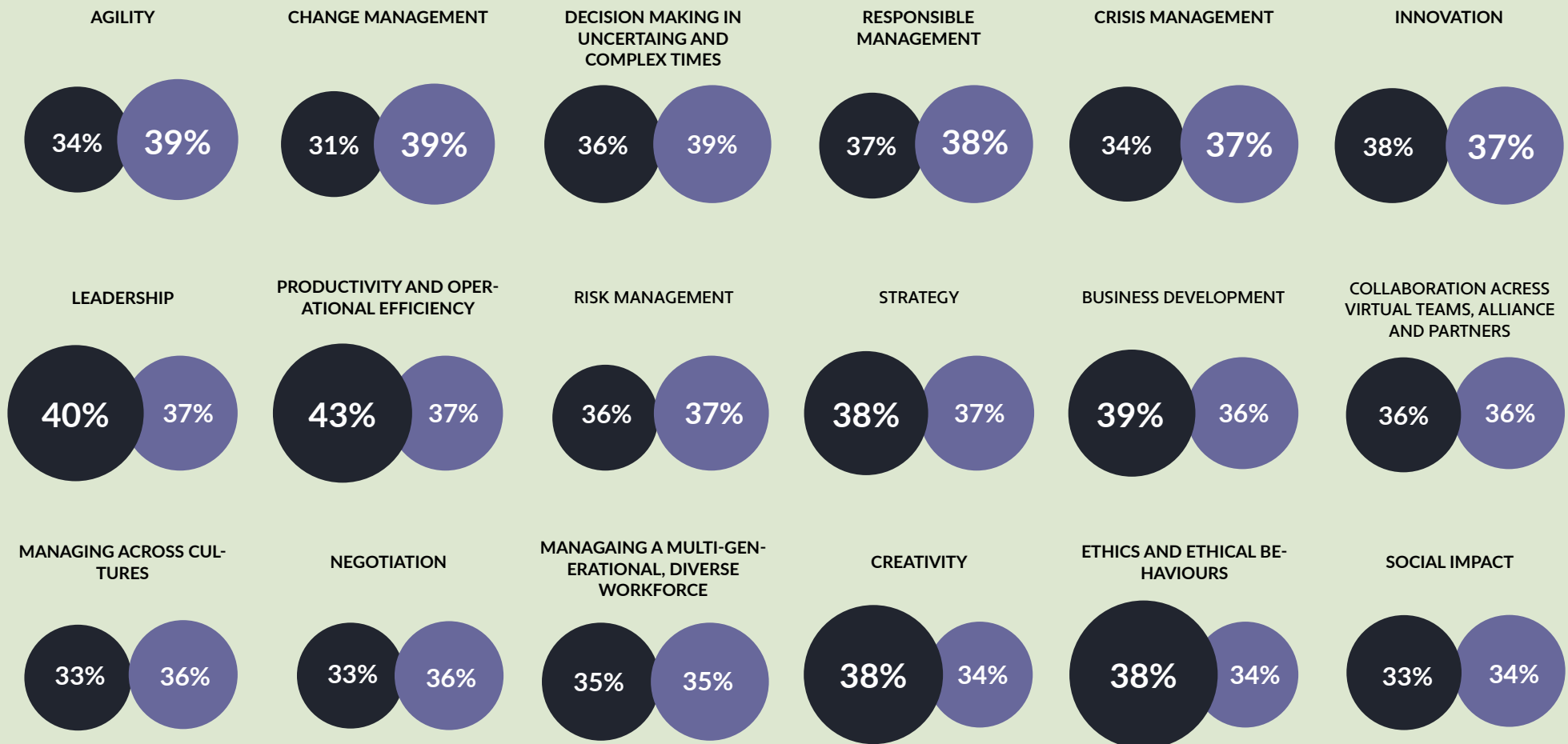
In the technology space, digital transformation emerged as the most critical skill, followed by artificial intelligence. As with non-technical skills, demand was widely distributed, with the top 10 technology skills separated by just eight percentage points - again suggesting a need for providers to deliver broad and flexible learning solutions.

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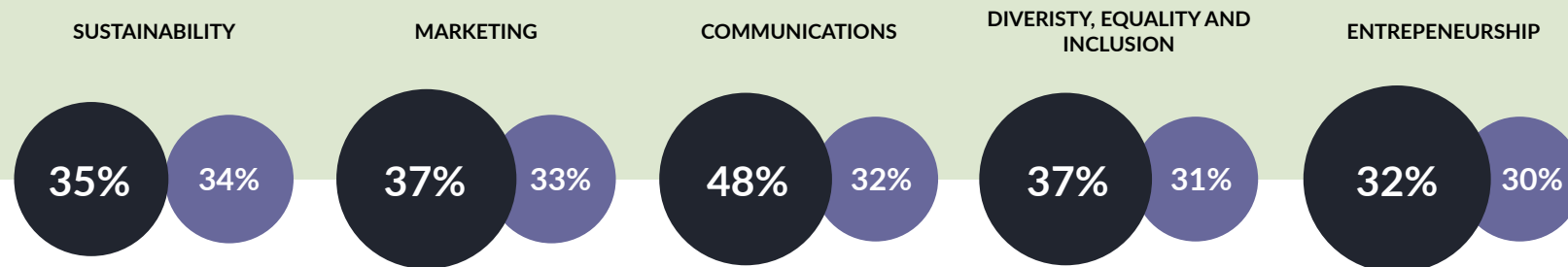
NON-TECHNOLOGY SKILLS

KEY SKILLS WIDELY AVAILABLE WHEN RECRUITING – OR – KEY SKILLS NOT WIDELY AVAILABLE WHEN RECRUITING

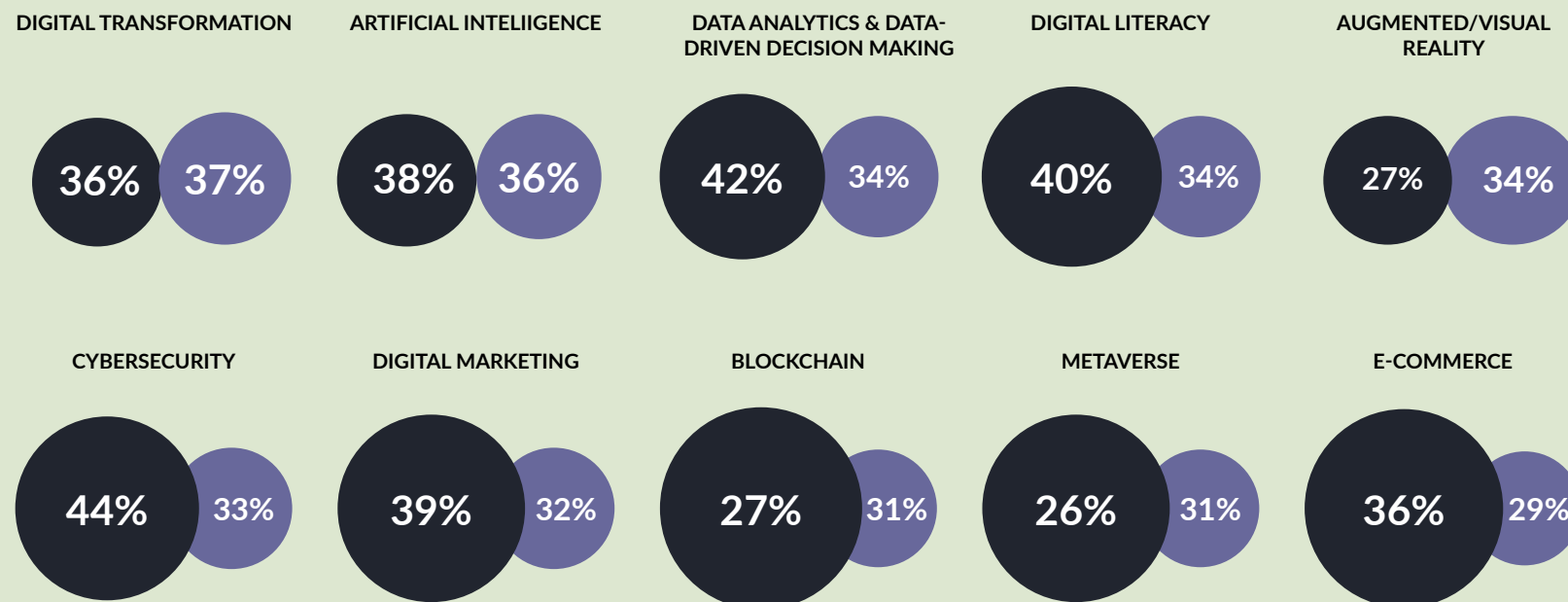


KEY SKILLS WIDELY AVAILABLE WHEN RECRUITING -OR- KEY SKILLS NOT WIDELY AVAILABLE WHEN RECRUITING

NON-TECHNOLOGY SKILLS



TECHNOLOGY SKILLS



How and where to learn

Employers, much like individual learners, are open to sourcing learning providers from around the world in order to find the best fit. Nearly half (49%) would support staff taking online courses with a university based in another country, with an additional 39% open to the idea. A third would even consider sending employees to study face-to-face abroad.

When it comes to online learning, employers favour blended delivery, combining live (synchronous) sessions with self-paced (asynchronous) content. This approach offers the flexibility staff need to balance learning with their day-to-day responsibilities.

Although only 18% of employers explicitly state they use non-university online providers, platform usage suggests a broader reliance on these resources:

- 63% report using LinkedIn Learning
- 46% have used Coursera
- 43% use Udemy
- 42% report using FutureLearn
- 42% say they use other online platforms beyond those listed

This indicates that many online learning providers are likely being used, even if not formally recognised as a distinct category.



Employers would like to see universities evolve to better meet their workforce development needs. More than 70% of employers agreed on the importance of universities:

- continuing to develop more flexible learning approaches
- offering affordable programmes that deliver practical, work-relevant skills
- becoming more innovative in how they support lifelong learning

When searching for learning and development providers, employers rely most on:

- online searches
- LinkedIn
- YouTube
- university websites
- recommendations from other employers

Only a quarter of employers consult rankings, suggesting that practical considerations and peer validation matter more than league tables when selecting learning partners.

The future of work and learning

Employers anticipate continued and significant shifts in how work and learning are delivered. Flexible and remote working are expected to become embedded in organisational operations and strategies, with 74% planning to adopt flexible working and 70% incorporating remote working into future plans.

Alongside these changes, more than half of employers believe staff will work beyond traditional retirement ages (55%), and 61% expect career changes to become a common feature of working life.

In this evolving landscape, learning and development must adapt. Online learning is expected to become the standard approach to staff development, with 64% of employers already using blended learning (a combination of face-to-face and online delivery) and an equal share believing online delivery will be the dominant format in the future. As a result, 62% of employers say the physical location of learning providers will become less important, and many are placing increased emphasis on measuring the impact of learning interventions.

To meet these needs, employers are looking for customised learning programmes tailored to their organisation and delivered by providers who understand their business. Solutions must support learning while working, enabling staff to develop skills without stepping away from their roles. As such, there is growing demand for long-term partnerships with learning providers - with 72% of employers aiming to build these relationships to ensure strategic alignment and impact.



Employers are also seeking innovation in learning design and delivery. Key features considered 'very' or 'extremely' valuable by more than half of employers include:

- interactive online materials that track and confirm progress
- subscription models that allow staff to personalise their learning journeys
- on-demand video content to reinforce and extend learning
- bite-sized updates that can be completed in under an hour
- follow-up articles linked to previous learning topics

In summary, the future of learning is increasingly flexible, digital, data-driven and tailored, designed around the evolving nature of work and the diverse, shifting needs of the workforce.

UK Apprenticeship Levy – Current use and future expectations

Among the 298 UK employers responding to the survey, the apprenticeship levy remains a key focus, especially in light of the newly formed Skills England,³ which will shape future policy in this area. Just under half of UK employers (48%) report paying the levy, while among those who do not, only 38% are aware they may still be eligible to receive support from it.

Use of the levy is set to rise. Just under half (45%) of employers have made significant or extensive use of the levy in the past two years, and 49% anticipate doing so in the next two. Employers plan to use higher and degree apprenticeships funded through the levy to:

- develop the skills of existing staff
- recruit and train younger workers
- strengthen leadership capabilities

When it comes to delivery, most employers expect a 50:50 balance between online and face-to-face learning. However, preferences vary by activity; learning content and interactive resources are slightly more likely to be delivered online while masterclasses and specialist workshops are expected to remain primarily face-to-face.

Regarding the role of universities in workplace learning, employers express strong support for all six options tested, with over 70% agreement on each. They particularly expect universities to:

- track the professional development of apprentices
- integrate on-the-job and off-the-job learning
- collaborate closely with employers to identify relevant workplace learning opportunities



³) Skills England - GOV.UK

Key Insights from learners

What learners want: motivation, formats and choices

Learners are primarily motivated by the desire to acquire a specific new skill and to support their personal development, though improved earning potential is also a strong driver.

For many, return on investment is a key consideration when choosing what and how to study. That said, a genuine interest in a subject remains important, with 23% of respondents selecting it as a primary motivation: 58% of those aged over 65 are planning to study because of enjoyment of the subject compared with only 16% of those aged 21- 35.

58%

of those aged over 65 are planning to study because
of enjoyment of the subject

LEARNER MOTIVATIONS TO UNDERTAKE FURTHER LEARNING

80%

Interest in microcredentials remains relatively low, cited by just 8% of respondents.

When it comes to preferred formats, postgraduate degrees rank only seventh, with learners showing a clear preference for short courses and certificates lasting from a week to a month.

Interest in microcredentials remains relatively low, cited by just 8% of respondents. This reflects a broader pattern seen in other CarringtonCrisp research, suggesting that many learners may still lack awareness of this term or be unsure of its meaning.

35%

To study further as part part of my personal development

34%

To learn a specific new skill

25%

To improve my earning potential

23%

Enjoyment of the subject

22%

To quickly add some new knowledge to support my career

16%

To improve my job security

12%

To start/grow my own business

11%

To help me change sector/industry/career

10%

To gain a promotion more quickly

10%

To help me change the roles within my organisation

8%

Because I am required to take regular refresher courses to maintain my professional status (CPD)

6%

To engage with my local community

6%

Because I was made redundant and am looking to explore new opportunities

4%

Because of a recommendation from a friend/colleague/employer

1%

Other (Please specify)

Where to learn

Universities and colleges are the most popular choice for those looking to study, although around a third would choose a commercial online learning provider.

More than a third say they would choose a university or college because:

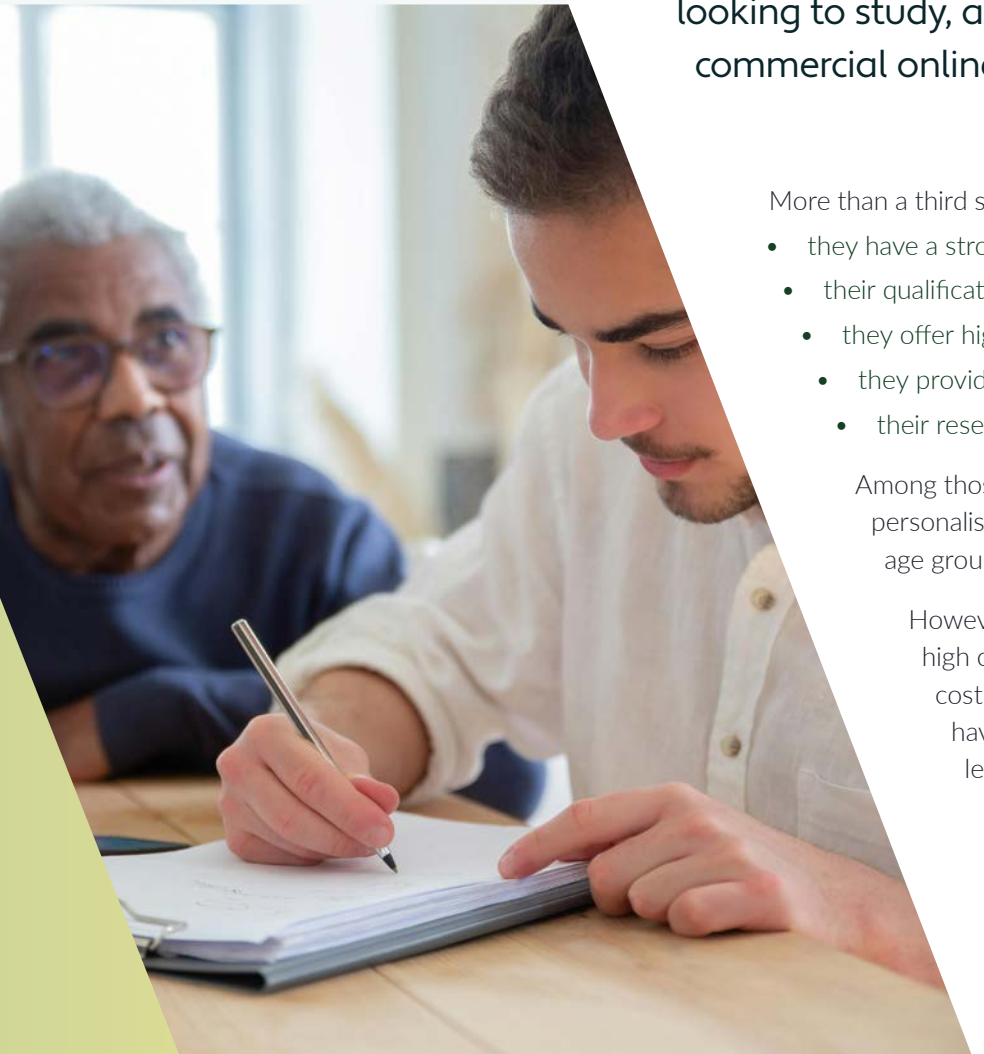
- they have a strong reputation for developing knowledge
- their qualifications are widely recognised by employers
- they offer high-quality teaching
- they provide a wide range of subjects
- their research adds value to the learning experience

Among those aged over 65, priorities differ significantly - proximity to home, a wide range of courses, personalisation, and access to free or low-cost options are far more important than they are for other age groups.

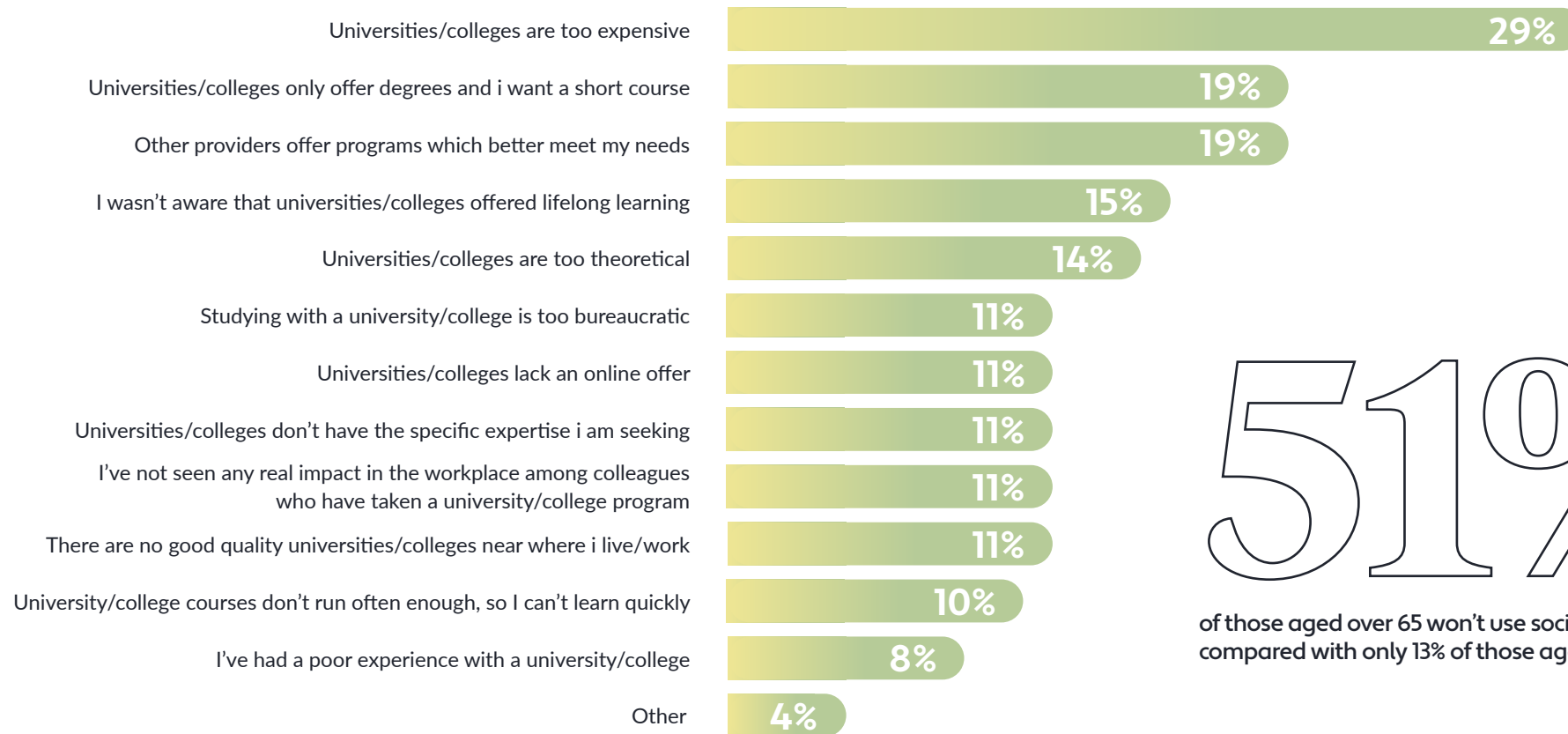
However, some learners are discouraged from choosing universities and colleges due to perceived high costs and the misconception that they only offer full degree programmes. Perceptions of high cost are more likely to dissuade younger learners than those over 65. Nearly 40% of respondents have used at least one commercial online provider, and flexibility remains a key requirement, with learners seeking personalised content and adaptable study approaches.

Value for money is the most important factor for learners when selecting a provider, closely followed by recognition of quality. Concerns about the cost of learning are closely linked to broader cost-of-living pressures. Nearly half of respondents (46%) expect to pay for future learning out of their own pockets. A quarter (24%) say they would only participate in free courses, while an equal proportion expect funding to come from local or national government. One in five anticipate that their employer will cover the costs, and 13% expect to take out a loan to support their learning.

“flexibility remains a key requirement, with learners seeking personalised content & adaptable study approaches.”



REASONS FOR NOT USING UNIVERSITIES TO PROVIDE FUTURE LEARNING



51%

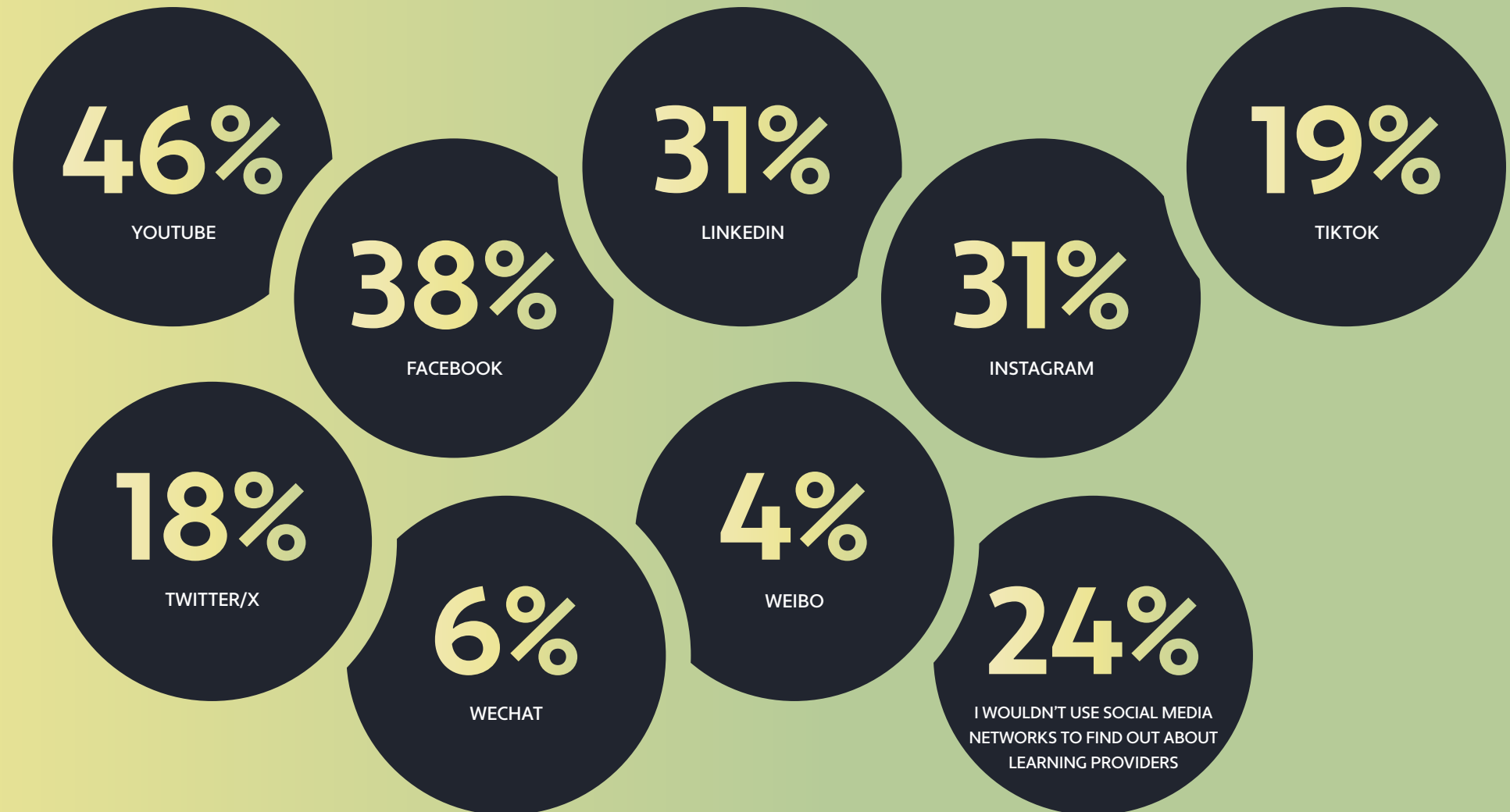
of those aged over 65 won't use social media compared with only 13% of those aged 21 - 35

When asked what universities should prioritise in the future, 70% or more of learners agree they should:

- develop more affordable programmes that deliver relevant skills for those in work or seeking employment
- offer more courses at convenient times, particularly outside standard working hours

When asked how they would go about finding out more about future learning providers, respondents identified online search, university websites and social media as their top three sources of information. While not always the primary source, more than three-quarters reported using social media to research learning opportunities. The most commonly used platforms are YouTube, Facebook, LinkedIn and Instagram. However, 51% of those aged over 65 won't use social media compared with only 13% of those aged 21 - 35.

SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS USED TO FIND OUT ABOUT LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES:



What learners want to learn

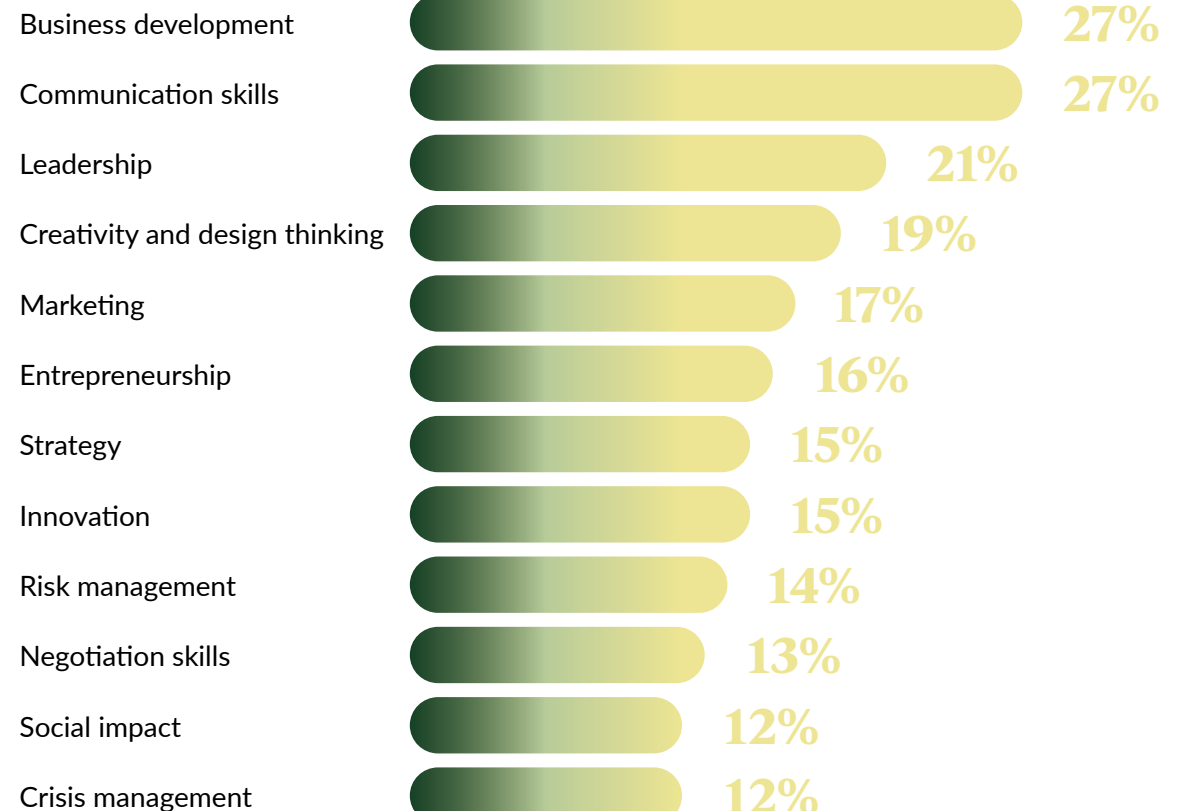
To explore subject preferences, respondents were presented with three lists: two focused on work-related topics (one IT-specific, one non-IT), and one covering broader subject areas.

Among the work-related options, artificial intelligence emerged as the most popular choice. Other subjects selected by at least one in five respondents included business development, communication skills, digital marketing, cybersecurity, leadership, and e-commerce. In the broader list, only economics was chosen by more than one in five respondents. However, interest was spread across a wide range of subjects, with ten additional topics each attracting at least one in ten learners. Among those aged over 65, 28% want to study history, but only 10% of the 21-35 year olds would like to do so.

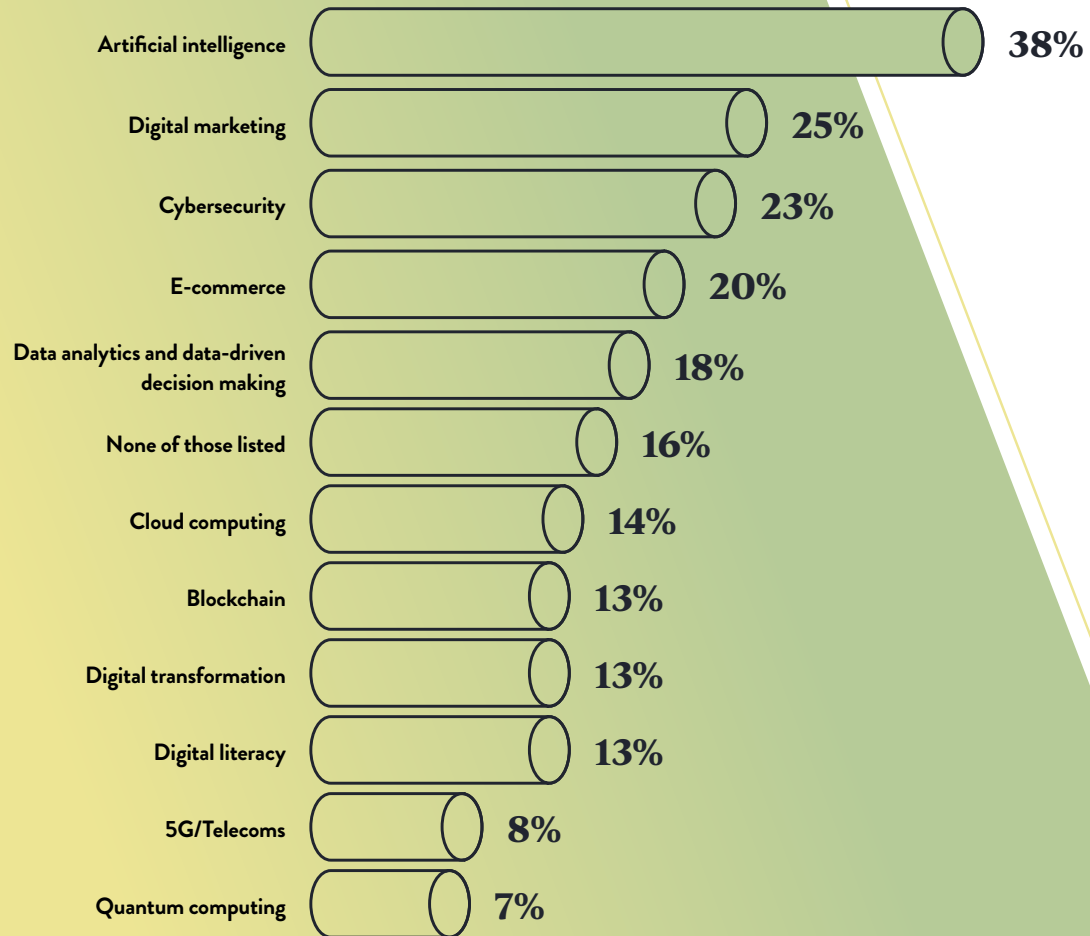
28%

Among those aged over 65, 28% want to study history, but only 10% of the 21-35 year olds would like to do so

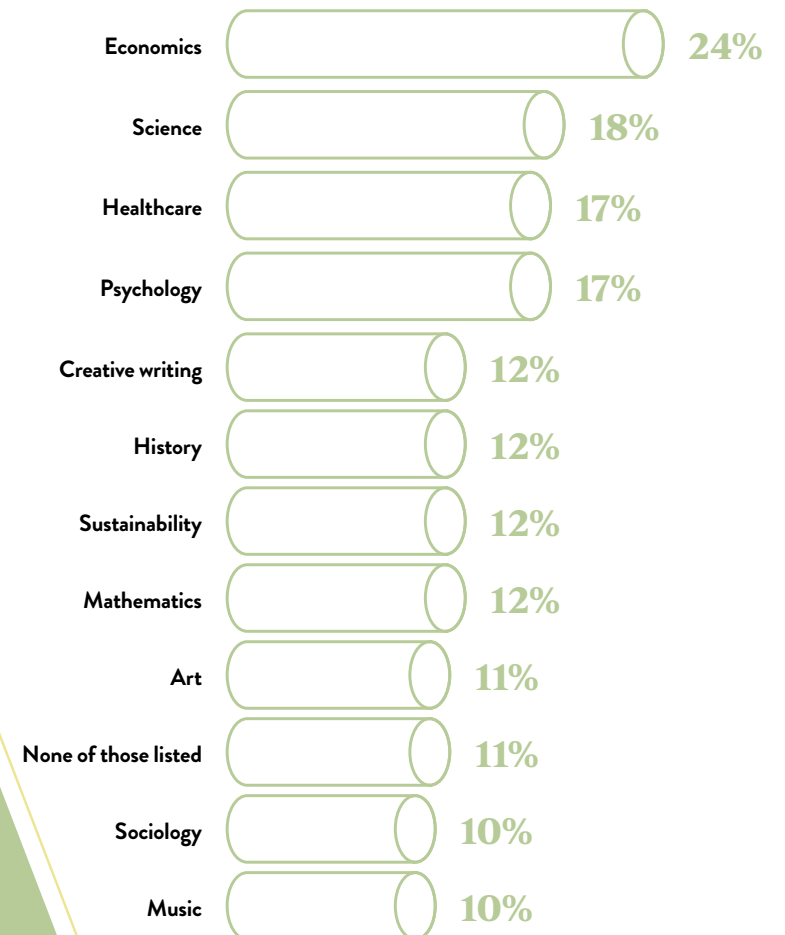
MOST IN DEMAND WORK-RELATED TOPICS FOR LEARNING



MOST IN-DEMAND TECHNOLOGY-RELATED TOPICS FOR LEARNING



MOST IN-DEMAND GENERAL TOPICS FOR LEARNING



Learner preferences in online and blended study

Blended learning is the most popular study format, with 55% of respondents preferring a mix of face-to-face and online learning, and 45% favouring a combination of live and self-directed online learning. Despite this, 38% still express a preference for fully face-to-face learning.

When asked what they value most in an online or partially online course, learners highlighted the following as most important:

- flexibility of study
- receiving a completion certificate
- access to high-quality video content
- feedback on progress or assessments
- interaction with experts in the subject area

On average, learners expect to dedicate between 3 and 8 hours per week to an online course. Just over half (51%) would take an online course with a university based in a country other than that in which they worked. A further 37% would consider doing so.



38%

still express a preference for fully face-to-face learning.

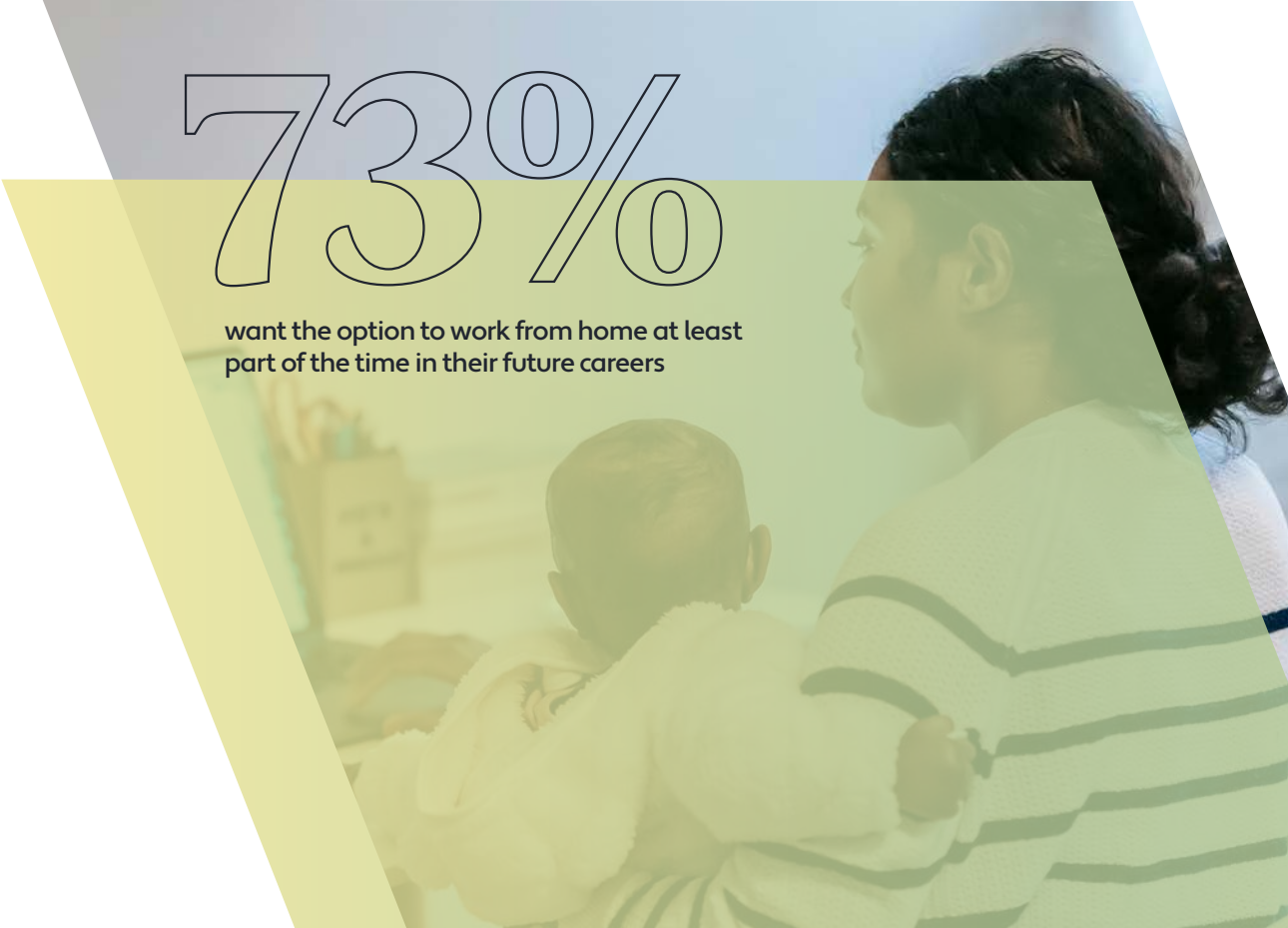
The future of work and learning

Flexibility is a clear priority for learners. Just under three-quarters (73%) want the option to work from home at least part of the time in their future careers, a preference that could increase demand for online learning. More than half (55%) expect to retire later than they had originally anticipated, and 60% have already changed or expect to change career direction at least once during their working life.

To support these shifts, 68% expect to upskill or reskill to advance their careers, and 69% believe they will need to update their learning more frequently to stay current with evolving skill requirements. As online provision becomes more advanced, 64% say the physical location of the learning provider will become less relevant, while 58% value learning with a provider that has an international reputation.

Learning is not confined to working life. Two-thirds (66%) of respondents want to continue taking courses for personal interest after retirement, and 68% anticipate engaging in learning simply for enjoyment.

Organisational support also plays a key role. It was found that 74% are more likely to remain with an employer that actively supports their development, and 64% are more likely to join an organisation that includes lifelong learning in its employee offering. More than half (56%) believe employers should cover the costs of career-related learning, yet 36% say they are unwilling to undertake learning outside of work hours. Flexibility remains essential, with 75% of respondents stating that they are only likely to engage with learning if it is delivered in a flexible format.



73%

want the option to work from home at least part of the time in their future careers

A future of personalisation, video and value added

Learners are increasingly drawn to new and flexible approaches to learning. Popular features include free learning updates that can be completed in under an hour (71%), online hubs that provide access to further courses (66%), follow-up articles on topics covered in earlier learning (65%) and on-demand video to reinforce or extend study (64%).

Survey respondents were also presented with four alternative models for learning, each of which attracted strong interest, with at least one in four expressing high enthusiasm:

- A learning subscription model with flexible, on-demand course access (27%)
- Joining a peer learning community to continue learning beyond formal study (25%)
- A 'Netflix-style' platform allowing users to choose courses from multiple providers (26%)
- Building a personalised certificate pathway by combining courses in different formats (27%)

27%

A learning subscription model with flexible, on-demand course access



A provider perspective

A series of interviews were undertaken with a number of the institutions who took part in the study, along with some desk research and the findings are set out in this section of the report.

Lifelong learning at universities comes in many different shapes and sizes. It is sometimes shaped by history and culture, sometimes by employer demand, sometimes by government initiative, and sometimes by a business plan. At Harvard, for example, executive education, an important part of lifelong learning for some institutions, produced \$224 million revenue in the financial year ending 30 June 2023. In contrast, at Hong Kong Metropolitan University, the Elder Academy receives no external funding but is supported by the University. So, what should the model be for lifelong learning? Indeed, what is lifelong learning? And what might it look like in the future?

Challenges are sometimes financial, sometimes historical, sometimes organisational and sometimes about a lack of imagination. Interviews with universities in the UK and beyond highlighted some of these challenges, as well as the innovations and responses that are emerging in the sector.

Universities provide a certain part of lifelong learning provision, often meeting the demand from those who already have strong levels of prior education. The room to expand this provision is significant, and initiatives such as the Lifelong Learning Entitlement may make a contribution to moving this forward.

For many institutions, lifelong learning has been pursued in some form or another, without it necessarily having been referred to as lifelong learning. One interviewee reported that until recently the phrase lifelong learning had not been used

internally at their organisation – instead it was adult learning, continuing education, post-compulsory training, CPD, executive education or something else.

There are many examples of universities who are growing their provision. There are business schools making significant incomes from their executive education provision; London Business School had revenues of €64 million in 2023. At Imperial, the newly launched Institute for Extended Learning has a mission ‘... to future-proof careers, businesses and communities by providing the advanced skills training and values-driven leadership needed to thrive in a tech-enabled world’. Executive education has been part of Cardiff Business School for about a decade, with short, bespoke programmes to drive engagement in line with its Public Value strategy.

The University of West London through its acquisition of Ruskin College Oxford runs a series of short courses alongside diplomas and undergraduate degrees with a focus on ‘accessible adult learning for everyone’, with ‘career-focused teaching’ designed to help learners fulfil their potential and offering support at every step to help learners progress into further study or employment.

The Vice Chancellor at Middlesex University has a clear vision which positions it as an anchor institution, meeting the needs of the communities it serves. For example, Middlesex has established a Lifelong Learning Agreement with the London Borough



of Barnet, where the University is located, to ensure learners progressing locally have the best opportunity to progress to higher education. Commenting on the Agreement, Vice-Chancellor, Professor Shân Wareing said “We want to ensure students are prepared for lifelong learning and leadership and that their talents help employers across Barnet and North London thrive.”

As an anchor institution, Middlesex University supports the lifelong learning and social mobility of over 36,000 students and apprentices in London and globally, who discover unexpected potential and go on to shape their professions and transform communities. Middlesex is committed to providing lifelong learning opportunities for people living in the communities they serve, working in partnership with employers and civic organisations, in order to contribute directly to the achievement of a fairer, more sustainable, more productive and prosperous society.

For Middlesex, clarity about communities and the skills and learning they need, informs strategic decisions about the kind of higher education provision the University offers, whether it is for example, apprenticeships, professional learning or micro-credentials, all with the purpose of enriching people's lives and careers while helping employers become more productive. Darryll Bravenboer, Director of Business and Civic Engagement and Professor of Higher Education and Skills at Middlesex University, is clear ‘If we are not driven by meeting the needs of our communities, then what is our purpose as a university?’

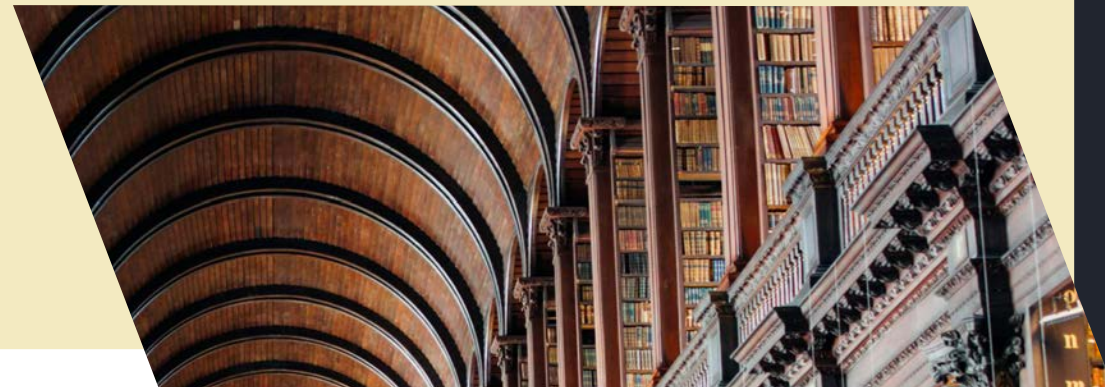
At Aberystwyth University, the ecosystem of lifelong learning is partly driven by the university itself and partly by its partnerships with external organisations across the community. Alongside the provision delivered by the university, there are partnerships in Ceredigion, such as the Mid-Wales Regional Skills Partnership and the Ceredigion Adult Community Learning Partnership; the latter is made up of representatives from the local authority's Lifelong Learning Department, the local Further Education College, and voluntary organisations, delivering a variety of learning in many different settings. At the university a team of six is supported by up to 80 tutors who deliver their courses, yet it is unclear whether lifelong learning

is an academic or professional services department. All courses are accredited, but depending on who is asked the delivery is seen as being part of the civic mission of the university, or because of the need to provide for people later in life, or as a means to make money for the university.

At Newcastle University, place has been important in driving the lifelong learning offer. While the university is not geographically isolated like Aberystwyth, it has lifelong learning in its DNA from the era of the industrial revolution through to it being a leader in its region for the training of teachers and doctors. However, the history of lifelong learning at Newcastle has had a chequered past. In the 1990s the Adult Learning Centre at Newcastle University was sold off to Sunderland University, although some of those involved in delivery set up their own organisation to continue to engage adult learners.

While many institutions have developed their lifelong learning provision, others struggle to develop their offer. Internal systems set up to deliver degrees rather than short courses, which are often on an occasional or bespoke basis, are not able to cope with the requirements of lifelong learning. Faculty may be more focused on research than delivering bite-size learning and measuring its impact. To deliver new provision, such as shorter courses that might appeal to different learners, certain things need to be in place, not least of which are staff. Staff need to be willing to take new approaches, have the right skills to deliver, and be backed by the systems that make the provision possible.

Perhaps the biggest challenge is deciding who lifelong learning will appeal to, and especially engaging those people who have not previously been involved with universities.




Emerging strategies

A growing number of universities are developing strategies, and innovating, to deliver different forms of lifelong learning.

At Newcastle, spurred on by rankings that showed some of the Russell Group universities performing well in the CPD income space, they have recently created their education for life strategy. It's no longer just an education strategy, but an education and skills strategy. However, lifelong learning is not yet embedded in the strategy, with the university having identified barriers in their systems that prevent them from delivering what some other institutions do. Funding hasn't always been present to support lifelong learning and business development, and enterprise units don't always have the sales skills required. Systems are also built on programme structures rather than modular structures, making the provision of courses with credit that can be carried forward difficult to deliver.

Cardiff University itself has boldly committed to the launch of a new Flexible Lifelong Learning Programme to scope a lifelong learning service which will offer learners more choice and scope for education throughout their lives. Aiming to be 'flexible by default' and through a new Director of Lifelong Learning shortly to be appointed, the three-year programme will scope and pilot new flexible master's programmes, stackable microcredentials (where learners can learn at their own pace and combine courses to achieve a larger award, e.g. a postgraduate certificate or diploma), as well as non-accredited short courses.

The Flexible Lifelong Learning Service will build on highly successful current Lifelong Learning activities ranging from Executive Education, CPD in medical schools such as Optometry, Dentistry, the University's central CPD team charged with helping all Schools to develop their CPD offer and the Lifelong Learning team



Cardiff University itself has boldly committed to the launch of a new Flexible Lifelong Learning Programme to scope a lifelong learning service which will offer learners more choice and scope for education throughout their lives

who specialise in widening participation, will provide pathways to higher education degrees and a range of adult learning opportunities to the wider community. These will complement campus-based programmes and transnational education developments.

At Cardiff Business School, the plan is to launch twelve new virtual programmes that can be purchased from a website by an individual this autumn. The focus of the new courses will be skills rather than programmes, recognising expressed needs. Income is important but not the principal driver here. Instead, relationship building to develop connections with organisations where trust can be grown and continuing to meet the school's strongly expressed social purpose will be key. Indeed, the School will offer opportunities for pro bono CPD work by balancing this with other revenue-generating activities.

Part of the thinking behind the new launch is a recognition that for an organisation like LinkedIn a third of its income comes from learning and development. In the face of such competition, Cardiff asked the question, what do we bring that is unique? The School has also tried to think about what success might look like, rather than trying to measure based on existing criteria.

At the University of Hertfordshire, a new lifelong learning plan will focus on alumni and local employers to respond to regional skills and workforce demands.

Lifelong learning was identified as a growing market that compliments the existing provision, and will include apprenticeships and short courses. Health and Social Care will be a feature of the new strategy, along with LSIP priorities such as the engineering, digital, and creative sectors, but more than anything else there is again a demand-led focus working with employers to ensure a viable portfolio that has impact for the people and organisations involved.

However, there are barriers to delivering the new strategy. Question marks about the future of the apprenticeship levy, competition for those who are self-funding, and unmapped alumni demand makes implementation complex. Understanding the internal user journey for lifelong learning is key. The LLE while potentially valuable must not disrupt the full-time degree campus experience.



The future, as set out in the Hertfordshire strategy anticipates increasing provision by 25% in the next 5 years. Creating such an outcome will need process and system changes, portfolio review and examining how course delivery takes place. The University will need to offer more than qualifications, be more agile in how it responds to new employer customers, and consider tying in career pathways to lifelong learning.

Online solutions

In addition, the University of Hertfordshire, both internally and with an OPM provider, has been developing online provision and expects that 20% of its lifelong learning provision may be online.

At Aberystwyth, the future is also probably more likely to be digital. Aberystwyth has always had to deal with geographic isolation, and online provision helps tackle that problem. Learning can take place throughout the year, learners don't have to give up their jobs to take part, and learning can be done in intensive bursts, providing much needed flexibility. Courses built on the back of the TV programme 'Watercolour Challenge' now extend internationally online – with COVID having proved wrong those who said art could never be taught online. Teaching online has not been without its problems; village halls with poor WIFI connection have led to a focus on better venues for learners and consequently, a better experience.

Key questions to drive its future strategy have been, who is provision for, and how will it be delivered? Prior to COVID, all courses were delivered face-to-face, with provision largely for those in the local community, often retirees. Today, with professional development courses, especially in science, ecology and conservation, student numbers are up by 30% on last year, with both national and international learners, either online or blended. Face-to-face courses now tend to recruit less well than those online, with convenience often identified as the reason for that choice.

The mix of students and their approaches to study also vary as well from retirees perhaps enjoying something they were unable to study before, to those in the workplace looking to extend their knowledge in a certain direction and some



taking several years just to complete one module. However, more tend to be using their learning as a pathway to a degree, perhaps not having had that opportunity when they were younger, banking credits that allow them to enter a degree at an advanced point rather than having to complete their whole study face-to-face in a traditional linear fashion.

The development of lifelong learning at Aberystwyth has gone from being a small part of the university's work - described to us as having been something of "a cottage industry" - to now being seen as central for the university, with the assessment of people on these courses taken more seriously, and local businesses now sending their staff for professional development in far greater numbers than previously - for example to learn digital skills - and with degree students able to take additional modules free of charge to extend their learning.

A financial question

Finance is often raised as a problem in developing lifelong learning provision. The wider learning ecosystem, particularly in England, is in a financially precarious situation. Stability is required for investment, along with evidence of future growth prospects, financial reserves, and a climate of innovation. Short term funding for universities may be useful to kick-start new initiatives, but without support from government or business, new programmes can be difficult to sustain and develop.

The Lifelong Learning Entitlement may provide some element of financial support for individual learning, however, creating another loan-based mechanism may do little to encourage those who made limited progress in education earlier in their lives and who are often highly cost sensitive and debt averse. The employer role is clearly key in supporting lifelong learning, whether that is help to overcome cost barriers or supporting workers with paid leave to study. Unions also have a part to play, supporting their members either directly or through negotiations with employers.

Key to the funding question is whether supply begets demand or demand begets supply? Amongst those interviewed there was a sense that providers were moving to more demand-led provision, using networks of providers to fill gaps as well as independent tutors to meet demand as it arises. Incentivising provision, while it would require some investment, may be less expensive than returning to a grant-based system for learners. Add in clear pathways for learners and a viable system for adult learning may begin to emerge.

In Hong Kong, the historic model of lifelong learning also appears to be under financial pressure. Only five universities in the public sector now have units that cater to lifelong learning, some have closed because they are no longer viable, some because the university no longer considers them necessary. Hong Kong



has become a credential-based society with more people focused on Master's degrees, seeing no reason to return to do a certificate or diploma unless they want to join a regulated profession (such as occupational health and safety, or property management).

The situation in Hong Kong is perhaps best characterised as missed opportunities when it comes to lifelong learning, especially when compared with Singapore. In 1997, the first post-British administration in Hong Kong instituted education reform, introducing a funding mechanism for part-time learners. The Continuing Education Fund provided up to HK\$10,000 for individual learners, reducing the average cost of a diploma at that time to around HK\$5,000 for the learner. Yet, the fund gradually lost its initial lustre and over time its value dwindled as fewer courses were added into it by providers as learners chased higher academic qualifications. In Singapore, the focus was, and continues to be, on funding people to learn skills for employment and re-training, with individual institutions often specialising in particular subjects and skills per government allocated roles.

At Aberystwyth, while there is undoubtedly a financial aspect to lifelong learning, there is also a strong civic and community thread that runs through provision. Giving people who had a poor school experience a second chance is an important motivation for those delivering learning.

While funding is an important issue, recognition of prior learning is key to successful delivery of lifelong learning. While universities may sign up to the idea of recognising prior learning it is not easy for learners and employers to find out about it with detail often hidden away in a dark corner of a university website. Recent research conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in the UK asked:

Why was it so difficult for us to locate the policies, and why were they so confusing when we did? Why have providers chosen to put those restrictions in place? What are the obstacles preventing those policies from being better? And what might ease the improvement process?⁴

4) Achieving credit transfer at scale: Do we want it, and how might we achieve it?, QAA:

Darryll Bravenboer, Director of Business and Civic Engagement and Professor of Higher Education and Skills at Middlesex University suggests that 'The practice of recognising prior learning isn't delivering what individual universities policies say they're intending, on a practical level. There's far more that could be done - universities don't perceive a financial interest in investing in the recognition of prior learning, because the funding model hasn't been clearly established.'

Bravenboer continues 'at the moment there isn't policy clarity, which means that employers can't plan, universities can't plan and learners can't plan. How can individuals, employers and civic organisations support flexible lifelong learning for the benefit of us all, if the policy environment isn't coherent? This is a real barrier to taking flexible learning forward in a positive way.'



Partners and potential

This wider sense of what lifelong learning might be is often delivered through partnerships, utilising funding, resources, experience and connections elsewhere to make the whole greater than the sum of the parts.

In Wales, a key part of the lifelong learning ecosystem is Adult Learning Wales, the Welsh Government funded body tasked with delivering learning from Pre-Entry level to Level 2 (mainly) with some provision delivered at Levels 3 and 4, also. Many of the learners who access Adult Learning Wales' core curriculum offering, are those who are often hardest to reach from education, training and employment, have no or very few qualifications, and who are looking to re-engage with learning.

Adult Learning Wales' regional curriculum offer focuses on the delivery of courses identified by Welsh Government as their key areas, namely, Literacy, Numeracy, ESOL, Digital Literacy, Employability and any subject delivered bilingually or through the medium of Welsh, alongside personal interest/leisure curriculum.

Adult Learning Wales works alongside a network of national, regional and local partner organisations, such as trade unions, youth organisations, public sector organisations, the private sector, the third sector and many charities to deliver bespoke provision for service users and clients, as well as running open courses for anyone to join. The organisation also has an active pan-Wales online offer of courses.

COVID proved what could be done in exceptional circumstances with Welsh Government funding allocated to Further Education institutions across Wales for the purchase of digital devices for use by learners, for them to access learning when provision was moved online due to the lockdowns. At Adult Learning Wales, this funding was used to purchase a whole host of digital devices – laptops, iPads, Dongles and Mi-Fi for learners, and in certain parts of rural Wales, staff delivered the devices to learners' homes providing set-up support.

However, across the Adult Community Learning sector in Wales, budgets are tight. Community venue hire costs have risen since the cost of living crisis began, and in the early aftermath of the pandemic, many community venues failed to re-open and many are still closed; some have shut down completely.

Tutor recruitment in parts of Wales, particularly in the more rural areas, is challenging, and many delivery providers are struggling to attract tutors to deliver for them. The Home Office Resettlement programmes, which support refugees and asylum seekers to integrate into Welsh society and life have been successful in supporting people from across the world at a time of great need. These learners access ESOL classes to improve their English language skills and to learn more about the UK and the communities that they are a part of, and now call 'home'. However, quite often, learners are moved in and out of dispersal areas with very little notice, disrupting their learning and progress.

Described as a 'College without Walls' (it does not have a campus; instead, its courses that are delivered in face-to-face settings are delivered in a host of community venues) Adult Learning Wales amply demonstrates the need to think differently to effectively deliver learning for those showing the resolve and resilience to return to learning later in life after poor previous experiences.

Ceredigion County Council is a partner in the provision of adult community learning Wales, utilising funding directly from the Welsh government. While the focus is on literacy, numeracy and digital skills, provision is diverse, and also includes employability, health and safety, and leisure courses. Learning also provides a pathway on to courses provided at Aberystwyth University.

Transparency is important, with the authority required to report each year to the Welsh government on which courses have run and what learners have achieved. Courses are accredited externally through organisations such as Agored Cymru, with accredited courses being cheaper or even free for learners compared with those that are not accredited.

However, much of the leisure provision is in decline, in part because of another COVID impact. With grandparents often becoming the main childcare providers, their availability to come on the courses in the daytime has declined significantly. Even digital skill courses have had to move to a free model to keep numbers up, with the cost of living making it harder for individuals to afford courses with fees.

The introduction of free courses does not come without its own problems. Community Learning funding is not intended to obviate the need for employers to pay, so the authority has to be careful how it uses its funds.

Increasingly the authority is moving to demand-led provision. Promotion takes place through events such as Adult Learners Week with a range of events in villages and community venues to try and find out what learning individuals and groups really want. Sometimes the authority will work with individual tutors who will promote courses through their own social media, boosting involvement.

Devolution is often suggested as part of the solution, but it needs capacity, expertise and knowledge to operate successfully at this level. Just because you have funding or you are closer to the learner doesn't mean that you necessarily have better provision. The distribution of provision is not after all linear across the UK. However, in some of the models outlined in the report, such as in Newcastle and Wales, there are signs of local providers stepping up to create the systems and capacity to deliver lifelong learning effectively.

A collaborative project commissioned by NHS England examined the barriers for healthcare support workers leaving the workforce and not progressing their careers, which has created skills shortages. The senior healthcare support worker apprenticeship is a really important apprenticeship for the healthcare sector in England, but the lack of recognition of this apprenticeship by universities has impeded access to registered healthcare professions.



Middlesex University, working with the Open University and the University Vocational Awards Council, developed a national progression agreement to get universities to sign up to recognise that people who undertake the apprenticeship have undertaken an excellent preparation for higher education programmes that lead to registered healthcare professions. This is a very clear way to meet the needs of communities by helping to better retain the healthcare support workforce, providing opportunities to progress their careers, while developing the professional skills the NHS needs.

Further collaboration takes place through universities operating as consortia, with a clear focus on better meeting the needs of employers and learners. For example, both the Police Education Consortium and the Healthcare Education Consortium involve universities collaborating to deliver degree apprenticeships in respective key public sector areas. By proactively gathering the views of employers to inform the design and delivery of programmes and operating as a kind of 'one-stop-shop', these consortia are able to more effectively deliver public value by mobilising their collective resources and expertise. Darryll Bravenboer, Director of Business and Civic Engagement and Professor of Higher Education and Skills at Middlesex University comments, 'In my experience, innovation is driven to a greater extent through collaborative approaches than through universities operating solely on a competitive basis'.

Defining audiences

At Hong Kong Metropolitan University, the School of Professional and Continuing Education has 80% of its business in Higher Diplomas which belong to the further education sector, with 2800 full-time students. The rest of the provision serves mature learners studying everything from Occupational Safety to Property Management, alongside 'interest' classes covering Chinese Calligraphy, Script Writing and Stage Performance. Yet, the largest part of the offer is best described as social outreach or community learning. One programme for women learners funded by the government has 8000 students per year. The Elder Academy has 1800 per year and an ICT for seniors course has 600 learners annually, funded by the Digital Policy Office in Hong Kong. Add in contract training for Food and Environmental Hygiene, programmes for Homeowners Associations, and even Chinese Temple Management, and the picture is complex. As the Dean of the School, Benjamin Chan comments 'It's very complicated to run the place, like you're driving on four lanes, each with different speeds and different cycles'.

Culturally, there is another element at play in Hong Kong, which is an ageing population. Currently, 24% of the population is over 65, only exceeded by Japan at 28%, but educational provision for older adults is not keeping up. The Dean believes Hong Kong Metropolitan University is thinking ahead by subsidising its Elder Academy internally so that it can continue without external funding, "because that's something that society needs".

There are other, potentially important new developments. At Hong Kong Metropolitan University, the Stage Performance course now attracts two annual cohorts of 30 students. Often these students are drawn from the ranks of professionals – accountants, doctors and lawyers – who originally studied a subject at the behest of their parents to ensure a good career. Having had that successful career and obtained financial security, they are now returning for a passion project in performing arts.

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The Elder Academy has 1800 per year and an ICT for seniors course has 600 learners annually, funded by the Digital Policy Office in Hong Kong

18000

Involving employers

Audience is not just about individual learners, but the component of lifelong learning that is driven by employers.

In Newcastle, the university is focusing on electrification, health, digital leadership and creative arts/creative industries. Outside the university, the proposed Gigafactory and Offshore Renewable Energy Catapult, as well as tenders from Innovate UK and UKRI for skills focused initiatives, have helped to focus the development of the electrification offer as well as advanced sustainable manufacturing as priorities.

Provision is now more demand driven than in the past, and industry plays a much larger role in programme development. Industry partners are keen to play a role in programme development rather than simply being part of another advisory board. Throughout the process of developing a recent level-six degree apprenticeship, academics got to learn from industry, while industry got to know the programme and understand how much it could offer.

Despite the engagement with industry, companies are more cautious than ever in the current economic climate, and while the need for engineers may have been identified, the vacancies simply don't exist as yet.

Newcastle has recognised that making a change regionally means collaborating with other providers in groups such as the North East Institute of Technology, and as a group of five regional universities. With the addition of the development of the North East Combined Authority, there are now a number of drivers for collaboration to meet the needs of local skills improvement plans.

Middlesex is taking the idea of collaboration further through its involvement in the West London Alliance which has established a West London Region of Learning. A number of universities are collaborating to pilot the idea of a flexi degree that can



be made up of modules from different universities. Modules can be undertaken individually, but recognised collectively and can lead to the award of a full degree.

Further collaboration takes place through the Health Education Consortium and the Police Education Consortium where universities collaborate to deliver degree apprenticeships. Consortia of several universities specifically meet the needs of particular employers, operating as a kind of one stop shop for employers, getting the views of employers to build into the design and delivery of programmes. Darryll Bravenboer, Director of Apprenticeships and Professor of Higher Education and Skills at Middlesex University comments, 'Innovation is driven, in my experience, to a greater extent through collaborative approaches than the other way around'.

Collaboration has also been a feature of delivery at the University of London where member institutions have pooled resources to create sustainable lifelong learning packages. Again, though, systems have created barriers. There have been problems due to the basic building blocks of existing programmes not being suitable for shorter provision, and difficulties with pro-rata funding mechanisms, which has made progress complex.

Innovative insights

Innovation is a significant part of the lifelong learning landscape.

At Cardiff Business School, future provision is likely to involve bites of education, very different from the long degree format which has been the standard in the past. Engaging alumni in such bites of learning will also be key to strengthen the relationship with those who previously only knew the degree format. Other CarringtonCrisp research found that nearly half of all business school alumni believe the relationship with their former school would be enhanced by ongoing access to learning.

The School of Medicine (SoM) at Cardiff University, has always had CPD courses as part of its offering to medical professionals. Unlike some other professions, CPD (and evidence of completion of courses / CPD points) is mandated by a professional governing body (the General Medical Council) as a requirement for doctors to continue to practice clinically within the NHS (and by other governing bodies in other health services globally). The School of Medicine CPD offerings are all multidisciplinary, however, typically involving other disciplines whose governing bodies also require similar evidence to allow clinicians to continue to practice. In the case of the GMC it lists 'universities' as one of the permitted CPD providers, alongside the post-graduate Royal Colleges (of all medical and surgical specialities/sub-specialities).

Already with the largest CPD course offering across the university (with net incomes ranging between £4,500 to £89,000 per iteration), a further transformation is currently underway within the School of Medicine CPD unit to more provision via distance learning (both asynchronous and synchronous), and blended learning (with asynchronous pre-course material, synchronous in-person course and asynchronous post-course assessment) and taking a standardised approach in the development of all educational content. This mirrors similar moves by the Royal Colleges.



The School of Medicine has embraced digital learning with aid from the Learning Teaching Academy (LTA). The system uses SharePoint based evaluation forms (giving non-CU course directors, who are typically NHS employees, direct access to feedback), utilising Vimeo rather than Panopto (to reduce workload of updating all video content), and developing associated medical apps for distributing course content.

In line with most medical CPD courses, candidates are only issued certificates with CPD points following completion of a post-course assessment and/or reflection. The digital learning platforms used have been adjusted but cannot match that of the Royal Colleges, the NHS or private CPD course providers which have been made bespoke for medical CPD. This places the School of Medicine at a disadvantage to its competitors in CPD provision, both domestically and overseas.

Such a transformation has not been without difficulties. In particular, Cardiff University internal systems have not helped with School of Medicine CPD variations. To rectify this a new SoM CPD Policy, Committee ToR and development SOP have been developed in the last year to standardise the approval process (both academic and financial). New surplus targets have been set at two levels, based on how close the course aligns with the university's civic mission. This has sped up the approval, development and delivery of the first course iteration. Among three new CPD courses launched in 2025, the latest was approved, all pre-course materials developed and two overseas iterations delivered within five weeks of the clinician first proposing the idea.

University systems, Google Advert's internal AI and more recently, reduction in staff numbers both within the CPD unit and Bioscience Communication teams, have been obstacles to success. This has led to reputational damage of cancelling course iterations, which some clinicians had already paid for and booked their NHS study leave. When learning is required annually (or with multiple iterations running per year), a strong reputation is key.



Having put the new structure in place, opportunities abound. Further innovations are currently being explored including:

- (1) discussions with health boards regarding franchising CPD courses (in the same manner as the Royal Colleges) with a 50:50 net income split with the partner(s),
- (2) the use of the student job shop to reduce the cost of clinician tutors / technicians, and
- (3) use of a prepared question bank with 100+ questions for post-course assessment with automatic CPD certificate generation (again the same as the Royal Colleges).

Development of CPD packages for both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are currently in discussion and awaiting the new School of Medicine standardised legal agreement (with oversight from the International Office). With a limit of 7.5% international students in undergraduate medical courses in the UK, the drive to deliver outside the UK is inevitable.

Solutions for lifelong learning are not just about money, but are equally about system organisation. For the UK to move to have more effective lifelong learning provision requires strong advocacy to drive policy for long term system change.

Beyond universities

A significant change in the lifelong learning arena came with the rapid growth of online providers during the pandemic. While some have struggled post-pandemic they continue to deliver significant lifelong learning provision. In September 2022, giving evidence to a House of Commons committee, Coursera reported that it had 2.75 million UK learners. Upskilling and reskilling, both components of lifelong learning, are only part of the Coursera offer, but they are a sizeable component.

The Coursera evidence suggests that in the UK 'training spend per employee has fallen 28% in real terms since 2005, from £2,139 to £1,530 per year, which is less than half the EU average. This has been compounded by the UK adult education budget falling by 49% between 2009/10 and 2019/20. The proportion of people getting training at work has fallen 14% over the same time, and those with the lowest levels of education are disproportionately likely to have been affected by this decline in private sector investment in human capital.'

In their evidence, Coursera focused on STEM learning, but the principles could be more widely applied across lifelong learning. Of particular importance for growing engagement with learning is flexible and accessible provision, along with independent validation of online offerings and stackable approaches to qualifications. A case study from the US highlighted the Coursera Google IT Support Professional Certificate. Since its inception, the Certificate 'has received 900,000 enrolments globally, of which 59% did not possess a four-year degree, 46% are in the lowest-income tertile, reporting less than \$30K annual income, and 53% are African American, Latino, Female, or Veteran'.

Coursera also highlighted the problems faced by workers seeking to change careers or wishing to upskill to advance their current career, especially the difficulty of taking time out from their career to take a university degree full-time.

Coursera reported that it had
2.75m
UK learners

Coursera suggested that 'the private sector, in collaboration with institutions, governments, and alternative education providers, must take on a far greater share of the retraining burden than it currently does'. Coursera offered an example where it partnered with Imperial College London to provide three free courses to NHS workers: Participatory Approaches in Public Health, Introduction to Quality Improvement in Healthcare, and Using Data for Healthcare Improvement.

In the US, Uber Eats and Arizona State University (ASU) have collaborated so that delivery staff or family members can get 100% tuition coverage for ASU's top-ranked online programmes. The Uber Eats staff gain key skills that will help their careers, while the business gains the skills needed but at a lower cost than Uber Eats would face when recruiting staff externally. In September 2023, eleven students graduated with degrees from the Open University with drivers completing their studies whilst working for Uber. Since Uber partnered with the Open University in 2019, more than 1,500 drivers have enrolled on courses through a scheme that provides free higher education to drivers.

An employer perspective

The future of work

For employers, lifelong learning is largely driven by the future of work, how work will take place and what skills employees will need to succeed in their careers. For many employers, the Covid-19 pandemic changed work, forcing millions of people to embrace home working and digital transformation. Changes in work practices that may have taken a long time to implement happened overnight, as successive lockdowns prevented people from going to the office. While change was already happening in the world of work, the pandemic accelerated that change and consequently, the needs of employers when developing their staff.

Yet today many employers have been keen for staff to return to the workplace, if not full-time, at least in a hybrid format. As one interviewee reported: “The CEO wants everybody in the office, but people don’t want to come back to the office full time.” However, flexibility is still a significant part of employment as are the acquisition of technology skills along with the human skills needed to help staff with technology.

As far back as 2017, McKinsey set out in their report, ‘What the future of work will mean for jobs, skills, and wages’, that a shift in skills demand was taking place.

During the pandemic, the then Singapore Education Minister, Ong Ye Kung commented on the breaking down of barriers between technical and soft skills, arguing that, ‘A few of the traditional divides would have to be breached. One is between study and work. You have to now intersperse study with work. Another is between technical and soft skills. We used to frontload a lot of technical knowledge, a lot of content. Today, we talk about the importance of developing soft skills. Which may mean that the person may not graduate with deep technical knowledge, but would have had more exposure to nurture and acquire soft skills. But they can always go back to deepen their technical skills later.

“Workers of the future will spend more time on activities that machines are less capable of, such as managing people, applying expertise, and communicating with others. They will spend less time on predictable physical activities and on collecting and processing data, where machines already exceed human performance. The skills and capabilities required will also shift, requiring more social and emotional skills and more advanced cognitive capabilities, such as logical reasoning and creativity.”

MCKINSEY GLOBAL INSTITUTE, NOVEMBER 2017

So, to keep on adapting and advancing, you have to embrace lifelong learning. The old assumptions for many professions, that you must achieve a certain stock of knowledge and skills to see through your career, will have to change.’

Flexible learning

The value of flexibility can be seen in the emergence of global teams, where not all staff will be employed, some will work in the gig economy, providing services as and when required. An employer commented 'In the past the global team was at HQ but now the head of the global team can be anywhere in the world and teams are truly global, with people working 24/7 as there is always somebody awake working!'

Where organisations have implemented hybrid work, managers are still finding ways of making it work for everyone, looking to strike a balance between developing a corporate culture and offering flexibility to their employees. As one Managing Director said: 'too much flexibility and you don't create a corporate culture.'

At the same time, managers need to show the value of being in the office and are searching for ways to meaningfully engage when everyone is there; 'it doesn't make sense to bring people together to watch a PowerPoint presentation.' Senior leaders acknowledge the challenges of leading teams in a virtual environment and creating a coherent organisational culture when people hardly ever come together in person. In this still new, hybrid working environment, soft skills such as critical thinking, communication, change management, and leadership are more in demand than ever before.



The impact of technology

Technology has shortened the time organisations have to prepare for new developments, but most interviewees see AI as an opportunity. They believe the advent of AI means that repetitive tasks are likely to disappear or be reduced to a minimum and that working with an AI assistant will make individuals more productive than ever before.

At the same time, those skills that only humans possess, such as leadership, building teams, empathy, change management, critical thinking, and communication will become more critical than ever. In the words of a Global VP: 'AI will give you the answers (what to do) but the challenge is putting it into practice (how to do it).' Another interviewee emphasised the importance of people management 'We've had the increasing realisation that managers need to be really good people managers, able to create an environment that is conducive to high performance and attractive to individuals. That skill set is not what we look for when we hire or promote, so we need to mitigate by building it.'

Most interviewees acknowledged that lifelong learning is more relevant than ever before: 'We need to hire people who can continuously learn, all of us need to evolve as the world evolves and the market changes.' If in the past learning interventions may have been disconnected, going forward they are more likely to be part of a learning path, as organisations strive to ensure that their workforce 'is up to date and ready to cope with whatever comes up'. This highlights the importance of continued learning for "everybody every year.'



The right skills

Employers are clear that learning and strategy go hand-in-hand, as one employer commented ‘Training is no longer just a “nice to have”. The organisation really understands that in order to deliver on our strategy, we need to have the workforce with the right skills.’

There is also an acknowledgement that people don’t need to be subject matter experts to work with a particular tool; what’s required is to keep up with the pace of change and have sufficient but not necessarily in-depth, knowledge.

Organisations are keen to understand the skills they have in their workforce, along with what skills they are losing and gaining, but in most cases, they don’t have mechanisms for doing that. Aligning the needs of the organisation with those of the individual employee is challenging, as individuals have different learning needs and motivation at different points in their lives. One employer said ‘We notice people no longer see jobs as careers - they’ll stay for shorter periods of time than the previous generation did. Their desire for learning goes beyond the role they’re in, it’s about the long-term view of what they’re interested in. And we’re seeing more and more boomerang employees.’

While there is a focus on technology and soft skills, many employers are uncertain about the skills their employees need, with one employer commenting ‘We don’t know what skills will be needed in the future. We don’t know how to prepare for the future.’

Uncertainty is perhaps the overarching theme driving change for employers, whether that is the rapidity of technological shifts or the shifting geopolitical



landscape, producing the need for different skills in their organisation. As the Dean of a North African business school commented ‘Corporate needs are evolving very quickly in turbulence, needs are not clear yet, but just like a tango, they are moving forward.’ Another employer suggested ‘The greatest skill is learning agility, learn and unlearn.’

Companies anticipate that the skills of their workforce will become more critical in the future and are incorporating skill audits and strategic workforce planning into their business cycle. Imagine a company that has traditionally focused on sales and marketing but has realised that product innovation is key to remaining competitive and hence they need to recruit and retain more R&D staff. This will require a shift in the skill set of their workforce, which will not happen overnight.

Organisations are also changing how they deploy staff; they foresee a future in which people support different projects according to their skills rather than having stable job titles and reporting lines. In such an environment, employees with the right skills will become highly sought after and will be able to pick and choose projects and employers. An employer commented, ‘Soft skills (communication, leadership, building teams, empathy, critical thinking, change management, decision making) are super critical and the things that AI can’t do.’

Learning solutions

Where will businesses find the learning providers to support their organisations? Will they work with universities? The survey data suggests they will, but not exclusively. Increasingly, organisations are setting up their own corporate universities, perhaps utilising academics to deliver some courses, but not working with a university itself.

When seeking to buy learning, most organisations have some level of formal procurement process in place, although they acknowledge that relationships play a key role. In organisations with highly formalised procurement processes, respondents reported that it is easier to work with partners who are already in the system. Companies seek providers that can meet their objectives at the best price; universities are often perceived as being expensive and less flexible than consultancies or independent trainers. The knowledge that universities can provide is now considered to be available online.

In their engagement with universities, companies are looking for pioneering technical expertise (in engineering or chemistry, for instance). However, universities are generally perceived to lack the agility required in the current environment. As one employer noted, 'Too often traditional business schools are product-centred like a vinyl LP when the contemporary school needs to be more like Spotify.'

Another interviewee suggested that delivering lifelong learning needed to be a whole university exercise and that the existence of the business school has, in some senses, been a constraint for some universities. Rather than having an offer that is grounded in skills development for senior leadership, it is better to have an offer that is more grounded in academic disciplines. Such an approach can be more focused on meeting clients' needs and supported by evidence-driven research.

Moving online

Some of the flexibility sought in lifelong learning comes from online learning provision, but interest in online provision is driven by more than just flexibility; costs are perceived to be lower, whether directly in the learning delivery or through the absence of travel and accommodation costs, while staff don't have to be away from desks for long periods. Employers are clear that 'Online is here to stay and a lot of Chief Learning Officers have caught up with the fact that online providers can do it well and deliver it at much cheaper prices.'

One employer in a previous CarringtonCrisp study of lifelong learning went as far as to suggest that, 'Rather than spending 50K sending two people to a Harvard programme, we can now try to send 50 people to Harvard content for the same cost.'

Those organisations seeking to be self-sufficient in their learning may have developed their own learning platforms, often having bought access to proprietary platforms such as Harvard Online or Udemy, allowing employees to curate their own learning.

More organisations also report that they are developing their own certification for technical topics (such as sustainability), technical skills (IT architect, digital platforms, product knowledge), and also for soft skills such as communication.

Interviewees acknowledged that when the learning objective is to impart knowledge, this can be achieved very effectively online, but when the objective is to change people's behaviour, then a face-to-face intervention is required.



Impact, data, curation and difference

When it comes to measuring the impact of learning interventions, surprisingly few respondents have processes in place beyond feedback surveys or attendance monitoring. When organisations do measure the impact of training it seems to be in areas such as improving product knowledge or sales performance, where the results are more easily quantified. A small number of organisations use tools such as employee engagement platforms to measure the impact of training.

Employers that collect data about staff learning, and measure its impact can go further. As an employer commented, 'The biggest news in corporate learning is the ability to create curated courses, to predict and recommend what learners might go on and do.'

The future of lifelong learning, while it may be familiar in some respects, may also be very different – and universities need to respond by doing things differently, innovating and imagining new approaches. An employer suggested 'If I could start from ground up to create a new university, it would be really different. I think there'd be a lot more short sprints of programming. And I think I would create people who are employable right from the outset, in varying levels of skills and competencies.'



Conclusions

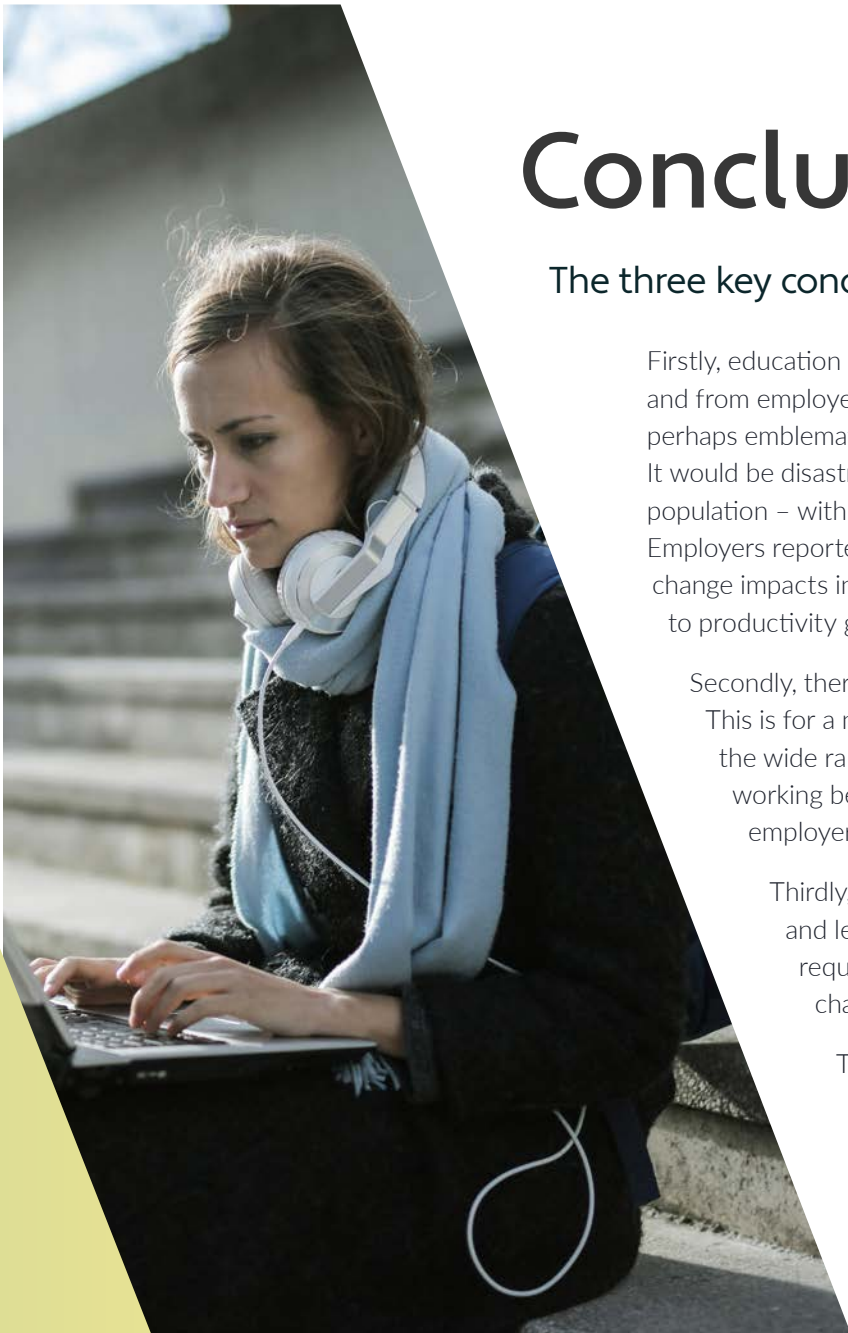
The three key conclusions from our research, reported above, are as follows.

Firstly, education needs to be regarded as a lifelong endeavour. This message came through loud and clear, from learners and from employers. The pace of technological change was reported as a particular imperative, with the impact of AI being perhaps emblematic. Any country wishing to be successful economically will certainly need to invest massively to keep up. It would be disastrous, though, to take too narrow a view of the skills required. What is needed is a workforce – indeed a population – with the capabilities to engage effectively with as yet unknown technologies as these emerge in the future. Employers reported creativity and communications as being important. It is also important to remember that technological change impacts individuals, communities and society, so the importance of lifelong learning goes far beyond its contribution to productivity growth and innovation at work.

Secondly, there are a range of educational providers, but universities are ranked highly by both employers and learners. This is for a number of reasons, including their role in researching the topics they teach, the quality of their faculty, and the wide range of topics that they cover. The successful delivery of lifelong learning requires effective partnership working between universities and other providers; local government, including mayoral combined authorities; and employers. Universities are well placed to play a role in galvanising and developing such partnership working.

Thirdly, though, for universities to contribute to the full extent necessary will require them to change. Employers and learners want access to short courses as well as degree programmes, taught in a variety of formats. This requires different systems and processes to those developed to handle full-time degree students. Such system change requires serious investment.

The UK government has set five key missions, including economic growth, and creating opportunity. These will not be achieved without a revolution in skills and lifelong learning. While that learning will need to be delivered locally, it will require a commitment – from the UK and devolved governments – at national level, with a strategic intent, and funding. It will also require universities to change, which requires investment, which government will need to provide, otherwise it simply will not be possible at the scale and pace required. That funding would not be to ‘bail out’ the university sector, it would be to enable universities to change in the way that is required to achieve the government’s missions. To invest in the systems required for the sort of flexible courses that employers and learners need.



Policy recommendations

Universities

Lifelong learning means many different things for many different audiences. Universities considering how to develop their lifelong learning provision should have clear purpose in doing so. Provision should be central to the university strategy, but the focus will vary depending on the university's wider mission, history and positioning. The primary purpose may be community-based, part of a civic mission, supporting the development of key skills, engaging employers, developing alumni relationships or a combination of these and other elements. Without focus to its lifelong learning provision, a university risks meeting none of its goals satisfactorily.

A necessary first step is a recognition that learning is a lifelong pursuit, not limited to younger people seeking degree qualifications.

The successful development of lifelong learning provision by universities will likely require a serious programme of change management. Systems and services that were established for the purpose of delivering degrees to residential students studying on a full-time basis are unlikely to be appropriate for handling the shorter courses and flexible delivery methods that make up much of the demand for lifelong learning.

Universities will need to consider how they might make best use of new delivery tools to provide lifelong learning. Both individuals and employers anticipate much of their future learning will involve an element of online delivery. High quality video and innovative pedagogy will be a feature of future lifelong learning and universities should experiment to develop new approaches for lifelong learning provision.

Delivering lifelong learning requires both the same and different skills as those already found in a university. Research-active can play a valuable role in informing



programmes and content, but teaching in short bursts without formal assessment may require staff training for successful delivery. Sales skills may need developing to ensure strong B2B outcomes compared with the B2C focus that is common and well developed in most universities today.

Provision of lifelong learning by a university is unlikely to be something it does on its own. Partnerships may need to be formed locally and globally, with employers, local government, community organisations, and with other learning providers, including those providing services in the learning space.

And universities need to not only develop new provision, they need to communicate effectively with potential learners, employers, and other organisations that this new provision is now available.

Employers

Building productivity at work means making a commitment to developing staff at all levels in an organisation not simply providing new technology. Employers need to be clear about the skills their organisation requires and build skill development into their business strategies. Identifying existing skills, recognising skill development on the job, and making it easy for staff to acquire new skills will all be key to successfully growing productivity.

The study is clear – attracting and retaining staff will be made easier if employers demonstrate their commitment to lifelong learning. That commitment may in part be financial, part in providing the time to learn new skills, and part in communicating the value of skills development to existing and potential staff.

Learning and skill development requires investment by employers. While there are many good examples of employers developing the skills of their staff, overall spending by employers on learning and development seems to have declined recently. Ensuring consistent support for individual staff and for programmes across groups of staff will be key to developing a learning culture in an organisation.

Engagement with universities to build programmes for individual organisations, sectors or regional partnerships will yield benefits for both employers and universities. Backing that engagement with the provision of opportunities for new staff and programmes for existing staff will be key to building long-term relationships between employers and universities that ultimately lead to growing productivity.



Government

Recognising the need for lifelong learning as a strategic priority for the country must be a requirement of any government. To build prosperity and fund priorities, government needs successful universities and businesses to deliver the learning needed for increased productivity.

In order to advance provision of lifelong learning, all partners involved need certainty, whether that is funding or the roll-out of policy.

Universities need to know that there is support to help them develop new lifelong learning provision. While universities recognise the need to develop new provision, to do so in the current financial situation that many face will be difficult if not impossible. Government investment in innovation and transformation of university provision will result in stronger and more effective delivery of lifelong learning into the future.

Employers also need certainty to invest in lifelong learning, and this too requires leadership from government, committing to a clear national strategy. Employers need to be able to plan the growth of their staff development knowing that frameworks and policies will be consistently delivered over extended periods. Knowing that policies which have been successfully rolled out over a number of years through partnerships with universities, such as level 7 apprenticeships, will continue, offers the degree of certainty that employers need to support their investment decisions. Similarly, policy on recognition of prior learning needs to be developed. There are still unanswered questions around the Lifelong Learning Entitlement.

All this calls for a national strategy for lifelong learning, with a responsible Government Minister to report annually to parliament, and with the funding to enable successful uptake, delivery and impact.



Appendix I

Glossary of terms

B2B – Business to Business

B2C – Business to Consumer

CPD – Continuing Professional Development

ESOL - English for Speakers of Other Languages

EUCEN – European Universities Continuing Education Network

GMC – General Medical Council

ICT – Information and Communication Technology

LLE – Lifelong Learning Entitlement

OECD – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

QAA – Quality Assurance Agency

STEM – Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics

UALL – Universities Association for Lifelong Learning

UKRI – UK Research and Innovation

UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization

UPCEA – The Online and Professional Education Association

Appendix II

Project methodology

The final report has been prepared through three key activities:

1. Desk research was undertaken to assess current trends in lifelong learning, reviewing reports, speeches, interviews, academic research and other sources. The information sourced was used to inform the survey and interview questions, as well as some elements of the report itself.
2. Interviews with universities, employers, local government and other organisations to assess their role in lifelong learning and how they are supporting communities. All the participating institutions were invited to take part in an interview and to recommend other contacts for interviews. Each interview followed a similar format focusing on the following themes:
 - o The definition of lifelong learning
 - o Lifelong learning activities undertaken by their institution/organization
 - o Future developments in lifelong learning

Wherever possible interviews were recorded in order to help the production of the report, but all respondents were offered the option that their comments could be provided anonymously. All institutions referenced in the report were provided with the information set out about them in the report so it could be checked for accuracy.

3. Surveys with 10,210 learners and 1,255 employers – using a sample generated through a panel provider - were drawn from around 40 countries in Europe, North America, Latin America, India, Africa and Asia with the learner sample split across age groups from 20 to 80. No information was collected that would identify any individual taking part in the surveys, and completion of the surveys was entirely optional.

Number and location of employer respondents

Australia	31	France	50	Malaysia	20	Singapore	31	UAE	20
Belgium	20	Germany	50	Mexico	20	South Africa	30	UK	298
Brazil	30	Hong Kong	40	Netherlands	30	South Korea	20	USA	104
Canada	60	India	40	Nigeria	20	Spain	30		
China	40	Ireland	30	Norway	20	Sweden	25		
Denmark	25	Italy	30	Poland	30	Switzerland	25		
Finland	25	Japan	21	Saudi Arabia	20	Turkey	20		

Number and location of individual respondents

Australia	250	Finland	124	Italy	200	Poland	100	Switzerland	152
Austria	103	France	301	Japan	120	Portugal	119	Thailand	200
Belgium	128	Germany	300	Malaysia	180	Saudi Arabia	200	Turkey	200
Brazil	151	Hong Kong	300	Mexico	151	Singapore	203	UAE	208
Canada	755	Hungary	90	Netherlands	200	South Africa	201	UK	1544
Chile	85	India	500	Nigeria/Ghana	201	South Korea	100		
China	400	Indonesia	182	Norway	150	Spain	202		
Denmark	151	Ireland	306	Pakistan	151	Sweden	179		

The panel provider, Obsurant, is a member of both the British Polling Council and the Market Research Society. High levels of data quality are ensured through several validations and checks that respondents go through before entering the survey, as well as quality checks after the data has been collected. Before entering a survey, a combination of parameters enables the firm to construct a unique fingerprint of respondents to identify them and stop duplicates occurring.

Additional link security is in place masking URLs and stopping link manipulation from fraudulent respondents. The survey software used also includes reCAPTCHA to deter bots and automated respondents. Geo-IP, Device ID and Respondent ID validation is used to ensure that the survey is being taken in the correct country and is another layer of security to stop duplicates. The panel provider draws on a panel over 1 million engaged respondents globally with access to over 80 countries. The panel provider can target respondents across more than 100 attributes.

Appendix III

Lifelong learning in context

The latest literature on lifelong learning is reported and discussed variously in a report from the Learning and Work Institute (Evans et al., 2025), a special issue of Forum edited by Holford (2024), and a Manifesto for Lifelong Learning issued in 2024 by the Adult Education 100 Campaign, the Universities Association for Lifelong Learning, and the National Education Opportunities Network (available at Holford and Michie, 2024).

Evans et al. (2025) describe the many approaches to adult education and skills over the decades, arguing that their success and staying power have partly depended on the economic, social and political context, but that five common themes emerge.

First, they argue that increasingly the focus has been on skills for jobs, rather than learning for life, health, wellbeing and enjoyment, and that this risks limiting its focus and impact. Second, they argue that governments need to decide their overall approach, and the balance between compulsion and voluntarism, and between market-led and planning – and that this needs to be based on an analysis of the problems being tackled, with lessons learned from the past.

Third, we need a clear sense of what a successful learning and skills system looks like, and to focus as much on quality and impact as we do on the quantity of learners, though this matters too. Fourth, skills policy needs to be viewed alongside other policy areas, and the focus needs to be as much on employer and individual investment in learning and skills utilisation as on what the Government spends and how. And finally, learning and skills policy has suffered from becoming increasingly centralised, with too much micromanagement.

The special issue of Forum edited by Holford (2024) includes articles covering the whole range of issues around lifelong learning, including those referred to above, of

needing to take a broader view of education than just the world of work, important though that is, and to recognise that other areas that need addressing across society also depend crucially on lifelong learning.

The Manifesto for Lifelong Learning argues that Britain needs a:

National Strategy for Adult Education & Lifelong Learning, recognising the importance of devolved decision making. Local delivery should be through partnership working by local and regional government, universities and colleges, trade unions and local employers, and a vibrant network of community, educational and voluntary organisations. For these Adult Learning Partnerships to rejuvenate local communities and economies – playing a role in policy formulation and delivery – local authorities and universities should be required to provide lifelong learning, with funding provided to enable this.

Frameworks for lifelong learning

Lifelong learning is no longer just a personal choice or a social good - it has become a strategic imperative for individuals, organisations, and nations. Frameworks such as the European Skills Agenda (2020) and UNESCO's Futures of Education (2021) see lifelong learning as essential for navigating rapid technological change, supporting equity and inclusion, and achieving sustainable development. Moreover, the rise of AI-powered learning environments and digital credentials is reshaping how learners access and demonstrate lifelong learning outcomes (OECD, 2021).

Lifelong learning is broadly defined as a continuous, voluntary and self-motivated pursuit of knowledge for both personal and professional development. Over the years, international organisations such as UNESCO, the OECD, and the European Commission, have emphasised its significance in adapting to changing economic and social conditions.

The OECD (1996) describes lifelong learning as a framework for learning opportunities throughout an individual's life, while UNESCO (2016) stresses that it encompasses formal, non-formal, and informal education to ensure skills development across all life stages. The European Commission (2001) adds that lifelong learning supports active citizenship, employability, and social inclusion.

Scholars such as Jarvis (2009) and Dewey (1998) discuss lifelong learning as a dynamic process linked to personal transformation, highlighting that it is not just about acquiring new knowledge but also about developing critical thinking and adaptability to societal changes.

This literature review provides a summary of key research trends, theoretical contributions, and policy discussions surrounding lifelong learning. It also highlights barriers to participation, the competencies needed for lifelong learning, policy implications, and research gaps.

Concepts and theories in lifelong learning

A 2003-2008 Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) project on **Learning Lives in the Life Course** had a particular focus on learning, identity and agency, identifying four avenues for improving learning across the life-course: provision of planned courses, personal support, enhancing learning cultures, and providing opportunities for narration, with an improvement of learning through the life-course depending on a combination of these avenues. The project outlined this in relation to three examples: learning at work, learning at college, and community learning.

Lifelong learning is typically categorized into three primary types:

- Formal learning. Structured education in institutions such as schools, universities, and training centres, leading to recognised qualifications (Yang et al., 2015).
- Non-formal learning. Organised learning outside formal institutions, such as workplace training, community programs, or online courses (Rogers, 2004).
- Informal learning. Unstructured, experience-based learning through personal interactions, daily activities, and problem-solving situations (Livingstone, 2001).

However, a report from the Learning and Skills Research Centre (part of the Learning and Skills Development Agency) by Colley, Hodkinson, and Malcolm (2003) critique this categorization, since different criteria are used by different writers, with 'non-formal' and 'informal' often being used interchangeably.

Several key theories inform lifelong learning:

- Constructivist Theory (Vygotsky, 1978). Suggests that learning is an active, social process where individuals construct new knowledge based on their experiences.
- Experiential Learning (Kolb, 1984). Emphasises the importance of hands-on experiences, reflection, and adaptation in lifelong learning.
- Transformative Learning (Mezirow, 1991). Highlights that adults engage in learning through critical reflection, leading to a shift in perspectives and behaviours.

Lifelong learning is increasingly associated with skill acquisition, adaptability, and personal development. Scholars emphasise that modern economies require a workforce that engages in continuous upskilling and reskilling to keep pace with technological advancements (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002).

Research trends in lifelong learning

The literature reveals several dominant research trends:

- Lifelong learning and economic development
 - o Governments increasingly view lifelong learning as essential for economic competitiveness and workforce resilience.
 - o Studies show that participation in lifelong learning improves employment prospects, career progression, and innovation in workplaces (Field, 2006; OECD, 2013).
- Competencies and soft skills in lifelong learning
 - o Research highlights that lifelong learners develop key competencies such as critical thinking, digital literacy, adaptability, and collaboration (Shin & Jun, 2019).
 - o The European Framework for Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (EU, 2018) identifies eight core skills, including communication, multilingualism, entrepreneurship, and cultural awareness.
- Barriers to lifelong learning participation
 - o Several factors influence participation in lifelong learning, including economic barriers, time constraints, and lack of institutional support.
 - o Lavrijsen & Nicaise (2017) found that lower-income individuals, older adults, and those with limited prior education are less likely to engage in lifelong learning.
 - o Psychological barriers such as lack of confidence and motivation also play a role in deterring participation (Buza et al., 2010).

- Technological innovations and online learning
 - o The rise of digital education platforms and MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) has expanded access to lifelong learning.
 - o Online learning is particularly beneficial for individuals in remote areas and those balancing work and study commitments (Bonk & Graham, 2012).
 - o However, digital literacy remains a challenge for older learners and economically disadvantaged groups (Panitsides, 2014).

The literature indicates that lifelong learning is essential for economic development, personal growth, and social mobility. However, barriers to participation persist, particularly for marginalised groups.

Lifelong learning and the Sustainable Development Goals

Lifelong learning plays a pivotal role in achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all. UNESCO (2021) underscores the need to embed sustainability competencies into lifelong learning programmes, ensuring learners are equipped with the knowledge and skills to engage in sustainable development practices.

The role of technology and artificial intelligence

The integration of AI and digital technologies is reshaping the delivery and accessibility of lifelong learning. Tools like ChatGPT and adaptive learning platforms provide personalised and scalable learning experiences. According to the OECD (2021), these technologies support more flexible, data-driven, and learner-centred educational pathways, increasing participation and retention among adult learners.

Lifelong learning in the workplace

In the context of rapid technological advancement and labour market shifts, lifelong learning is essential for workforce resilience. Employers are increasingly investing in upskilling and reskilling initiatives. Reports from Cedefop (2020) and the World Economic Forum (2023) emphasise the need for continuous learning to enable career transitions, maintain employability, and close skill gaps in critical areas such as digital literacy, sustainability, and leadership.

Key recommendations for future research

While the current body of literature highlights the growing importance of lifelong learning in an evolving labour market, there remain several areas that warrant deeper exploration. The following recommendations aim to address existing gaps, inform policy and practice, and guide future studies to strengthen the impact and inclusivity of lifelong learning systems:

- Expand empirical studies in underrepresented regions to gain a global perspective on lifelong learning.
- Examine the role of digital learning and AI-powered education in supporting lifelong learners.
- Assess how more inclusive learning policies may address barriers faced by disadvantaged populations.
- Examine how to integrate lifelong learning into workforce development strategies to support reskilling and upskilling initiatives.

Lifelong learning remains a critical pillar of education policy, and further research is necessary to ensure it is accessible, inclusive, and effective, as argued for example by James et al. (eds)(2025), whose Research Handbook rethinks current paradigms in adult education, providing a toolkit for responding to the challenges and opportunities for adult education and lifelong learning amidst a changing world, with the contributing authors analysing key aspects of the field through the lenses of democracy, sustainability, and social justice.

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