



A.L.E. POLICIES

UK – IRELAND

TRENDS IN ADULT PARTICIPATION IN LEARNING (2002-2023)



University
of Glasgow



Economic
and Social
Research Council



University of
Nottingham
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

Dr Zyra Evangelista
Professor Ellen Boeren
Dr Queralt Capsada-Munsech

Dr Betul Babayigit
Dr Sharon Clancy
Professor John Holford

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our colleagues from Learning and Work Institute for providing us with the Adult Participation in Learning (APiL) Survey data



Corin Egglestone
Oriane Nermond
Emily Jones

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council [ES/X000826/I]

Project Title:

A UK-Ireland investigation into the statistical evidence-base underpinning adult learning and education policy-making

Project Duration:

1 April 2023-30 June 2025

Introduction

Over the last three decades, the need for people to continue to learn *throughout their lives* has become more and more inescapable. What do we know about how adults' participation in learning and education has changed over this period? And what patterns of participation do we observe in the adult population?

The ESRC project '*A UK-Ireland investigation into the statistical evidence-base underpinning adult learning and education policy-making*' provides important new evidence based on data from the Learning and Work Institute's (L&W) annual Adult Participation in Learning (APiL) Survey. This report presents and investigates participation in adult learning and education (ALE) in the United Kingdom between 2002 and 2023 for adults between the ages of 25 and 64. For this report, we concentrated on adults between the ages of 25 and 64 to allow tailored analyses that reduce the inclusion of adults still in initial education.

Over the last decade, participation rates have fallen significantly, followed by a rise since the COVID-19 pandemic. Previous reports from L&W, the Institute for Fiscal Studies, and other stakeholders have communicated this general trend of decline. The rapid pace of social, economic and political change calls for learning to be lifelong, but education tends to be "frontloaded" in people's lives. The UK's rich tradition of adult learning and education – stretching back for well over a century – has contributed to social cohesion, community resilience, and a strong democracy. For most of its history, "liberal education"

was a key theme in British adult education, but in recent decades the focus has been on skills training for employability.

Since the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, the governance of adult learning provision, typically organised within local community contexts, has been centralised. Governments have spent resources much more on employability and apprenticeship programmes, devoting less and less to "traditional" classroom-based adult education. Although funding in recent years is being regionalised through the Adult Skills Fund (previously Devolved Adult Education Budget), skills training for employability remains the newly-emerging regional authorities' primary focus.

When participation rates fluctuate or decline, we need to understand how these changes affect adults from different socio-economic and socio-demographic backgrounds. In which sectors of adult learning have these changes occurred? Are the reasons why adults are taking part changing? Are the benefits of participation, or the barriers that prevent non-participants taking part, shifting? Accurately diagnosing these problems is essential for designing evidence-based recommendations on how adult learning can be made more effective and efficient, and how its potential for generating benefits for the economy and society can be strengthened.

The annual Adult Participation in Learning Survey

- L&W, previously known as NIACE – the National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education – has a long history of surveying the adult population on their participation in adult learning and education. The **Adult Participation in Learning (APiL) Survey** started in 1996. Since then, it has been undertaken on a near-annual basis, with a few exceptions (e.g. no survey was undertaken in 2016, and the quality of data from 2020 was affected by a change of survey method due to COVID-19.)
- APiL is a **cross-sectional survey** and does not allow for longitudinal analyses at the individual level. Reported results over time reflect population trends.
- APiL surveys around 5,000 adults per year and aims to be **representative of the UK adult population** aged 17 and above. Starting as surveys with the support of an interviewer, they have evolved (particularly since COVID-19) towards a web survey. In recent years, APiL has been administered as part of the **Kantar Omnibus** survey. Data are typically collected during the summer period over a time span of three weeks. This allows L&W to gather sufficient responses from across the UK. Kantar's datasets come with a **weighting variable** to adjust for potential population imbalances.
- Questionnaires and data collection modes have changed over the years but APiL's **core question on adults' participation in learning** has remained the same since its inception. This allows us to track the population's participation in adult learning over the years. Micro-level datasets are available from 2002 onwards and act as the starting point for the analyses.
- The formulation of questions on topics such as motivation to learn and barriers to participation has altered over the years. Where possible, we have streamlined and recoded variables in a **harmonised dataset** to allow the inspection of trends over time. This has led to a reliable set of variables on motivations, benefits, challenges and barriers for the periods 2017 to 2019 and 2021 to 2023. These data form the basis for analyses comparing the **pre-** and **post-COVID-19** periods.
- All analyses were carried out in SPSS, using the respective annual weighting factor. Given the presence of weightings for representation, we report **significance levels**; these indicate the confidence to be placed in making evidence-based statements. The number of respondents has been streamlined on an annual basis to allow equal representation of each year in the dataset.
- All underlying data can be consulted in the **data appendix** on the project website. The data are owned by L&W, and full datasets are not publicly available. Requests for access to the micro-data can be discussed with L&W.

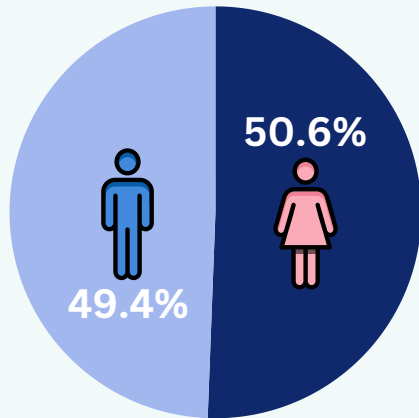
The composition of the APiL sample (2002–2023)

- Analyses presented throughout this report refer to the **six background characteristics** that we have been able to streamline for the entire dataset. We undertook descriptive analyses and controlled for variation in responses according to *gender, age, age of leaving school, social grade, ethnicity, and work status*.
- The total sample consists of 67,787 adults aged between 25 and 64.
- Gender** is represented through women and men. While recent APiL questionnaires included the answering options ‘nonbinary’, ‘prefer to self-identify’ or ‘prefer not to say’, we did not have sufficient data to include these as separate categories. Our harmonised dataset is nearly equally split between women (50.6%) and men (49.4%). In our multivariate analyses, we use women as the reference category.
- Age** data have been categorised into four groups, each representing 10 years of adults’ lives between the ages of 25 and 64. The groups only differ slightly in size: 25-34 (25.5%), 35-44 (26.7%), 45-54 (24.5%), 55-64 (23.3%). The youngest group is used as the reference category when presenting results of multivariate analyses.
- Age left school** is used as a proxy for educational attainment as the APiL survey does not consistently collect data on the highest qualification obtained. We do have information on whether adults left full-time schooling before or after the age of 21. In total, 27.1 percent of the sample left education at 21 or older. This group is used as the reference category.
- Social grade** is presented through four categories. The sample distribution is as follows: AB Higher & intermediate managerial, administrative, professional occupations (22.7%), C1 Supervisory, clerical & junior managerial, administrative, professional occupations (29.8%), C2 Skilled manual occupations (21.6%), DE Semi-skilled & unskilled manual occupations, unemployed and lowest grade occupations (25.8%). AB is used as the reference category.
- Ethnicity** data are available for all years except 2004. While several APiL questionnaires included detailed answering options on ethnicity, harmonisation required us to create a binary distinction between ‘white’ and ‘minority ethnic’ adults. The harmonised dataset contains 88.5 percent of white and 11.5 percent of minority ethnic adults. White is used as the reference category.
- Work status** refers to whether adults are in full-time employment or not. Those who work at least 30 hours a week are classified as full-time; they represent 53.9 percent of the sample. They are also used as the reference category in the multivariate analyses.

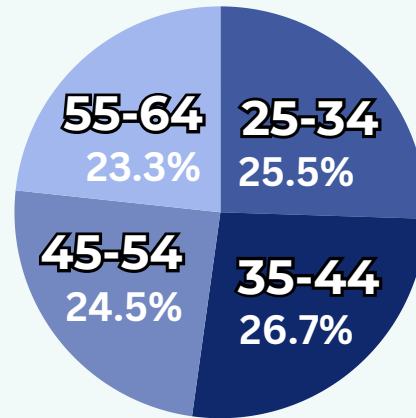
SAMPLE COMPOSITION



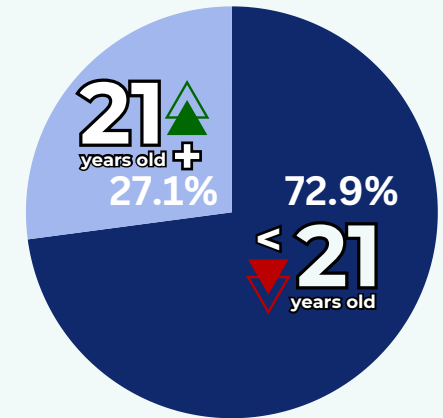
GENDER



AGE GROUP

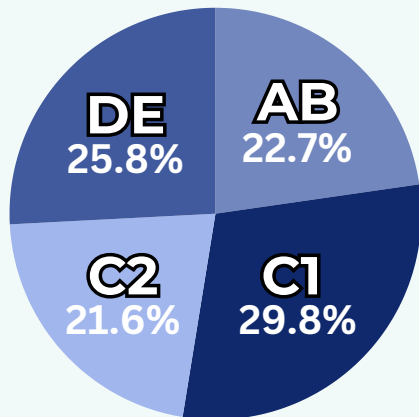


AGE LEFT SCHOOL

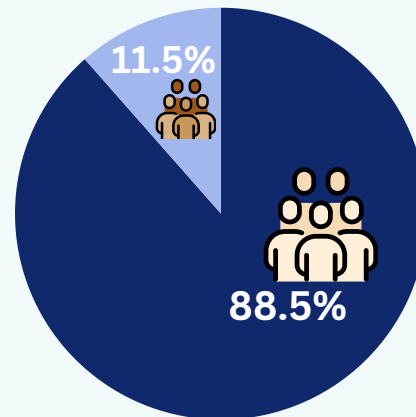


Excluded:
Nonbinary, Prefer to self identify, Prefer not to say

SOCIAL GRADE

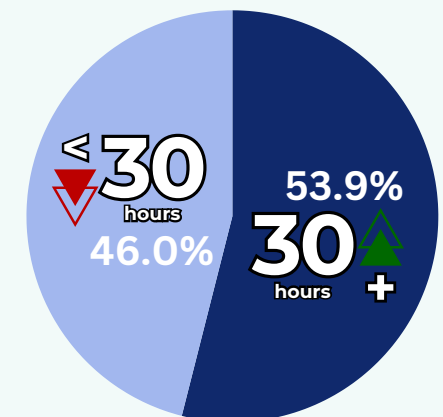


ETHNICITY



Excluded:
No data for 2004

WORK STATUS



N = 67,787 except for Work Status (N=67,747; 40 missing data due to survey non-response)

Who participated in adult learning and education between 2002 and 2023?

- Our previous work demonstrates that several UK surveys collect data on participation but that their methodologies and **conceptual operationalisations of 'ALE'** differ (see Babayigit et al., 2024). As a result, the participation rates they report vary. It is therefore important to understand APiL's working definition of participation.
- The APiL survey measures **current** and recent participation (the latter defined as participation in the **last three years**). Those who studied **more than three years ago** are typically classified as non-learners, as are those who **never participated since leaving initial education**. Respondents can indicate that they **'don't know'**. For each of the six background characteristics (i.e. gender, age, age left school, social grade, ethnicity, work status), we investigated their distribution across the five participation categories for the period 2002-2023.
- APiL data demonstrate that **men and women** were nearly equally represented across the five participation and non-participation categories, with a marginal advantage in favour of women participating more in adult learning and education.
- In relation to **age**, participation rates declined at a fast rate once adults turn into the 55-64 age group. Differences in current participation and participation during the last three years are marginal for those between 25-34 and 35-44.
- In line with expectations, we found significant differences based on **school leaving age**. Nearly 37 percent of those who left the initial education system before the age of 21 never participated afterwards – nearly twice the rate for those who left at 21 or older (20%). Current participation for those who left after age 21 is more than 10 percent higher than those who left before the age of 21.
- Nearly half of our sample who belong to **social grade DE** (48.5%) indicated that they had never participated in learning since leaving school. In contrast, more than one in four AB (26.9%) adults were participating in learning at the time of the survey. As evident from the infographics, participation patterns change gradually according to Social Grade.
- Our data for **ethnicity** contained a proportion of missing values. No ethnicity data were collected in 2004. Investigating the available data from 2002-2003 and 2005-2023, we found a higher current participation rate among adults from minority ethnic groups, but a lower one based on recent participation during the last three years. However, the differences are not large. Non-participation since leaving school was slightly higher among adults from minority ethnic groups.
- In relation to **work status**, current and recent participation rates for the full-time employed were higher. For those who did not work full-time at the time of the survey, 37.6 percent had never participated since leaving school.

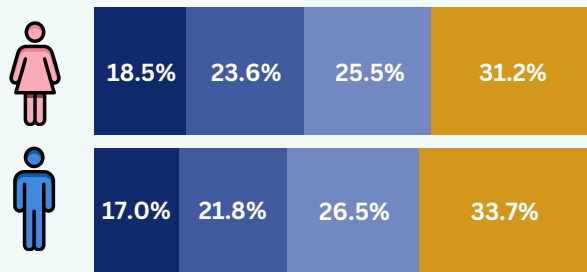


ALE PARTICIPATION

“ Which of the following statements best applies to you? ”

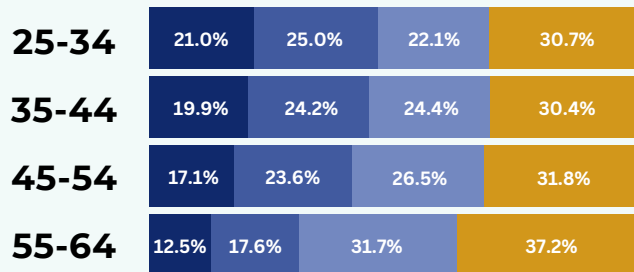


GENDER



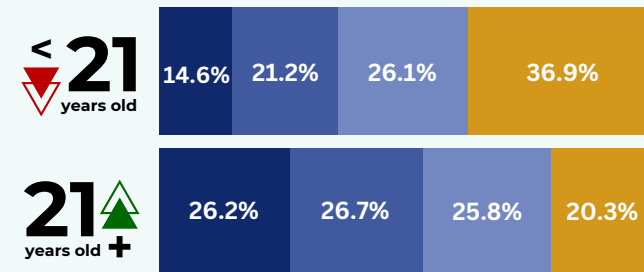
APIL data demonstrate an equal gender balance across categories

AGE GROUP



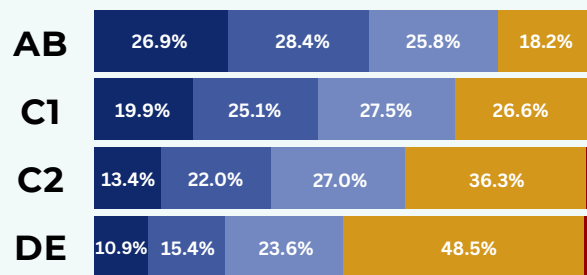
Participation rates declined at a fast rate once adults turn into the 55-64 age group

AGE LEFT SCHOOL



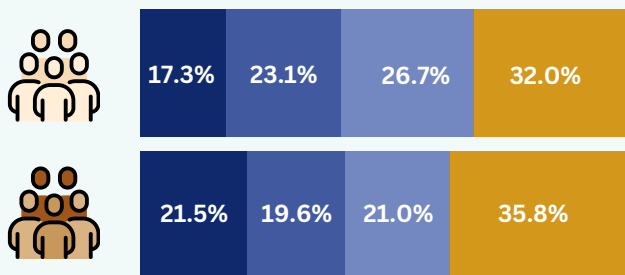
We found significant differences based on school leaving age

SOCIAL GRADE



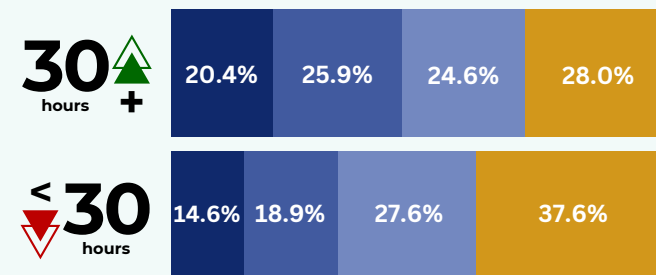
50% of those belonging to social grade DE indicated never participating in ALE

ETHNICITY



We found higher participation rates among adults from minority ethnic groups

WORK STATUS



We observed a higher proportion of participants among the full-time employed

N = 67,787 except for Work Status (N=67,747; 40 missing data due to survey non-response)
“Do not know” responses = < 2.0%

Who participated in adult learning and education between 2002 and 2023?

- Among those not in **full-time employment**, we can distinguish between adults in **part-time employment** and those who are **self-employed**. Those out of work can either be **seeking or not seeking work**. Additionally, the sample contains a proportion of adults who have **retired**. These six categories provide more nuanced and detailed data on adults by **work status**.
- Breaking down participation patterns in adult learning and education by **work status**, 20.8 percent of those in **full-time employment** ‘currently’ participated, at the time of the survey. An additional 25.9 percent participated in the previous three years. The proportion of adult learners among those in **part-time employment** were rather similar, accounting for 19.6 and 26.5 percent, respectively.
- Among **self-employed workers** in the survey, 21.3 percent indicated ‘current’ participation. Just below 20 percent had participated during the previous three years. The proportion of recent learners among self-employed workers was thus lower than those in traditional employment.
- While participation in adult learning and education can be a route towards employment for jobseekers, only 13.7 percent of the **unemployed and seeking work** participated in learning at the time of the survey. The proportion of adults in this category with a recent learning experience in the previous three years sat at 22.3 percent. However, 38.6 percent of them had not engaged with learning activities anymore since leaving full-time education. The discrepancy between ‘current participation’ versus ‘never participated’ indicates an imbalance within this category of adults.
- Among those already **retired**, nearly 40 percent of adults had never participated in learning activities since leaving full-time education. Previously, we already indicated a lower participation rate amongst the oldest age group in the sample. Those in retirement are overrepresented in the 55 to 64 age group. Among this category of retired adults, more than one in three stated experiences with learning but more than three years ago. Only 11.3 percent indicated ‘current’ engagement with learning. Recent experience in the previous three years was also low (13.2%).
- Adults who are **not in work and who are also not seeking work** are most likely to not have participated in any learning since leaving full-time education (46.9%). While more than one in four has experienced learning at least more than three years ago, the proportion of current learners among this category of adults is lowest among all work status groups (10.4%).

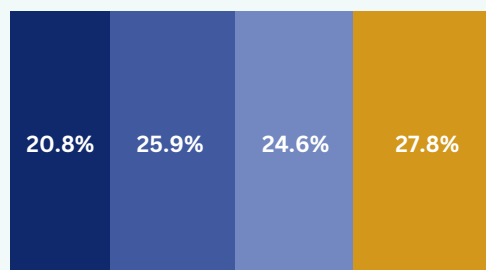
ADULT PARTICIPATION BY WORK STATUS



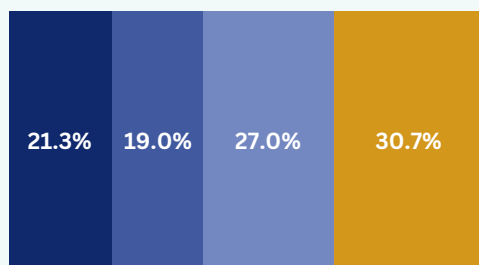
“ Which of the following statements best applies to you? ”

- ☒ I am currently doing some learning activity now
- ☒ I have done some learning activity in the last 3 years
- ☒ I have studied/learnt but it was over 3 years ago
- ☒ I have not studied/learnt since I left full time education
- ☒ Do not know

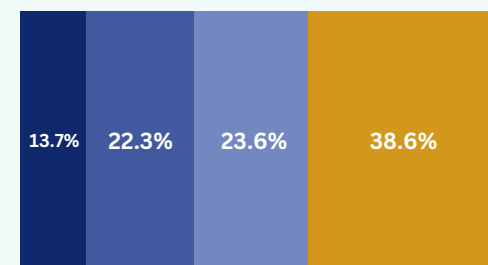
EMPLOYED FULL-TIME



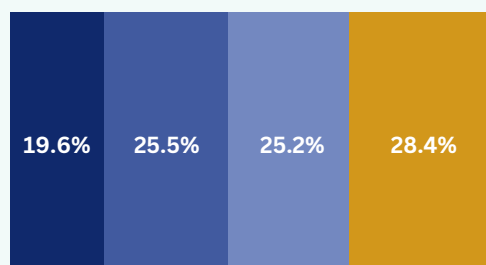
SELF-EMPLOYED



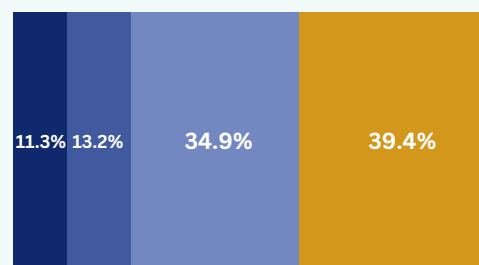
UNEMPLOYED & SEEKING WORK



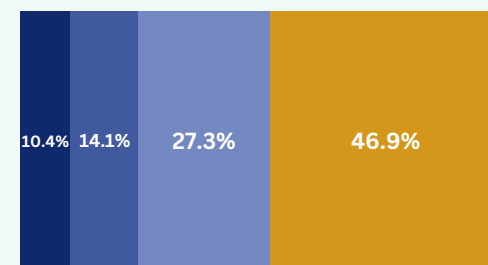
EMPLOYED PART-TIME



RETIRED



NOT WORKING & NOT SEEKING WORK



N = 73,593
“Do not know” responses = < 2.0%

How have APiL participation rates varied by year?

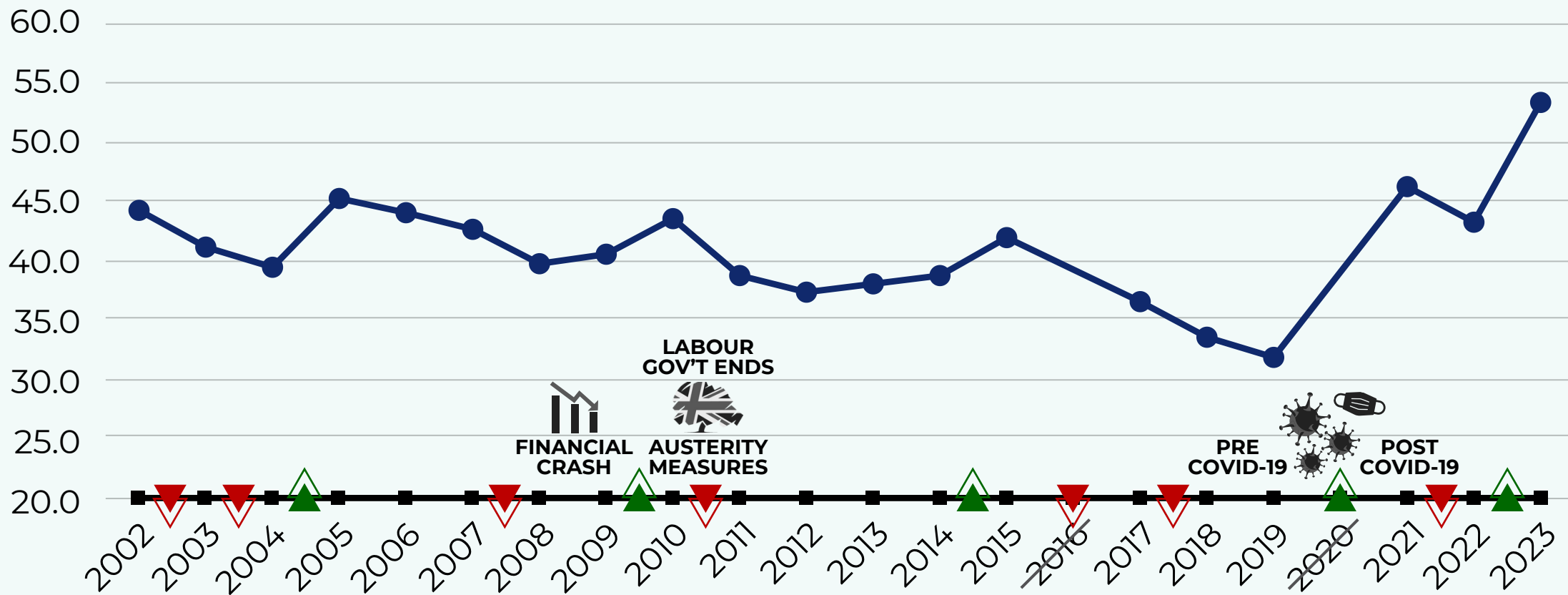
- In line with L&W's approach, the overall participation rate we use combines **current** and **recent** learners: those who participated at the time of the survey *and* during the last three years. Rates reported are for those aged 25-64.
- During the period 2002-2023, participation rates **fluctuated between 31.9 and 53.4 percent**, starting at 44.3 percent in 2002. Significant increases and decreases between two years have been indicated by green and red **arrows** respectively.
- Participation rates decreased by nearly 5 percentage points during 2002 and 2004 but bounced back to over 45 percent in 2005. Rates then dropped again until 2008, with a **boost** in participation in **2010**. Between 2011 and 2014, participation rates decreased to below 40 percent. Except for 2015, they then dropped rapidly to a **low of 31.9 percent in 2019**. Participation rates appear to have **increased** in the aftermath of the **COVID-19 pandemic**, though as pointed out in the methodology section of this report, APiL's data collection mode changed to online during this period.
- In line with evidence presented in reports by the Institute of Fiscal Studies and L&W, the adult education sector has been affected by **austerity measures** in the aftermath of the financial crisis. The Labour Government fell in 2010, replaced by Conservatives (in coalition with the Liberal Democrats until 2015). During this period, the sector experienced a reduction in funding for classroom-based education while tuition fees in higher education in England tripled, leading to a significant loss of part-time and mature students. Liberal adult education was left mainly to the initiative of third sector and grassroots organisations with government funding channelled into skills initiatives, including adult apprenticeships.
- Participation rates were **lowest in 2019**. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, participation rates rose significantly. While more research is needed to understand this shift fully, and (as noted above) APiL's data collection method changed during this period, it is plausible that the increase was fuelled by the acceleration of online and flexible working during lockdowns. This included the increased use of online learning environments. COVID-19 also led to a shake-up in the labour market with numerous adults losing their jobs. Government responded by launching free courses on platforms such as The Skills Toolkit. Later in this report, we analyse shifts in participation in the three years before and after COVID lockdowns.

APIL PARTICIPATION RATES BY YEAR

DATA BASED ON SURVEY RESPONDENTS WHO ANSWERED:

I am currently doing some learning activity now

I have done some learning activity in the last 3 years



Statistically significant increase



Statistically significant decrease

N = 73,593
No APIL survey data for 2016 and 2020

How have APiL participation rates varied by region?

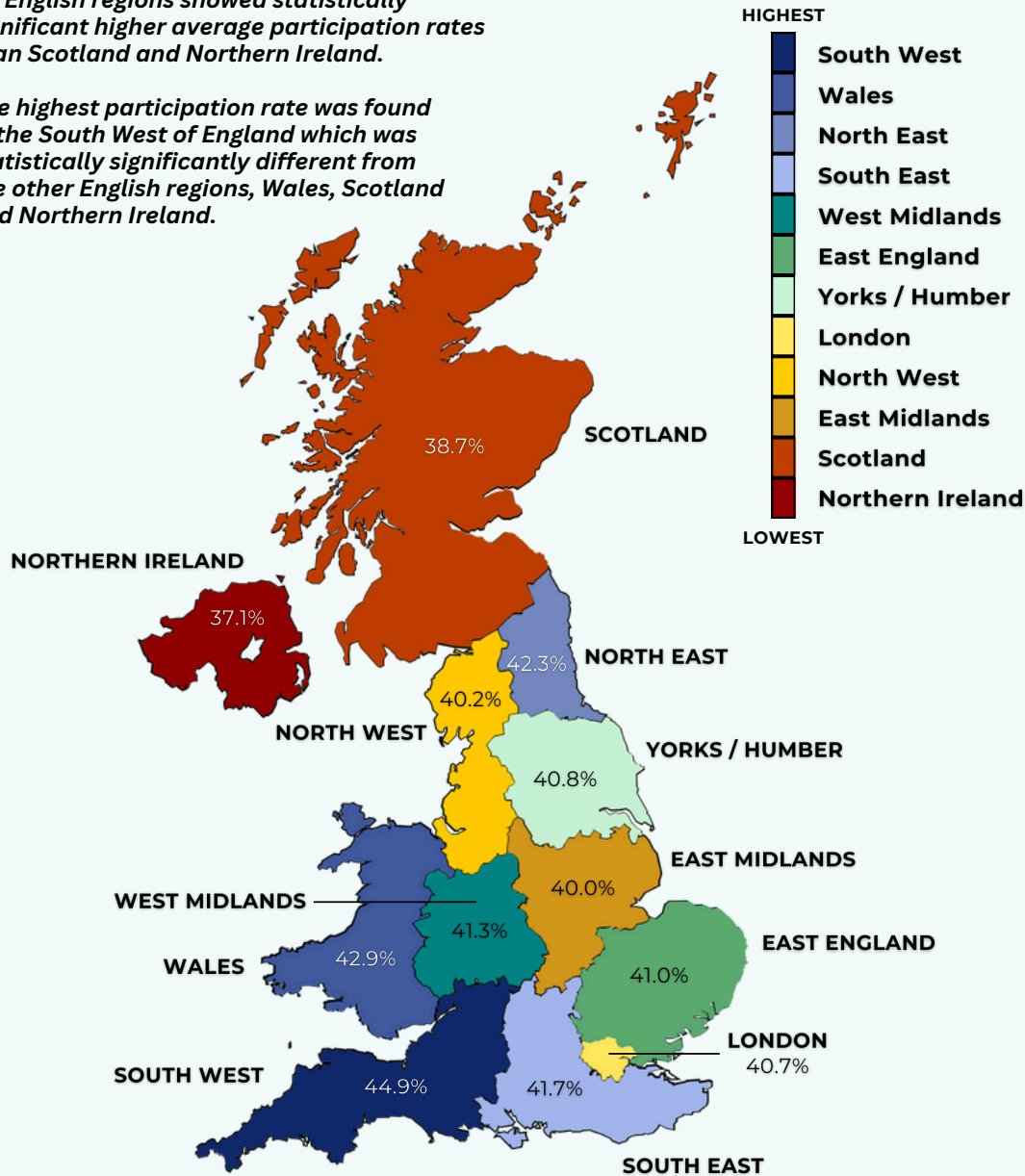
- Across the United Kingdom, adult learning is a **devolved matter**. Governments in **Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland** design, implement, and execute their own policies. In **England**, recent years have seen a shift towards the implementation of devolved Adult Skills Funds in a range of local areas, for example the Greater London Authority and the West Midlands Combined Authority. This was stimulated by a growing awareness of the importance of local factors in terms of labour market opportunities and people's wider needs. It also relates to the Conservative Government's "Levelling Up" agenda which recognised the social, economic, and demographic variation between regions in England. More than two thirds of the English adult education budget is now devolved. This proportion seems likely to increase as further devolution settlements are made.
- Participation rates differ across the four devolved nations of the UK. During the period 2002-2023, Wales had the highest average rate (42.9%), followed by 41.3 percent in England. Scotland's rate averaged 38.7 percent. Northern Ireland had the lowest participation rate at 37.1 percent. Our analyses indicate that participation rates between England and Wales are not significantly different from each other; neither are those between Scotland and Northern Ireland.
- Breaking down participation rates at regional level needs to be interpreted with caution given annual fluctuations. Based on the available data, for England, the highest rate was found in the South West (44.9%), followed by the North East (42.3%) and South East (41.7%). All English regions had participation rates over 40 percent and thus showed higher average participation rates than Scotland and Northern Ireland. While the South West of England's participation rate was higher than other English regions, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, it was not in statistical terms an outlier.
- Some of the patterns can be linked to variations in demographic profiles across the regions. For example, Scotland and Northern Ireland have higher proportions of adults who left full-time education before the age of 21 compared to England. Given that educational attainment is a strong predictor of participation, it is important to note these observations. They have also a lower proportion of adults in social class group AB.
- Apart from nuances in population demographics, there are differences in countries' adult education policies. Scotland is traditionally known for its focus on community education while Wales has invested heavily in Welsh language proficiency. Northern Ireland's focus on skills development needs to be seen in the context of years of political instability and conflict.

APiL PARTICIPATION RATES BY REGION



All English regions showed statistically significant higher average participation rates than Scotland and Northern Ireland.

The highest participation rate was found in the South West of England which was statistically significantly different from the other English regions, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.



N = 73,593
No APiL survey data for 2016 and 2020

SAMPLE COMPOSITION BY NATION

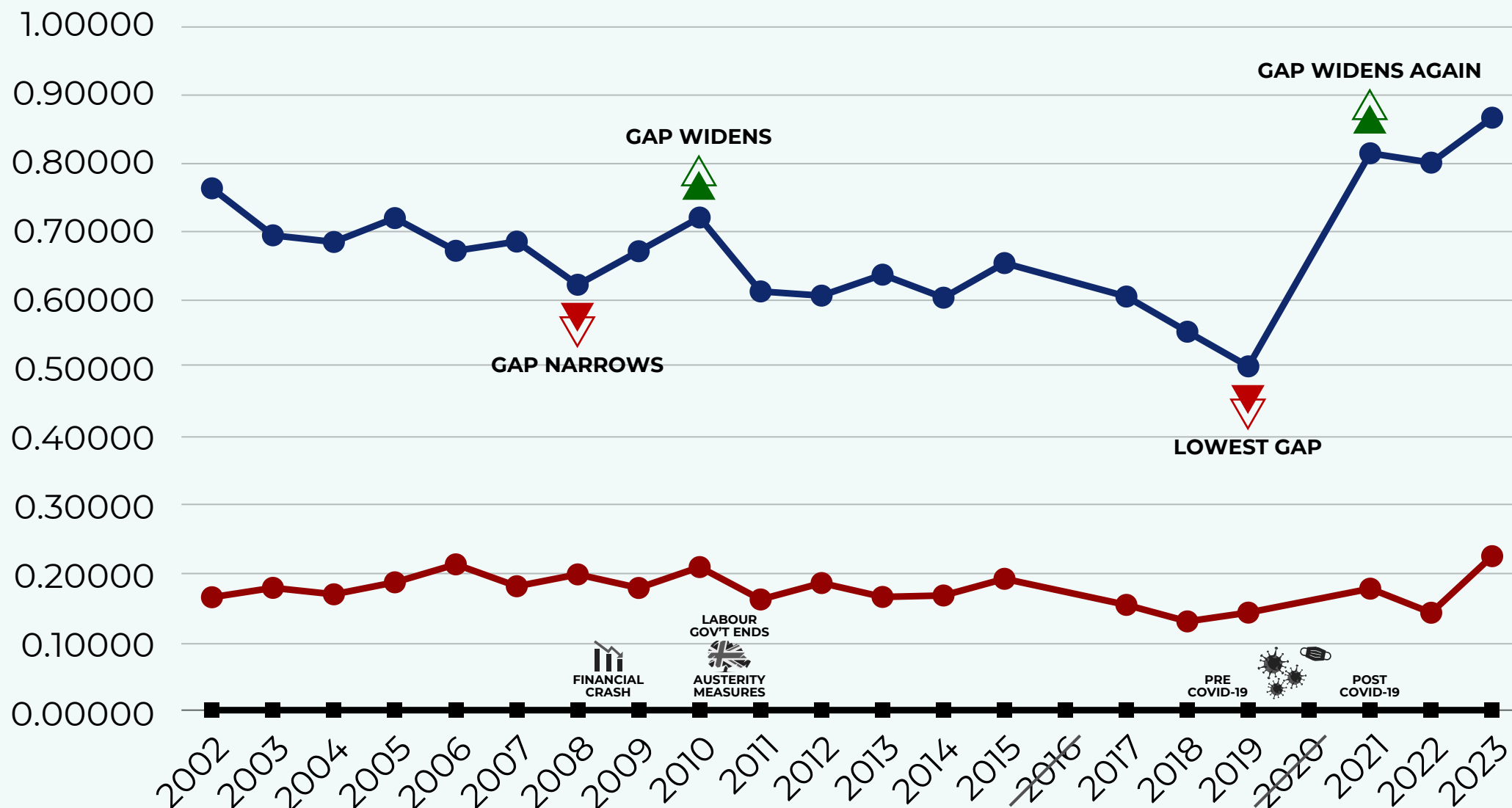
BASE CATEGORY					
GENDER		50.5	51.3	50.8	51.4
		49.5	48.7	49.2	48.6
AGE GROUP	25-34	25.9	24.6	23.5	23.3
	35-44	27.0	25.4	25.8	23.7
	45-54	24.2	25.9	25.4	26.2
	55-64	22.8	24.1	25.3	26.8
AGE LEFT SCHOOL	< 21 years old	72.0	79.4	76.6	78.2
	21 years old +	28.0	20.6	23.4	21.8
SOCIAL GRADE	AB	23.4	18.8	19.2	20.7
	C1	30.5	25.4	27.0	27.1
	C2	21.4	22.6	22.7	23.1
	DE	24.7	33.2	31.1	29.1
ETHNICITY		86.8	98.8	96.6	97.4
		13.2	1.2	3.4	2.6
WORK STATUS	30+ hours	54.7	51.5	50.3	50.2
	< 30 hours	45.3	48.5	49.7	49.8

N = 67,787

Inequalities in participation

- We know from previous research that participation in ALE is **unequal** and that these patterns are hard to crack (Boeren, 2016). It is evident from our breakdown of participation by adults' background characteristics that participation declines by age, that those who leave full-time education before the age of 21 participate less than those who leave later, and that participation patterns correlate with social grade. Those in full-time employment participate more as job-related learning constitutes a significant part of adult learning. Differences based on gender and ethnicity are less clear cut.
- International evidence on **gender and ethnicity** is mixed. With more women now active in the labour market, educational patterns are shifting. Internationally, minority ethnic groups with high qualifications tend to participate more than their white counterparts with low or no qualifications. Similar nuances were found in our data.
- To investigate **fluctuations in inequality over time**, we calculated **participation probabilities** for groups that typically have high versus low chances to participate. In line with L&W's working definition, participation refers to those who '**currently**' participated at the time of the survey and those who had participated in the '**last three years**'.
- **Younger adults, who finished their initial education at or after 21, from the highest social grade AB, in full-time employment**, had 76.4 percent chance to participate in ALE in 2002 compared with only a 16.5 percent chance if they were amongst the **oldest age group, not in full-time work, had left education before the age of 21 and were among the lowest social grade DE**. By 2008, this 50 percentage point gap had closed to 42 points, but it widened again to over 50 percent in the **aftermath of the financial crash**.
- It is worth noting that most of the change in this gap comes from changes in the **higher probability group**. The lower probability group rates remained fairly stubborn and showed little upward movement over time.
- When participation rates declined steadily between **2015 and 2019**, inequalities between these two groups declined too. By 2019, just before the **COVID-19 pandemic** lockdowns, the gap between the two groups narrowed to 36 percentage points.
- As is evident from Institute for Fiscal Studies reports, the 2010s were characterised by **significant spending cuts** in adult education, especially classroom-based education.
- Participation rates **exploded after the lockdowns**, especially for the high probability group. In 2023, the difference between the two groups had risen to 64 percentage points. While not part of this project, figures from the 2024 APiL survey indicate a further increase in participation rates, while inequalities between groups remain.

APIL PARTICIPATION PROFILE PROBABILITY PLOT



Age 25-34
Social Grade AB
 Left FT Education After Age 21
 FT Employed



Age 55-64
Social Grade DE
 Left FT Education Before Age 21
 Not FT Employed

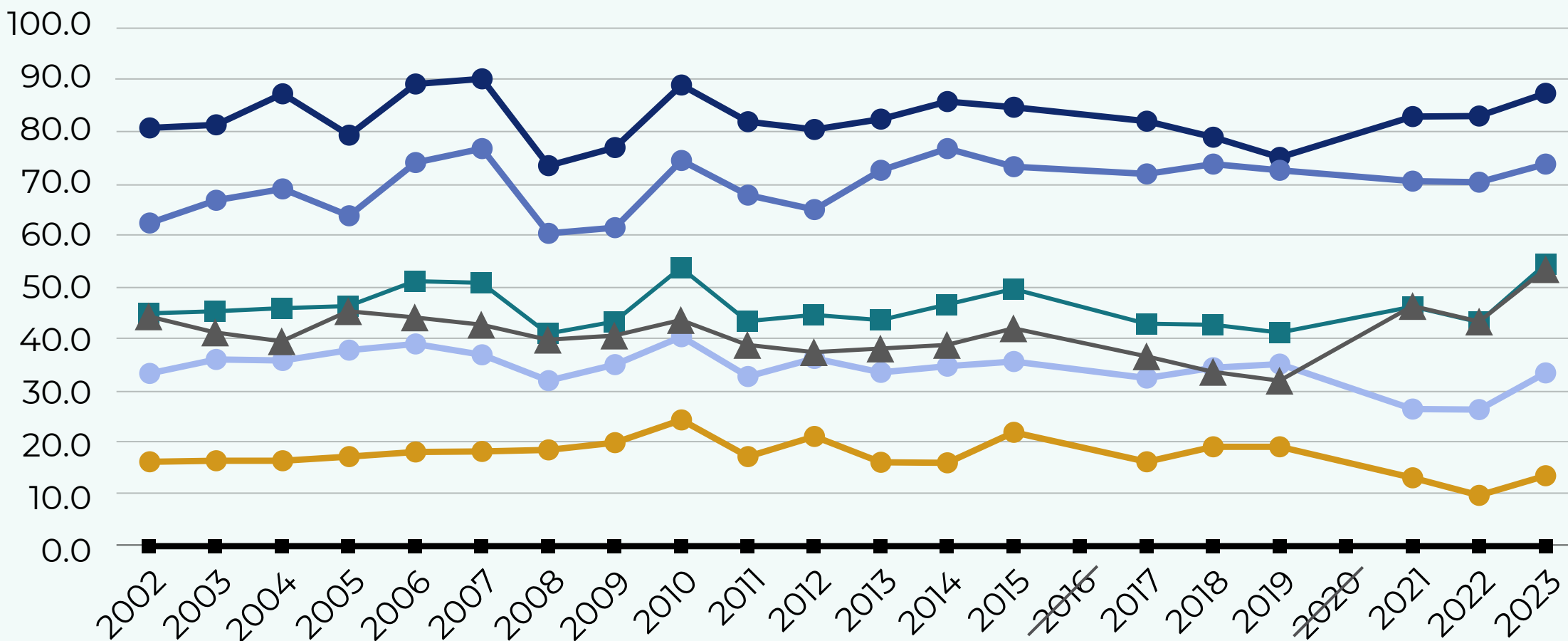
Trends in future learning intentions

- APiL not only collects information on adults' participation in learning. It also surveys adults' **future learning intentions**. More specifically, adults are asked whether they are likely to take up any further learning in the future.
- Learning intentions across the entire sample of adults (aged 25-64) fluctuated between **40.7 and 54.1 percent** during the period 2002-2023. This includes the future learning intentions of all adults in the sample, **regardless of their participation status**.
- Comparing the desire for future learning with **actual participation rates**, we found **similar ups and downs**. When participation rates go down, future learning intentions tend to go down too and vice versa. This suggests participation rates tend to go up when the perceived need for learning is intense, or that learning intentions go down when there is an increase in financial or other barriers to participate.
- Across the entire sample throughout this period, the interest in future learning has typically been higher than the actual current or recent uptake during the last three years. This suggests that a proportion of adults had an **unfulfilled learning intention**. The reasons why adults did not participate in learning will be further discussed under the section on **'barriers'** in this report.
- There are **stark inequalities** in the indication of future learning intentions based on participation status. This was a consistent pattern across the period 2002-2023.
- Adults who **'currently'** participate in learning are most likely to indicate that they will participate again in the future. In most years, over 80 percent state they want to participate again. Among those who had participated during the **three years** before the survey, more than 60 percent indicated that they intended to learn again in the future. At its highest point in 2007, it came close to 80 percent. Among those whose experience of participating was **more than three years ago**, future learning intentions dropped to 40 percent and below. For non-participants, their intentions peaked in 2010, just after the financial crash. Their intentions to learn dropped after the COVID-19 lockdowns. This was also the case for those who had **never participated since leaving school**: their learning intentions typically sat below 20 percent, except for a few small peaks.
- Further analyses of future learning uptake – controlling for the six background characteristics (gender, age, age left school, social grade, ethnicity, work status) – showed that **current or recent participation** during the past three years is by far the **strongest predictor** of adults' learning intentions.

FUTURE LEARNING UPTAKE

BY ALE PARTICIPATION CATEGORY

(2002-2023)



- Learn Uptake
- I am currently doing some learning activity now
- I have done some learning activity in the last 3 years
- I have studied/learnt but it was over 3 years ago
- I have not studied/learnt since I left full time education
- ▲ Participation 2





Future learning uptake by participation status

- As shown in the previous section, future learning intentions differ according to adults' participation status. We further investigated whether variation existed within and between groups of **participants and non-participants**. We performed logistic regressions within each of the four participant and non-participant groups, controlling for the six adult background characteristics. We excluded those whose participation status was not known.
- We found that **men were less likely than women** to indicate a future learning intention, regardless of their participation status.
- Compared to the **youngest age group** (25-34), **other age groups were less likely** to indicate future learning intentions. This applies especially among non-participants. Among recent learners, we could not claim a significant difference between those aged 25-34 and 35-44. Among current participants, only those between the ages of 55-64 were less likely to indicate a future learning intention. This may be explained through their shorter time horizons in the labour market as they approach retirement age.
- Among current participants, those who **left school before age 21** were less likely to express a future learning intention compared to those who left school at or after 21. Among those who had never participated, those who left school before 21 were also less likely to indicate a learning intention than those who left later. We did not find a significant difference between the two groups among recent learners and non-participants with learning experiences.
- Among current and recent participants, adults classified under **social grades C1, C2 and DE were less likely** to indicate a future learning intention than those in the AB grade. Adults on the lowest social grade are under-represented among adult learning participants and thus less likely to say that they want to participate again in the future. We could not see significant differences in learning intentions based on social grade for those who had never participated since leaving school.
- Adults from **minority ethnic groups** outnumber white adults among 'current' participants and we could not claim significant differences in their desire for future learning. However, among recent participants and non-participants, adults from minority ethnic backgrounds were **more likely** to express a future learning intention compared to their white counterparts.
- Among recent participants and non-participants with learning experience, we could not claim a significant difference in future learning intentions according to **work status**. Among current participants, those not in full-time work were less likely to indicate a future intention, but we found the opposite for those who had never participated since leaving school.



LIKELIHOOD OF FUTURE LEARNING UPTAKE

BY PARTICIPATION STATUS

BASE CATEGORY	I AM CURRENTLY DOING SOME LEARNING ACTIVITY NOW	I HAVE DONE SOME LEARNING ACTIVITY IN THE LAST 3 YEARS	I HAVE STUDIED/LEARNED BUT IT WAS OVER 3 YEARS AGO	I HAVE NOT STUDIED/LEARNED SINCE I LEFT FT EDUCATION
 WOMEN	MEN less likely	MEN less likely	MEN less likely	MEN less likely
AGE 25-34	AGE 55-64 less likely	AGE 45-54 and 55-64 less likely	AGE 35-44, 45-54, and 55-64 less likely	AGE 35-44, 45-54, and 55-64 less likely
LEFT EDUCATION AFTER 21 21 years old + 	LEFT EDUCATION BEFORE 21 less likely			LEFT EDUCATION BEFORE 21 less likely
SOCIAL GRADE AB	SOCIAL GRADE C1, C2, and DE less likely	SOCIAL GRADE C1, C2, and DE less likely	SOCIAL GRADE C2 less likely	
 WHITE		MINORITY ETHNIC more likely	MINORITY ETHNIC more likely	MINORITY ETHNIC more likely
FULL TIME EMPLOYED 30 hours + 	NOT FT EMPLOYED less likely			NOT FT EMPLOYED more likely

Only those that were statistically significant are included in the above table

N = 64,729

What motivates adults to learn? (1)

- There are multiple reasons why adults do or do not participate in ALE. Discussions of motivation to learn typically use a **binary classification**: *‘participation for work-related reasons’* versus *‘participation for leisure and/or personal development’*. In reality, the reasons are more fine-grained and can occur simultaneously.
- Detailed motivational items used in the APiL survey have evolved over the years. We use **streamlined data from 2017 to 2023** to allow more detailed investigation.
- The top three reasons for participation, between 29 and 33 percent each, were **‘to develop myself as a person’**, **‘to help me do my current job / improve job skills’** and **‘I am interested in the subject’**. More than one in five indicated that they participated **‘to get a recognised qualification’**. Nearly 15 percent of participants said their participation was involuntary – **‘not really my choice’**. This option was offered in the APiL survey to indicate that participation was mandatory, for example as part of the job or to be eligible for benefits.
- The reasons **‘to improve job skills’** and **‘for self-development’** were both more likely to be selected by **women** compared to men, and by those who **left school at or after the age of 21** compared to those who left before 21. Those from **social grade DE** and **not in full-time employment** were less likely to

indicate participation to improve job skills compared to others. We cannot claim a significant difference between adults from white versus **minority ethnic background** for job skills improvement, but we found that the latter group was more likely to indicate participation for self-development.

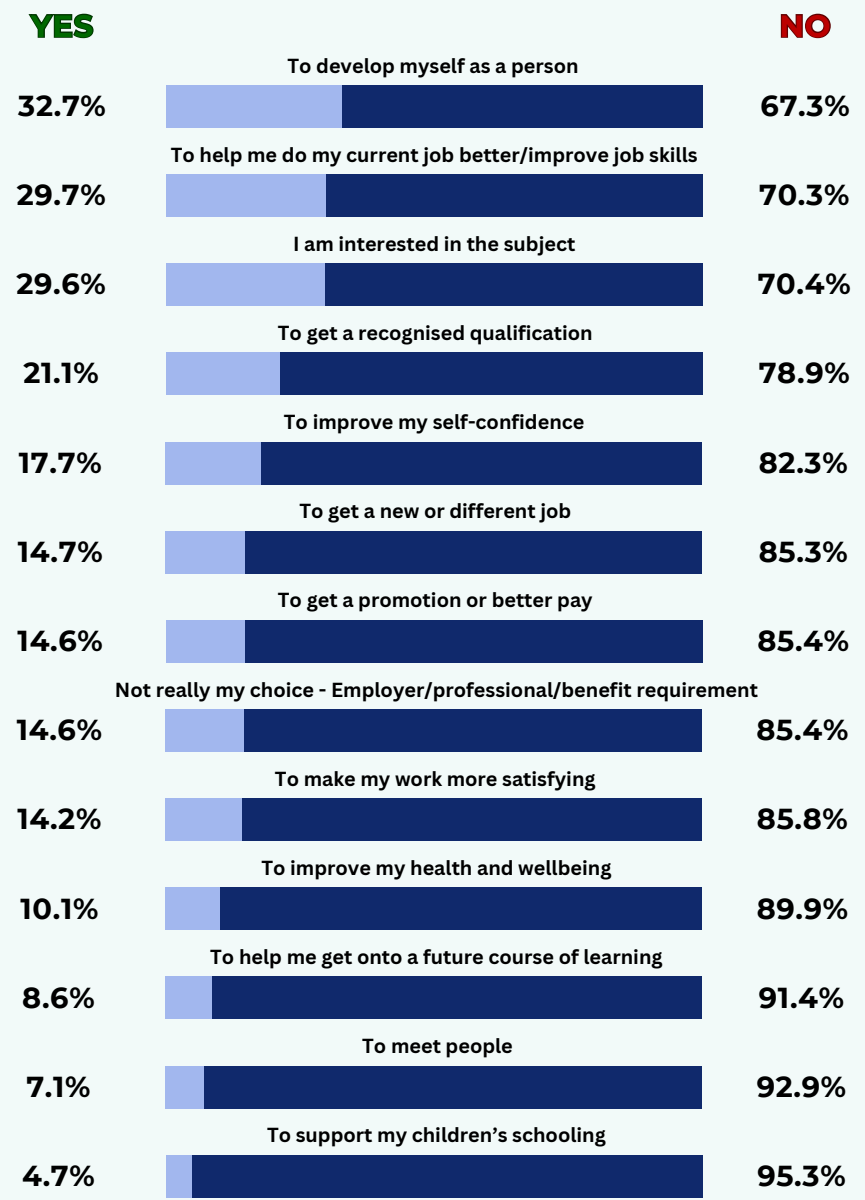
- Among the 20 percent of participants who indicated that their intention was to **obtain a qualification**, we found that women, younger adults and adults from minority ethnic groups were more likely to select this motivational item. Our results for age of leaving school, social grade, and work status did not show significant differences between these categories of adults.
- Among the nearly 15 percent of participants who stated that learning was **‘not my choice’**, we found no significant differences between men and women. Adults who belonged to the two oldest age categories were more likely to select this option, as were adults who left school before the age of 21. Compared to adults from social grade AB, we found adults from C2 were more likely to participate against their choice, but we could not claim significant differences for the C1 and DE groups. Those not in full-time employment were less likely to indicate ‘not my choice’. Adults from minority ethnic backgrounds were less likely to select this option compared to white adults.



MOTIVATIONS





SPECIFIC MOTIVATIONS OF APIL PARTICIPANTS (2017 - 2023)

“ Which of the following best describe the reasons you started this learning? ”



N = 8,752
Respondents were instructed to 'please select all that apply'

LIKELIHOOD OF SELECTING A SPECIFIC MOTIVATIONAL ITEM

BASE CATEGORY	SELF-DEVELOPMENT	IMPROVE JOB SKILLS	OBTAIN QUALIFICATION	NOT MY CHOICE
WOMEN 	MEN less likely	MEN less likely	MEN less likely	
AGE 25-34	AGE 45-54 more likely	AGE 45-54 and 55-64 more likely	AGE 45-55 and 55-64 less likely	AGE 45-55 and 55-64 more likely
LEFT EDUCATION AFTER 21 21 years old + 	LEFT EDUCATION BEFORE 21 less likely	LEFT EDUCATION BEFORE 21 less likely		LEFT EDUCATION BEFORE 21 more likely
SOCIAL GRADE AB		SOCIAL GRADE DE less likely		SOCIAL GRADE C2 more likely
WHITE 	MINORITY ETHNIC more likely		MINORITY ETHNIC more likely	MINORITY ETHNIC less likely
FULL TIME EMPLOYED 30 hours + 	NOT FT EMPLOYED more likely	NOT FT EMPLOYED less likely		NOT FT EMPLOYED less likely

N = 8,149
Only those that were statistically significant are included in the above table

What motivates adults to learn? (2)

- One of the difficulties in defining adult learning and education relates to its broad nature. Adults can take part in organised courses in institutions that can grant official qualifications. Examples include Further Education Colleges, adult learning centres or universities. This is often referred to as **formal education**. Learning activities can also be organised by voluntary or local community organisations at grassroots level, or by organisations offering learning for leisure activities. This is often labelled non-formal or **liberal education**. A significant volume of learning takes place at work – through organised courses, external training, or job placements/apprenticeships. This is commonly known as **organised work-related training**. Adults can also learn independently, outside organised structures. This can be done online or wherever suitable, alone or in group. This type of learning is referred to as **informal learning**.
- The APIL survey collects data on the **types of learning providers** used by participants. Detailed answering options have been regrouped and streamlined into the four abovementioned categories (i.e. formal education, liberal education, organised work-related training, informal learning) for the period 2017-2023. This allows us to dig deeper into the nuances in motivation between adults who study in different learning settings.
- The binary distinction between participating for **‘work/career reasons’** or for **‘leisure/personal interest’** revealed different results according to type of provider. Learners in formal education and organised work-related training were more likely to indicate they were mainly motivated by work/career reasons. Close to 90 percent of those in work-related training selected this as their main motivation. Leisure/personal interest was chosen as the main motivation by 57.8 percent among those in liberal education, while 41.2 percent selected work/career reasons. Among those who studied independently through informal learning, the split between the two main motivations was 50/50.
- We also investigated a number of detailed reasons for participation. In line with expectations, learners in formal education were more likely to indicate that their participation was intended **‘to get a recognised qualification’**. Some participants in other settings also selected this option. The results reflect potential overlaps in the learning routes offered by different types of providers.
- Learners who indicated that participation was **‘not really my choice’**, were present across all four provision groups. More than 1 in 4 participants in organised work-related training stated that their reason for participating was initiated by their employer or because of professional/benefit requirements. This can apply to those in or out of paid work – for example, jobseekers on benefits are often required to take training.
- Likewise, learners who selected **‘to develop myself as a person’** and **‘to meet people’** as specific motivations for learning were present across all provision groups. Notably, self-development was selected by more than 40 percent of those taking part in **informal learning**, followed by learners in formal education (33.1%), liberal education (31.6%), and organised work-related training (25.8%). On the other hand, more than 20 percent of those in **liberal education** were motivated by meeting other people, followed by learners in formal education (10.9%), informal learning (8.4%), and organised work-related training (5.6%).



ALE MOTIVATIONS BY PROVISION GROUP

(2017 - 2023)

“How are you doing this learning? / How did you do this learning?”



ORGANISED FORMAL

Through university, college, adult education centre/class, school



ORGANISED LIBERAL

Through voluntary organisation, local community, health/leisure club



ORGANISED WORK

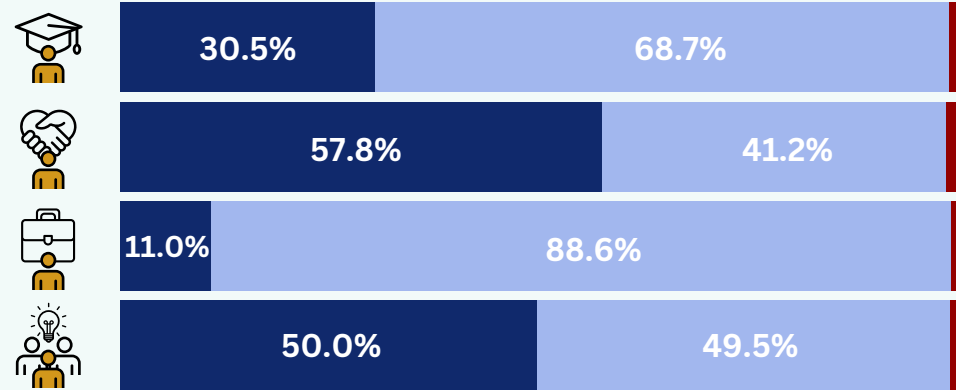
On a training course at work, external training, job, apprenticeship



INFORMAL

Independently on my own/with others

MAIN MOTIVATION



For leisure/personal interest

For my work and/or career

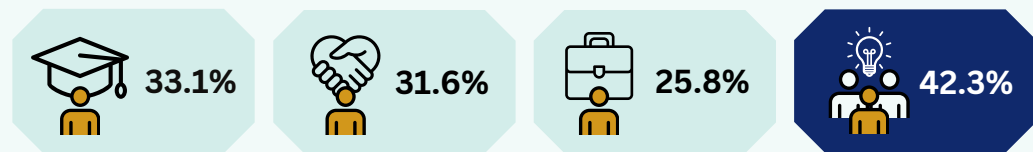
Do not know

“Do not know” responses = < 1.0%

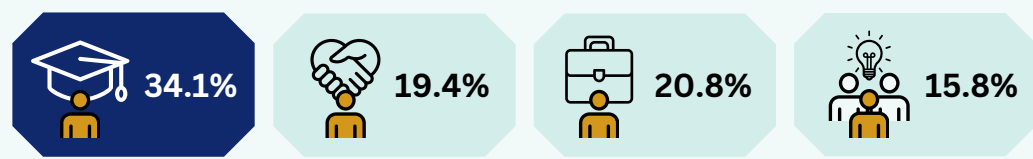
SPECIFIC MOTIVATION

“Which of the following best describe the reasons you started this learning?”

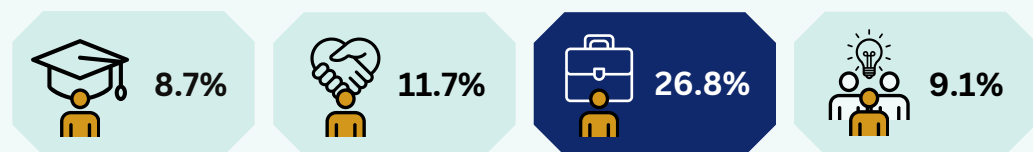
TO DEVELOP MYSELF AS A PERSON



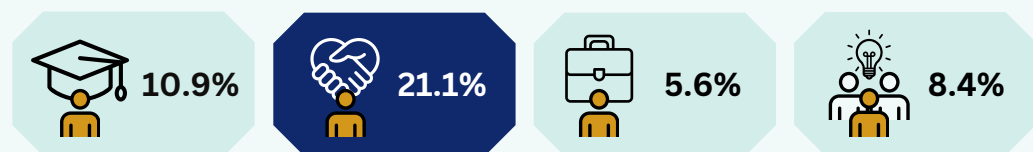
TO GET A RECOGNISED QUALIFICATION



NOT REALLY MY CHOICE - EMPLOYER / PROFESSIONAL / BENEFIT REQUIREMENT



TO MEET PEOPLE



Percentage of those who selected the specific motive per provision group

N = 8,667

What benefits do adults expect from learning? (1)

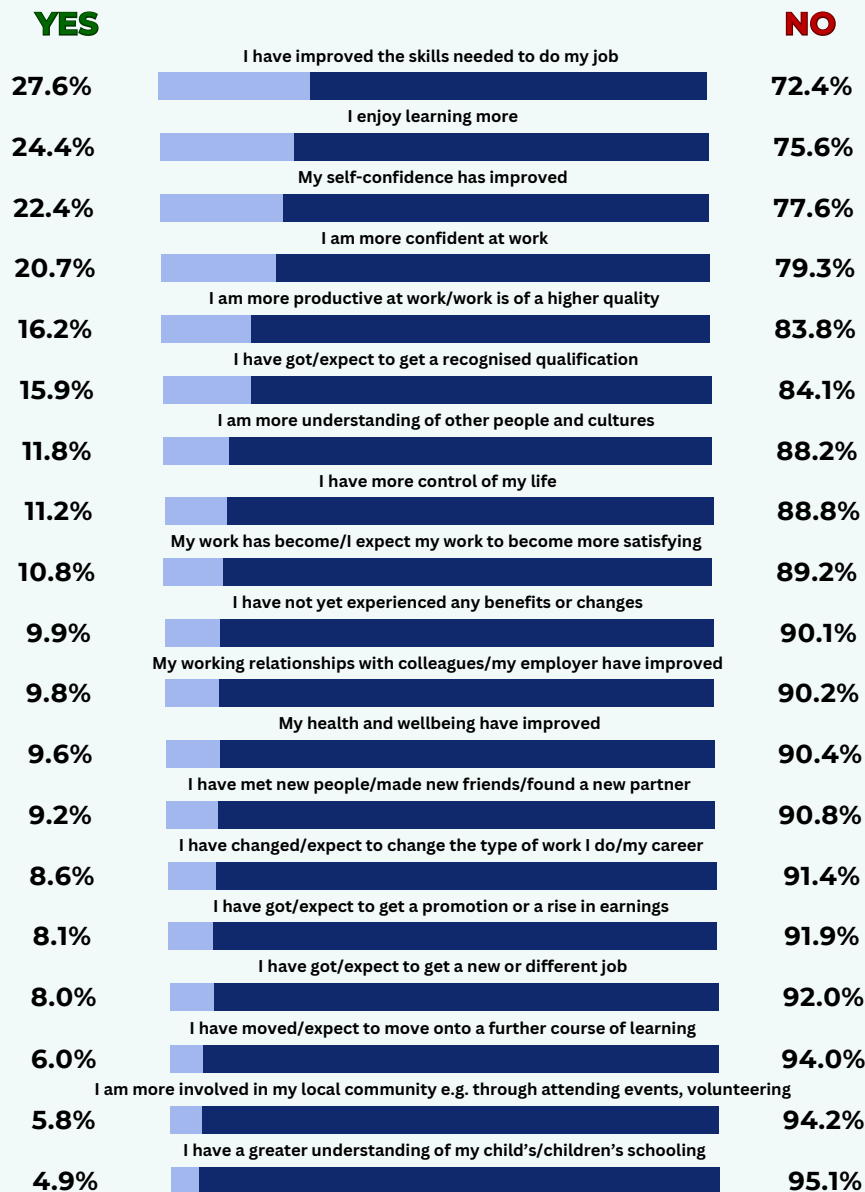
- Adults' motivations to participate in ALE can be influenced by the **benefits** they hope to gain. Broadly speaking, benefits can be monetary or non-monetary. Learners who master new skills and then manage to get a better-paid job or salary hike will have achieved a monetary benefit. Those who participate out of a personal interest, for enjoyment of learning, or want to contribute to their community might see benefits in terms of new friendships, greater knowledge, or improved well-being. These benefits are non-monetary.
- Data from the APiL survey provide insights into the benefits adult learners think they get from participation. Again, we used the **streamlined data** for 2017-2023 to search for patterns based on adult learners' six background characteristics.
- In line with motivations, the benefits selected most often were those relating to gaining **skills for work** and self-development such as **increased self-confidence** or **enjoyment of learning**. While learners could select as many 'benefits' as they liked, many options were selected only by small proportions of participants. In real numbers, however, this still reflects benefits achieved by several hundreds of participants, resulting in positive changes in their and/or their families' lives.
- Just below 10 percent (9.9%) of participants indicated that they had '**not yet experienced any benefits or positive changes**' because of their participation. Based on APiL data, it is difficult to make very clear statements about why this could be the case. Further analyses revealed that older adults, those from lower social grades, and those not in full-time employment were more likely to select this option. However, learners from minority ethnic groups were less likely than white learners to express a lack of perceived benefits.
- **Social grade** is an important predictor of participation. We contrasted groups AB and DE to investigate differences in their selection of 'benefit' items. Learners from social grade AB were significantly more likely to opt for work-related benefits than those from social grade DE. In contrast, learners from social grade DE were more likely to indicate health benefits, increases in self-confidence and the development of friendships. They were also more likely to indicate that they had not yet perceived any benefits from their learning.



BENEFITS

BENEFITS RECOGNISED BY APIL PARTICIPANTS (2017 - 2023)

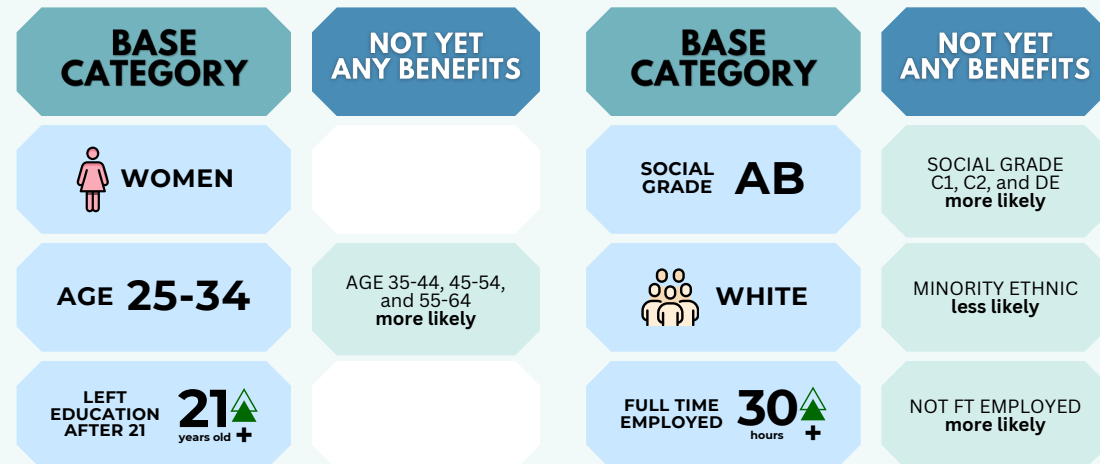
“ Can you identify any changes or benefits that have happened as a result of your learning? ”



N = 8,752

Respondents were instructed to 'please select all that apply'

LIKELIHOOD OF DECLARING 'NOT YET ANY BENEFITS'



VARIATION IN PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF LEARNING BY SOCIAL GRADE



Chi-square tests revealed statistically significant differences between Social Grade AB and DE in what they perceived as benefits of learning

N = 8,149 (top); N = 4,061 (bottom)

Only those that were statistically significant are included in the above figures

What benefits do adults expect from learning? (2)

- We found **variations in expected benefits by type of learning provision (organised formal, liberal, work-related and informal learning)**. Similar to the findings on motivations – presented before – benefits relating to **job-relevant skills** were more likely to be reported by full-time employees taking part in organised work-related training.
- Here we concentrate on some of the other popular types of benefits the learners in our sample reported. We also report variation among learners who indicated that they had not yet experienced any benefits at the time of the survey.
- Participants who engaged in **informal learning** were most likely to report that they **enjoy learning more** (32.1% of all participants in informal learning) because of their learning activity. At least one in four learners in **formal and liberal education** selected this option too. The lowest indication of increased learning enjoyment was found among those participating in **organised work-related training** (17.6%). As shown in the discussion of motivation before, learners in this latter group were more likely to participate because it was **compulsory** for them, for example because it was required by their employer or for benefit purposes.
- Slightly more than one in four adult learners in **formal (25.9%) and liberal education (26.1%)**, and in **informal learning (25.9%)** reported an **improvement in their self-confidence** because of their participation in adult learning and education. For **organised work-related training**, this option was lower. Increased self-confidence was selected by nearly one in five (19.4%) learners in this type of training provision.
- Around one in ten learners indicated that they **had not yet experienced any benefits** at the time of the survey. For those learning through **informal modes**, this sat above 10 percent (10.3%). The lowest reporting of this response item was among learners in **liberal education** (3.3%). Nearly 9 percent of learners in **formal education** had not yet experienced any benefits. For those in **organised work-related training**, this sat at 7.7 percent. Based on the data, it is not possible to know whether they experienced any benefits at a later stage.

ALE BENEFITS BY PROVISION GROUP

(2017 - 2023)

“ How are you doing this learning? / How did you do this learning? ”



ORGANISED FORMAL

Through university, college, adult education centre/class, school



ORGANISED WORK

On a training course at work, external training, job, apprenticeship



ORGANISED LIBERAL

Through voluntary organisation, local community, health/leisure club



INFORMAL

Independently on my own/with others

“ Can you identify any changes or benefits that have happened as a result of your learning? ”

I ENJOY LEARNING MORE



26.8%



25.52%

MY SELF-CONFIDENCE HAS IMPROVED



25.9%



26.1%

I HAVE NOT YET EXPERIENCED ANY BENEFITS OR CHANGES



8.9%



3.3%



17.6%



32.6%



19.4%



25.9%



7.7%



10.3%

Percentage of those who selected enjoying learning as a benefit per provision group

Percentage of those who selected improving their self-confidence as a benefit per provision group

Percentage of those who selected not yet experiencing any benefits per provision group

What challenges do participants encounter in their learning?

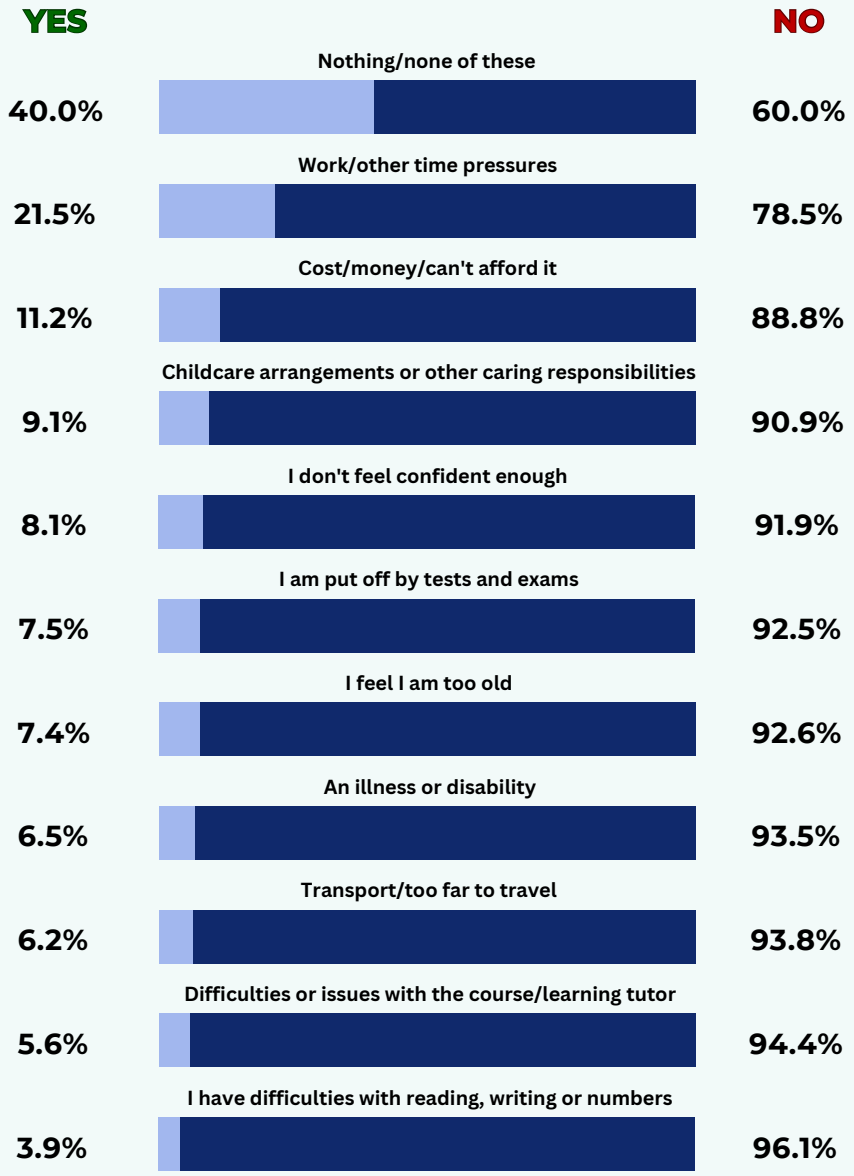
- Adult learners can experience a range of challenges that could potentially hamper their participation. The APiL data do not allow us to provide a detailed account of who successfully finished the learning activity they started, or of who dropped out. We do, however, have streamlined data on perceived challenges for the period 2017-2023.
- Four in 10 learners reported that they **did not experience any challenges** that hindered their participation. The data revealed that this option was selected more often by older learners as compared to those aged 25-34, indicating higher levels of challenges for the youngest adult group. Our data did not allow us to make significant claims on differences between groups for the other five background characteristics. These observations indicate that many learners have to deal with challenges, and that – apart from age – these affect everyone regardless of their background (though not necessarily to the same extent).
- Among the available items, more than 20 percent indicated **‘work or other time pressures’** and close to 10 percent selected **‘childcare arrangements or other caring responsibilities’**. Challenges relating to **‘cost or money’** were also indicated by more than 10 percent of all learners. These findings are in line with debates in the published literature that underline the role of time and money as potential hindrances to participation in adult learning.
- Investigating challenges by provision group, more than four in ten learners in **organised work-related training** indicated that they **did not experience any challenges**. This may be the result of their learning being incorporated into their daily work routine. Independent **informal** learners (38.3%) were also more likely than those in **formal** (29.4%) and **liberal** (22.0%) education to select that they did not experience challenges.
- While informal learning can typically be undertaken at one’s own pace, perhaps facilitated through freely accessible learning resources, nearly one in four learners in this provision group selected **‘time pressures’** as a challenge. We found fairly similar results (between 20% and 25%) for the other provision groups.
- The challenge **‘cost, money, can’t afford it’** was lowest among learners in organised work-related training (8.2%). While work-related training can be sponsored by the employer or employment services, some learners will undertake activities on a self-funded basis. Similarly, informal learning (14.3%) can involve cost, for example the purchase of learning material such as books. Cost challenges were highest for those in formal education (16.9%), closely followed by liberal education (16.2%).



CHALLENGES

PERCEIVED CHALLENGES OF APIL PARTICIPANTS (2017 - 2023)

“ Have you experienced any of the following challenges while learning?
Did you experience any of the following challenges while learning? ”



N = 8,752

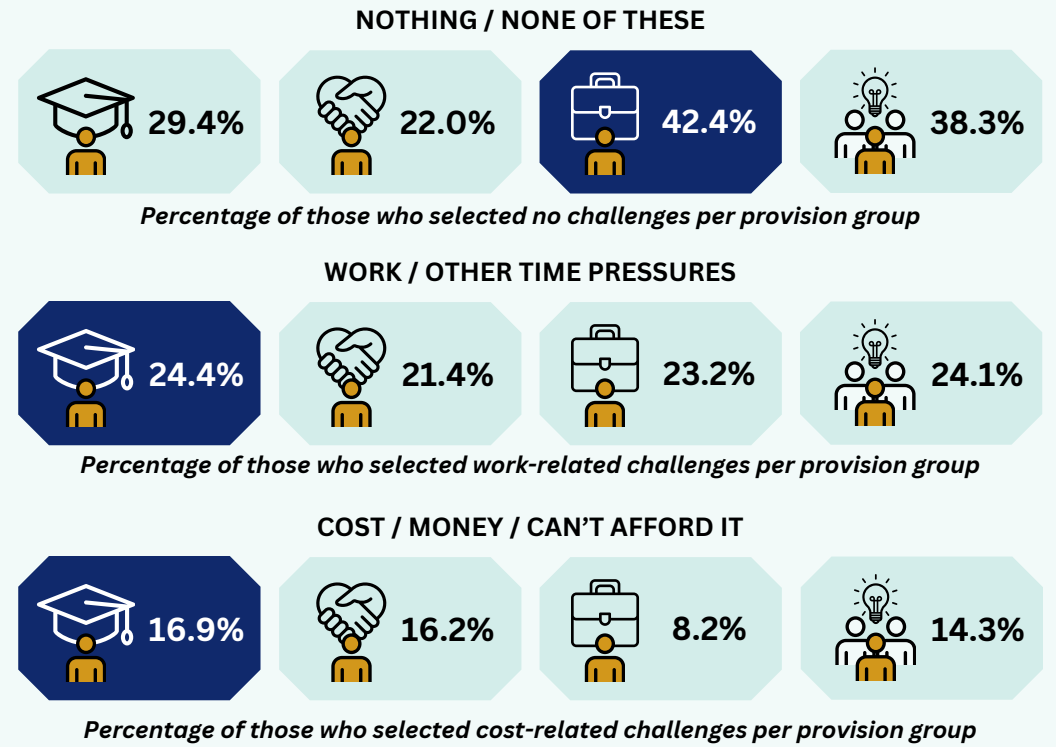
Respondents were instructed to 'please select all that apply'

LEARNING CHALLENGES BY PROVISION GROUP (2017 - 2023)

“ How are you doing this learning? / How did you do this learning? ”

- ORGANISED FORMAL**
Through university, college, adult education centre/class, school
- ORGANISED LIBERAL**
Through voluntary organisation, local community, health/leisure club
- ORGANISED WORK**
On a training course at work, external training, job, apprenticeship
- INFORMAL**
Independently on my own/with others

“ Have you experienced any of the following challenges while learning?
Did you experience any of the following challenges while learning? ”



Percentage of those who selected cost-related challenges per provision group

N = 8,667

What barriers do non-participants encounter that prevent their learning?

- **Not all adults participate in learning activities.** Earlier in this report, we presented insights into the **unequal distribution** of participants according to the six streamlined background characteristics. Younger adults belonging to social grade AB, who left education at age 21 or later, and who are in full-time employment are more likely to take part. An earlier section in this report also showed that many adults do not have an intention to take up learning in the future. This is especially the case for those who never engaged with learning since leaving school, and for those with learning experiences more than three years ago.
- Adults who have not participated in learning activities during the previous three years – including those who have not participated since leaving school – were asked whether any **barriers prevented them from learning**. Again, we used a streamlined list of the barriers included in the APiL survey between 2017 and 2023.
- The top ‘barrier’ was **‘nothing is preventing me / I don’t want to’**, selected by 36.7 percent of non-participants. This is in line with our previous finding that non-learners are more likely to lack an intention to learn in the future.
- Other top barriers were **time** (21.8%) and **cost** (20.0%) issues, although more than 10 percent of non-learners also indicated that they **felt too old** (13.6%).
- Using multivariate analyses, we investigated **variations in selecting of the top four barriers**. We present the results of logistic regressions against the base category. Full details of the analyses can be found in the **online data appendix**.
- **‘Nothing is preventing me’** was more likely to be indicated by men and those in the older age categories. However, those in social grade DE and not in full-time employment were less likely to select this option.
- Those in social grade DE and not in full-time employment were also less likely to choose **time pressures**. More detailed investigation showed that time pressures were most commonly selected by women, young, full-time workers in higher social grades. We also found lower time pressures for adults belonging to minority ethnic groups.
- **Cost issues** were more likely to be selected by women, those in social grades C1 and DE and by those not in full-time employment. Compared to the youngest age group, the oldest adults experienced fewer problems with the cost of study. This was also the case for adults from minority ethnic groups.
- Unsurprisingly, the likelihood of selecting **‘I feel I am too old’** increased by age. It was also stronger for adults in the lower social grades and more common among those who left full-time education before the age of 21.



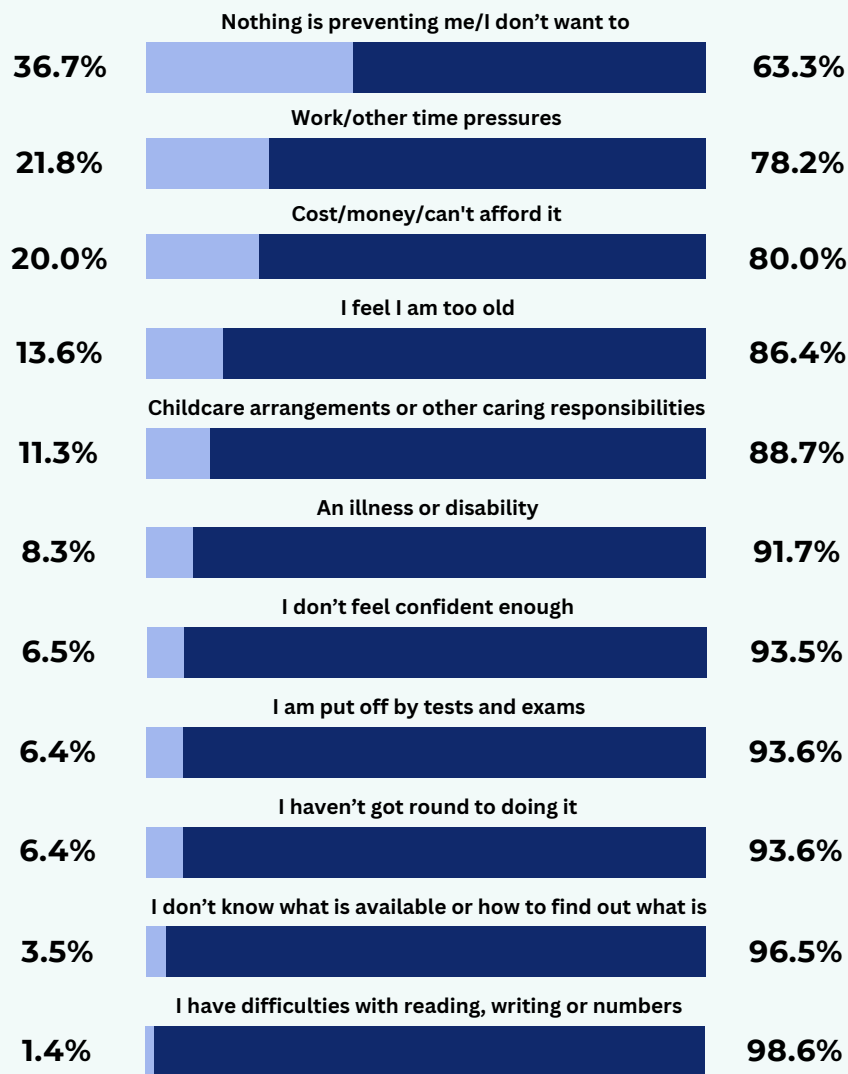
BARRIERS

PERCEIVED BARRIERS OF APIL NON-PARTICIPANTS (2017 - 2023)

“What, if anything, would you say are the main things preventing you from taking part in learning?”

YES

NO



N = 12,263

Respondents were instructed to 'please select all that apply'

LIKELIHOOD OF SELECTING A SPECIFIC BARRIER

BASE CATEGORY	NOTHING IS PREVENTING ME	WORK / OTHER TIME PRESSURES	COST / MONEY / CAN'T AFFORD IT	I FEEL I AM TOO OLD
WOMEN 	MEN more likely	MEN less likely	MEN less likely	
AGE 25-34	AGE 45-55 and 55-64 more likely	AGE 55-64 less likely	AGE 55-64 less likely	AGE 35-44, 45-55, and 55-64 more likely
LEFT EDUCATION AFTER 21 21 years old + 		LEFT EDUCATION BEFORE 21 less likely	LEFT EDUCATION BEFORE 21 less likely	LEFT EDUCATION BEFORE 21 more likely
SOCIAL GRADE AB	SOCIAL GRADE DE less likely	SOCIAL GRADE DE less likely	SOCIAL GRADE C1 and DE more likely	SOCIAL GRADE C1, C2, and DE more likely
WHITE 		MINORITY ETHNIC less likely	MINORITY ETHNIC less likely	
FULL TIME EMPLOYED 30 hours + 	NOT FT EMPLOYED less likely	NOT FT EMPLOYED less likely	NOT FT EMPLOYED more likely	

N = 11,881

Only those that were statistically significant are included in the above table

Before and after COVID-19

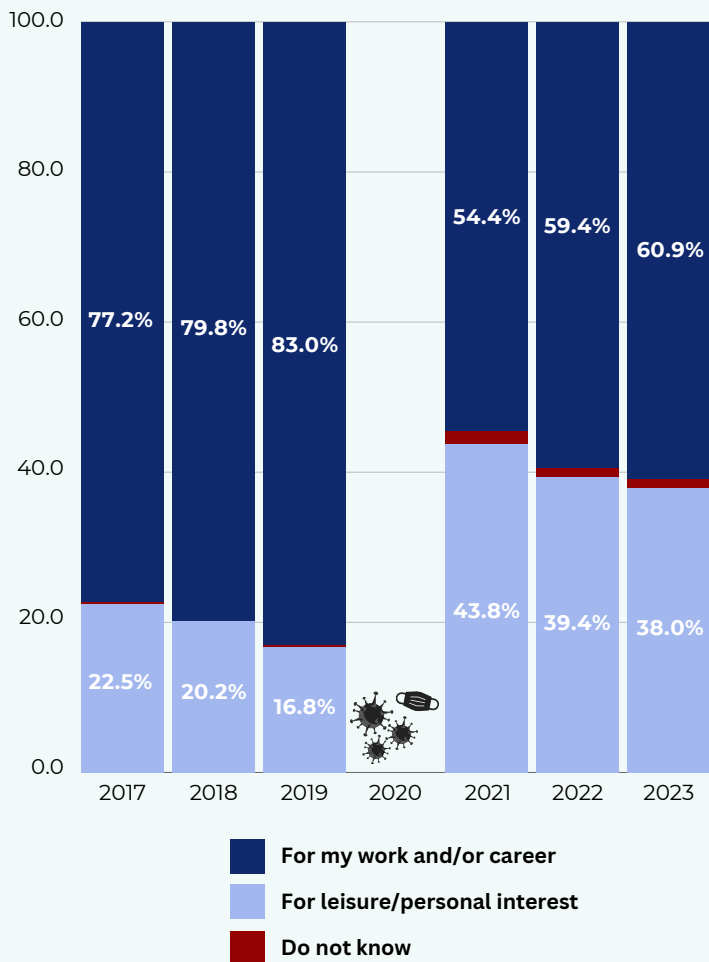
- Trends can change direction because of **‘critical junctures’**. As shown above, participation rates during the period 2002-2023 spiked in the aftermath of the global financial crisis in the late 2000s and the **COVID-19 lockdowns**. Given we have streamlined data for variables measuring motivations, challenges, and barriers for the period 2017-2023, we explored these further to discover changes before and after 2020.
- As mentioned earlier in this report, the APiL survey moved to a completely online mode during the pandemic. As such, contrasts pre- and post-COVID-19 lockdowns need to be treated with caution. The observed shifts may be partially due to societal and economic changes but may also be driven by the change in survey methodology.
- When asking adults to choose between work and career or leisure and personal interest as their **main motivation**, the majority would opt for work and career reasons. Interestingly, the 80 to 20 split in pre-COVID-19 years in favour of work-related reasons changed to 60 to 40 in the post-COVID-19 years. While most adults still opted for work and career reasons as their primary motivation, a higher proportion chose participation for personal interests.
- Exploring **learners’ challenges**, a lower proportion of them selected ‘no perceived challenges’ during the post-COVID-19 years. Consistent with this, both time and cost pressures were indicated by a higher proportion of learners post-COVID. In fact, every single challenge category had higher rates after COVID-19 compared with before. While participation rates increased, this was not because learning became ‘challenge free’.
- We observe similar patterns for **barriers perceived by non-learners**. During the pre-COVID-19 years, ‘nothing is preventing me’ was indicated by 45 percent of respondents. This declined to 25 percent during the post-COVID-19 years. Apart from a slight decrease for childcare issues, all other barriers increased. Notably, we found a significant increase for the barrier option ‘I feel I am too old’ to participate, which rose to over 20 percent in the post-pandemic years. The indication of ‘costs’ as a barrier preventing participation also tripled after COVID-19.



PRE-COVID VERSUS POST-COVID CHANGES IN ALE TRENDS

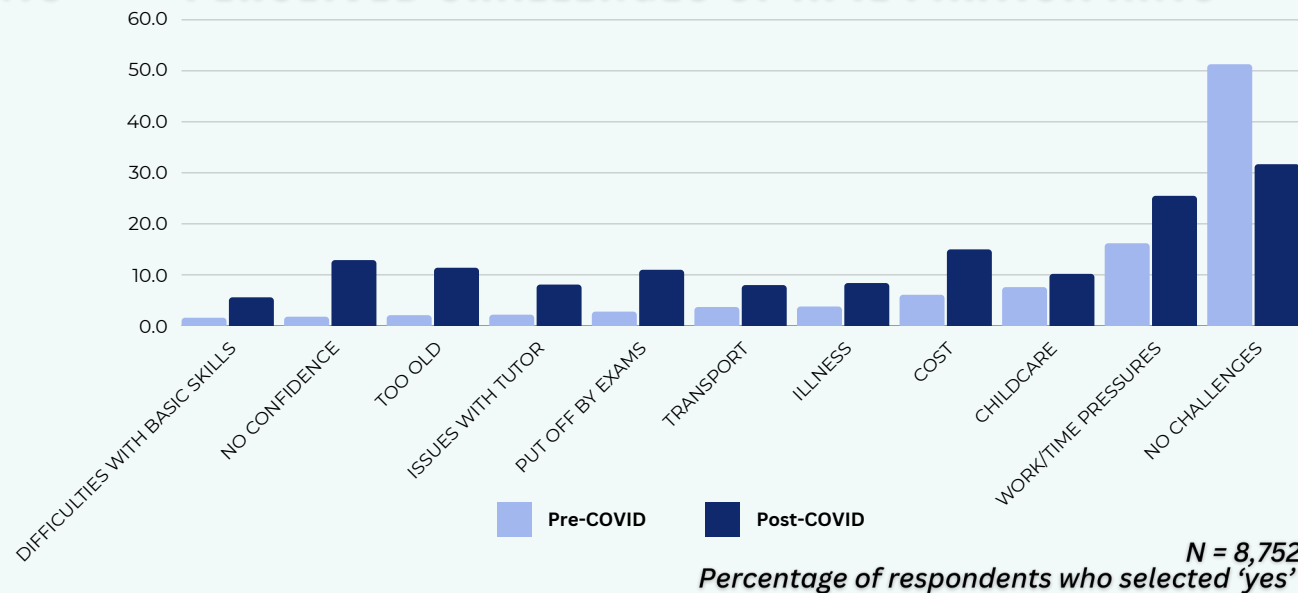
MAIN MOTIVATIONS OF APiL PARTICIPANTS

“ Thinking about your MAIN learning, are you doing this for leisure/personal interest or is it for your work/career reason? ”



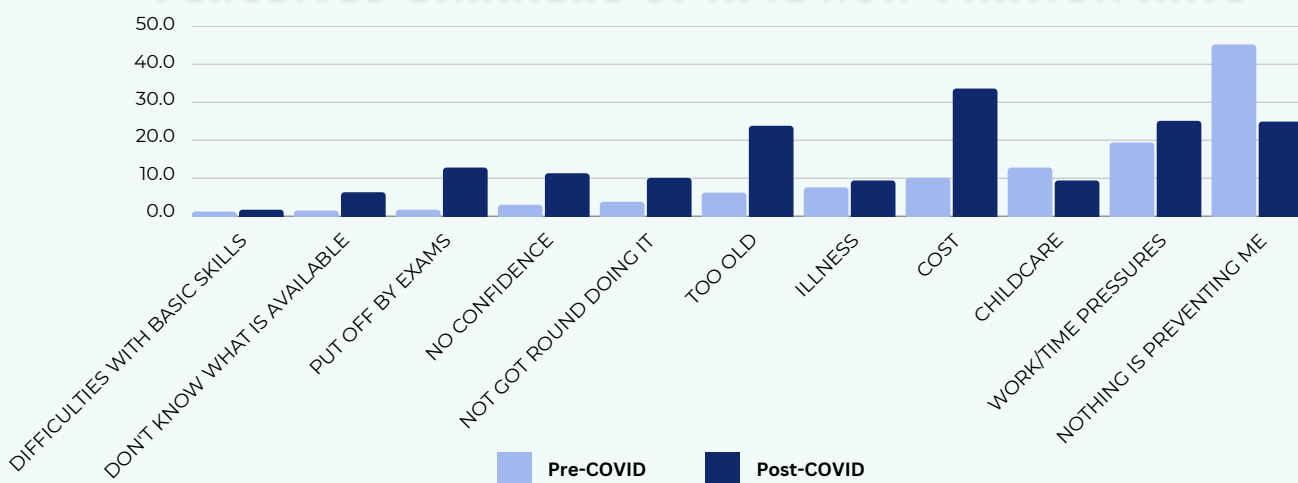
N = 8,752
“Do not know” responses = < 1.8%

PERCEIVED CHALLENGES OF APiL PARTICIPANTS



N = 8,752
Percentage of respondents who selected ‘yes’

PERCEIVED BARRIERS OF APiL NON-PARTICIPANTS



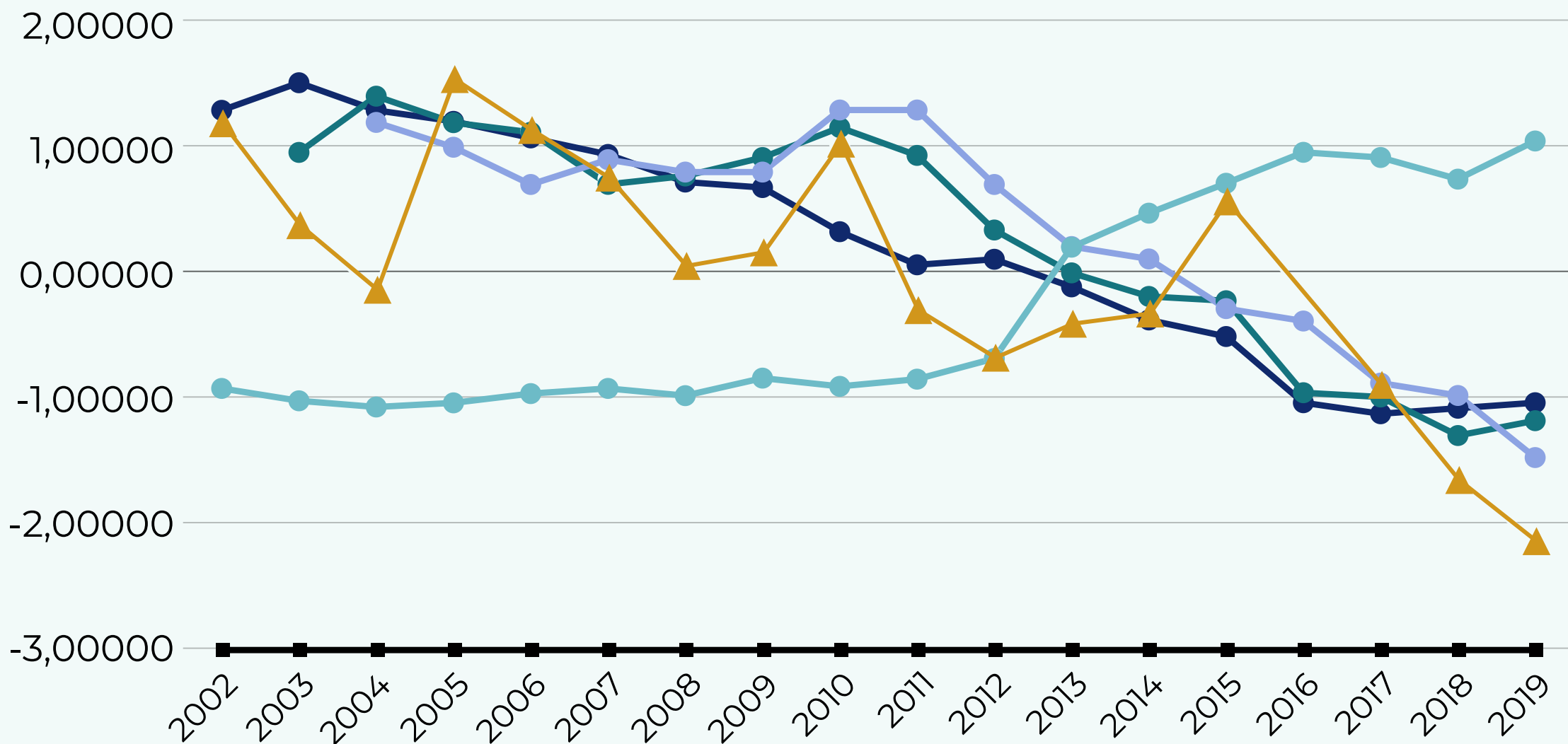
N = 12,263
Percentage of respondents who selected ‘yes’

APiL participation and macro-level indicators

- Adults cannot be separated from the societal, economic, and political context in which their learning takes place. The **multilevel layered model of participation** (Boeren, 2017) posits that adults' participation in learning can be influenced by system-level characteristics. Therefore, we analysed 18 different macro-level factors on topics of the economy, labour market and public funding that can induce more participation behaviour among adults.
- We analysed macro-level data through descriptive and correlational methods. We limited analyses to the **2002-2019** period due to methodological differences that brought about comparability issues in the post-COVID era. Findings should therefore be interpreted with caution. Data were standardised using z-scores and financial figures were adjusted to account for inflation.
- Four variables were found to be closely related with the patterns we found in APiL participation rates over time.
- **Trade union membership** was found to be positively associated with higher participation rates. Trade unions can have an important role in proliferating learning opportunities by negotiating training opportunities with employers and supporting learning culture in workplaces. The decrease in trade union membership between 2002 and 2019 is in line with the decreasing trend in APiL participation.
- **Public expenditure on adult education** is positively associated with APiL participation, which suggests that higher levels of public funding for adult learning is among the most important prerequisites for having more adults participate in learning. This also suggests that the 31 percent decrease in public funding for adult learning throughout the 2010s (see IFS, 2023) may partially explain the decline in APiL participation until the COVID-19 lockdowns.
- **Higher levels of economic activity** in the population were also found to be positively related to participation. Given the nature of our data, we need to be cautious about making causal claims about this finding. As stated earlier in this report, those in full-time employment tend to participate more. Further analyses are needed to potentially spot mediating factors between these two variables.
- Using the share of people working on zero-hour contracts as a proxy, we found that **precarious employment** is negatively associated with participation. Precarious contracts tend to bring unstable schedules and unpredictable incomes, which can potentially make 'time' and 'cost' significant barriers for adult participation in learning.

PARTICIPATION RATES AND MACRO-LEVEL INDICATORS

(2002-2019)



▲ Participation in ALE

- Trade Union Membership
- Public Expenditure on ALE
- Economic Inactivity
- Precarious Employment

No APiL survey data for 2016

Summary of results

- **Overall**, younger adults who finished their initial education at or after age 21, belonging to the highest social grade AB, and are in full-time employment had the highest probability of taking part in adult learning and education. While motivations, barriers, challenges and benefits varied within gender and ethnicity groups, their participation rates have been fairly balanced.
- **The decline in participation rates** during the 2010s occurred because of lower engagement among those with the strongest probabilities to participate. While there was some fluctuation among those who are typically under-represented, their participation rates remained stubbornly low throughout the entire period. The decline co-occurred with a lower expenditure on adult learning, lower trade union membership numbers and a rise in zero-hour contracts and precarious work. Participation rates spiked during the post-COVID years.
- **Previous participation** was by far the strongest predictor for the indication of a future learning intention. Those who participated at the time of the survey or in the three years before the data collection point were much more likely to express an interest than non-participants. This result underlines the cumulative effect of participation.
- **Gender:** Overall, women were more likely to participate in adult learning although the differences with men were marginal. They were also more likely to express an intention to participate in future learning activities. They were more likely than men to select motivations both for self-development and work but were less likely to say that nothing is preventing them from participating. Women were more likely to indicate time and cost issues as challenges and barriers. This indicates that, while participation patterns have become much more equal in recent decades, gendered patterns remain in terms of financial situation and work-life balance.
- **Age groups:** Both actual participation and future learning intentions declined by age. The decline became more rapid for those between ages 55 and 64. Younger adults were more likely to indicate obtaining a qualification as a motivation for learning while those in the older groups were more likely to say that participation was not their choice. Older participants were more inclined to indicate that they did not perceive any challenges while learning but were also more likely to select the lack of benefits arising from their participation. They were less likely to indicate barriers preventing participation. This was in contrast with younger learners who were more likely to cite time barriers.
- **Age left school:** Adults who left full-time education before the age of 21 participate less than those who left later. They were also more likely to indicate that participation in learning was involuntary/not their choice. Among those who did

participate, the indication of motivations both for self-development and work-related issues was weaker compared to those who left later. While this background characteristic needs to be carefully interpreted as a proxy for educational attainment, it hints at an ongoing cumulative effect of participation where earlier educational success fuels future success.

- **Social grade:** Both participation rates and future learning intentions decline by social grade, with around half of those in groups DE not having participated since leaving school. When comparing the participation benefits from those in groups AB and DE, we found DE participants were more likely to select non-monetary benefits (e.g. friendship, health and well-being) while AB participants were more likely to indicate work-related benefits. Those in group DE were also more inclined to select that they had not yet perceived any benefits. Cost barriers were stronger among non-participants in group DE while those in AB felt mainly prevented by time barriers. Class differences were clearly visible in the data and were more powerful than differences in relation to gender and ethnicity.
- **Ethnicity:** Differences based on ethnicity were less clear cut. Combined current and recent participation rates during the previous three years were equal between white and adults from minority ethnic backgrounds. For the entire sample, we could not claim significant differences in future learning

intentions between the two groups, although adults from minority ethnic backgrounds were more likely to express a future learning intention when located in the non-participant and the recent participant group. Compared to their white counterparts, adults from minority ethnic backgrounds participated more with the aim to obtain a qualification but also for self-development. They were less likely to say that participation was involuntary or that they did not perceive any benefits, and perceived lower levels of time pressures compared to white adults.

- **Work status:** Those in full-time employment participated more but they were also more likely to indicate that their participation was involuntary. Their motivations for learning related to work issues such as improving job skills. They felt more time pressures compared to those who do not work full-time. This latter group was mainly prevented from participating by costs and affordances issues. Within this group, participants were also more likely to indicate that they had not yet perceived any benefits from their learning. While participation in adult learning and education can serve a wide range of purposes, the work-related focus was found to be a dominant one in our data.

Recommendations

- Our findings allow us to formulate several **recommendations for policy, practice and future research**.
- Besides unequal participation rates, we did not find a universal intention for future learning among the adult population. A significant proportion of non-participants indicated that they were not obstructed by any barriers. A more rigorous **tracking of participants over time** will help to reveal ALE benefits more accurately and will provide more factual insights on what adults can expect from their engagement with learning. More **longitudinal research** is needed, including on those who participated against their own intention. This is needed to track whether involuntary participation leads to satisfactory learning outcomes.
- **Alternative approaches to data collection** are needed to go beyond the listing of barrier items in surveys, allowing researchers to delve deeper into the reasons why adults do not have a **learning intention** in the first place. This can include the combination of **qualitative and quantitative research**.
- Additional research on larger databases such as the Labour Force Survey is recommended to provide more robust insights on the **regional variation in participation** in adult learning and education over time.
- The **post-COVID period** saw an increase in participation rates but also in **perceived barriers and challenges**. Stakeholders in government, the workplace and civil society need to be encouraged to find ways that allow adults to blend engagement with learning as part of their **work-life balance**. Adequate **finance mechanisms** are needed to lower cost barriers. In due course, research will be needed to evaluate newer initiatives such as devolved skills funding and the introduction in England of the Lifelong Learning Entitlement.
- Lifelong learning is still skewed towards the **younger adult population**. Extended retirement ages and longevity ask for fundamental shifts in thinking about and incentivising learning throughout life, both for work and non-work-related reasons.
- Differences in participation and learning intentions according to **age left school and social grade** strongly indicate stubborn inequalities in participation. These insights require stakeholders to tackle unequal chances early in the life cycle. At the same time, it asks for ongoing efforts to make learning accessible for all, to support second chance routes, and to keep on reaching out to those who are typically underrepresented.

References

Babayigit, B., Boeren, E., Clancy, C., Evangelista, Z., & Holford, J. (2024, February 29–March 2). Investigating participation in adult learning and education: But how is it measured? *5th Conference of the ESREA (European Society for Research on the Education of Adults) Network on Policy Studies in Adult Education*, Funchal, Madeira, Portugal.

Boeren, E. (2016). *Lifelong learning participation in a changing policy context: An interdisciplinary theory*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Boeren, E. (2017). Understanding adult lifelong learning participation as a layered problem. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 39(2), 161-175.

IFS. (2023). *Investment in Training and Skills*.

<https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-10/IFS-Green-Budget-2023-Investment-in-training-and-skills.pdf>



A.L.E. POLICIES

UK - IRELAND