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Standard Life Centre
for the Future of Retirement

Never too late to learn: Attitudes, behaviours and overcoming barriers – engagement with lifelong learning for midlife and older people

October 2022

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Phoenix
Insights

To explore perceptions of lifelong learning, Phoenix Insights reports on findings from polling and focus groups independently commissioned from Public First looking at what steps we can take to unlock the potential of people to upskill at all ages.

Acknowledgements

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thephoenixgroup.com/views-insights/phoenix-insights

1

Executive summary

Never too late to learn

People are living for longer and the world of work is changing rapidly. Being able to access lifelong learning and upskill when needed matters both for people's own experience of work as well as for the UK's wider economic growth.

This is particularly important in the context of large numbers of older workers who have left the labour market and not returned post-pandemic, and a growing gap between people's retirement expectations and likely outcomes. Previous Phoenix Insights research shows that even with increased rates of savings and people working for longer, a sizable number of people will not be on track to reach their expected retirement income.[1] The opportunity to train, upskill and then continue to progress at work is therefore important in today's cost of living crisis as well as for people's future financial wellbeing.

Our report sets out new research on the perceptions of individuals and businesses to upskilling, retraining and lifelong learning. We also make recommendations for the government's proposed flagship policy in this area, the Lifelong Loan Entitlement ('LLE').

1. Great Expectations: Are people's retirement income expectations adequate and achievable? Phoenix Insights (2022).

Key statistics

People's attitudes to lifelong learning:

70%

The majority of people thought that the government needs to do more to help people build on their skills throughout their career (70%) and retrain and upskill throughout their lives (67%)

59%

Three in five people (59%) agreed that the government should only expect people to be willing to retrain if they are guaranteed employment afterwards

62%

62% of working people said they are more likely to stay in their industry than change industry over the course of their career

Business attitudes to lifelong learning:

53%

Over half of business decision-makers (53%) thought that the government is not doing enough to support on-the-job training

56%

56% of business decision-makers thought that we should put more emphasis on retraining employees in the middle of their careers, rising to 62% of decision-makers at large companies

69%

However, we estimate that 69% of businesses hadn't offered their employees any formal training over the last 12 months

Attitudes to the Lifelong Loan Entitlement policy:

70%

70% of employers (and 74% of large employers) supported the LLE

48%

However, 48% said 'I don't think my employees would want to take on new debt'

X

Making individuals aware of the proposed LLE made no statistically significant impact on their desire to retrain

Individuals and businesses are broadly positive about lifelong learning, upskilling and retraining:

Our research shows that 70% of individuals agreed that today's economy makes retraining more important than ever before – and only 4% of business decision-makers disagreed with the statement that 'offering formal training beyond the basic functions of a job has a positive effect on people's performance at work'.

However, these views are not matched by action.

- We estimate that 37% of businesses have never offered employees formal training, and 69% hadn't offered their employees any formal training in the last 12 months.
- Among of the businesses that had never offered any formal training, 41% of decision-makers said that their reason for not doing so was that their staff 'did not need any formal training'.
- 48% of individuals said that they had never considered retraining for a job.
- The older people get, the less likely they are to consider retraining – 60% of 45–54-year-olds had never considered retraining, compared to 35% of 35–44-year-olds.

Many people face significant barriers to taking part in lifelong learning

Our research identified the challenges which make it harder for people to engage with training and retraining in the middle of their careers. These include:

- not being able to stop working or reduce hours;
- not being able to fund study;
- not being able to afford living costs – for individuals and for their dependants – while taking time out to upskill or retrain;
- caring responsibilities;
- risk aversion to doing something new;
- lack of confidence about their ability or capacity to return to academic study;
- fear of being 'shamed' or 'embarrassed'; and
- physical or mental ill-health.

> "It's a gamble. Especially if you've got mortgages, and if you've got children that depend on you...even if something new comes up. You look at it and go but what if."
>
> Train driver, 42

> "...if you are stuck in with a load of youngsters that are learning things, lightning fast, and you're really the slow kid in the class, it's not nice."
>
> Construction manager, 63

> "The ones that want to learn aren't allowed... We're the zombies of our generation."
>
> Unemployed, 60

We also found barriers in how businesses engage with training, upskilling and retraining initiatives.

These included:

- funding;
- time pressures/prioritisation;
- risk of losing investment if staff move on; and
- lack of information about available schemes.

These barriers varied in relation to the size of the organisation and the sector they were in. Decision-makers in small and medium enterprises ('SMEs') were more likely to think their employees didn't need training (43% vs 30% of larger businesses), and many businesses in highly regulated sectors such as healthcare and banking predominantly focused on mandatory training.

People like lifelong learning, but not lifelong loans

The government's proposed LLE should be targeted to unlock and broaden access to upskilling and retraining for people across their lives, particularly those who may have missed out on opportunities to learn earlier in adulthood. However, we found that many of the barriers we have identified to lifelong learning apply equally to willingness to engage with the LLE. We found that the LLE made no statistically significant impact on an individual's intention to retrain – with taking on more debt (41%) being the top concern.

What is the Lifelong Loan Entitlement?

As part of the Lifetime Skills Guarantee, from 2025, the LLE will provide individuals with the equivalent of four years of post-18 education loan entitlement to use over their lifetime. This could be provided in colleges or universities and it aims to put further education ('FE') and training at levels 4 and 5 on an equal footing with the familiar route to an undergraduate degree.

The scheme aims to create a more flexible system to allow individuals to study individual modules at levels 4 to 6. The government proposes that a more flexible, modular system would allow individuals to step in and out of the system when it is right for them.

Our research also highlighted the essential role employers have in advising and supporting their staff when it comes to upskilling, training and retraining, and the implications this would have for the LLE model. Many participants in our focus groups (all of whom were aged 40 and over) made it clear they would only consider taking out a loan for training if an employer was offering them a job or promotion on the back of it.

Businesses were keen in principle to engage with schemes such as the LLE, as well as other government initiatives such as the Midlife MOT, but they still had their reservations. Only 54% of business decision-makers thought that the LLE would help them upskill their employees, and only 48% of decision-makers at SMEs. In our focus groups, businesses felt it would be important for the LLE to have guidance for employers to ensure they weren't seen to be 'pushing' employees into taking out a loan. Information on what courses were available and the time commitment for employees would be vital if they were to undertake their studies whilst at work.

> "...if you're an unethical employer, you need to know that you're not going to be able to screw over your employees by pushing the onus of finding training onto them rather than yourself."
>
> Bank, 1,000 employees

Recommendations for action

Using these findings, we have developed a set of recommendations which we believe would improve the upskilling and retraining offer for midlife and older people in the UK, as well as targeted recommendations for the effective rollout of the LLE. Our recommendations centre around the English skills system however many are applicable to devolved nations.

Recommendations – Policy positioning

Training, retraining and upskilling should be centred as a vital tool for businesses to grow and succeed. Government should highlight the role of training and retraining in forging a high-productivity economy and a thriving business sector across the UK. Policies such as the right to paid training leave could support employees to engage with training opportunities.

Government should explore creative ways to highlight financial incentives for people in midlife to engage with lifelong learning, including alternative or additional means of financing the LLE. Self-funding learning through debt is a major barrier for many in midlife. Whilst we do not expect government to offer a grant for 100% of costs, we believe that government should explore creative ways to incentivise midlife and older people to engage with the scheme, including part subsidies or provider or employer bursaries/scholarships, particularly in skill shortage areas. There is precedent for this approach in sectors such as the NHS and teaching (e.g. the NHS bursary and funded teacher training places). Phoenix Insights has previously recommended that some of this funding could be secured from government savings resulting from any increases to the state pension age.

Build a coalition of key actors, including businesses and representative groups, learners and education providers, to work together to close skills gaps across the UK, particularly through Local Skills Improvement Plans ('LSIPs'). Where appropriate these should be devolved to Mayoral Combined Authorities where possible to respond to local and regional skills shortages and needs.

Recommendations – Framing and communicating to individuals

Review the language used when discussing learning opportunities for adults of different ages. Words such as 'apprenticeship' and 'internship' have strong associations with low pay and 'starting at the bottom' – rephrasing opportunities to lean on preferences for framing such as 'upskilling, 'retraining' and 'on-the-job training' will help give midlife and older people more confidence to engage.

A renaming and branding of the Lifelong Loan Entitlement scheme and more positive framing. The phrase 'lifelong loan' was widely viewed as negative and unappealing. Having the scheme too closely associated with government was also seen as a negative – the scheme will need to be delivered in an impartial and independent way that prioritises choice for the learner.

Accurate information about the quality and outcomes of courses available to adult learners to support them in their careers, including potential new career routes or the number of vacancies available linked to the qualification studied. Midlife and older people consider retraining to be a 'risk' or 'a gamble' and need to know what they can expect if they successfully complete a course – the presence of a 'safety net' as well as whether the course would be 'worth it' both financially and otherwise (e.g. a guaranteed job role or commitment to progression within their current role).

Recommendations – Strengthening the role of employers

Provide clear guidance on the role of employers, including how they can support their employees to engage with lifelong learning broadly and specifically with the LLE. We believe government should do this working closely with representative organisations.

Create accessible and practical information and guidance for employers on what training is available from providers, what time commitment courses require and the outcomes of the qualification. Employers are most interested in the business benefit to them in terms of improved productivity but also in terms of staff wellbeing, retention and engagement. **Support for employers to understand how different levels of qualification could be useful for their business** – we found a lack of understanding, particularly amongst SMEs, about different qualifications and at different levels.

Engage employers early on in the design, development and implementation of the LLE to ensure their needs, preferences and concerns are taken into account. Employers know their skills gaps and workforce needs better than anyone and their expertise and insights are essential. Working with both individuals and employers to develop the scheme should boost uptake, troubleshoot potential issues before they arise and ensure that the LLE is as effective as possible.

Recommendations – Design and delivery

Lifelong learning requires a **flexible delivery model which works around caring responsibilities and other needs** (including disabilities and poor physical/mental health) and does not make older learners in this setting feel like they're 'back in a classroom' – midlife and older people do not want 'one size fits all' training. If this is going to work, it needs to be tailored around individuals' needs.

Access to free independent adult careers support to give midlife and older workers the confidence to engage with general training and retraining as well as the LLE and enable them to utilise their new qualifications to full effect. This is something that Phoenix Insights recommended in its previous report (Public Engagement in Longer Lives)[2] as a means to support individuals in their decision-making as well as to provide a point of information and guidance for employers.

For the LLE we require **clear information for both individuals and employers on how loan repayments and maintenance support will work, as well as information on entry requirements, format of the learning, and assessment methods**. Unlike those in their late teens and twenties, midlife and older people will not be at school or college and are therefore unlikely to receive clear support and guidance on their options. This also makes engaging with employers crucial.

2. Public engagement in longer lives | Phoenix Group.

2

Introduction

Research context

People are living for longer. But longer lives are not yet better lives. We want to change this.
Phoenix Insights Strategy, 2021[3]

The value of upskilling across longer lives

Life expectancy at birth in the UK in 2018 to 2020 was 79 years for males and nearly 83 years for females.[4] To put that in perspective, in 2011 life expectancy at birth was almost double what it was in 1841.[5] A longer life expectancy means that many people may need or want to work for longer, and many people will find the world of work very different from the one they may have trained for early in their careers. As we work for longer and technology changes around us, the need to upskill and reskill later in life becomes greater. Our education and skills system has not been designed with this in mind.

The role of lifelong learning, to support people across their longer careers to get into, progress within, or change jobs, has therefore never been more important. In March 2022, CIPD highlighted 974,000 older workers were not working but would like to.[6] We also know that as the workforce becomes older it decreases the average rate of job mobility – as older workers are less likely to move jobs compared to younger workers. In 201–19, 5.8% of 16–24-year-olds moved jobs per quarter, five times the rate of 55–64-year-olds ((1.2%).[7] As a consequence, many older workers, particularly in declining sectors, become 'stuck' in their role or their industry – and when they eventually do make a job move, this is usually to a job at a lower skill level than their previous position.

Whilst lifelong learning has obvious positive impacts for individuals in terms of getting into work or changing careers, it is also vital for employers to get the best out of their staff.

> "Virtually every UK worker needs reskilling: about 30.5 million UK workers (94% of today's workforce) lack the full suite of skills they will require in 2030 to perform their jobs well."[8]
>
> The economic case for reskilling the UK: How employers can thrive by boosting workers' skills, McKinsey

McKinsey research shows that 75% of reskilling cases make economic sense for employers[9] and effective reskilling can bring a productivity uplift of between 6 to 12% for them[10]. When it comes to the country as a whole, the CBI reported that closing the UK skills gap could provide a £150bn uplift to GVA by 2030[11]. And whilst the remaining 25% of reskilling cases may not provide the employer with direct economic benefits, they can still benefit from the social desirability of offering reskilling opportunities.[12]

3. For better longer lives – Phoenix Insights Strategy Document I Phoenix Insights (2021).
4. National life tables – life expectancy in the UK: 2018 to 2020 I Office for National Statistics (2021).
5. How has life expectancy changed over time? I Office for National Statistics (2015).
6. Understanding older workers: Analysis and recommendations to support longer and more fulfilling working lives (2022).
7. Changing jobs? I The Economy 2030 Inquiry (2022).
8. The economic case for reskilling in the UK: How employers can thrive by boosting workers' skills I McKinsey (2020).
9. Employer skills survey 2019 I GOV.UK (2020).
10. The economic case for reskilling in the UK: How employers can thrive by boosting workers' skills I McKinsey (2020).
11. How Britain grows again – Educating for the modern world – An economic plan for the UK I CBI (2022) .
12. Learning for Life: Funding a world-class adult education system I CBI (2022).
13. Educational expenditure by source and destination I OECD.

Uptake and provision of lifelong learning needs to change

Spending on adult education and learning within the UK lags comparator nations in the OECD.[13] Despite a wide range of training/retraining programmes in the UK, between 2010–11 and 2020–21 there was a 50% decrease in the number of adults participating in government-funded further education and skills training,[14] and there was an 11% real-terms fall in employers' spending on workforce training per employee from 2011–2019.[15]

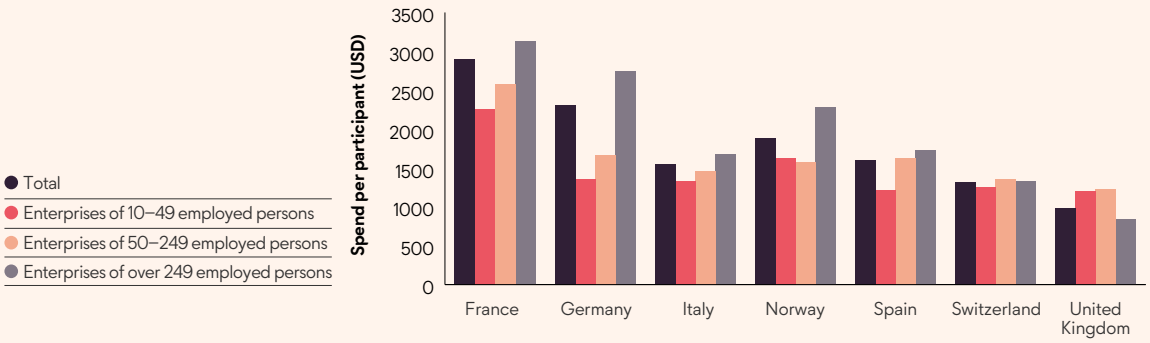
This is particularly problematic for midlife and older individuals. he distance between our initial education and when we stop work is getting longer, leading to a greater need for upskilling throughout working life. Indeed, the very concept of careers is being challenged, with those leaving education now talking increasingly of 'portfolio careers'[16] as opposed to the traditional '9 to 5'. Changing and new technology also means that some industries will face greater challenges than others in terms of automation and skills shortages – so the impact on workers will not be spread evenly.

Phoenix Insights research, the Longer Lives Index, found that 18 million adults in the UK are not adequately preparing financially for later life, and 10 million are not confident in their ability to secure work, worried that ill health and a lack of skills will stop them from earning what they need to save for retirement.

Changes to the labour market since the pandemic have led to what some have called the 'Great Retirement' with over 60% of the increase in economic inactivity during the coronavirus pandemic being driven by those aged 50 to 64[17] . The data continues to paint a concerning picture of economic inactivity amongst this age group, reaching the highest level it has been since 2012. This is not due to the rising unemployment numbers, but the increase of over 50s unable to find work. In fact, job vacancies in the UK remain at a record level. Rather it is a crisis of participation – of people not working, but not looking for work either.

Figure 1

Adult Education and Learning: Annual Training Costs (OECD, 2015)[18]



14. Developing workforce skills for a strong economy I National Audit Office (2022).
15. Developing workforce skills for a strong economy (Summary) I National Audit Office (2022).
16. Educational expenditure by source and destination I OECD.
17. Portfolio careers – the new normal? I BBC Bitesize.
18. Employment in the UK: July 2022 I Office for National Statistics (2022).

We also know that only 53.5% of disabled people aged 16 to 64 were in employment between July and September 2021, compared with 81.6% of non-disabled people.[19] Considering the rate of disability increases proportionally with age,[20] utilising lifelong learning to ensure midlife and older people have the skills to move roles which are fit for them will be key. In addition to this, research by Ipsos shows that one in five women (19%) have left a job because of difficulties balancing work with caring responsibilities, and that women account for 85% of sole carers for children, and 65% of sole carers for older adults.[21] Where people may care for their older relatives, often parents, in their mid-career, utilising lifelong learning could enable them to engage in both flexible learning and ultimately obtain a job which they both want, and are able to do, around their caring responsibilities.

All of this points to a greater need to successfully engage people in their mid to late career with upskilling and retraining opportunities that meet their career needs.

Education policy needs to meet the needs of learners and employers

In early 2022, the then Minister of State for Higher and Further Education, Michelle Donelan, laid out a plan for the future of lifelong learning, upskilling and retraining:

> "We will turbocharge our economy by becoming the first country to have a Lifelong Loan Entitlement at scale. People from all walks of life will have the opportunity to build up learning over their lifetime and have a real choice in how and when they study to acquire new life-changing skills.
>
> "They will have the opportunity to train, retrain and upskill as needed in response to changing skills needs and employment patterns. Their fund will be able to be used to study flexibly, module-by-module, as and when they want throughout their life. Above all, it is a system that will support a lifelong learning culture that will improve opportunities, support businesses and in turn increase our productivity."[22]

We believe this has the potential to radically change the landscape for midlife and older individuals. Success here would mean a step change in how adults approach learning across their longer lives – supported by a government scheme that facilitates and supports this change in behaviour.

In order to help this happen, we commissioned research into lifelong learning, upskilling and the proposed LLE, including both public and businesses' perceptions of the scheme. We examined this through three key lenses:

- High-level, current attitudes towards training and retraining.
- What barriers both individuals and employers face when engaging with retraining.
- Specific views from individuals and employers on government policy and provision including the proposed LLE and what adjustments could be made to ensure it works for them.

19. Outcomes for disabled people in the UK: 2021 | Office for National Statistics (2022).
20. Ageing and disability | United Nations Enable.
21. Who Cares? Business in the Community & Ipsos research reveals the great workplace divide (2022).
22. Spring Conference 2022: Speech by the Universities Minister | Conservative Friends of Education (2022).

3

Research methodology

Research methodology

Phoenix Insights commissioned Public First to conduct research into individuals' and businesses' perceptions of training, the barriers they face and possible ways to mitigate these barriers.

The research was comprised of the following:

Individuals

- A nationally representative poll of 2,012 UK adults,[23] including cross breaks by social grade, age and education level.
- Seven focus groups of individuals both in and out of work – all focus group participants were above 40 years old and none had a level 6 qualification or higher. Participants were recruited from a range of geographies.

  Each group focused on the following:

  - Those working in manufacturing or construction.
  - Those working in retail.
  - Those working in transport.
  - Those who had switched industry at a point in their career.
  - Two groups with people who had additional barriers to learning (e.g. dyslexia and caring responsibilities).
  - A group with a mixture of the above.

Businesses

- A nationally representative poll of 502 UK senior business decision-makers of English companies.[24] Businesses surveyed ranged in size from two to over 10,000 employees – with 300 SME respondents. As it is important to get opinions from large businesses, we oversample this group (which should only be around one business in a sample of 500). Where we refer to a percentage of businesses, these larger business decision-makers are underweighted to account for the smaller proportion of businesses which are of this size.
- Four focus groups of between four and seven businesses selected from a range of geographies and business sizes. Participants were responsible – in part or in whole – for decision-making on the learning and development opportunities the business provided.

Businesses were from a range of sectors including:

- manufacturing;
- banking;
- health and social care; and
- IT.

Both sets of focus groups and polling included descriptions of the proposed LLE[25] taken from gov.uk webpages. All research activities were undertaken between April and September 2022 engaging participants from across the UK.

In addition to this, desk research on the policy context of lifelong learning, upskilling and retraining was conducted.

Public First is a member of the British Polling Council and Company Partners of the Market Research Society, whose rules and guidelines it adheres to.

23. https://www.publicfirst.co.uk/new-polling-for-phoenix-insights.html.
24. https://www.publicfirst.co.uk/new-polling-for-phoenix-insights.html.
25. Lifelong loan entitlement – gov.uk (2022).

4

Our findings

Section 1: Perceptions of and attitudes towards lifelong learning, upskilling and retraining

Individuals and businesses are broadly positive about lifelong learning, upskilling and retraining.

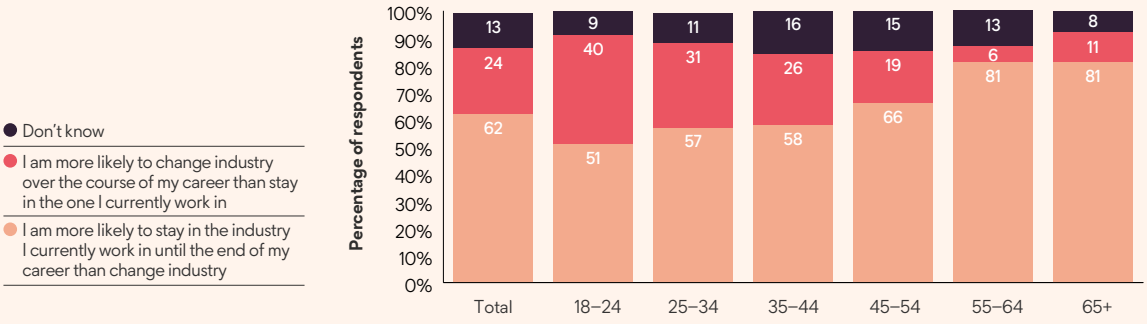
The vast majority of people agreed that today's economy makes the ability to retrain more important than ever before (70%) and that offering more routes to formal training will help them adapt to longer careers (74%).

> "I resigned from retail banking, it's the best thing I ever did."
>
> Adult Carer, 61

Despite individuals being broadly positive about retraining in principle, 62% believed they are likely to remain in the same industry for the rest of their career. This varied with age – younger people were more likely to think they would change industry over their career compared to midlife and older people.

Figure 2

'And which of the following comes closest to your view?'



Reasons for remaining in the same industry included individuals being satisfied with the type of work they do (60%) and liking their employer (35%). Those who thought they would change industry said they would do so due to their current role being transitional (31%) and not being satisfied with the work they do (29%).

A majority of those polled believed they will not need to retrain or change industry throughout their career.

74% of respondents felt that they would be able to stay in employment throughout their career without returning to formal education. This supports our focus group findings, which included participants viewing retraining as a choice and, for some, 'a gamble'.

> "It's a gamble. Especially, if you've got mortgages, and if you've got children or whoever that depends on you... even if something new comes up. You look at it and go but what if."
>
> Train driver, 42

Business decision-makers followed a similar pattern to individuals. Only 4% of business decision-makers disagreed with the statement – 'Offering formal training beyond the basic functions of a job has a positive effect on people's performance at work' – reflecting a majority view that training is beneficial to their business. Business decision-makers also recognised the role of training in increasing the chances of finding a job for those who are unemployed or at risk of redundancy (82%).

Businesses' perceptions of what retraining meant also varied. Our research found that many – especially those in financial services, legal and healthcare sectors – focused on mandatory training due to higher levels of regulation within their sectors. This meant they often had less ability to prioritise additional training for their staff.

> "It's been raised in my company where a new start had to do about 40 hours of training, when they first came in, just to get through the regulatory training, let alone anything for career planning."
>
> Bank with 1,000+ employees

Other employers shared that they consider it training rather than retraining even when staff move roles – or even departments – within the company. This highlights a key challenge for the launch of the LLE in how people and employers understand different language and terminology.

> "If you're talking about complete retraining. That's like saying, I'm going from sales, and I'm going to become a heart surgeon, then that's retraining."
>
> Global engineering company with 100,000+ employees

Both individuals and businesses were cautious about the role of government in the implementation and provision of the LLE.

The majority of people agreed that the government needs to do more to help people build on their skills throughout their career (70%) and retrain throughout their lives (67%).

Many were suspicious about whether there were any ulterior motives as well as whether the scheme would have any longevity or just be 'another government scheme'.

> "Well, regarding anything the government comes up with, I'm deeply suspicious. I'm afraid to say I think they've usually got some kind of ulterior motive... I think money will be at the root of it somewhere and it'll be trying to claw back money from us somehow, like, for instance, this course I'm being put on, if I don't finish it, I have to pay £1,000s."
>
> Residential careworker for young adults, 54

> "They're just gonna keep moving the pension age."
>
> Finance manager of an SME, 56

> "I can't think of many government proposals that have ever worked, where the government interferes with business."
>
> Golf club, under 50 employees

> "Sometimes I think, 'is there any point?' because some employers don't want to employ someone at my age. They look for the younger generation – people who they think can learn better than I can... and they can pay them less as well."
>
> Medical administrator, 56

Better framing and language can signal that workplace training isn't just for young people

Many individuals were concerned that they were 'too old' to return to education and that they would not be able to keep up with the pace of teaching. This was compounded by a perception that some forms of education – particularly apprenticeships and internships – were 'for younger people'. Some participants highlighted the ability to self-pace learning – but receive high-quality support at the same time – as a key influencer in their decision whether or not to return to education.

> "It's still there at the back of your mind, but I think, am I too old now?"
>
> Stockroom co-ordinator, 50

Some of our participants also highlighted fears about being the 'old person' in the classroom:

> "...if you are stuck in with a load of youngsters that are learning things, lightning fast, and you're really the slow kid in the class, it's not nice."
>
> Construction manager, 63

Some of the participants in our focus groups shared that they, at times, felt 'stuck' in their jobs – and that retraining could be an attractive way of trying something new.

Midlife and older individuals have limited understanding of the student loan system. Enabling this group to engage with the LLE will require developing understanding of how the loan system works – to ensure individuals are able to make informed choices.

We found that understanding of the student loan system varied considerably across age groups. Whilst 76% of 18–24-year-olds described themselves as having either a good or very good understanding of the loan system, only 50% of 45–54-year-olds described themselves as having the same level of understanding.

Figure 3

'How would you rate your understanding of student loans for higher education courses in the UK?' (Age)

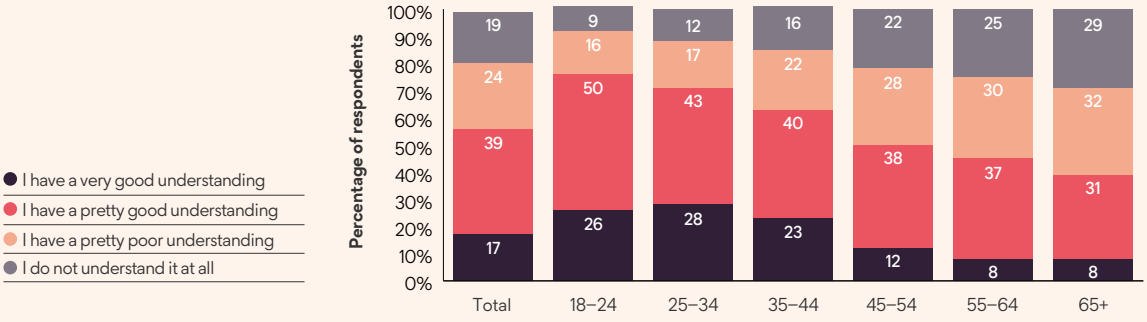
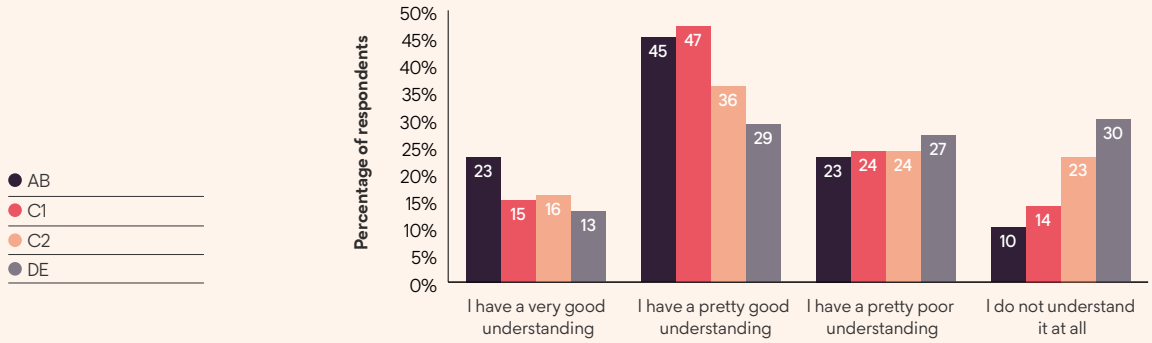


Figure 4

'How would you rate your understanding of student loans for higher education courses in the UK?' (Social grade)



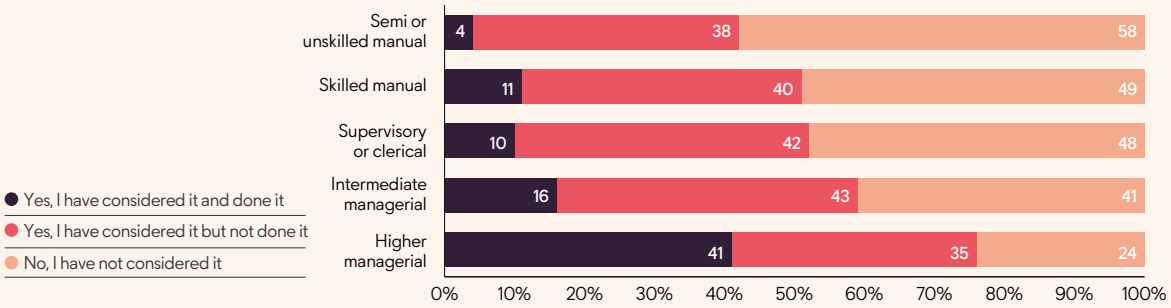
Understanding of the student loan system also varied across social grade – with people in social grade AB being more likely to describe themselves as having a pretty good or very good understanding of the system than people of social grade DE (68% vs 42%). This is an important barrier for the implementation of the LLE given that the loan entitlement will function in broadly the same way as current student loans. Recognising and addressing the barriers faced by midlife and older people – including taking into account intersectionality e.g. age and social grade – will be key to ensuring that the LLE is able to engage with people from across all walks of life.

In our polling, engagement with retraining was higher amongst higher managerial occupations (41%) and dropped significantly when compared to semi or unskilled manual occupations (4%).

Data from the OECD found only 20% of adults with low skills participate in low skills job-related adult learning,[26] whereas participation of adults with medium and high skills is much higher (37% and 58% respectively). According to the 2016 Adult Education Survey ('AES'), 11.6% of adults with low skills looked for learning opportunities compared to 35.5% of adults with high skill levels. Developing training schemes which reach individuals who would otherwise not engage could help address developing skills challenges such as declining manual industries.

Figure 5

'Have you ever considered retraining for a job by completing a new qualification, certificate or degree?' (Occupation)



26. Engaging low-skilled adults in learning I OECD (2019).

A flexible approach to training provision

There was universal support for a more flexible approach to course delivery. Indeed, 50% of individuals agreed with the statement 'The current higher education system does not cater for people in employment' (with only 9% disagreeing). This increased to 57% agreeing when respondents were asked specifically about whether the system caters for people with caring responsibilities (7% disagree).

> "I had opportunities to go uni but then I was thinking I don't want to go away for five years and do this. If they had a shorter version with the same qualification, enabling you to get the qualification in a short space of time but still do the work... Then that's perfect."
>
> Road traffic manager, 52

Ultimately, many employers we spoke to did not believe that older workers wanted training. This was one of the most striking parts of our research: that midlife and older workers who told us they were interested and invested in retraining, if only they were given the right support, were perceived by employers to be dead set against it.

> "...we do have people of older generations that just don't want to do training... They just don't want to, it's like they're happy where they're at. They don't want to put any effort in, anything like that, they just want to do their job and get it over with."
>
> Global engineering company with 100,000+ employees

Section 2: Motivations and behaviours towards lifelong learning, upskilling and retraining

Many employers believe that their staff do not need training, particularly SMEs.

53% of senior decision-makers said that the current labour market (specifically the 'great resignation') would make them more likely to invest in upskilling for their business. However, this was considerably higher among larger businesses. 40% of those at SMEs said it would make them more likely, compared to 68% of those at larger companies.

Despite broad support for retraining, our polling indicates only 31% of UK businesses have offered formal training to their employees in the last 12 months. This was particularly stark amongst SMEs: 37% had never offered formal training to their employees.

This matched our polling of individuals. 67% of 45–54-year-olds surveyed shared that they had not been offered any training over the last 12 months. This compared to 54% of 25–34-year-olds. People from lower socioeconomic groups were also less likely to have been offered training in the last 12 months (71% DE vs 52% AB).

Among the 69% of UK companies who hadn't offered their employees any formal training in the last 12 months, 41% of decision-makers shared that their reason for not doing so was that their staff 'did not need any formal training'.

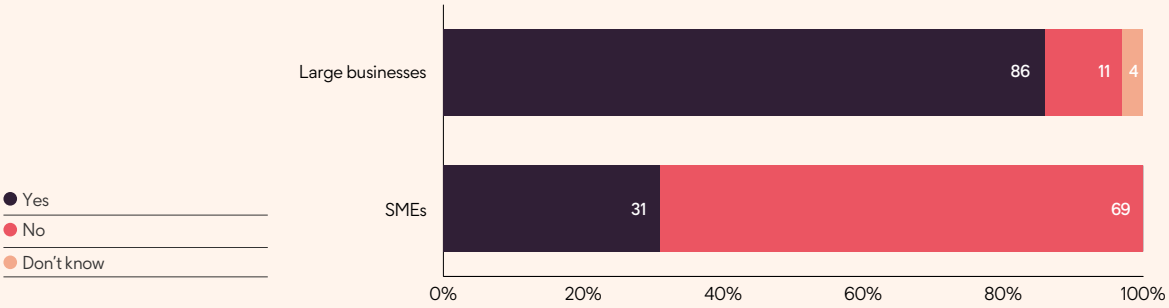
We found this particularly interesting given the focus that is often put on encouraging individuals to retrain. This finding suggests another route may be in convincing employers that staff in their business may benefit from training in the first place.

You said your company has not offered its employees any formal training in the last 12 months. Why is this? Please select all that apply.

Decision makers at...	SMEs	Larger businesses
Our staff do not need any formal training	43%	30%
We prefer informal training	30%	36%
We support our employees to do training in their own time	13%	24%
Our company does not have the spare capacity to undergo formal training	13%	18%
None of the above	3%	8%

Figure 6

'Has your company offered its employees any formal training in the last 12 months? By this, we mean a day or more of training delivered by an external party and paid for by the company.'



When businesses do engage with training they often prefer online and shorter training courses. Decision-makers at larger businesses were more likely to express this preference for online training than smaller businesses.

When asked 'What types of training would be most useful for the staff at your company to take part in during the time at work?' business decision-makers preferred shorter training courses, i.e. one or two days (53% including 55% amongst large businesses). Businesses also favoured online training courses related to the employees' role (40% rising to 48% for larger businesses) compared to more substantial training such as apprenticeships (20% and 23% for larger businesses) and longer training sessions, i.e. over a period of 3 – 12 months (21% rising to 29% for larger businesses). This sheds some light on the preferences of employers when providing training, including how online and modular learning might be an attractive option in the years to come.

A lack of confidence prevents individuals from engaging in training provision without incentives from their employer or from government.

Almost half of the people surveyed said they had never considered retraining for a job (48%), whilst 41% had considered it but not done it. Younger people were more likely to consider retraining than older people (62% of 25–34-year-olds vs 440% of 45–54-year-olds); as well as those in higher socioeconomic groups (62% of AB vs 44% of DE). Our focus groups highlighted that often those who had thought about retraining but had not done it didn't feel confident taking the step.

> "It's just having the confidence and the oomph to do it, to actually take that step and do it."
>
> Stockroom co-ordinator, 50

In addition to a lack of confidence, many focus group participants raised concerns about finances, both in terms of how they would fund their studies day-to-day (maintenance) as well as the impact of another debt on their existing financial responsibilities.

> "I've got to say an apprenticeship is a good idea. But for older people who have been in full-time employment, it generally says no money or less money. It's not really a viable option."
>
> Water surveyor, 64

Recent Phoenix Insights research[27] shows that a worrying 40% of people are not on track for the retirement incomes they expect. People are either choosing not to save for retirement or are unable to. Additional repayments for lifelong learning through a loan, as well as any day-to-day costs of studying, are evidently of concern and, for many, out of reach.

Businesses struggle to prioritise training over service delivery

One focus group participant from a small business shared that they would have to prioritise service and the customer experience over providing training for their staff:

> "Service is king, customer is king."
>
> Golf club, under 50 employees

Businesses from our focus groups also shared concerns about encouraging employees to engage in retraining in case it increased the risk of them leaving the company. Staff retention was considered a particular concern for smaller businesses which relied heavily on particular staff and more specific skill sets.

Larger businesses were more able to move staff into other departments following retraining, whereas this is obviously more difficult in smaller businesses. SMEs also highlighted that they would be concerned about the costs of releasing staff to study, e.g. backfilling staff.

27. Great Expectations: Are people's retirement income expectations adequate and achievable? | Phoenix Insights (2022).

Section 3: Needs and wants of lifelong learning, upskilling and retraining

A focus on practical benefits of training for skills that are most in demand.

Results from our polling showed that 63% of people believe that the government should try to incentivise people to pursue degrees and qualifications where we currently lack skills in the country. This was in comparison to the 26% of people who said that they think the government should enable people to pursue whatever degrees and qualifications they want, irrespective of whether or not we lack the skills in the country. 36% of people thought there are too many people pursuing university degrees, compared to 5% and 4% for level 4/5 qualifications and apprenticeships respectively.

> "But my daughter, she's got a master's degree in psychology and sociology, and she can't get a job in that field. So, she's doing something completely different and cannot get a job and what does it stand for that piece of paper? Was it worth doing?"
>
> Stockroom co-ordinator, 50

> "We don't need any more academics... I think we need more apprenticeships in the building trade."
>
> Carpenter, 63

> "So, I think it's absolutely vital that people get trained in some sort of skill, creative things, which machines can't do yet probably a good idea... people don't realise how fast the world will change in the next 20 to 30 years."
>
> Construction manager, 63

The quality and outcomes of a course were key factors for people considering retraining.

Multiple focus group participants shared that they would only feel confident engaging with lifelong learning if it meant they were able to get a better job afterwards. Many shared the sentiment that returning to education was a 'gamble' and that having a clear idea of the outcomes of the course would be key to making a decision.

> "Sometimes I think, is it really worth it studying for three, four years, and then not getting a job at the end of it."
>
> Medical administrator, 56

> "You get yourself in thousands of pounds worth of debt. And then I've got a diploma or something that's not even worth the paper it's written on!"
>
> Carpenter, 63

71% of respondents in our poll shared that it would be either very or somewhat important for them to know whether a course was of high quality. The same percentage said that additional support to find employment after the course is completed would be important (35% very important; 36% somewhat important).

This was similar to previous pilots as part of the National Skills Fund which found that nearly a quarter of learners (24%) would have liked more support while on their course.[28] Ensuring that midlife and older people have access to free independent adult careers support when thinking about retraining will be key to the success of the LLE – this echoes recommendations from our Public Engagement in Longer Lives report.[29] The National Careers Service or other providers need to support potential learners to explore new career pathways.

28. National Retraining Scheme: Cost and outreach pilot evaluation ILearning and Work Institute (2021).
29. Public Engagement in Longer Lives I Phoenix Insights (2022).

Businesses are broadly supportive of the LLE; however, they are uncertain about their role in supporting employees' decision-making

A majority of senior decision-makers we polled supported the LLE and this jumped to 74% for larger businesses. 54% of decision-makers thought that the LLE would help them to specifically retrain/upskill their employees, although 19% didn't know. Many businesses felt they required more information about the LLE as a whole, including what their role might be as an employer.

> "...one individual could be not aware of what training is available for them. So, it's down to HR or line managers to encourage them to do this."
>
> Sustainability company with over 1,000 employees

However, some employers in our focus groups were cautious when it came to supporting the LLE. We have already highlighted that some SMEs felt that increasing the risk of individuals moving on from their company – through making them more employable – would not be positive for their business. However, some larger companies were also reluctant for their company to be involved in discussions on training that would be financed by a personal loan.

> "I would provide awareness, not push them towards it, I'd say 'that the opportunity is there for you so that they could use it outside work'. But again, until the rules are fully defined as a company, do you really want to make yourself liable?"
>
> Bank with over 1,000 employees

Both individuals and businesses dislike the name 'Lifelong Loan Entitlement'

One of the most significant findings was the dislike of the name 'Lifelong Loan Entitlement'. Participants in our focus groups said that the name was 'negative' and 'it's like you're going to be paying it back when you're dead'. Another participant shared:

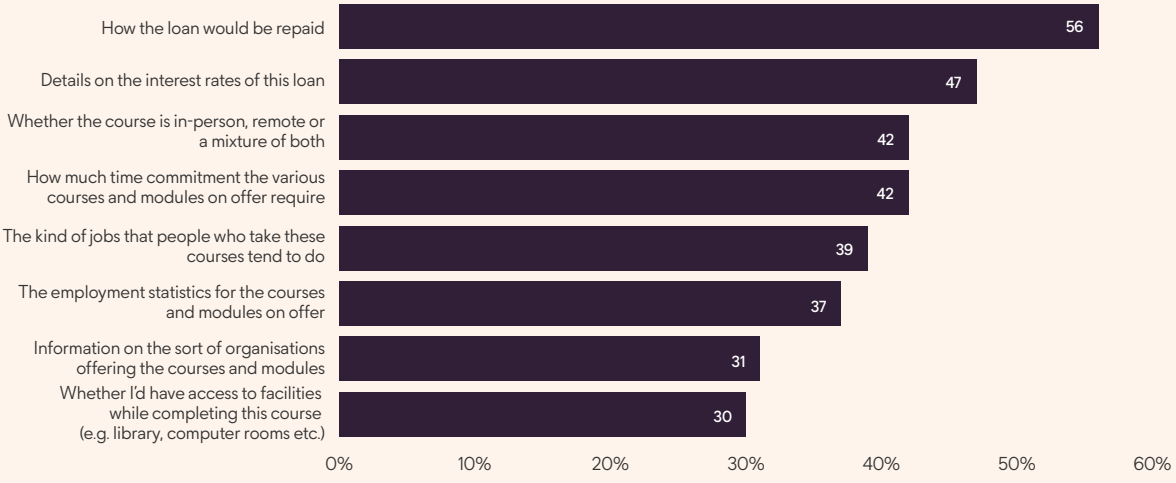
> "They'll pass it on to your children, guaranteed. It's a millstone... It will be a lifelong loan!"
>
> Residential careworker of young adults, 54

We think a better name would be one which emphasised the positives of the policy – its flexibility and its ability to improve the lives of people who make use of it. It is important to signal what the money will actually be used for, not just how you access it.

Both in our polling and our focus groups we found that individuals were concerned about taking on debt to engage with the LLE (41%).

Figure 7

'What pieces of information would be most useful in deciding whether or not you would like to retrain or upskill under the new Lifelong Loan Entitlement scheme? Select all that apply.'



> "Why would you want to incur a debt in your midlife?"
>
> Adult carer, 61

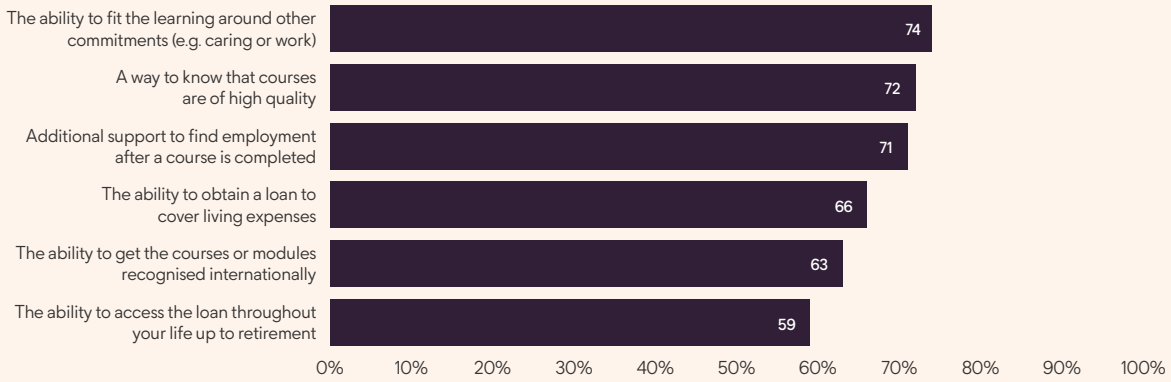
> "...most people can just go to a bank and get a loan anyway, can't you?... So, I don't see it's an improvement on anything we've got already."
>
> Construction manager, 63

The LLE appears to make little or no difference to whether people would intend to retrain

Our evidence highlights that despite support for upskilling, training and retraining in general, individuals and businesses still have reservations about whether it would work for them. When we asked participants in our poll what they thought would make the LLE scheme successful, they ranked their answers as follows:

Figure 8

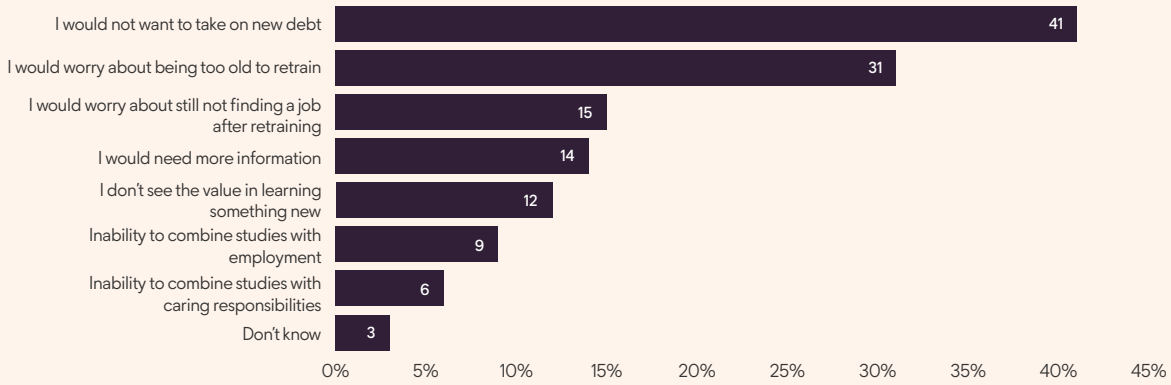
'How important or unimportant do you think the following would be for the Lifelong Loan Entitlement scheme to be successful?'



In addition to the question above we also presented respondents with a range of scenarios, related to their circumstances, to test whether they would be interested in accessing the LLE (for example asking them to imagine they were at risk of losing their job). **Across all three of these scenarios, we found the LLE made no statistically significant difference in whether participants in our poll would retrain or not.** This was a stark finding: the information we gave participants about the proposed LLE did not change their willingness to retrain.

Figure 9

'You said you would be unlikely to retrain or upskill with the option of taking a loan under the new Lifelong Loan Entitlement scheme. Why is that?'



> "...you're going to be paying this with interest, it could grow every year without you being able to pay it off, and it's just going to put people off."
>
> Finance manager of an SME, 56

They were also concerned about how the repayment of the loan would work (47%) including whether it would affect existing financial commitments such as their mortgage.

> "...we've all got mortgages, and if you've got children that depend on you... you look at it and go, but what if I absolutely hate it and I look back and go, I wish I'd stayed where I was. The older you get, the worse that is."
>
> Train driver, 42

> "And I'd have to reduce hours at my work, I'd have to take time off work which I can't afford to do at this moment in time. So you know, it's a catch 22 really, isn't it?"
>
> Stockroom co-ordinator, 50

Individuals had a strong preference for grants over loans due to an aversion to debt (41%). Previous Phoenix Insights research, The Longer Lives Index: A crisis of confidence,[30] highlighted that out of savings, work, health, housing and family support, confidence in savings is the lowest. More than two in five people in the UK say they are not confident they will have enough savings to meet their future goals in later life. The most significant reason for low confidence is people's inability to afford to save regularly, followed by worries about paying off debts. This aversion could significantly impact the number of people who are likely to engage with the LLE.

We also noticed that much of the language currently used to discuss training and retraining was, for our focus group participants, associated with younger workers. For example, any mention of apprenticeships typically elicited responses about participants' children or other young people they knew who were doing them. Participants also associated apprenticeships with lower wages – which they considered as not viable for many older people, whereas participants were generally more receptive to the idea of 'upskilling', 'retraining' or 'relearning'.

> "I've got to say an apprenticeship is a good idea. But for older people who have been in full-time employment, it generally says no money or less money. It's not really a viable option."
>
> Water surveyor, 64

> "...for mature people, training is perfect because you're relearning. You're waking up your brain, you're bringing something new into your life, and you're going to be doing something different."
>
> Road traffic manager, 52

Using language that is accessible will be key to ensuring the success of the LLE. Demonstrating that prospective learners are not 'too old' through role modelling and a targeted campaign will be vital to develop confidence and enable midlife and older workers to identify with the opportunities provided.

30. The Longer Lives Index: A crisis of confidence I Phoenix Insights (2022).

People with additional barriers to learning require training and retraining to take into account their personal circumstances through flexible delivery and financial support

Our focus groups found that individuals with additional barriers to learning – such as learning disabilities, physical mobility issues and/or caring responsibilities – had additional barriers to engaging with training and retraining. Many saw retraining as a potential way to get back into work following periods out of work – often related to their health condition and/or caring responsibilities – but struggled to access it. A recent study from UCL found that over a third of adults have multiple health problems in their late 40s.[31]

> "I regret not going to university straight from grammar school – I was actually quite clever. I feel like I lost my brain – it went to my kids... I just ran out of time, I was bringing up the kids, I got divorced and then got remarried. Then both my husband and I began to deteriorate with illnesses... and I've only recently, at age 49, been diagnosed with dyslexia. I wanted to be a teacher but it didn't happen because I was 18, I was stupid and I fell in love and left my future to be with him. Two years later... I had a house, a mortgage and everything by then."
>
> Unemployed, 49

Phoenix Insights research on Public Engagement in Longer Lives[32] suggested that current schemes for supporting older adults into work are too generic and fail to account for individual circumstances. This is echoed by our focus groups where many shared that learning would have to be flexible and well supported to ensure they were able to take full advantage of the course provided.

> "The ones that want to learn aren't allowed... We're the zombies of our generation."
>
> Unemployed, 60

Businesses are positive about the LLE but are concerned that unless they have a defined role it will be difficult to know how best to support employees to engage.

A majority of the businesses who engaged in our focus groups were keen to support the LLE in their workplace in principle. However, the largest barrier for them was the lack of clarity on their role as an employer and how they should support employees looking to use the LLE. Many were concerned about looking like they were 'pushing' their staff to use their personal entitlement on training that they would otherwise fund through the business. Others were concerned about whether they would be able to turn down employees' requests to take time off the retrain for something outside of their current job role.

> "I think there needs to be a lot more structure around it. As an employer, you need to know what the government really should be funding, as opposed to yourself... if you're an unethical employer, you need to know that you're not going to be able to screw over your employees by pushing the onus of finding [training] onto them rather than yourself."
>
> Bank, 1,000 employees

For the government to be successful in engaging potential learners in midlife it must provide a clear message to employers.

Our polling indicated that only 14% of business decision-makers had heard of the Midlife MOT (a government scheme to support midlife workers) and knew what it was. When the Midlife MOT was explained to businesses they were generally positive about the scheme. 75% of decision-makers at larger companies said that they would be open to utilising the Midlife MOT in their workplace.

Similarly, 48% of business decision-makers polled had never heard of LSIPs before, with only 17% having heard of them and knowing what they were. A majority of SME decision-makers (57%) had never heard of them. Both LSIPs and the Midlife MOT are relatively new schemes and therefore are less likely to have high recognition rates amongst businesses. However, it does highlight an opportunity to improve communication between government and businesses for schemes to maximise their potential, in particular, how reskilling midlife and older people can be incorporated into LSIPs. Businesses in our focus groups felt that they needed a clear message about the longevity of the LLE to combat that narrative of it just being 'another government scheme'.

31. Over a third of adults have multiple health problems in midlife | IOE – Faculty of Education and Society – UCL (2021).
32. Public Engagement in Longer Lives | Phoenix Insights (2022.

Section 4: Recommendations to overcome barriers to lifelong learning, upskilling and retraining

Throughout this report we have touched on a number of barriers individuals and businesses experience when looking to engage with lifelong learning, upskilling and retraining and these are summarised below:

Individuals:

- A lack of confidence, particularly amongst midlife and older people as well as people in lower social grades
- A reluctance to take on debt, especially alongside existing financial responsibilities such as a mortgage
- Hesitancy stemming from being unsure about the financial support available whilst studying, i.e. maintenance support
- A low level of understanding of the student loan system
- Learning provision which isn't flexible and doesn't consider their personal circumstances, including poor physical/mental health and caring responsibilities

Businesses:

- Concerns about upskilling employees only for them to move on/to be poached by other companies
- Funding, as well as the associated costs with releasing staff to go and study, e.g. backfilling costs, gaps in providing services to clients etc.
- Ability to prioritise this ahead of service delivery or existing mandatory training
- Perceptions that midlife and older workers do not want to retrain or upskill
- Low levels of recognition for other government schemes relating to midlife and older workers

Addressing these barriers will be key to ensuring the success of the LLE and training and retraining more generally. Therefore, we have outlined below four recommended areas of work to address these barriers:

- Policy positioning.
- Framing and communication to individuals.
- Strengthening the role of employers.
- Design and delivery.

Policy positioning

We need to create a policy consensus on the value and purpose of lifelong learning, and how funding it should be allocated.

Highlight the economic imperative for lifelong learning

Spending on adult education and learning within the UK is comparatively lower than many other OECD countries.[33] Positioning the LLE as a tool for growth through growing the UK skills base in emerging industries such as technology and green jobs will help curate buy-in from businesses. Research from the CBI has shown that closing the UK skills gap could provide a £150 billion uplift to GVA by 2030, and with one in three workers in the UK aged 50 and over, the need to retrain and upskill across the life course has clear economic benefits.

There are also clear benefits to public finances in upskilling and increasing the productivity of the workforce. Previous Phoenix Insights research has also highlighted that for many people even working for longer and saving more will not guarantee the retirement income that they expect. Opportunities for continued progression in mid-career through upskilling and reskilling is another variable which could bring more people on track to meet their retirement saving needs. This in turn will provide savings on public spending with fewer people reliant on state support in later life.

Taking on debt is a major disincentive for people to participate in lifelong learning in midlife

Our research shows that the funding mechanism for lifelong learning will be a major factor in whether individuals engage. The LLE is currently designed with the risks of participating and responsibility to pay for it (albeit via a loan) sitting largely with the individual. Our research shows that this will be a major disincentive to older learners taking part, who already view taking up training as a 'gamble' and who also face many pressures in midlife to save and pay off debts, instead of taking on new ones.

There are a range of potential funding options which could alleviate individuals' concerns:

- A co-funding model involving employer contributions.
- Reviewing the use of the apprenticeship levy – widening the apprenticeship levy to a wider skills development fund. This could help businesses co-fund study.
- A targeted funding approach (either from employers or from government):
  - Bursaries/scholarships for courses covering topics with high skills gaps such as technology and green industry, providing support for living costs whilst studying.
  - Tax relief for institutions providing the modules/courses outlined above, resulting in a lower loan requirement for the individual.
- Providing additional incentives such as reduced costs/free transport for study.

These are just a few examples of adjustments to the funding mechanism which may increase appetite amongst midlife and older workers.

The National Retraining Scheme – a 2021 retraining pilot funded by the National Skills Fund – investigated the role of employer subsidy on participation in retraining.[34] They found that employer subsidies acted as an incentive for both individuals and for employers to support their workforce to participate in learning. The report did recognise that employer subsidy can create dead weight, where individuals who would have usually paid for the training themselves are funded to do so anyway. However, employer subsidies were also found to have a widening participant effect, engaging individuals from sectors and occupations that have traditionally been excluded from retraining.

Phoenix Insights has previously called for support for older workers (including investment in lifelong learning) to be funded through a reallocation of a proportion of savings to public spending arising from any increases to the state pension age. The last state pension age rise from 65 to 66, led to a saving to the Treasury of nearly £5 billion.[35]

Build a coalition with a co-ordinated policy narrative on the purpose of lifelong learning

Effective policy positioning requires the definition of the roles of key actors. We have identified the key actors for lifelong learning, upskilling and retraining (and the LLE scheme) as:

- local business groupings such as Chambers of Commerce;
- individual employers;
- individuals; and
- education providers.

The LLE should be designed to provide clear roles for the above actors, in particular capitalising on the mechanisms already in place such as LSIPs. Building on established networks to provide a co-ordinated approach to closing the skills gap across the UK could provide government with an effective communication route and enable localised, specific behaviour change, i.e. addressing regional skills gaps.

33. Educational expenditure by source and destination I OECD.
34. National Retraining Scheme: Cost and outreach pilot evaluation – Learning and Work Institute (2021).
35. Reaching a certain age: Public attitudes to the state pension I Phoenix Insights (2022).

Recommendations – Policy positioning

Training, retraining and upskilling should be centred as a vital tool for businesses to grow and succeed. Government should highlight the role of training and retraining in forging a high-productivity economy and a thriving business sector across the UK. Policies such as the right to paid training leave could support employees to engage with training opportunities.

Government should explore creative ways to highlight financial incentives for people in midlife to engage with lifelong learning, including alternative or additional means of financing the LLE. Self-funding learning through debt is a major barrier for many in midlife. Whilst we do not expect government to offer a grant for 100% of costs, we believe that government should explore creative ways to incentivise midlife and older people to engage with the scheme, including part subsidies or provider or employer bursaries/ scholarships, particularly in skill shortage areas. There is precedent for this approach in sectors such as the NHS and teaching (e.g. the NHS bursary and funded teacher training places). Phoenix Insights has previously recommended that some of this funding could be secured from government savings resulting from any increases to the state pension age.

Build a coalition of key actors, including businesses and representative groups, learners and education providers, to work together to close skills gaps across the UK, particularly through LSIPs. Where appropriate these should be devolved to Mayoral Combined Authorities where possible to respond to local and regional skills shortages and needs.

Framing and communicating to individuals

'What's in it for me?'

Our research has shown that while many adults over the age of 40 in the UK are supportive of the idea of lifelong learning, large numbers still do not believe that learning is for 'someone like them'. This is also true more specifically of the LLE scheme, with our polling showing that being offered it made no statistically significant difference to people's desire to participate in lifelong learning.

How the LLE and qualifications are framed will be a big factor in their success. Throughout this report we have touched on the role of language and the influence of phrases such as 'lifelong loan' and the associations with words like 'apprenticeship'. In addition to this, the LLE is perceived as an extension of the current student loan system, rather than a new approach to lifelong education. This is reflected in the language used, which has little cut-through with midlife and older people. Reviewing this would enable the LLE to effectively target midlife and older people. The policy positioning will determine how the LLE and the next phase of retraining will be framed and communicated to the public and their employers. Key questions on the framing of the LLE include:

- What is the function of the LLE? That is, helping people from declining industries into emerging industries, upskilling people to meet changing needs at work, or creating a more flexible workforce which can move between industries and job?
- Who are the principal audience for the LLE? That is, is this for midlife and older workers? Is this for people in work looking to change sectors or is this for those currently out of work?

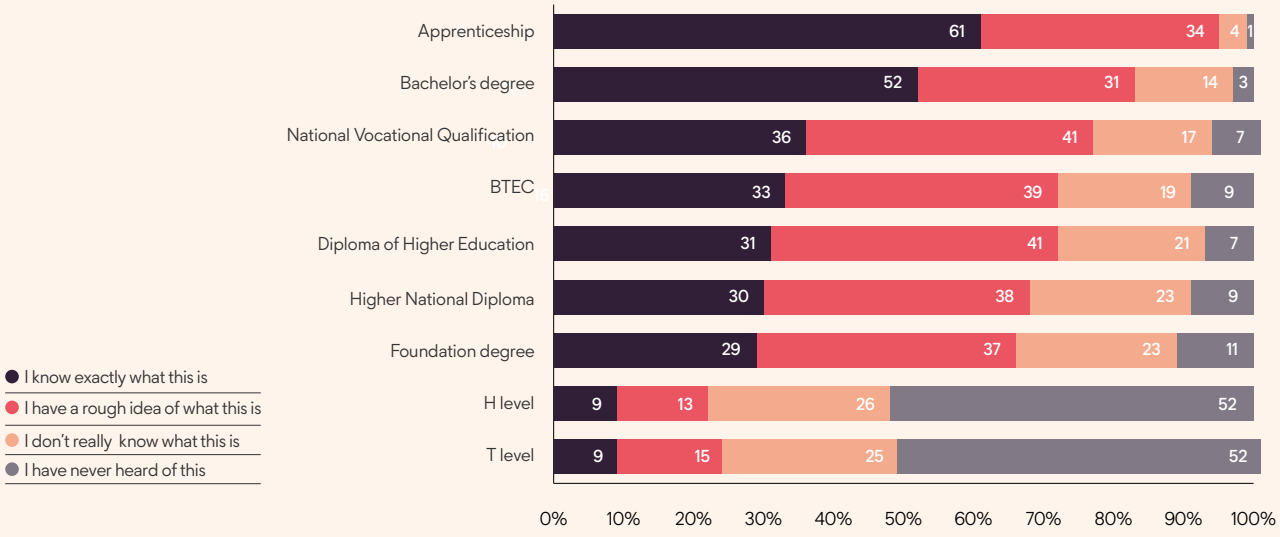
This report has primarily focused on adults already in employment engaging with training. However, the LLE has potential to engage those who aren't in work into 'escalator jobs' and ultimately secure employment through upskilling. In further research, the role of Jobcentre Plus, work coaches and sector-based work academies in the implementation of the LLE should be explored.

The challenge of raising public awareness on adult education and skills provision

Government should look to challenges around its existing programmes as evidence of the scale of communications work it has to do. Similarly to the LLE, T levels are a relatively new initiative which need public buy-in to succeed, and indeed the Department for Education has invested much time and resources in raising awareness of them. We asked our sample of over 2,000 people whether they had heard of a range of qualifications, including apprenticeships, A levels and T levels, and we also included a fictional 'H level' as a control question. We found that awareness of T levels is almost identical to the awareness of fictional H levels (in both cases only 9% of respondents said 'I know exactly what this is'). This only highlights further the challenge that will face the government in driving up awareness of the LLE before it is launched.

Figure 10

'To what extent would you say you understand what the following levels of qualification mean?'



Data does not total 100% due to rounding

Need for a targeted communications campaign to widen awareness among adults of all ages

To support the roll out of the LLE, the government (working with the sector) should launch a messaging campaign to prepare the ground. The LLE must not be seen solely as a standalone 'government initiative', but rather part of a genuine movement which is supported across the sector and beyond. And, crucially, midlife and older workers must feel it is a scheme aimed at and designed for them, and for positive reasons, not underhand ones. In its current form, the risk is it will not cut through to midlife and older workers, or be largely ignored as not relevant to them. At worst, it risks being dismissed as an attempt to make money from midlife and older people either through loans or pushing people to work for longer. Learning should be taken from previous reskilling schemes such as the National Retraining Scheme[36] to provide insight into how best to utilise existing mechanisms and ensure that the LLE is as successful as possible. This could include the utilisation of a pilot period for the scheme to message test, develop a targeted campaign and develop a deeper understanding of successful sources of support for the scheme such as the National Careers Service. A pilot would also provide the opportunity to collect case studies of successful engagement to promote the scheme.

Messaging on student loans should also consider the implications of Equivalent Level Qualifications rules for funding, as 21% of respondents told us they would want to know how their previous student loan would count against their entitlement before engaging with the LLE. Ensuring that individuals are able to understand eligibility criteria for funding should be a key priority for promoting the scheme.

Recommendations – Framing and communicating to individuals

Review the language used when discussing learning opportunities for adults of different ages. Words such as 'apprenticeship' and 'internship' have strong associations with low pay and 'starting at the bottom' – rephrasing opportunities to lean on preferences for framing such as 'upskilling', 'retraining' and 'on-the-job training' will help give midlife and older people more confidence to engage.

A renaming and branding of the Lifelong Loan Entitlement scheme and more positive framing. The phrase 'lifelong loan' was widely viewed as negative and unappealing. Having the scheme too closely associated with government was also seen as a negative – the scheme will need to be delivered in an impartial and independent way that prioritises choice for the learner.

Accurate information about the quality and outcomes of courses available to adult learners to support them in their careers, including potential new career routes or the number of vacancies available linked to the qualification studied. Midlife and older people consider retraining to be a 'risk' or 'a gamble' and need to know what they can expect if they successfully complete a course – the presence of a 'safety net' as well as whether the course would be 'worth it' both financially and otherwise (e.g. a guaranteed job role or commitment to progression within their current role).

36. National Retraining Scheme: Cost and outreach pilot evaluation – Learning and Work Institute (2021).

Strengthening the role of employers

Communicating how employers can be involved, including whether they are able to provide subsidies for employees, could help increase the reach and impact of the LLE. Employers might also embed training further into their employment practices if they were able to subsidise training through the LLE. For example, an employer providing a partial or full subsidy for employees to complete a level 4 qualification through the LLE could incorporate this into the individual's personal development plan and progression plan within the company.

However, government will need to be mindful that this may lead businesses to providing 'training contracts' which require employees to pay for their training if they leave the business before a specified time point. Providing choices for businesses and their employees to choose how they finance their studies could be a flexible yet pragmatic way forward.

Ensuring employers have the opportunity to learn from each other would also help facilitate the process and address any issues early on. Building the capacity and connectedness of local, regional and national organisations to support prospective learners with high- quality information and guidance and support will be key to maximising the chance of success.

Overall, businesses were supportive of the LLE and the role it could play in their workplace; however, they felt that clear guidance on their role as an employer would be key to protect their business and ensure they were supporting employees in the right way.

Recommendations – Strengthening the role of employers

Provide clear guidance on the role of employers, including how they can support their employees to engage with lifelong learning broadly and specifically with the LLE. We believe government should do this working closely with representative organisations.

Create accessible and practical information and guidance for employers on what training is available from providers, what time commitment courses require and the outcomes of the qualification. Employers are most interested in the business benefit to them in terms of improved productivity but also in terms of staff wellbeing, retention and engagement. **Support for employers to understand how different levels of qualification could be useful for their business** – we found a lack of understanding, particularly amongst SMEs, about different qualifications and at different levels.

Engage employers early on in the design, development and implementation of the LLE to ensure their needs, preferences and concerns are taken into account. Employers know their skills gaps and workforce needs better than anyone and their expertise and insights are essential. Working with both individuals and employers to develop the scheme should boost uptake, troubleshoot potential issues before they arise and ensure that the LLE is as effective as possible.

Design and delivery

Flexible delivery

Our research has found that all too often the design and delivery of skills and education provision is targeted at younger age groups and new starters. Adults in mid-career are often overlooked in terms of what their preferences and needs are in undertaking upskilling or retraining. The design and delivery of lifelong learning needs to take into account flexible learning requirements that learners may have, particularly balancing learning with caring or health needs, as well as current work.

Modular learning

Policymakers should also be aware of concerns around the recognition of qualifications. Both individuals and businesses we spoke to had limited understanding of qualifications outside of bachelor's degrees and apprenticeships. Often, focus group participants would refer to bachelor's degree and apprenticeships as a 'full set' or 'complete' set of studies. Moving to a modular model would involve acknowledging and addressing widely held views that completing a module would be seen as incomplete or only part of a qualification rather than something which was useful in its own right. Ensuring employers are prepped to understand the value and relative outcomes associated with level 4 and 5 qualifications – and their constituent modules – will be vital in supporting those who engage with the LLE to gain employment from it.

Credit transfer will also be a difficult issue to tackle – for providers, but also for individuals who engage with the LLE. Transferring credits between institutions is widely understood as a concept but less often put into practice.[37] Clear information will be needed to ensure that learners – as well as providers and employers – are able to understand how they can build modules towards qualifications. Effective recognition of prior learning practices will be more important than ever before. Understanding whether someone who hasn't stepped into a classroom for 30 years will be able to excel on a module will be a difficult task. Practices on recognition of prior learning vary widely across OECD countries[38] but provide multiple examples of how interventions can be effectively used to ensure that lifelong education is accessible for people with different experiences and careers.

Recommendations – Strengthening the role of employers

Lifelong learning requires a **flexible delivery model which works around caring responsibilities and other needs** (including disabilities and poor physical/mental health) and does not make older learners in this setting feel like they're 'back in a classroom' – midlife and older people do not want 'one size fits all' training. If this is going to work, it needs to be tailored around individuals' needs.

Access to free independent adult careers support to give midlife and older workers the confidence to engage with the general training and retraining as well as the LLE and enable them to utilise their new qualifications to full effect. This is something that Phoenix Insights recommended in its previous report (Public Engagement in Longer Lives)[39] as a means to support individuals in their decision-making as well as provide a point of information and guidance for employers.

For the LLE we require **clear information for both individuals and employers on how loan repayments and maintenance support will work, as well as information on entry requirements, format of the learning, and assessment methods**. Unlike those in their late teens and twenties, midlife and older people will not be at school or college and are therefore unlikely to receive clear support and guidance on their options. This also makes engaging with employers crucial.

37. Credit transfer in higher educations: A review of the literature I Department for Education (2017).
38. OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers I OECD (2022).
39. Public engagement in longer lives I Phoenix Group (2022).

Conclusion

The appetite for lifelong learning from individuals in the UK is high. Whilst respondents shared their enthusiasm with us for engaging with upskilling and retraining, and more specifically the LLE, the realities of committing to education in mid- and later life are clear. The recommendations we have outlined are our attempt to help mitigate these challenges to ensure that everyone is able to access lifelong learning and its benefits.

Businesses are keen to support employees to develop and engage with lifelong learning. However, the key to building confidence with employers is by defining their role in the scheme and relieving fears about the risks associated with upskilling workers, including that it might divert attention from day-to-day service provision.

The LLE has the potential to have a significant positive impact on the skills base of the UK workforce, the number of people in employment and the number of people working for longer. For the scheme to be fully effective, the LLE needs to be designed in such a way that it puts the views of individuals and businesses at its heart, with a messaging strategy that 'cuts through' for as many people as possible.

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