

ROOM TO GROW: REMOVING BARRIERS TO TRAINING FOR PEOPLE ON UNIVERSAL CREDIT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

If the new Prime Minister is going to deliver the Conservative Party's Levelling Up agenda, then people across the UK will need to be able to access training and develop new skills. But our social security system is preventing people on low incomes from accessing training opportunities. The way Universal Credit (UC) operates, with conditionality requirements and limits on full-time study, does not support people to access the training courses they want and need to access secure work.

While there is extensive research on the ways people experience conditionality, this research seeks to address a gap in understanding about how this system specifically impacts access to training opportunities.

We conducted 16 qualitative interviews during early 2022 with people who were receiving UC and were interested in accessing training courses. These interviews revealed that while people getting UC held ambitions to move into new careers and access better and more flexible work, they faced numerous challenges accessing training that would unlock those opportunities.

Our research found that:

Meeting UC requirements is a full-time job in itself

- UC conditionality requirements built into the system were limiting the types of training people could access, and Work Coaches often didn't adjust job search requirements to account for the time people were spending studying. Some people faced full-time job search requirements while studying and missed out on parts of their courses so they could attend Jobcentre appointments or complete work search activity.
- For people with caring responsibilities or part-time jobs, it was especially difficult to fit training courses around other responsibilities. Those with mental and physical health conditions also found it difficult to take part in training while completing their work search activity, and sometimes didn't feel supported by their Work Coach.

Transactional relationships with Work Coaches limit support to build new skills

- People on UC had difficulties finding training opportunities and were often researching the rules around study and available courses without help from their Work Coach. There were a couple of examples where Work Coaches were especially helpful in discussing and finding training, but some felt their Work Coach wasn't able to help them or were simply focused on ticking boxes or monitoring them rather than providing tailored support.
- A major challenge for people on UC was building relationships with their Work Coaches. Many participants went through numerous Work Coach changes and couldn't establish a trusting relationship, while others struggled to share their aspirations or get advice because meetings were too short.

Parents are struggling to take up training opportunities without access to affordable and flexible childcare

- A lack of affordable childcare made it difficult or impossible for some people to access training courses, especially where they had conditionality and part-time work to balance, leading to a case of someone not being able to attend a funded nursing training course. Given that nine of the 16 people we interviewed were mothers with children, this issue impacted a large number of people in our research and was frequently a barrier to accessing opportunities for training and work.



We have drawn on the existing literature and our interviews to offer practical recommendations for the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the Department for Education (DfE) to ensure that people on UC who want to access training are able to find and take up those opportunities. Most importantly, DWP should:

- Allow anyone receiving benefits to study part or full-time for at least one year, with the potential to extend. Conditionality requirements should be adjusted to account for time spent studying to allow students to fully benefit from taking part.
- Provide clear information about the ways people can study while getting UC, as well as funding available to help cover course fees and other costs associated with taking part in training.
- Create opportunities for people on UC to discuss and explore any interests in accessing training with their Work Coach at any point throughout their claim. This should trigger a training-focused meeting and potentially signposting to the National Careers Service. Work Coaches should agree and document any training goals.
- Work with the DfE to ensure Work Coaches have up-to-date knowledge of local skills ecosystems, labour market demand and training opportunities, including Government skills initiatives. This should involve appointing career development leads at Jobcentres to build relationships with local stakeholders and share their knowledge with Work Coaches.

In addition, given the distinct challenges faced by parents on UC, the Government should improve and increase provision of affordable childcare in the UK, including increasing childcare funding and reducing barriers to accessing full-time care, especially for those with children under five years old. For parents and carers on UC, childcare costs should be covered in full and paid up front.

GLOSSARY

Claimant commitment

This document is agreed between Work Coaches and people getting UC when they first claim, and it sets out the types of activities the person receiving benefits is expected to do to continue receiving their benefits. For example, requirements can include spending a specific amount of time each week looking for work or attending training. This document also outlines the consequences for not meeting these requirements.

Jobcentre

The term 'Jobcentre' in this report refers to Jobcentre Plus centres, which are part of DWP and are funded by the Government to provide employment support to people receiving UC and other benefits. They employ Work Coaches to support people into employment.

Journal

The Journal is the online system people on UC recipients with conditionality requirements use to communicate with their Work Coaches. It is where they record their job search activities and receive notifications about relevant job opportunities and job fairs.

In-work progression

In-work progression is where someone who is working while receiving UC is able to increase their pay or working hours to earn more.

Restart

Restart is a DWP commissioned, Government-funded employment support scheme launched in July 2021 and operating in England and Wales. Its purpose is to support people who are receiving benefits and are considered long-term unemployed to find work through 12 months of intensive support.

Sanction

A sanction is a loss of benefits resulting from not meeting requirements set out as part of a person's benefits claim.

Skills Bootcamps

Skills Bootcamps were created by the Department for Education and provide free training for up to 16 weeks in high-demand skills, including construction, engineering, digital, industrial health & safety, HGV certification and rail. They're open to people aged 19 and over who've been on UC for 12 months or less or who are in work.

Welfare conditionality

Conditionality describes an approach to providing welfare benefits where access to financial support is contingent on meeting specific requirements to prepare or look for work. Not meeting these requirements can lead to a sanction (a loss of benefits). People are generally required to provide evidence of their work search to their Work Coach and be available to attend meetings with them.

Work and Health Programme

The Work and Health Programme is commissioned by DWP to provide support for long-term unemployed people who have health conditions, disabilities or experience certain circumstances such as veterans, care leavers and ex-offenders. The support provided aims to help people find employment while supporting their health and wellbeing.



Work search requirements

People on UC who are not working or are earning below a certain amount may be required to look and apply for jobs. An unemployed person with no children and someone with children 13 and over will be expected to look for work for 35 hours per week. There is a sliding scale for people with children younger than 13 requiring between 16-25 hours of work or work search activity per week.

Work Coach

Work Coaches are employed by the DWP and works with people receiving UC through local Jobcentres. Their role is intended to provide individual support to people to help them access work and increase their earnings.



1. INTRODUCTION

Everyone should have the chance to learn new skills throughout their working lives. We're retiring later than previous generations, and are much less likely to work in a single occupation or sector throughout our lives. In this context, the opportunity to access training is increasingly important.

Recognising the need to open up opportunities to access training and earn qualifications, the Government under Boris Johnson put investment in training at the centre of its plans to 'level up' the country, with an ambition that by 2030 "the number of people successfully completing high-quality skills training will have significantly increased in every area of the UK".¹ Subsidised training is now available through the Lifetime Skills Guarantee.

But people receiving benefits face multiple barriers that could threaten the efficacy of these skills initiatives and ultimately the Government's Levelling Up agenda. Work Foundation analysis found that in May 2022, nearly 2.4 million people or 43% of those on UC, were subject to requirements which may be holding them back from taking part in training.

Our research found that this is coupled with a series of other barriers to engaging in training that people on low incomes also face, including an employment support system that doesn't facilitate opportunities for people on benefits to build new skills² and some of the highest childcare costs within the OECD countries.³

Adult Education participation rates have fallen over recent years, particularly for lower-level qualifications. Between 2010-11 and 2020-21, there was a 50% fall in the number of adults taking qualifications at Level 2 and below, and 33% for Level 3 qualifications.⁴ If the Government is to deliver on plans to improve skills across the UK, they must ensure that those people most likely to benefit from adult education reforms are able to access the training opportunities they create. Doing so will benefit not only individuals but the wider economy, ensuring we have a workforce able to adapt to the changing skills needs of the future.⁵

With the number of people who are out of work and not looking for a job – or economically inactive – reaches a record 1.3 million⁶, it's crucial that the new Government builds an approach to training and employment support that is inclusive of people facing multiple and complex barriers to work. This will involve reimagining our approach to training and employment support, ensuring that the ambitions of the DfE and the DWP are aligned and that welfare support is designed to improve access to secure work by allowing people to quickly acquire the skills they need.

Training is crucial to 'Levelling Up' opportunities

One in five workers in the UK are in severely insecure work, according to the UK Insecure Work Index.⁷ Our employment support system has frequently faced criticism for encouraging people getting welfare benefits to apply for 'any job', leading to people cycling between stints of unemployment, and periods in insecure and low paid work.⁸

Building skills and earning qualifications can be a way into better quality work, improving progression opportunities and reducing insecurity. For example, recent evidence indicates that reaching a Level 2 qualification improves the employment prospects and earnings, particularly for women. Notably, this was especially true in areas with poor economic performance.⁹ To 'level up' these areas and the economy, it will be crucial for everyone who wants to develop new skills to have access to training opportunities.

How welfare conditionality impacts access to training

Within UC, people who are considered to be 'available to work'* can face strict requirements as part of their benefits claim. They can be required to work a specific number of hours/reach a specific earnings level each week. For people out of work or on a low income, these requirements can include:

- spending up to 35 hours per week looking for and applying to jobs
- attending meetings with Work Coaches
- reporting work search activity.

This approach, often termed 'welfare conditionality' means that if people on UC don't meet these requirements, they risk being sanctioned, a temporary reduction in their household's UC payment.¹⁰

Sanctions are intended to incentivise people to take steps towards increasing their income, but there is evidence they have limited impact on whether a person moves into employment or progresses to increased earnings,¹¹ and they've been shown to drive people facing barriers further from the labour market and induce financial hardship.¹² This hardship can lead to reliance on charities and borrowing money from relatives and friends, further exacerbating a sense of stigma.¹³

The amount of time people must spend on meeting requirements each week varies depending on their situations. Unemployed people who are considered available for work are closely monitored by their Work Coach. This is sometimes described as the Intensive Work Search Group (IWS group).

People who have requirements as part of their UC claim generally cannot access full-time training. Meeting conditionality requirements may not leave much time for study, and this is something our research has sought to explore. While Work Coaches have discretion to change conditionality requirements, and some may adjust requirements to allow a period of study to count towards someone's job search, it is unclear how consistently this practice is applied and it doesn't seem to be communicated as an option to people getting UC.

The policy of limiting access to full-time study for people on UC seems to ignore the role that gaining a qualification can play in helping people to move in to more secure, higher paid roles.

Recognising this issue, DWP launched a scheme in April 2021 to allow some people on UC to take part in short courses. Through this 'Train and Progress' pilot, UC recipients can access full time training for up to 12 weeks, or 16 if they're enrolled on Skills Bootcamps (see Glossary for details on these courses). Before this, only eight weeks of full time training was allowed, locking out most full-time courses. This pilot is due to end in April 2023,¹⁴ but the latest available data indicates that as of March 2021, only 2,210 people had completed a Bootcamp.¹⁵

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, the Government has launched numerous 'back to work' programmes and initiatives to support people affected by the crisis through its Plan for Jobs, although, like the Bootcamps, programmes have not always met participation targets. Additionally, there is a real risk that many may be excluded from training opportunities due to their conditionality requirements, requiring they spend much of their time looking for work.

The recent shift to extend conditionality through schemes, like Way to Work, puts pressure on individuals subject to requirements to apply for 'any job' shared with them is particularly concerning. This is unsustainable – it may be leading to people feeling obliged to apply for roles they do not want and don't feel suit them, leading to some cycling between jobs and periods out of work.

* This category does not include disabled people and those with health conditions who are placed in the 'limited capability for work' or 'limited capability for work and work-related activity' groups or parents of young children.

A personalised approach focussed on supporting individuals to enter and stay in work will be crucial to meet future skills needs. A personalised approach focussed on individuals entering and staying in work will be crucial. This will need to be underpinned by a commitment to open up opportunities that could help them improve their working lives.



2. KEY FINDINGS

This research explored the motivations people receiving UC had for accessing training and the barriers and challenges they faced. The following sections summarise findings from our interviews with people in England who were currently or recently claiming UC about their motivations for building new skills and challenges they experienced in accessing training.

The findings in this report draw from 16 semi-structured interviews the Work Foundation conducted by phone between February and April 2022 with people who were receiving or had recently received UC and were either accessing training or interested in doing so in the future. There is further information in the methodology about the sample, recruitment process and methods used in this research.

We interviewed 11 women and five men aged 24-64 based across England, with seven in the North West region between February and April 2022. Nine of the women were also parents. They also faced varying levels of requirements with some required to look for work for 35 hours a week and others not currently required to report their job search activity.

In this research, we were interested in learning about people's ambitions and motivations for accessing training while on UC. Key to this research, was a question about what impact welfare conditionality might have on benefits recipients' ability to undertake training. Given our previous 2020 research¹⁶ highlighted the range of barriers that people on low incomes can encounter when looking to build new skills, we wanted to better understand any barriers people had to overcome to access training while receiving benefits. We also wanted to understand how benefits recipients experienced meeting work search requirements alongside their course of study.

2.1 People getting UC want to build new skills and move into new careers

The stigma associated with welfare benefits and assumptions about the types of people receiving Universal Credit could lead to a public perception that people getting benefits will not be interested in accessing training courses.¹⁷ While building formal qualifications won't be of interest to everyone, in our interviews we heard from many people who wanted an opportunity to access training while getting UC.

Most of the people we interviewed were accessing some form of training at the time of the interview, with some having also taken courses in the past while receiving UC. A couple of people were not currently in training but were looking into different training options, and a couple others were considering apprenticeships as a future option. Those who were studying had managed to combine this with their UC requirements by either engaging in in-person courses on a part-time basis or online self-paced study. While some appreciated flexibility of self-paced courses, studying part-time meant it took longer to earn qualifications.

The types of training and courses people said they were taking or interested in varied, but nine of the 16 participants were mothers taking courses in child psychology, safeguarding and early years education, child counselling and child psychology.

Other people we spoke to were studying a range of courses including hairdressing, construction, literacy, a social sciences access course, carpentry and music production. One person was trying to get onto an HGV Skills Bootcamp, and another was looking to start an access course for social work.

Courses ranged from part-time Level 2 to Level 5 qualifications to a Level 2 NVQ and were either freely provided by different online providers or were paid for by the learners sometimes with help from a partner. One person was receiving a mature student grant. Course lengths ranged from a few weeks to a year part-time.



From needing flexible work to pursuing a passion: learners held a range of different motivations for accessing training

Most of the people we spoke to wanted training to change industries or pursue a new career. In some cases, people had studied courses in the past but felt their qualifications were out of date.

Some wanted training to allow them to access more stable hours, better pay and a calmer work environment. A woman who was working part-time as a receptionist was hoping to move into work in a school because she felt this would be “less stressful” than her current role.

Finding training that would facilitate a move into less physically demanding work was important for one older interviewee. A 55-year-old man in the North West had been a self-employed builder but felt that he was getting “too old for barrowing concrete” and was looking for a stable income for the future. When he heard about the UK’s lorry driver shortages he tried to pursue an HGV driving Skills Bootcamp.

In another case, an unemployed man in his mid-sixties was proactively trying to get back into work but wanted training to help him “brush up” on digital skills to access jobs in logistics and warehousing. Many wanted to access better jobs that would fit around caring needs. For example, mothers we interviewed who were studying courses related to child development and safeguarding shared an aim to work jobs in local schools or nurseries, which would fit with children’s school hours, allowing them to work around their caring commitments. Finding work close to home was especially important for parents of young children and disabled children.

One mother we interviewed found that variable shift patterns in retail made it difficult to be around for her children. But she also wanted the chance to gain qualifications she had missed out on at school, and to build new skills to avoid getting “stuck” having left school without qualifications.

“I want to build up my skills like any other person. I want to build up my skills and knowledge so I can be more adaptable and more flexible in that sense because I didn't really get given the opportunity to properly learn and develop them when I was a teenager... You don't wanna be stuck in – I just wanna earn enough to be happy to live off where I don't need to be claiming any benefits.”

30-YEAR-OLD WOMAN IN THE NORTH WEST

Two others described being in a position to look in to training now that their children had grown older:

“It's something that I've always wanted to do, really. But with having the kids, that just kept putting it off 'cause it was too awkward, but now they've gotten, you know, they're a bit older now. I think that's how I'm sort of concentrating on that type of thing now.”

45-YEAR-OLD WOMAN IN THE NORTH WEST

For some, the pandemic had led to them needing to consider different career paths. A woman who had a university degree and had previously worked in administrative corporate roles lost her job during the pandemic and then decided to change course and follow a long-held interest in hairdressing:

“I'd say in my house, that hairdressing is like an unorthodox thing to do, so I never really did it. I just, you know, I went to uni. Studied... went, so you know, like corporate roles... but it's just not for me. I'd rather be like hands on and doing [hairdressing] instead.”

28-YEAR-OLD WOMAN IN LONDON

2.2 People are facing numerous barriers to accessing training while receiving benefits

Our interviews evidenced that people receiving UC are interested in accessing training, and in many cases, are already undertaking courses alongside their other responsibilities. But due to the way the welfare system is set up, people must balance their desire to gain new skills and qualifications with any requirements they must meet to continue receiving benefits. And some of our participants had to fit all of this around family responsibilities and health challenges, with many unable to access support to navigate these challenges through their local Jobcentre.

Our interviews revealed approaches to support varied widely between Work Coaches. However, people we interviewed consistently reported that their relationship with their Work Coach was transactional, and this, coupled the short and procedural nature of meetings, and frequent staff turnover appeared to hinder the development of trust needed for people to discuss their goals and their challenges.

Perhaps because of this, many interviewees didn't know where to look to find the right courses for them, and those who did often did so independently.

Conditionality requirements can present a barrier to starting training

For some people in our research, meeting these requirements felt like a full-time job in itself. And the costs of not meeting these requirements are very real, including a potential reduction in benefits payments. The risk of a sanction may disincentivise people on UC from participating in training.

As of May 2022, nearly 2.4 million unemployed or low-income people were potentially facing barriers to accessing training because of their conditionality, despite standing to benefit the most from training.¹⁸

Those who faced less scrutiny from their Work Coach due to having a sick note or because they felt their Work Coach acknowledged they were proactively searching for work, noticed the difference having the space and time to reflect made.

For example, one woman described how the Government suspending requirements during the pandemic¹⁹ had relieved some of the pressure built into the system to get a job quickly and contrasted this to a previous time receiving UC where she faced conditionality:

“It's less degrading and depressing because you haven't constantly got someone mithering you to get stuff like done because that like sort of makes you very, feel very panicked and then you end up rushing into things that you don't want to actually do or that aren't good for you. So, I think with the pandemic – because, with the understanding that people can't actively go out and look for work – it's been less intense and it's allowed room to think about what you would actually like to do, what you are good at and then sort of focus on how to get into that role.”

38-YEAR-OLD WOMAN IN THE NORTH WEST



Through UC, Work Coaches have a high level of individual discretion, allowing them to act in the ways they see best with their clients. In our interviews, sometimes this was helpful, where a Work Coach who knew their client's circumstances could reduce the number of hours they needed to look for work if they were experiencing a mental health problem, for example.

Work Coaches also have discretion to offer claimants support to cover expenses associated with looking for work through the Flexible Support Fund,²⁰ but this can't be used for training.

Our interviews appeared to suggest Work Coaches apply conditionality requirements inconsistently - with some people facing greater scrutiny, increased pressure and less support - while others in similar situations were met with more understanding and flexibility. As a result, decisions about when and how discretion is applied appear to be down to luck rather than clear guidance. One person interviewed for this project said she still had weekly calls with her Work Coach during the pandemic lockdowns, checking on whether she was applying for jobs.

"It's stressful because I had to think about like, you know, am I applying for enough job? Is it the right job I'm applying for where I'll get the interview or not? What are they gonna say when they will call me?... Like sometimes the Work Coach will ask us 'You have applied for so many jobs and you don't get. You don't have one of the interview. This is strange. Have you applied for it or not or just paste it in here on the job record?'"

36-YEAR-OLD WOMAN IN LONDON

While her experience does seem to be an outlier, it may indicate that guidance for Work Coaches on suspending requirements wasn't being consistently communicated.

Those who had accessed training struggled to fit study time around their requirements to search and apply for jobs

People were having to fit their conditionality requirements around their study. Some were studying alongside working part time or being required by their benefits to look for work for between 16 and 35 hours per week. For one person, who had to complete 35 hours of work-related activity each week, this meant she sometimes had to spend class time searching for jobs and logging her activity in her Journal to ensure she met the requirements. This put her at risk of missing out on the course material and learning experience necessary to help her move into her chosen career.

"Yeah it can be quite difficult, but I'm lucky that I've got a really good teacher, so she makes accommodations like if you need to like, sit in the back on the laptop and apply for jobs to meet those requirements, then she will allow us to do that, so I'm grateful for that."

28-YEAR-OLD WOMAN IN LONDON

In rare cases, the study time could count towards the number of hours a Work Coach had required that an individual spent looking for work. But largely, people we heard from were studying in addition to and alongside their job searching and interview activity, despite talking to their Work Coaches about their ambitions to use the training to access new career opportunities.



“Like I had a conversation with my Work Coach about a month ago and that I was going to college to hopefully find a job, a career, and I was asking them why that doesn’t count towards like the hours I have to search for work for. He didn’t really have a good answer for me. He’s saying, ‘Oh you still need to look for work because being in college isn’t working.’”

24-YEAR-OLD IN LIVERPOOL

This meant that it potentially takes much longer to complete courses than if UC claimants could focus solely on studying. The consequences may be that they’re able to move into better paid jobs more slowly, which would ultimately cost DWP more in benefits payments. The DWP’s own trials testing in-work progression interventions found that participants who received ‘job-related training’ saw increased earnings.²¹

For those who were working part-time and still had to report their jobs search activity, it could be hard to fit in studying time, especially alongside any caring needs and health conditions. One mother, who was working part-time for an agency, had no certainty about which days she’d work filling in as a receptionist. While she was hoping to complete a teaching assistant course at her local college, she wasn’t currently able to attend a literacy course she needed to complete before she could enrol because her hours were too irregular. When we spoke, she was applying for jobs in the hope of getting more stable work that would allow her to finish her course.

The following case illustrates how inefficient conditionality rules can be when time spent studying relevant courses isn’t counted towards their work search requirements, drawing out the time it takes for people to earn qualifications and move into more secure work.

Case Study One: Bradley

29-year-old man, based in London, who recently came off UC while in training

Bradley, a self-employed carpenter, began studying a free Level 2 NVQ in site carpentry at his local college after his Work Coach suggested it. Despite the Work Coach recommending he do the qualification "to make it easier to get work", he wasn't able to study full-time due to cost and the Jobcentre were not able to adjust his work search requirements to account for study time.

"One bit of advice was to get a carpentry NVQ as they said it'd be easier to get work. And that advice from them in terms of UC was actively detrimental, as they kept the 35-hour requirement while I was working two days a week and refused to acknowledge that [they] had suggested [the training]... They didn't put me forward for [the training course] but they had suggested it, said to get qualifications, do everything possible. Then I had lots of chats about them funding a ten-week rapid course, full time. They refused to fund anything like that. So, all I could afford was a two-day-a-week, year-long course at my local college."

He felt frustrated by the conflicting advice he'd been given by his Work Coach and felt this had hindered him progressing his business as quickly as he could. He had also recently come off of UC after the 'minimum income floor' for self-employed people was applied to his benefits and he no longer felt that the amount he was getting was worth the 35 hours of work search activity. He had struggled to find the time to meet his work search commitments alongside his training and managing a mental health condition, which had limited his ability to work full-time prior to receiving UC. But he was clear on the kind of work that would work best for him.

"The happiest I have been over the past year was when I was self-contracted, doing stable work, firstly for five days a week before I started the course and then three days a week once I had started the course... I was at a workshop, but even though I was technically self-employed the set up of it was really being an employee and that was much better for my mental health. I was keeping myself busy and I knew what I was doing each day, it was very good for my mental health."

Some participants were discouraged by the process of having to meet the requirements, feeling that the number of available jobs they could apply for didn't always match the expectations for their search activity.

"I find that it's a bit unrealistic to spend 35 hours looking for work because the job market is so... it's not an easy market to enter. And it can be disheartening, but you have to kind of do it."

28-YEAR-OLD WOMAN IN LONDON

What's striking in our research is how many people were proactively looking for work and training opportunities hoping to access better jobs that fit their needs and interests. And



they were doing so while having to meet the requirements of a system that largely doesn't create room for them to access the kinds of training opportunities that would help them achieve their goals.

Course fees and indirect training costs are holding people back from accessing training

In addition to these challenges, for those we interviewed, training costs, including indirect costs such as travel and childcare, presented a significant barrier to building new skills.

While Work Coaches did offer funding to cover some short courses (like the Construction Skills Certification Scheme), it wasn't always clear to participants why funding was available for certain courses but not others, and there was almost no mention of accessing loans to cover study or maintenance costs.

Indeed, many of the people we interviewed who studying were paying for courses themselves or with the help of their partner, as illustrated through Victoria's experience below.



Case Study Two: Victoria

45-year-old woman, based in the North West, required to look for work for 20 hours each week

Receiving benefits since October 2015, Victoria had two children in school. Her partner was working full-time but had become self-employed in January 2021, and as a result her conditionality requirements changed from not needing to look for work to having to do so for 20 hours per week. Since then, she has visited the Jobcentre every other week. The change from having no requirements was “a shock.”

While she was mostly looking for retail sales assistant roles, she was pursuing training to achieve her ambition of becoming as a teaching assistant in a school. While she felt the mental drain of having to look for work while caring for children had impacted her ability to complete training, she also felt that money was still a greater barrier keeping her from undertaking courses. She had an interest in adult psychology training but realised fees for child psychology courses were lower. Her partner found the courses for her, and she and her partner paid for two self-paced online courses that were taking her about six months each.

“There's been a few [courses] that I've wanted to take. But to be fair, it's been [a] money issue, you know, because I was paying for them myself. And it was just like you say, 'No, that's just going to cost far too much and I can't... I've got to prioritise the money for the family and for things that the kids need rather than shelling it all out for... educational courses.’”

She said her Work Coach had not recommended any training courses to her, and there had been no discussion of available funding to help cover her study fees and maintenance costs.

Her Work Coach had recently referred her to the Restart programme, and while she had only recently started, she already felt the support she received at Restart was better and more holistic than what she'd experienced at the Jobcentre.

“I would say, personally, not that - there's nothing wrong with my Work Coach - but I would say that it's more support at Restart [...] I was kind of dreading going because I didn't really have a clue what this Restart was, 'cause I didn't really get much explained to me. But when I got there, they make you so feel so welcome. And you can have a giggle. You can be yourself. You don't have to have any airs and graces or anything like that. And they were just so good. And they've got people to cover every aspect of job seeking, your life, of rent, money, everything. It's actually a really, really good programme as far as I can see.”

Childcare availability and costs are significant barriers for parents

Many women we interviewed spoke of issues accessing affordable childcare. This reinforces existing research about women in particular often bearing the main responsibilities for childcare²² and conditionality not accounting for unpaid childcare.²³ Because private childcare was simply too costly, some parents had to put their training plans on hold until their children were old enough to go to school or qualify for increased free childcare hours.

Another challenge was finding affordable care. One 25-year-old woman had to turn down a fully-funded nursing course because she didn't have childcare. Since not doing the course, she had worked part-time in a number of temporary roles in call centres and retail while remaining on benefits.

In another case, a Work Coach recommended a woman attend a short training course, but she had to turn down the opportunity because it wasn't possible to arrange childcare at short notice.

“Yesterday my coach was saying there was some training going on today that I could go to, but it's holidays now for the children so my daughter is home so I can't go.”

39-YEAR-OLD WOMAN IN LONDON

While parents getting UC may be eligible for 85% of childcare costs to be covered within their UC payments, this is paid in arrears requiring them to meet costs up front, and some told us they struggled to afford the 15% they would need to cover themselves. This is potentially holding a large portion of people on UC back from accessing training.

Our findings are in line with the wide body of research on the impacts of caring responsibilities on people's careers, and we support the argument that the UK needs a system of affordable, flexible childcare so parents and carers who want to work able to fully participate in the labour market.

Jobcentres aren't equipped to support people on UC to take up training. Our research found that it was individuals getting UC, rather than their Work Coaches, who had to take responsibility for identifying training options and participants often had to be the instigating discussions about their career goals. Key challenges included:

- Our interviews suggested that some Work Coaches don't have access to essential information about training opportunities, which meant that many learners had to find the information they needed on their own
- It is difficult to build a positive and trusting relationship with a Work Coach. Many of the people we interviewed said they didn't feel their Work Coaches were supportive of their career goals, and Work Coaches may not have enough time during appointments to build up an understanding of the specific training opportunities that would be suitable for the people they support.

Knowledge about training was limited among Work Coaches, meaning many learners had to find information about training independently

Some of our interviewees felt their Work Coaches didn't have information or knowledge about training opportunities, even where these aligned with flagship skills programmes or sectors experiencing skills shortages.

In one case, an interviewee working in a low-paid part-time role wanted to find out about opportunities to gain a social work degree. Through researching on Facebook and discussions with friends, she found out that as a parent of a young child, she was eligible for an exemption to the rules which allowed her to study a Higher Education Access course and continue to receive UC. This information wasn't provided by her Work Coach, or promoted through her



local Jobcentre. Given national shortages in qualified Social Workers,²⁴ and widely evidenced barriers to work experienced by mothers of young children, such as limited access to affordable childcare²⁵ or flexible working,²⁶ it could be expected that Jobcentres might be encouraging individuals in her circumstances with an ambition to enter the sector to access relevant training opportunities.

In another case, a participant had asked his Work Coach about the Government-funded Skills Bootcamps but, found their Work Coach didn't know much about them. This led to him being sent between services and providers and going "round in a big circle to end up with what [he] already knew," which delayed him starting the course. Despite the push to recruit UK-based HGV drivers,²⁷ he felt he was taken less seriously as a prospective learner getting Universal Credit, and has faced delays in getting information about the course.

"I mean, I'm still on with it, but I'm just like disheartened about it. Is it actually going to happen, this?... I just think. I am still a customer even though I'm not directly paying for it, the government's paying for it, you know, and they haven't treated me like that. They haven't even returned a call. If I was sat here with me £3,000 wanting to pay them maybe they would have treated me better. Or are we just, 'Oh that's one of them lot off the dole, wanting to do the free training'? I don't know."

55-YEAR-OLD MAN IN NORTH WEST

Another person had mentioned her interest in learning coding through a Government Skills Bootcamp, but she had struggled to find any information about her eligibility for the courses on the dedicated website and wasn't sure whether there were any coding bootcamps that she would be eligible for. The lack of clarity she experienced is concerning given the emphasis the Government has placed on promoting these programmes.

Most of the people we spoke to researched courses themselves, and some then brought these ideas to their Work Coaches. It was evident that some Work Coaches, even if supportive of the ideas, didn't always seem to actively seek information to help people reach that goal.

It was concerning that our interviews, participants often said they didn't feel that they could ask for advice or that their Work Coach would be able to provide the answers they need. This was sometimes due to seeing some Work Coaches as just trying to fulfil bureaucratic duties.

"I'm saying even in the past Work Coaches are all very, very different, like really different. I can't explain it like you could get a Work Coach who is just there to tick boxes and then you can get a Work Coach that really wants to help you get into work. It's very hit or miss I would say."

28-YEAR-OLD WOMAN IN LONDON

One person saw a lack of clear and comprehensive tailored advice about training courses.

"Ideally, I'd like for someone to help like find the courses... Yeah, ideally I would like for someone to be like "this is the perfect course for you. Here you go!" And by the end of it there's a job opportunity, or a day trial or training or anything."

30-YEAR-OLD WOMAN IN THE NORTH WEST

Even after people informed their Work Coach about careers they were interested in, in some cases, Work Coaches would still send adverts for jobs in other sectors.



While most of the people we interviewed did not feel pressured to take just any job their Work Coach shared with them, this is in contrast to what other research has found²⁸ and could be connected to the timing of the interviews, which were occurring before increased conditionality was fully implemented and post-relaxation of rules during the Covid-19 pandemic. A small number did experience pressure to apply for whatever jobs were sent by their Work Coach, even when they knew they didn't have the skills needed and would be unlikely to get an interview.

"I had I got more careful and then I said OK I have to go with the job more quickly. I don't want to feel that more pressure from the job centre and they, I don't want them to force me to go for any job."

36-YEAR-OLD WOMAN IN LONDON

It is often difficult to build relationships with Work Coaches

Alongside specific concerns about whether Work Coaches have the resources and expertise to signpost people on UC to training opportunities is a more fundamental problem: many of the people we interviewed felt they didn't have a positive relationship with their Work Coach. One person spoke about a Work Coach who temporarily filled in for her usual Work Coach:

"[I] literally met her five minutes and she's made me feel like... Like nothing. Like it... could be me, you know what I mean? It could be me and not her, but she made me feel very like, 'How can you even be here claiming Universal Credit?' almost. That was the impression I got from her. It was almost like. 'I've got a job. Why don't you have a job?' like 'Everyone else has a job? Why don't you have a job?' It was really just disheartening."

28-YEAR-OLD WOMAN IN LONDON

There were several examples of people having only brief interactions and limited guidance from Work Coaches. Sometimes relationships were impacted by individuals experiencing multiple changes in Work Coaches over a short period of time. We also heard accounts of some people having three or four Coaches in a matter of a few months.

Here, there is a risk that just as people are starting to establish a relationship and understanding with their Work Coach, they are suddenly "starting over" with a new Work Coach.

"I couldn't actually go into the job centre, so they rescheduled my appointment... with like a different Work Coach, a lady I never met before and like just sitting down with her, I felt like... I didn't - it didn't feel nice, and, in my head, I'm like "this is literally a stranger. I've never met her."

28-YEAR-OLD WOMAN IN LONDON

In addition, abrupt changes in Work Coaches can also make it particularly difficult to explain sensitive personal circumstances such as childcare responsibilities, family dynamics such as relationship breakdown, and health-related challenges. All of these are important factors that can impact the type of work someone might want or be able to do. Not knowing if they'll need to re-explain a potentially sensitive personal matter may add another element of stress for people getting UC, particularly where there is a risk of benefit sanctions. For one man who'd been experiencing depression, having to meet a new Work Coach was disruptive and distressing.

“Yeah the second one [Work Coach] felt very bureaucratic and uncaring. I felt like I'd built up a personal relationship with the Work Coach on the phone. He understood where I was coming from. He had a lovely Irish accent which always calmed me down. But then ... it felt like as soon as I showed up to the in-person appointments with the new Work Coach, it felt like his motivation was to get me off UC from the very beginning.”

29-YEAR-OLD MAN IN LONDON

Several interviewees felt that communication could be better between the DWP and people receiving UC. One participant was frustrated that her Work Coach would sometimes schedule appointments that conflicted with her courses.

“Sometimes because when I've got to go to the Universal Credit meeting, they schedule it for while I'm in college. So, I have told them that I can only do Wednesdays but sometimes they just do it and I feel like I have to turn up or I'll lose my benefits.”

24-YEAR-OLD WOMAN IN LONDON

There were numerous examples of people being told about job fairs and opportunities last minute on the same day they were occurring, which for those with caring responsibilities or part-time jobs meant they were unable to attend.

The short length of meetings between Work Coaches and people receiving benefits, which we heard lasted between five and fifteen minutes, presented a major challenge to building relationships. And for many, these were merely check-ins to talk about the jobs they applied for. Having such short meetings can make it difficult to build trust and understanding of individual circumstances, which can be particularly important where individuals had health conditions or caring responsibilities that impacted their ability to look for work.

In one extreme case, one participant who had young children was placed in the incorrect conditionality group for two years. Despite having young children, she was required to look for 35 hours each week, which she found “very, very stressful.” She reported this repeatedly, but nothing changed until she had a new Work Coach, who resolved the issue. She felt that her new Work Coach listened to her and took her concerns seriously, where others hadn't.

Our research suggests that the current relationship dynamic between Work Coaches and people on UC is not conducive to supporting people to find and access training. The majority of participants saw their Work Coaches as being responsible for monitoring their activity rather than providing support, which aligns with other research on experiences of Jobcentre Plus.²⁹ This is in contrast to guidance for Work Coaches, which states that they will get to know people to understand their skills and what kind of advice and support they might need.³⁰

When Jobcentre support works well: getting tailored support from Work Coaches to access training

Some participants felt their Work Coaches were proactive and helpful, looking things up after appointments, and sharing relevant information with them:



“It's like ... I come up with the ideas and then he helps me like build on it. I wanted to get into something like... teaching and things. Then he looks at like similar things, similar opportunities around... and he mentioned the apprenticeship website... and he told me about a job in Doncaster, a teaching job. So, like I sort of like, give him my ideas and he sort of like builds on it and like researches it and then tells me and helps me, like says what I can apply for and what sort of funding is available and things like that.”

25-YEAR-OLD WOMAN IN YORKSHIRE

Another person recalled a similar relationship with a previous Work Coach, who had identified a course that enabled her to move in to work:

“I did used to have, when I was last on in about... 2014, I think it was or 15. I did have a job coach and she used to discuss with me what we could do and what I'm interested in, and then she'd actually get me on a training programme, which helped me into work. And I found that useful because she listened to my abilities and what my goals were, so it was more like tailored to me. And I found that useful.”

38-YEAR-OLD-WOMAN IN THE NORTH WEST

Since getting back onto UC in 2020, she'd had less contact with the Jobcentre and felt she'd have benefited from help from someone with more “awareness of like local courses and local training programmes.”

These examples illustrate how Work Coaches can support people on UC to meet their goals through build a trusting relationship with them over time, but they were exceptional in our interviews, with many Work Coaches acting in more reactive than proactive ways. It's clear that a transformative shift in approach to support will be essential to unlocking training opportunities for people on UC.



3. REIMAGINING EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT TO REALISE TRAINING AMBITIONS

In this research, we sought to understand the relationship between welfare conditionality and access to training for people receiving UC. Our research finds that there are people receiving UC who want to be able to access training opportunities that can help them move into new roles and careers, but they are facing that made accessing or completing courses more difficult.

Informed by this evidence, we have identified practical steps DWP should take to ensure that people who want to build new skills are supported to access training.

Helping people access the kinds of jobs that fit with their situations and personal goals will increase their chances of staying in work, and save the DWP money in the long run. If people receiving benefits are encouraged to take up temporary, unstable and insecure jobs, this makes them more vulnerable to needing to access benefits in the future. This is counter-productive and costly for individuals and their families, DWP and the economy. If the Government is to reach its 'Levelling Up' ambitions, even more people will need to be supported to develop new skills and earn qualifications.

The 2021 In-Work Progression Commission report, which draws from the DWP's own research, recommended that DWP should develop in-work progression expertise along with in-depth labour market knowledge derived from close working relationships with local skills providers, employers and local authorities.³¹ The Commission also recommended people on low pay should be "proactively encouraged and enabled to take up learning through a progression and learning plan and creation of bridging funding to higher level qualifications. However, the Government have yet to respond to the Commission's recommendations. The Government must ensure that people getting UC can benefit from a more joined-up effort between Jobcentres and local skills ecosystems, and that people's individual needs are prioritised and their training and progression ambitions are supported.

1. Embed flexibility in employment support to allow everyone who wants to access training to pursue their goals

Conditionality is preventing many people on UC from accessing the full range of training opportunities that could benefit them. Our interviews showed that people on UC sought training to help them renew outdated qualifications, develop new/advanced skills or to move into a new career. People were motivated to change careers to access flexible work that would fit around caring needs and health conditions, to pursue a passion or interest and to access more stable, better paid and less stressful work. Allowing people to improve their working lives and establish more stability in their careers by accessing training will ultimately benefit the social security system by moving people into work that suits their lives better. But conditionality is preventing many people on UC from accessing the full range of training opportunities that could benefit them.

We found that people who are accessing training alongside conditionality are facing challenges balancing their learning with caring responsibilities, part-time work and required job search activity. While the Train and Progress initiative has been extended once, Government should make this extension permanent and increase the length of time UC recipients can study so they can access training programmes that will enable them to move into stable, well-paid employment.

Recommendation 1: The Department for Work and Pension should remove the restrictions on people getting UC to allow anyone receiving benefits to study part and full-time for at least a year initially, with possibilities to extend. Claimant Commitments and any conditionality requirements should be adjusted for anyone who is studying full or part-time to account for time spent studying and to allow people to fully benefit from taking part.

According to our interviews, Work Coaches were able to help people find free courses and to provide support for small, one-off costs related to studying. Funding for longer term courses, however, appeared rarely to be discussed with Work Coaches, and awareness of options available to people receiving UC and in specific circumstances was lacking among people on UC. It also appeared that people in our research were mostly not told about or able to access any financial assistance for maintenance costs of studying FE.

Recommendation 2: Work Coaches and the Department for Work and Pensions should ensure that people on UC have access to clear information about course costs and the circumstances where they can study and remain on UC. They should also provide clear information about what funding is available from different sources to help cover course costs and other costs to study.

2. Give Work Coaches the resources, training and time to support people's training aspirations

Work Coaches need to be given all the knowledge and guidance to do their role effectively, and this is certainly happening in some Jobcentres. But our interviews revealed that people on UC did not see their Work Coaches as able to support their training and career goals, and they were not sharing their ambitions or seeking advice from Work Coaches, in many cases. One major barrier to creating a more supportive dynamic was the short meetings, potentially driven by the large caseloads and need to prioritise support for those furthest from the labour market. People who want to access training should not be discouraged from doing so, especially if their desired qualification could move them into better paid and more stable work.

Recommendation 3: The Department for Work and Pensions should ensure that Work Coaches have time to support everyone who has an interest in accessing training by implementing opportunities for benefits recipients to indicate their interest in accessing training at any point throughout their claim. Doing so should initiate a training-focused meeting with their Work Coach or other specialised staff, where they would discuss their options and signpost them to National Careers Service Advisers.

Work Coaches should be empowered and provided with the time, insights and resource to help people find and access training they need to get into jobs that interest them. Based on our interviews, the relationship between people receiving UC and Work Coaches does not seem to start with a question about how they can best work together to help the person into work they want to do or to progress into better paid or more stable work – suggesting a gap between policy intention and practice. And where people need more guidance to establish career goals, or face specific challenging circumstances, there wasn't always time in their meetings to share these details and explore how they might impact their training and career goals.

Recommendation 4: The Department for Work and Pensions should provide in-depth training and regular professional development for Work Coaches so they can better support people to find, access and afford training courses, while also supporting their different needs, including physical and mental conditions and caring responsibilities.

While some local Jobcentres may engage with Further Education colleges and other training providers in their local areas, there is a need for Work Coaches to build specialist expertise and cultivate relationships with local training providers to help match the people they support to the right training opportunities. Work Coaches and employment support providers should be knowledgeable and able to answer questions, provide information about training courses and link people to the wider local skills and education system.

Creating a role for specialised experts who actively engage in local skills ecosystems could ensure Work Coaches have access to high-quality and up-to-date information about local opportunities and can enable people to explore courses and training options and wider career pathways in their local areas.

Recommendation 5: The Department for Work and Pensions should work with the Department for Education and ensure Work Coaches have up-to-date knowledge of local skills ecosystems, labour market demand and training opportunities, including Government skills initiatives, by establishing a specialised group of career developers who would engage with and build relationships with Combined Authorities, local chambers of commerce, Local Enterprise Partnerships, employers and businesses, training providers, Skills Advisory Boards and the Local Skills Improvement Plans. Acting as local training specialists within Jobcentres, they would then share their knowledge with Work Coaches through CPD sessions and high-quality advice.

3. Ensure consistency and embed trust into interactions between Work Coaches and people on Universal Credit

Additionally, the DWP works with many commissioned organisations to provide different parts of the employment support programme, and the join up and coordination between the Jobcentre and these providers wasn't always clear for people in our research. Some people felt they were having to start over because information about individuals on UC wasn't being transferred from their original Work Coaches to any new support officers. Communication between different Work Coaches and commissioned employment support providers was also inconsistent, creating confusion and uncertainty about who was responsible for providing different forms of support.

Recommendation 6: Work Coaches should agree and document any training goals with people on UC before sending them to external contracted organisations. Once they've been transferred, Work Coaches should ensure that people are receiving valuable support that moves them closer to their goals.

In our interviews, some people experienced frequent changes in Work Coaches, and this was sometimes quite disruptive, especially for individuals with caring responsibilities or health conditions. This finding is in line with other research, which suggested that DWP should monitor the extent to which there was continuity of Work Coaches across caseloads.³²

Recommendation 7: Where people experience a change in Work Coaches, every effort should be made to ensure that systems and the Jobcentre's staff smoothly transfer an individual's specific information about their personal circumstances, goals and any challenges they face to new Work Coaches and new coaches have sufficient time to review the information before meeting with clients.



4. Create a robust and affordable childcare funding system in the UK

Women with children made up a large proportion of our interview participants, and their experiences of trying to access training courses revealed weaknesses within the childcare system. And we know from other research that women are particularly impacted by the inability to access affordable childcare.³³ Many of those in our research were working part-time, and having to fit conditionality work search requirements around their caring responsibilities. Those who were taking courses were balancing their study alongside these other responsibilities.

While some support is available for people on UC to meet childcare costs, this does not fully cover costs and is paid in arrears, which means parents on very low incomes are required to absorb up-front costs. Another challenge for interviewees was the difficulty of arranging childcare at short notice, when the opportunity to attend a short course or an interview came up suddenly. In some cases, difficulties accessing childcare had prevented people from accessing training courses.

Being able to access flexible work was also important for those with caring responsibilities, but this was especially true for parents of disabled children. Numerous organisations are calling for reforms and creation of a well-funded childcare system to allow parents to fully engage in the labour market and be able to take part in training, if they choose to. As living costs rise, it is essential the UK Government act to ensure that affordable childcare is available to all who need it. Otherwise there remains a risk that women who would want to be in paid work are forced to leave the labour market to manage childcare.

Recommendation 8: To support learners with caring responsibilities – as well as all carers – the Government should improve and increase provision of affordable childcare in the UK, including increasing funding for part and full-time childcare for parents and carers and reducing barriers to accessing full-time care, especially for those with children under five years old. For parents and carers on Universal Credit, childcare costs should be covered in full and paid up front.

METHODOLOGY

For this study we sought to capture a mix of experiences of people who were receiving or had recently received Universal Credit and were either accessing training currently or were interested in accessing training in the future.

To recruit, we engaged a variety of different groups to access people, including the benefits calculator Entitledto, the Association of Colleges, a regional DWP office and further education colleges within our own networks.

We conducted 16 qualitative semi-structured interviews by phone with people between February and April 2022. The interviews lasted approximately one hour, and there were 11 women and five men in our sample.

Our participants were based across England. Seven of them were in the NW region, five in London, and the remaining four were in the East and West Midlands, Yorkshire and South East of England. They also ranged in ages from their 20s to 60s. Four were in their 20s, six in their 30s, three in their 40s, and one each in their 50s and 60s. One person's age was unknown. Nine participants had children. None of the five men we spoke to had children. Nine of the 11 women had children.

People in the study faced slightly different levels of conditionality and requirements to report their job search activity. Two people were not working at the time of interview and faced no requirements to show their search activity. One was temporarily not required because she had a sick note from a doctor saying she was unfit for work. The other had a formal assessment from the DWP which determined he was not currently able to work, called 'limited capacity for work', and he was not currently expected to work.

Of those 14 interviewees considered by DWP to be 'fit for work' and not working, some had to look for work 35 hours per week, while others had to look for work 16 hours or 20 hours each week, depending on the ages of their children.

We also spoke to people working part-time hours but who were also required to look for additional hours or increase their earnings.



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