

# LEARNING TO LEVEL UP:

The role of skills in tackling job  
insecurity through Brexit and Covid-19

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In partnership with

**Totaljobs**

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# Executive Summary

Despite the UK reaching record levels of employment in January 2020<sup>1</sup>, many organisations experienced difficulties in recruiting the skilled workers that they require in recent years, and an increasing number of workers found themselves stuck in insecure employment<sup>2</sup>.

The economic picture has now dramatically shifted, with the Covid-19 pandemic and the imminent end to free movement with the European Union causing significant labour market disruption. Hundreds of thousands of people have already lost their jobs in recent months, and unemployment is widely expected to increase sharply as we enter 2021. Other features of more insecure work such as low pay, variable hours and temporary contracts are also set to rise further<sup>3</sup>.

Unsurprisingly, attention has already shifted to how best to support those who do lose their jobs or see their wages and hours cut, so they can access new employment opportunities in the future. Government has recognised that an important element of this is ensuring that workers have the necessary skills that employers are looking for. A new set of measures to encourage participation in training and adult learning has recently been announced – most notably through the Lifetime Skills Guarantee, which will offer free intermediate and higher level training courses to individuals in England.

However, our analysis has found that a significant proportion of those in the middle of their working lives, aged 25-49, are ineligible for these new skills support initiatives and are less likely to access training overall. In particular:

*1.4 million mid-career workers with level 3 qualifications (the equivalent of A-levels) in routine or manual occupations would currently be ineligible for the Lifetime Skills Guarantee or Kickstart Scheme despite being amongst those most likely to benefit from training to help them progress into higher paid work.*

Over the last decade, access to training has flatlined for workers at all levels, but it remains the case that those who would likely benefit the most from learning opportunities are the least likely to access them. Just under a fifth of workers in routine and intermediate roles have taken part in training, compared to just under a third of those in more senior roles between April-June 2019<sup>4</sup>.

Concerningly, we have found that workers in the sectors most at risk of heightened insecurity through Covid-19 are also less likely to have received training and skills development recently. For example, less than 20% of those working in restaurants, events and catering or the creative, arts and entertainment industries received training in the months April-June last year<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, training provided by employers understandably often focusses on compliance with legal requirements, or workers' current job duties, rather than the development of additional skills.

In addition, for many mid-career workers, the prospect of engaging in adult learning or skills development will feel particularly difficult.

- Up to 1.9 million mid-career workers with dependent children aged under 16 may find it harder to access training opportunities as a result of caring and family responsibilities.
- Over 7.5 million mid-career workers have not received any training since leaving full time education, meaning they have no recent experience of engaging in learning and skills development.
- Participation in training decreases with age. While between 31% and 28% of 16 to 24-year-old workers access training, this drops to 25% for 30 to 49-year-old workers.

Alongside these challenges, sector experts suggest that lower skilled workers in particular can suffer from lacking confidence in relation to accessing more substantial skills development. For some workers, the stigma associated with having limited numeracy, language or digital skills can limit engagement in training. Negative experiences of training or education in the past could contribute to this. For others, the perceived benefits of such training may not seem sufficient to justify the costs in terms of fees or loss in earnings, or because those workers don't see training and development as something for them to engage in full stop.

This can have a particularly negative impact on specific worker groups who face structural inequalities in the labour market, such as women, Black people, or those with a disability. Our analysis found that these workers face longstanding barriers to progression within the labour market, which cannot be addressed through training alone. Ongoing work to make recruitment practices more inclusive and to include representation of these groups at a senior level within organisations will be essential to ensuring that training is perceived as a valuable route to progression for all workers.

In addition, it is important to note that the welfare system currently prevents many individuals who are out of work or on low incomes from accessing some training opportunities while receiving benefits.

The Government has rightly recognised the importance of boosting life-long learning in the months and years ahead. In order to address the challenges raised in this report and ensure life-long learning opportunities are available to everyone, there are a series of steps that Government and employers can undertake.

## Recommendations for Government

- Review eligibility for the Lifetime Skills Guarantee to maximise access and participation among workers on low pay, recognising that some workers who hold a level 3 qualification may benefit from access to further training.
- Offer support with the indirect costs of taking part in training, such as childcare, to workers on low incomes.
- Include a specific focus on engagement with further education within the role of the Disabled Students' Commission to ensure that initiatives like the Lifetime Skills Guarantee are inclusive of disabled learners.
- Remove restrictions on engaging in training for individuals receiving welfare benefits like Jobseekers Allowance and Universal Credit.
- Work extensively with local actors, including Local Enterprise Partnerships, Local Authorities and industry bodies, as well as providers and employers to ensure that training offers align closely with demand within local economies, and that employers understand how to navigate the adult education landscape.
- Help employers to meet the indirect costs of staff training, such as arranging cover for staff who are away from work. Our analysis shows lower paid, lower skilled mid-career workers have limited access to training, but for employers there is little incentive to support workers in routine and manual roles to invest in their longer term learning and development. Costs, fatigue and time constraints can prevent engagement in courses outside of working hours.

## Recommendations for Employers

- Offer all workers opportunities to explore learning and development routes available to them. Employers should look at ways of investing in the longer-term learning and development of lower paid workers, for example through offering mentoring or coaching, or providing information and advice about low and no cost training.
- Offer flexible routes to training. Workers with parenting and caring responsibilities experience difficulties in meeting time commitments needed for some training courses. For some workers, combining training with the demands of work is physically exhausting and can impact wellbeing, and this has led to workers dropping out of courses at times. Employers could address this by offering training on a flexible basis. This should include offering training during paid working hours, or providing paid study leave.
- Tackle barriers to entry and progression within their organisation. Our analysis has found that for some workers who face wider structural inequalities in society, taking part in training simply isn't leading to the positive outcomes it should. While training can present a valuable route out of insecure work, it isn't a silver bullet, and should be considered alongside a strategic approach to ensuring that recruitment at intermediate and senior levels is inclusive.



## Glossary

**Apprenticeship:** A training programme which combines on the job training with accompanying study.

**Income Support:** A form of welfare benefit that helps claimants to meet their living costs if they receive a low income. It is £74.35 per week for people aged 25 or over, with additional payments available for some people who are disabled or are carers<sup>6</sup>.

**Jobseekers Allowance:** Jobseekers Allowance is a benefit for unemployed individuals who are looking for work. It is being partially replaced by Universal Credit, but now only available to people who have paid national insurance contributions as an employee over the 2-3 years before making their claim. It is £74.35 per week for people aged 25 or over.

**Kickstart Scheme:** A Government programme set out in response to Covid-19, part of the Plan for Jobs, which provides funding to employers to create six-month job placements for 16-24 year olds receiving Universal Credit.

**Lifetime Skills Guarantee:** Adults without an A-level or equivalent qualification are entitled to four years of post-18 education under the scheme and are able to take out loans to pursue a level 3 qualification.

**Local Enterprise Partnerships:** A form of partnership, in England, between local authorities and business which functions to make decisions on local economic priorities, undertaking activities to help drive economic growth and create jobs.

**Mid-career workers:** Workers between the ages of 25-49. Typically, workers within this age band have established themselves in an occupation or professional pathway.

**NS-SEC occupation groups:** The National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification is used by the Office for National Statistics to derive socio-economic positions from occupational and other employment data. For the purpose of this research and in line with the Social Mobility Commission's approach, the longer list of NS-SEC categories are aggregated into three: Managerial occupations, intermediate occupations and routine & manual occupations.

**Qualification levels:** There are nine qualification levels. The two which feature most within this report are level 2, which is equivalent to GCSE level, and level 3, which includes A-level qualifications as well level 3 National Vocational Qualification.

**Universal Credit:** A social security payment that combines six benefits for working age people who have a low household income.

# Introduction

Over recent years, skills policy, adult learning and training in the UK have only partly met workers' and employers' needs. Many UK organisations have found it difficult to recruit people with the skills they require. The training available is often accessed by those who already have higher qualifications, while many people in low paid, insecure work have limited opportunities to pursue higher level skills through training and progress into better paid, more secure jobs.

Although the full impact of Covid-19 on jobs is yet to be felt, unemployment is forecast to grow significantly as we enter 2021<sup>7</sup>. Alongside this, free movement with the EU will end at the beginning of next year. According to the Open University Business Barometer 2019, **three in five (59%) senior business leaders surveyed think that the skills shortage will worsen after the UK officially leaves the EU, with the impact expected to be even worse in Scotland and Wales** (67% and 64% respectively)<sup>8</sup>.

Against this backdrop, the dual challenge of ensuring that workers have the skills to access secure employment and that businesses can recruit the skilled workers they need is set to become more pressing.

The Government has introduced a number of measures to ensure that employers are supported to keep staff on their payroll and avoid further redundancies during the pandemic. Initiatives to help groups of workers access employment and training opportunities have also been developed.

Perhaps most significant has been the announcement of a new Lifetime Skills Guarantee, due to come into effect in spring 2021. This will offer four years of free training to adults who don't hold an A-level or equivalent 'level 3' qualification. This is particularly important in the context of the current economic crisis. In the face of an increasingly competitive and volatile labour market, workers with higher qualifications may be better positioned to progress into more secure and stable work. For employers, investing in workforce skills and development now will be essential to maintaining and enhancing productivity through the crisis and recovery ahead.

This report provides insight into the nature of skills gaps in the UK labour market, the barriers workers are faced with in accessing skills and training programmes, and the ways in which policy and practice can be improved to maximise the impact that initiatives such as the Lifetime Skills Guarantee can have in the future.

To do so, the analysis draws on a mixed methods approach and focuses on 'mid-career' workers - those in the middle of their working lives, between the ages of 25-49 - and the kinds of tailored support they are likely to require. While Government initially focussed much of its support on younger people whose prospects of employment were most affected by Covid-19, including through the Kickstart Scheme, it is important that tailored support is also provided for people further along in their working lives.



Mid-career workers have distinct skill and training requirements, which are more likely to need to be balanced against parenting and caring commitments and other financial obligations, which are more prevalent at that stage of life. Department for Education research has described these as 'situational barriers', that sit alongside 'institutional barriers' (arising from poor provision) and 'dispositional barriers' (relating to individual attitudes towards learning) as one of the three main factors that prevent adults from taking up learning opportunities<sup>9</sup>.

With training budgets across the UK having been cut by 15% across all organisations on account of the Covid-19 crisis<sup>10</sup>, there is a danger that workers could face declining opportunities for training that could have potentially long-term implications.

Finally, this report sets out a range of recommendations for Government and employers that can help address these challenges, and support mid-career workers in enhancing their employment prospects in the future.

# Adult education in 2020

In order to develop ways in which the skills system can be improved to help meet the challenges presented by Covid-19 and Brexit, it's first important to understand how training and development has been provided in recent years.

## Training provided by employers

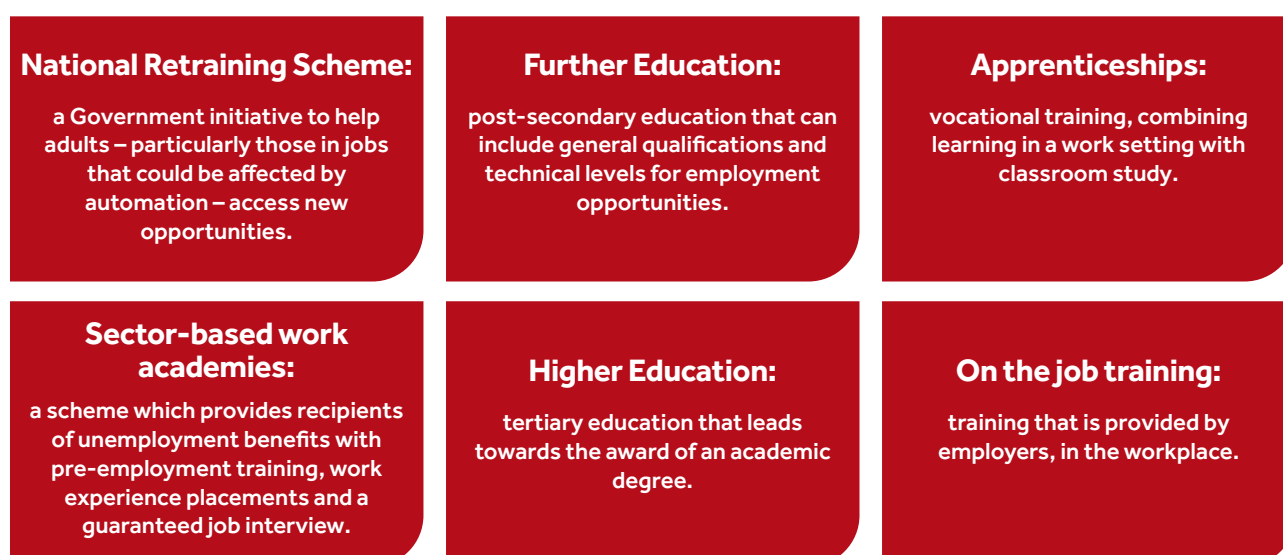
The majority of training that mid-career workers undertake is provided by their employers. Research by the Social Mobility Commission shows that where individuals had accessed training, 77% had done so through their employer<sup>11</sup>. It found that the most frequent reasons for undertaking training were connected to the employee's current job: to improve skills in their current job (77%) and to maintain professional status/meet occupational standards (45%), as opposed to preparing for a potential job in the future (22%)<sup>12</sup>.

This was reflected through the qualitative stakeholder interviews conducted for this research. Stakeholders reported that training provided by employers is often connected closely to employees' jobs, and is often covers topics, like health and safety or safeguarding, that enable an individual to do the job in hand, rather than equip them with further skills to advance their career or working prospects.

*"A lot of employer investment is in statutory things like health and safety or safeguarding. Not skills."*

(Policy stakeholder interview)

**Figure 1: Summary of the principal routes to adult learning and skills development in 2020**



## Government support for adult learning and shifts in response to Covid-19

Government investment in adult skills has historically been lower in the UK than in other OECD countries<sup>13</sup>. A sustained period of low investment has resulted in declining participation in adult learning<sup>14</sup> with data showing that other nations have achieved a higher take up of job-related training among low-skilled adults - for example, 35% in Norway and 29% in Denmark, compared to 20% in the UK<sup>15,16</sup>. Against this backdrop, various forms of support have been developed at the local level. In Nottingham and Leicester, for example, local councils have developed Local Employment Hubs which are intended to connect recruiting employers with local people, especially those facing significant barriers to successfully entering the labour market, by offering training in the skills that they need for job opportunities in the area.

In response to the substantial impact of Covid-19 on the labour market, the Government launched the Plan for Jobs and put in place a set of packages to protect jobs and avoid redundancies, including the Coronavirus Job Retention (furlough) Scheme and the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme.

While these packages have sought to protect household incomes during the pandemic and buffered a large number of jobs from being lost in part through the furloughing of millions of workers, redundancies have risen. It is expected that levels of unemployment will continue to grow as further Covid-19 restrictions are put in place throughout the winter period<sup>17</sup>.

Alongside measures implemented to prevent job losses, new Government initiatives have also sought to provide support for those out of work to find new jobs.

As part of this, the Government has recently launched a new National Skills Fund worth £2.5 billion. This will fund the Lifetime Skills Guarantee, offering four years of free training to adults who don't hold an A-level or equivalent level 3 qualification, as well as planned reforms to further education courses, and support to retrain through the former National Retraining Scheme<sup>18,19</sup>.

These changes represent positive first steps in supporting workers to improve their skills and employment prospects in the future. A level 3 training entitlement for adult learners was one of the recommendations made in the Augar Review of post-18 education, which highlighted that providing funding for both levels 2 and 3 would help to remove barriers to social mobility<sup>20</sup>.

However, there remain significant challenges as to whether those who would most likely benefit from this new provision will be able to access it. Our analysis found that **there were 4.9 million mid-career workers in the UK who didn't hold a level 3 qualification in 2019**<sup>21</sup>. For nearly half of these workers (2.3 million) in routine and manual occupations, the new provision could open routes to progression or alternative work. However, **there are approximately 1.4 million mid-career workers with level 3 qualifications in routine/manual occupations who would be ineligible for the Lifetime Skills Guarantee or the Kickstart Scheme, but who might benefit from retraining to move into higher paid work**.

Furthermore, it is unlikely that many of those in the middle of their working lives, of which over 9 million have one or more children aged under 16 and who may have other financial responsibilities, such as a mortgage, could afford to take a substantial pay cut in order to retrain. In fact, analysis suggests that 1.9 million mid-career workers find family commitments to be a barrier to training<sup>22</sup>. The next section of this report explores these questions regarding access to training in more detail.

**Figure 2: Summary of Government labour market initiatives in response to Covid-19**

### Lifetime Skills Guarantee:

Adults without an A-level or equivalent qualification are entitled to four years of post-18 education under the scheme and are able to take out loans to pursue a Level 3 qualification.

### Kickstart Scheme:

The Kickstart Scheme funds the creation of new jobs for 16-24 year olds claiming Universal Credit who are at risk of long term unemployment. Funding covers 100% of the National Minimum Wage for six months, on the basis that the job is new and offers 25 hours of work per week.

### Funding for apprentices and trainees:

Employers are also eligible for £2,000 of Government funding for each new apprentice they hire under the age of 24, up to 31 January 2021. Employers will receive £1,000 for each 16-24 year old trainee that they hire.

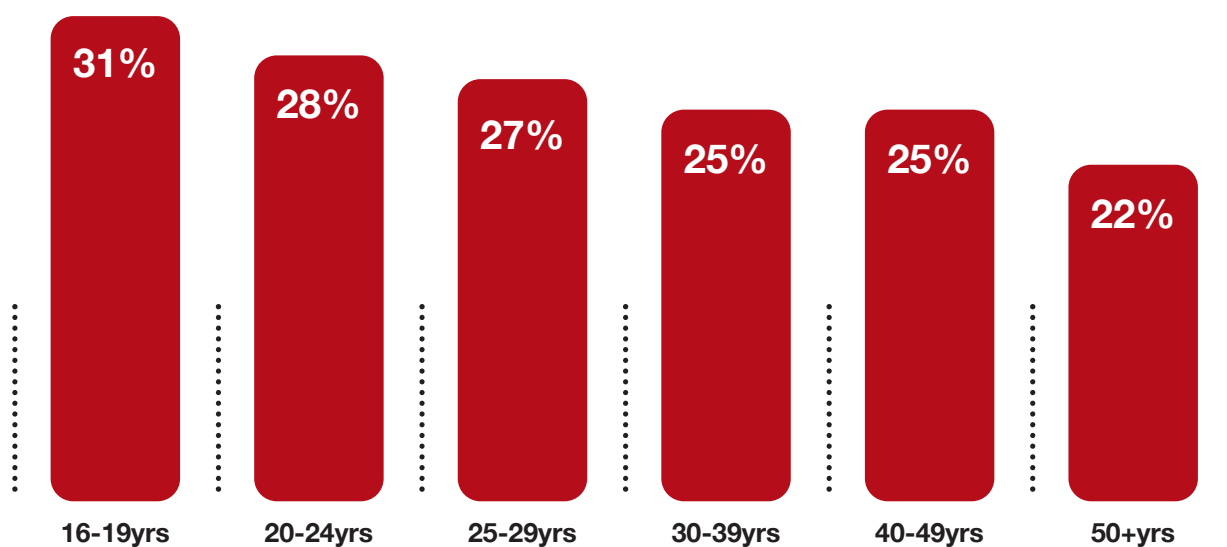
## Access to training for mid-career workers

When reflecting on this policy backdrop, it is important to recognise that mid-career workers have had limited access to training, and some groups who have developed new skills have experienced poor employment outcomes in recent years.

As Figure 3 illustrates, participation in training appears to decrease with age. Currently, once they progress through the earliest stage of their career,

workers are less likely to engage in training and development. To an extent, this is to be expected, given that younger workers will necessarily need to engage in training at the start of their working life. However, the workforce is ageing; 80% of those who will be in work by 2030 are already in the labour market<sup>23</sup>. This, combined with ongoing evolution in employer demand for certain skills, means the absence of ongoing lifelong learning will soon become unsustainable.

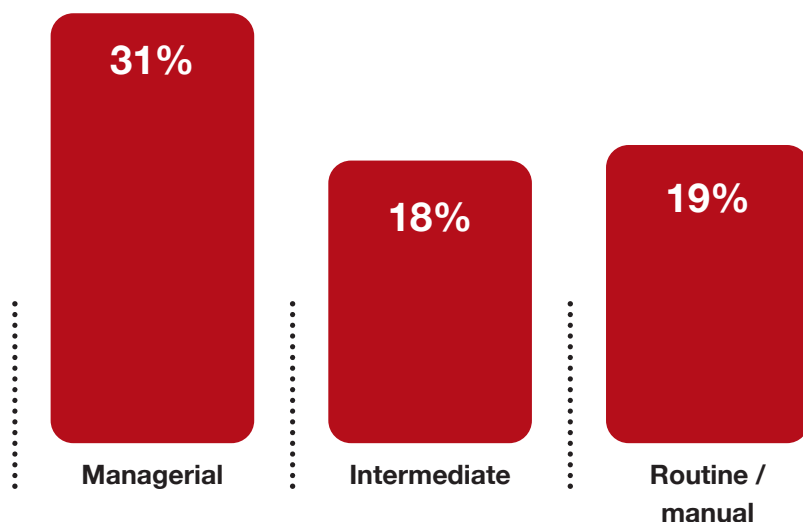
**Figure 3: Mid-career workers who had accessed training over the last 3 months, by age (based on Labour Force Survey April-June, 2019)**



Source: Labour Force Survey 2019

## Training by occupational group

**Figure 4: Mid-career workers who had accessed training over the last 3 months, by occupational group (based on Labour Force Survey April-June, 2019)**



**Source: Labour Force Survey 2019**

Increasing take up of training among those that need it most has been a persistent challenge. Our analysis shows that lower paid mid-career workers are the least likely to access such opportunities – with those in either intermediate or routine and manual skill-level jobs 13% and 12% less likely to have received training in a three month period, than those in managerial roles during 2019.

Estimates based on the 2017 Skills and Employment Survey indicate that **more than 7.5 million mid-career workers have not received any training since leaving full time education**<sup>24</sup>. This suggests that a proportion of workers will have no recent experience of engaging in learning and skills development, and may therefore be less likely to be aware of the opportunities available.

This analysis is echoed in recent findings from the Learning and Work Institute's annual Adult Participation in Learning Survey of learners aged 18 and over. This shows that those from more affluent socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to engage in adult learning. 57% of respondents in the two highest socio-economic groups were undertaking learning, a proportion that decreases across social grades, reaching 29% of adults in the two lowest socio-economic groups<sup>25</sup>.

The table below shows that access to training for managerial and routine and manual mid-career workers has declined gradually since 2010.

**Figure 5: Proportion of mid-career workers who have received training over the last three months over time, by occupational group.<sup>1</sup>**

NS-SEC occupational level	2010	2015	2019
Managerial	34%	31%	31%
Intermediate	18%	19%	18%
Routine/manual	21%	20%	19%

**Source: Labour Force Survey 2010, 2015 and 2019**

In this context, it is important to note that while the funding of adult education provision is important, it does not in and of itself guarantee increased participation. The adult education budget includes a legal entitlement to funding for adult learners who lack GCSE English and Maths to undertake this learning, but the number of adults taking up this opportunity has declined in recent years<sup>26</sup> with the number of adults aged 19 or above enrolled on level 2 courses falling by over 300,000 between 2011/12 and 2015/2016<sup>27</sup>. The number of apprenticeship starts at Level 2 in March/April of this year was 70% less than the same period a year ago<sup>28</sup>.

#### **Lifestyle factors influencing access to training and skills development**

Many adults will find it difficult to take up new learning opportunities due to a lack of time and financial resources, particularly low-paid workers. For example, analysis of the Skills and Employment Survey 2017 suggests that **21% of working parents consider childcare a barrier to participating in training**. Similarly, the Adult Participation in Learning Survey, undertaken by the Learning and Work Institute, found that 23% of respondents (aged 18 and above) who have not taken part in training over the past three years identified work and other time pressures as a barrier, with 11% and 10% of respondents highlighting childcare or caring responsibilities and financial costs, respectively, as other practical barriers<sup>29</sup>.

Workers who have been in a role in a large organisation for more than half a year have a statutory right to request time off for training or study – but given the decline in training observable

within our analysis, it is likely that this entitlement is not being used to a large extent.

This analysis suggests that workers need access to a range of training pathways throughout their working life. Training must be tailored around the kinds of commitments those in the middle of their working lives are likely to have. Online learning that is flexible, 'bitesize' and that does not need to be accessed live could all help to address these requirements.

#### **Perceptions of training and training outcomes**

Lacking confidence was a key theme outlined among stakeholder interviewees as a barrier to mid-career workers taking up adult education.

***"A lot of people haven't done any training since they left school. So, a big issue here is confidence."***

(policy stakeholder interviewee)

Where adults lack basic language, numeracy and digital skills, there can be a sense of stigma that prevents mid-career workers from re-entering training.

But as stakeholder interviewees also highlighted, a lack of confidence can also be based on not believing that the training will genuinely result in new or better job opportunities. Training requires a financial and emotional investment, and mid-career workers will need a degree of certainty that the investment will be worthwhile.

<sup>1</sup> The 'intermediate' occupation category covers both intermediate occupations and small employers.



Lacking confidence in the effectiveness of training may also be more acute among groups that face disadvantage in the labour market, such as disabled workers and workers of an ethnic minority background, that fare worse than other groups in terms of progression. This concern is borne out in data on training and progression. Evidence shows that participation in training most often leads to modest increases in wages, reflected by the fact that the salary gains of moving into higher occupational levels can be marginal unless you are confident of securing a managerial level role<sup>30,31</sup>.

**Figure 6: Average weekly salary by occupational group**



**Source: Labour Force Survey 2019**

### Accessing training while receiving welfare benefits

People receiving welfare benefits have limited opportunities to take part in training. For example, people receiving Universal Credit, Jobseekers Allowance and Income Support are currently not permitted to engage in full time training as a condition of their benefit entitlement.

There are currently more than 1 million people in the middle of their working lives in the 'all work requirements group' within Universal Credit. These people are required to be actively looking for work for 35 hours per week, which can act as a major barrier to accessing training<sup>32</sup>.

There are 202,385 people aged 25-49 receiving Job Seekers Allowance and 164,014 people receiving Income Support who are not permitted to complete 16 or more hours of training a week.

These rules could prevent unemployed mid-career workers from enrolling in short courses to boost their employment prospects and potentially transition into a new occupation or sector, as well as longer courses that require more intensive engagement<sup>33</sup>.

## Structural inequalities in the labour market

Our analysis found that for some workers, participating in training doesn't lead to opportunities to move in to better paid, more secure work. Women, Black workers and disabled workers are less likely to hold intermediate and managerial roles than workers who hold qualifications at the same level as them. As we have noted, the perception that training does not ultimately deliver significant career progression is a key factor in constraining participation. In light of this, failure to address these barriers to progression risks impacting take up of adult learning and skills development.

The findings below underline the importance of wider strategic work to tackle the structural inequalities that remain in the UK labour market to ensure that opportunities for progression are available to all workers.

### Gender

A large body of evidence indicates that women in the UK experience structural inequalities in the workplace, including persistent gaps in pay and limited opportunities for progression into leadership roles<sup>34</sup>.

Our analysis reflects this picture, finding that **women tend to hold significantly lower level roles than men, even when attaining the same level of qualifications**. Looking at workers who hold a level 3 (A-level or equivalent) qualification, men were more likely to be in senior roles (38%) than women (31%), and women were more likely to be in intermediate roles (37%) than men (26%). Furthermore, **women with degrees are 5% less likely to be employed in managerial occupations than men**.

In addition, women in low skilled work appear to be at particular risk of financial insecurity through the current economic crisis. Analysis of the Labour Force Survey suggests that 1.1 million women in routine and semi-routine occupations within sectors hard-hit by the pandemic have been with their current employer for fewer than two years, and are therefore not eligible for redundancy pay, including 234,000 women working in retail and 145,000 in the food and beverages sector<sup>35</sup>.

These findings highlight structural barriers to progression in the labour market, which cannot be resolved through the skills system alone. As such, ongoing work to improve representation of women in senior roles will be essential to ensuring that engagement in training is perceived to be an effective route to progression for women.

### Disability

The employment gap experienced by disabled people is longstanding. Disabled people are more likely to be unemployed than non-disabled people, with Government analysis showing this employment gap to be highest among disabled people with no qualifications. **21% of disabled people without qualifications were employed last year, compared to 62% of non-disabled people without qualifications**. The same analysis also found that disabled workers were more likely than non-disabled workers to be employed in lower skilled roles, with 12% of disabled workers in this category compared to 10% of non-disabled workers<sup>36</sup>.

Disabled workers face societal barriers to starting work and progressing in their career. These include outdated societal attitudes about disability, inflexible working practices and inaccessible transport and workplaces. Disabled people are more likely to experience bullying or harassment at work compared to non-disabled workers<sup>37</sup>. Ongoing campaigns, such as Disability Confident, aim to promote the benefits of inclusive recruitment, dispel myths about the cost of workplace adjustments and highlight the range of support available to disabled workers and their employers.

Evidence shows that these barriers can prevent disabled people from taking part in opportunities to develop new skills. Recent research from the Office for Students has highlighted that disabled students experience poorer outcomes in both further and higher education across attainment, continuing studies and progressing into employment after completing their course<sup>38</sup>. The research highlights the importance of inclusive teaching and training practices, including offering materials in a range of formats as standard; providing more flexible routes to assessment and making better use of assessment.

An independent commission has been launched to address these challenges<sup>39</sup>, but will be largely focussed on higher education. As Government seeks to both improve access to lifelong learning and tackle the barriers disabled people face in entering and progressing in work, it is essential that focus is given to ensuring that initiatives like the Lifetime Skills Guarantee are inclusive of disabled learners. In addition, a concerted focus on improving routes to progression and representation at a senior leadership level for disabled workers will be key to ensuring that engagement in training unlocks opportunities for development.

## Ethnicity

Our analysis of the Labour Force Survey highlights that in comparison with White mid-career workers, **Black African and Black Caribbean workers are not accessing roles equivalent to their level of qualification within the labour market.**

Among workers who hold a level 1 or 2 qualification, 43% of Black African and Black Caribbean workers access intermediate or managerial occupations, compared to 53% of White mid-career workers. Looking at workers who hold level 3 qualifications, 49% of Black African and Black Caribbean workers are in routine and manual roles compared to 32% of White mid-career workers with the same qualification level<sup>40</sup>.

This analysis highlights that systemic barriers and attitudes are preventing Black workers from working in senior roles, despite holding similar qualifications to white workers. There are a number of interrelated factors which account for suboptimal labour market outcomes among minority ethnic groups, many of which have been persistent challenges. Recognising this, the Government have established the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities to explore education, employment, and other facets of disadvantage minority ethnic groups experience. It is essential that these barriers are tackled to ensure that Black workers experience positive outcomes from engaging in training in the future.

# What will Covid-19 and Brexit mean for training in the UK?

The challenges identified in the previous section that have led to many mid-career workers not accessing training or skills development could very easily be exacerbated by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, but must urgently be resolved given the imminent end to freedom of movement as the UK leaves the EU.

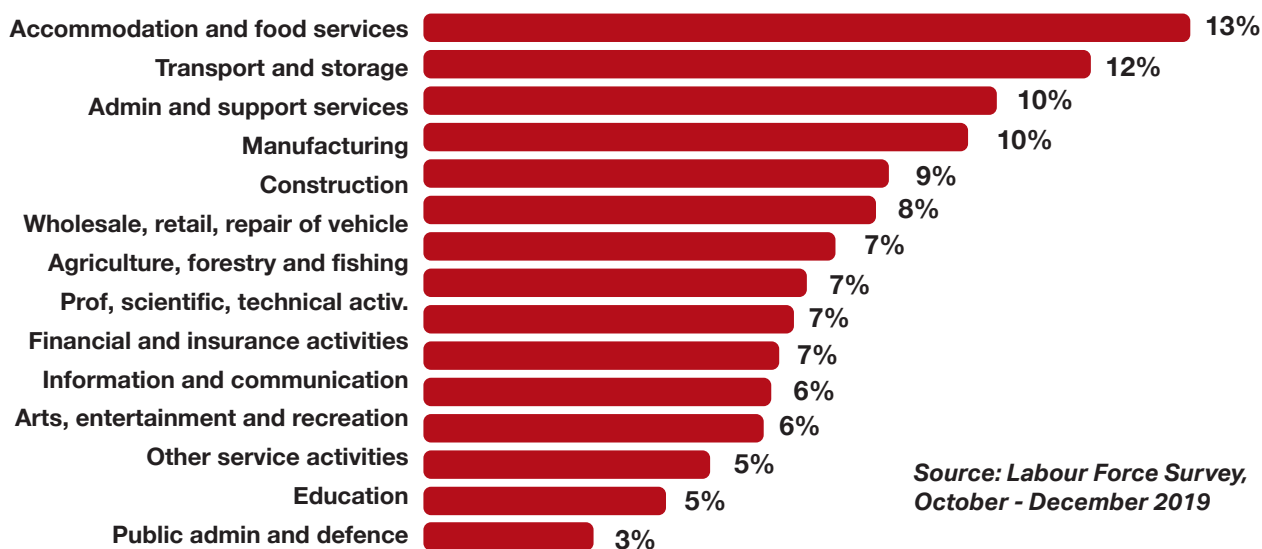
Covid-19's impact on the labour market has been significant, increasing insecurity for millions of workers, and putting substantial pressure on employers across the country to adapt their operations. At the same time, the UK's imminent departure from the European Union and uncertainty regarding the terms of our future trading relationship will also significantly impact the skills needs of businesses across the country. Policy measures designed to improve access to skills and development will need to reflect the specific challenges and opportunities that this highly turbulent context presents.

## Increased skills shortages resulting from Brexit

Brexit is a key cause of concern for many employers. Whatever shape it takes, the final Brexit settlement is likely to make it more difficult to recruit both specialised and lower skilled labour from across the EU.

These pressures will be felt particularly acutely in certain sectors. For example, the social care workforce is likely to come under intense pressure following Brexit. The ongoing pandemic together with an ageing population mean social care workers will remain in high demand – jobs increased by 130,000 from 2012-2018, according to Skills for Care<sup>41</sup>. The Labour Force Survey shows that **the highest vacancy levels across all sectors are in human health and social work activities, with 2.8 vacancies per 100 employee jobs**<sup>42</sup>.

**Figure 7: EU workers as a proportion of the workforce, by sector** *EU Workers as Proportion of Sector Workforce*



Social care has a large contingent of EU workers in its workforce, 5% in 2019 – a proportion that has been rising in recent years<sup>43</sup>. With Brexit likely to complicate the recruitment of EU workers, an increasing share of the social care workforce will need to be made up of British citizens in the future. Yet Totaljobs research shows that the sector is struggling to attract younger workers, with 56% of 16-25-year olds reporting they would not consider a career in the sector<sup>44</sup>.

### Heightened labour market insecurity through Covid-19

The sectors most affected by the pandemic were already characterised by high levels of worker insecurity before the crisis began, including low pay, variable hours and temporary contracts. Since the UK first went into lockdown in March 2020, a disproportionate number of vulnerable workers concentrated in sectors such as retail, leisure and tourism, were either furloughed, made redundant, or experienced reductions in working hours.

**In retail alone, 1.9 million workers were on furlough as of August 2020, accounting for 42% of all those employed in the sector.**

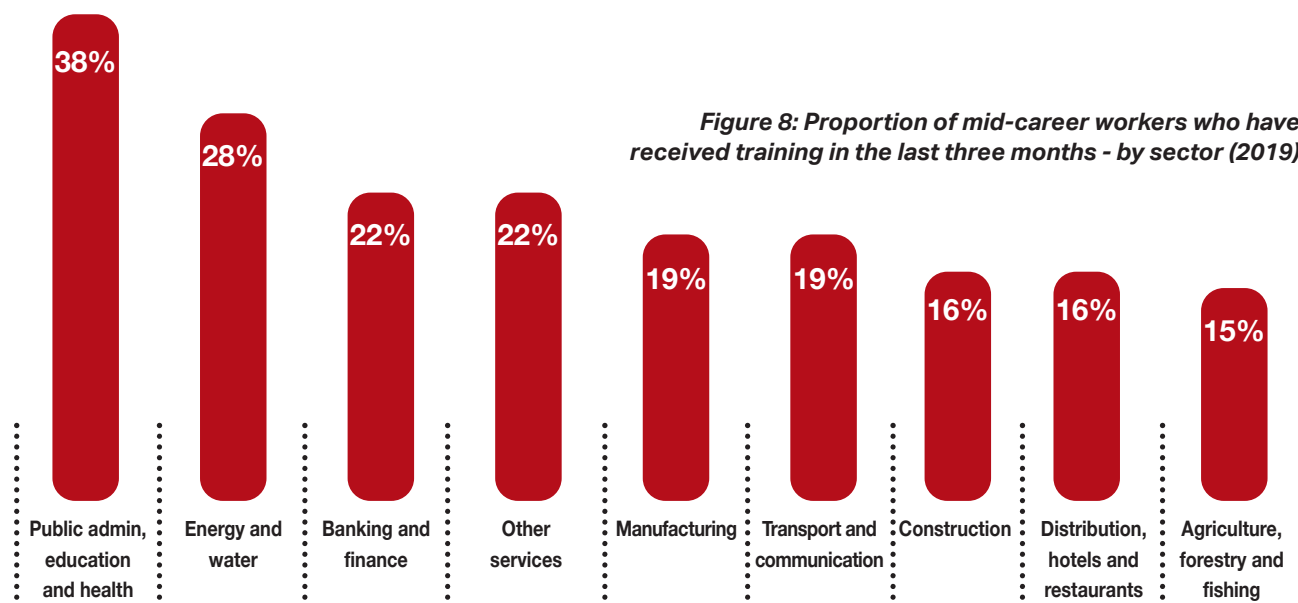
Analysis of the Labour Force Survey suggests that there are 4.8 million mid-career workers who have not worked with their employer for two or more years and so are not currently eligible for redundancy pay, including 1.6 million mid-career workers in routine or manual occupations. This underlines the difficulties some may encounter in prioritising training in the context of the current economic uncertainty.

Overall, HMRC PAYE data showed that as of October 2020, there were 782,000 fewer people on payroll compared with March, while redundancies increased by a record 181,000 during the quarterly period of June-August 2020<sup>45</sup>. The Office for Budget Responsibility forecast that unemployment will reach 11.9% in the fourth quarter of 2020, with an upside scenario of 9.7% and a downside scenario of 13.2%<sup>46</sup>.

Analysis highlights that workers in those sectors most at risk of heightened insecurity are unlikely to have received training and skills development recently. For example, **less than 20% of those working in restaurants, events and catering or the creative, arts and entertainment industries received training in the months April-June last year**<sup>47</sup>.

Take up of training among mid-career workers varies considerably by sector, which is reflected in the graph below. This highlights that mid-career workers in sectors vulnerable to the economic impacts of Covid-19 typically do not access a high degree of training.

The lack of recent training prior to the pandemic could contribute to an increasingly precarious position for workers who need to look for work in other sectors in the months ahead, and could likewise create further barriers to them taking up adult learning opportunities in the future. Survey data shows that adult learners who have participated in recent learning activity are more inclined to pursue other opportunities in the future. **81% of current learners say they are likely to take up learning again in the next three years, compared to 13% of adults who have done no learning since leaving full-time education**<sup>48</sup>.



**Figure 8: Proportion of mid-career workers who have received training in the last three months - by sector (2019)**

Source: Labour Force Survey 2019

With uncertainty remaining regarding the length of time that public health restrictions will remain in place, job insecurity and unemployment within those sectors worst affected is likely to rise throughout 2021<sup>49</sup>, which is why having tailored training opportunities connected to new job opportunities will be essential moving forward.

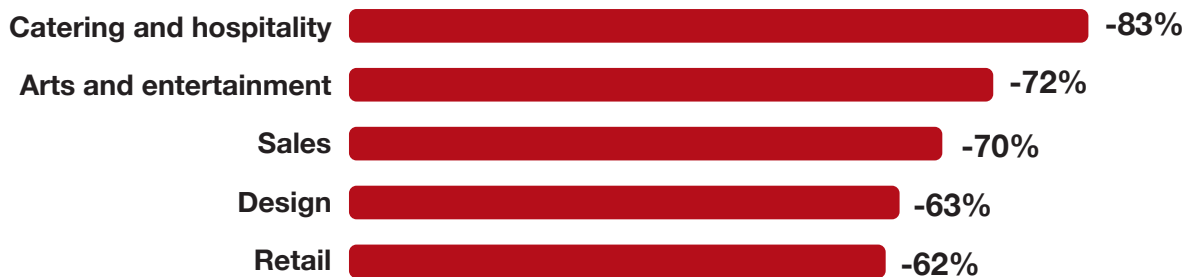
#### **How Covid-19 could affect recruitment in the short term**

While firms across the economy have indicated that they will focus more on developing internal talent from within<sup>50</sup>, the financial implications of the pandemic could mean many find it difficult to invest in training in the short term. The most recent Open University Business Barometer survey found that across the UK, training budgets have fallen by an average of 15% across all organisations<sup>51</sup>.

Analysis of Totaljobs vacancy data shows a substantial fall in the jobs market, when comparing quarter 3 2020 and quarter 3 2019. However, with the easing of restrictions there was a 15% uplift in vacancies advertised in September alone, meaning the job market entered quarter 4 at 62% of pre-Covid-19 levels. At this time, the green shoots were driven particularly by industries such as healthcare, IT, social care and logistics which remain among the most active recruiting sectors.

The opportunity to reskill will be key to meeting increased demands in these and other sectors, as we emerge from the economic impact of Covid-19.

**Figure 9: Change in published vacancies by sector between 2019 and 2020.**



**Source: Totaljobs vacancy data July - September 2019 and 2020**



# Maximising engagement with the UK skills system: conclusion and actions for policymakers and employers

The analysis in this report has highlighted the significant challenges facing many workers in the middle of their working lives when it comes to accessing training and skills development. While it is right that targeted provision has been developed for younger people through initiatives like the Kickstart Scheme, it is essential that Government now turns its attention to mid-career workers with limited qualifications as we grapple with the dual challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic and Brexit.

The new Lifetime Skills Guarantee and wider National Skills Fund present an opportunity to tackle these challenges, but our analysis has identified **1.4 million people who could benefit from access to training currently would not be entitled to support through the scheme**. Limiting eligibility to those who don't yet hold a level 3 qualification prevents workers on low incomes who have completed some training in the past from seeking out opportunities to progress in to better paid, more secure work.

Our analysis also highlights that millions more mid-career workers are likely to struggle to access training opportunities due to lifestyle factors and constraints. Although mid-career workers are thought of as more resilient to labour market turbulence than younger or older age groups, they are also more likely to have financial and family commitments that can limit engagement in training. For people who haven't taken part in education or training for some time, the investments in cost, time and personal energy can be off-putting. More could be done to improve perceptions of training among workers with lower through ensuring that courses align with opportunities available locally.

Ensuring training is flexible, with shorter 'bitesize' modules and opportunities for both face to face and remote online learning will be key for improving access among those working full time, or balancing work and studies with other responsibilities. Government could also play a role here, looking beyond subsidised course fees to supporting individuals and employers to meet the indirect costs of training. That could involve support with childcare costs and travel for learners, as well as support to cover staff time for employers.

Concerningly, our analysis has found that workers in those sectors most at risk of heightened insecurity as a result of Covid-19 are less likely to have received training and skills development recently. As the numbers of people accessing the welfare benefits system grows, it's essential that Government improves alignment between income support and access to training. Individuals receiving financial support through means tested benefits like Universal Credit, Jobseekers Allowance or Income Support who want to develop new skills should be supported to take part in training.

It is also crucial that it is recognised that women, disabled workers and Black workers face distinct challenges in the labour market, with our analysis finding that training does not always lead to progression into better paid, more secure work for these groups. This underlines the need to tackle the structural barriers that are preventing some workers from progressing, despite engaging in training.

The Government has rightly recognised the importance of boosting life-long learning in the months and years ahead. In order to address the challenges raised in this report and ensure life-long learning opportunities are available to everyone, there are a series of steps that Government and employers can take.

### Recommendations for Government

- Review eligibility for the Lifetime Skills Guarantee to maximise access and participation among workers on low pay, recognising that some workers who hold a level 3 qualification may benefit from access to further training.
- Offer support with the indirect costs of taking part in training, such as childcare, to workers on low incomes. .
- Include a specific focus on engagement with further education within the role of the Disabled Students' Commission to ensure that initiatives like the Lifetime Skills Guarantee are inclusive of disabled learners.
- Remove restrictions on engaging in training for individuals receiving welfare benefits like Jobseekers Allowance and Universal Credit.
- Work extensively with local actors, including Local Enterprise Partnerships, Local Authorities and industry bodies, as well as providers and employers to ensure that training offers align closely with demand within local economies, and that employers understand how to navigate the adult education landscape.
- Help employers to meet the indirect costs of staff training, such as arranging cover for staff who are away from work. Our analysis shows lower-paid, lower skilled mid-career workers have limited access to training, but for employers there is little incentive to support workers in routine and manual roles to invest in their longer term learning and development. Costs, fatigue and time constraints can prevent engagement in courses outside of working hours.

### Recommendations for Employers

- Offer all workers opportunities to explore learning and development routes available to them. Employers should look at ways of investing in the longer-term learning and development of lower paid workers, for example through offering mentoring or coaching, or providing information and advice about low and no cost training.
- Offer flexible routes to training. Workers with parenting and caring responsibilities experience difficulties in meeting time commitments needed for some training courses. For some workers, combining training with the demands of work is physically exhausting and can impact wellbeing, and this has led to workers dropping out of courses at times. Employers could address this by offering training on a flexible basis. This should include offering training during paid working hours, or providing paid study leave.
- Tackle barriers to entry and progression within their organisation. Our analysis has found that for some workers who face wider structural inequalities in society, taking part in training simply isn't leading to the positive outcomes it should. While training can present a valuable route out of insecure work, it isn't a silver bullet, and should be considered alongside a strategic approach to ensuring that recruitment at intermediate and senior levels is inclusive.

# Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was utilised for this research. A rapid assessment of the evidence was undertaken to capture key findings from relevant academic and grey literature.

Alongside this, we analysed microdata from the Skills and Employment Survey 2017, as well as the data from Labour Force Survey 2010 - 2019, using NS-SEC categories as a lens through which to examine opportunities, access to training, and experience of the mid-career workforce, between the ages of 25-49. To ensure consistency over time, and to avoid seasonal effects, we used the April-June quarter of the Labour Force Survey for each year over the period. In most instances we have used 2019 rather than 2020 data to reflect circumstances prior to the onset of Covid-19.

Additionally, we have used online jobs data from Totaljobs, which complements the use of national datasets. This data includes the sums of published jobs and applications, by sector. It is important to note that demographic information on the businesses posting job adverts and the workers who respond to them is limited. Therefore, these may not be representative of the working population or the wider jobs market. Further, Totaljobs uses a proprietary taxonomy of sectors, which means that analysis on sectors should not be compared with datasets using the Standard Industrial Classification, such as in the Skills and Employment Survey and the Labour Force Survey.

Further, qualitative insights were derived through semi-structured interviews. These were undertaken with policy stakeholders, drawn from representative bodies for business, workers, recruiters, FE Colleges, as well as a charity and an international institution that works on labour market issues as part of its broader remit to support economic progress. Interviews were also conducted with employers. Conducted between September 18th - November 3rd the interviews explored skills shortages and their causes prior to Covid-19, how these gaps were likely to be impacted by the pandemic and Brexit, and to what extent skills and training policy interventions, including those set out by Government in the Plan for Jobs, would help employers to meet skill needs.

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