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| UNISON College Research |
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| UNISON |
|  |
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# Overview and objectives

## Overview

UNISON is establishing a College providing high quality learning and training for its 1.3m members. The College will not be a new, physical building, but rather a new service building on the existing range of learning opportunities offered by UNISON and expanding into new areas. This means doubling or trebling the numbers of learning opportunities UNISON currently offers to members and activists across the whole of the UK. The College will make learning more accessible, and the opportunities available will be flexible and responsive to members’ needs. The UNISON College will provide learning and training opportunities for: activists and potential activists who want to learn about their role / potential role in UNISON; members who want to get on at work and in their career; and those interested in development and learning for personal interest.

Learning will be delivered online but also be available as classroom-based sessions and a hybrid of these. The College offer will cover formal qualifications and also informal learning. The delivery will be done by UNISON staff or activists, and a consortium of high-quality providers (Open University, FE Colleges and independent training providers). The College will work in partnership with leading employers and already has strong support from organisations such as the Association of Colleges (AoC) and Health Education England (HEE).

Key features of the College are: to provide every member with access to high quality professional information, advice and guidance (IAG) on suitable learning and career advice, to provide support for their learning journey and to help members make choices to enhance or even change career.

## Research Objectives

UNISON commissioned IFF Research to conduct exploratory research with members to understand the level and nature of demand for learning, the main barriers to undertaking learning, and the interest in learning with UNISON. The findings of this research will inform the development of the College.

The specific objectives of the study were to explore the following research questions:

* What is the likely level of demand for learning delivered through a UNISON College as described?
* What kind of learning is most in demand among members?
  + Is it for job and career progression, is it for personal development and interest, or is it related to UNISON activism?
  + Is it to develop soft skills, or job-specific, technical skills (and which skill areas are of most interest?
  + Is gaining a qualification key, and if so at what level?
  + What format of training do members want is it off a short duration, individual bite sized modules, a series of modules/courses, or more substantive learning?
  + How do members want to access training? Is it self-directed online, virtual, in-person or a mixture?
  + How does demand differ by the UNISON’s main sectors (Health and Social Care; Education; Local Government; Police and Justice; Water, Environment and Transport)?
* How does demand by demographic factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, region, level of prior learning?
* What are the main obstacles and barriers to undertaking learning, and what sort of support would help overcome these issues?
* What are the potential barriers to training with UNISON / through a UNISON College?
* What is the reaction to the proposed College once it is explained? Which aspects are most appealing and why?

This report seeks to answer these questions and suggest issues for UNISON to consider in developing the College and provision. The remainder of the report is structured as follows:

* Chapter 2 – Methodology (our approach to the research)
* Chapter 3 - Key findings
* Chapter 4 - Experience of learning and training
* Chapter 5 - Demand for learning and training
* Chapter 6 - Barriers to learning and training
* Chapter 7 - Views on UNISON College.

# Methodology

In order to meet the research aims and objectives a mixed-methods research design was developed involving:

* A quantitative online survey among UNISON members to learn about previous learning experiences and the level and nature of demand for learning
* Six online focus groups to explore members’ interest, motivations, challenges and barriers to learning in more depth.

Across methods we explored the UNISON College concept and the type of learning and training offer members would be interested in.

The fieldwork was carried out in March and April 2022. The research tools included a detailed online questionnaire, and a topic guide for the focus groups.

## Quantitative survey

The online survey of UNISON members explored their overall level of interest in learning and training, how this varies by member type and sector, what type of training is most in demand (by mode e.g., online or in person, duration and subject area) and the nature and extent of any barriers to people taking part in training and learning.

Fieldwork took place between 3 March 2022 and 1 April 2022. Information about the survey and the link for taking part were sent by UNISON to all members through a general email newsletter, other sector newsletters, and publicised on social media. This meant that all UNISON members were potentially able to give their views. To encourage responses, participants were entered into a prize draw as a thank you for their time. In total, the survey received 18,329 responses which were largely representative of UNISON member demographics.

## Qualitative focus groups

The qualitative strand of the research explored UNISON members’ attitudes to and experiences of learning and training, barriers to participation, what they think of UNISON’s existing learning and training offer, the idea of UNISON College, and what appeals to them about the College. It built on some of the key findings and issues raised in the survey and aimed to explore these in more depth.

Six online focus groups were conducted, each with members who had completed the online survey. Participants were recruited based on their survey responses. This allowed us to speak to participants with different experiences of learning, levels of involvement with UNISON and a with a range of demographic backgrounds. We divided participants into groups based on the following characteristics and views:

Table 2.1 Focus group structure

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Group no. | Learning views | Demographics | Rationale |
| 1 | Interested in learning | People with formal qualifications below Level 3  Lower income bands (some participants were working part time) | Captures views of low skilled/low paid group |
| 2 | Interested in learning | People with Level 3+ qualifications  Higher income bands | Captures views of higher skilled/higher paid group |
| 3 | Interested in activist training | All | Captures area of key interest for UNISON |
| 4 | All | Women aged 50-59 | Captures mid-career workers |
| 5 | Interested in learning, but not with UNISON | All | Explore the views of those who are not interested in UNISON training and why |
| 6 | Interested in learning | All | Explore views of those interested in learning through any provider including UNISON for comparison to Group 5 |

Fieldwork took place between 5 and 12 April 2022. Focus group discussions were held over Zoom. Each lasted 90 minutes and was moderated by an IFF researcher.

The next chapter summarises key findings from the research and sets out our recommendations to UNISON.

# Key findings and recommendations

### Overall findings

### Experience of learning, training and development

Nearly all members in the online survey had taken part in some training, learning or development since leaving full-time education (93%), with two-thirds (67%) doing so within in the last three years (20% were undertaking learning and training at the time of the survey).

The most common type of recent learning undertaken by members was for work or career purposes (89%). This includes mandatory training as well as wider career development. The most recent training had usually been organised by their employer (66%) and delivered at least partly during the employer’s time (42% solely, 32% a mix of the employer’s and in their own time). It had commonly been delivered at work, or ‘on the job’ (43%) though 30% had undertaken online self-directed learning and 22% an online course led by a tutor or facilitator.

However, there is also evidence of members playing an active role in seeking learning opportunities – 18% of members indicated that the recent learning had been for personal reasons, 26% trained solely in their own time and 33% organised the most recent training themselves, and 7% had most recently attended UNISON-organised training.

**Awareness and experience of UNISON’s learning offer**

Half of members (50%) are not aware of UNISON’s learning offer, and a further 28% indicated that they do not know much about it. Awareness is particularly low amongst those under 40 (37% aware compared with 47% of those aged 50 plus). There was also often an assumption among those who knew about UNISON’s learning that it was aimed at activists.

Members are positive about potentially learning through UNISON once the current offer is outlined. Some see particular value in UNISON as an advisor, potentially signposting to other provision if that is more appropriate.

Although only a relatively small proportion (7%) of members said that their most recent training was organised through UNISON, a fifth (21%) of members had ever taken part in training or learning through UNISON. This was most commonly activist training (56%). The training was seen as relevant and well delivered, and rated excellent or good by 86% of participants.

## **Demand for learning**

Most members (85%) are interested in learning and training in the next three years. This is fairly consistent across all sectors with at least three-quarters (77%) of members in each sector saying they are fairly, very or extremely interested. Interest in future learning increases by qualification level and income. It is also higher amongst those who have already participated in learning, training or development since leaving full-time education and those who are UNISON activists.

Interest in learning is also higher among younger members. The majority of those under 40 are extremely interested in learning in the near future (52%) compared to just over a quarter (27%) of those over 50. This indicates younger members will be more likely to take up a UNISON learning offer, whilst older members may require more targeted marketing / messaging to encourage take up.

Amongst those who are interested there is a need for / interest in Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) to help members find and access the right learning provision for them.

Personal development and interest are some of the key drivers of demand amongst those interested in future learning: the top two key reasons for being interested in future learning are to learn something new (51%) or for personal development, enjoyment or well-being (50%). The next most common key reason was improving their ability to do their job (39%). These results suggest marketing and communication of UNISON learning should focus at least as much on personal development and fulfilment as on job-related aspects (though often personal development and interest overlaps with wanting to learn to develop work-related skills).

Three-fifths (60%) indicated that achieving qualifications was at least partly behind their interest in learning, though they are a key reason for only a quarter (26%). Around two-fifths (42%) of members with interest in future learning were able to identify interest in qualifications at a specific level – generally one level higher than their existing qualification (for example, Level 3 qualifications such as A Levels for those who already hold qualifications at Level 2). The types of learning members are most commonly interested in over the next three years are learning for work e.g., CPD (71%) and / or for their general personal development (76%).

Younger members under 40 are more likely than older members to be interested in learning for work (82%), job specific skills (81%) and general personal development (81%). They are also more likely to be interested in developing softer skills in confidence and assertiveness (64%), and supervisory or management skills (71%). Two-thirds of members are interested in acquiring any digital skills within the next three years (68%), which is consistent across all age groups except for those aged 16-26 being less likely to be interested in developing their digital skills (53%). Computer and internet skills are particularly of interest to those aged 50 or above (54%), though still a quarter (25%) of those aged 16 to 26 are also interested in developing these. Female members are also particularly likely to be interested in developing confidence and assertiveness (52% compared to 43% of men). Some saw this as a first step to feeling able to change jobs.

Most commonly, members who are interested in learning would prefer it to be delivered through a mix of online and in person methods (45%). Only around a quarter preferred to access learning online-only (split evenly between those preferring self-directed online learning and those preferring tutor-led online learning). In the focus group participants often felt they have experienced a lot of self-directed online work-related training during COVID and wanted a return to more, face-to-face training.

Across all members (including those not interested in learning), almost half (48%) would access online learning via their own laptop at home, 40% via a work laptop at home and 37% via a PC or laptop at work. A fifth (18%) would use a tablet and a slightly lower proportion (15%) a phone. Many have multiple options so their choice may depend on content and timings, but some may only have access via phone.

## **Barriers to accessing learning**

The main challenge members who have undertaken learning and training encountered was balancing the time needed for training with work and / or personal commitments. This was especially common for those aged 27 to 39.

When considering future learning opportunities similar barriers are anticipated – relatively high proportions of members expected barriers to include a lack of time due to work (56%) or personal commitments (37%, rising to 51% of those aged 27 to 39). Support from employers is commonly identified as a way to help overcome the barriers faced (by 43%), as is increased flexibility for accessing learning (38%).

Cost is also a potential issue for a third of members (33%). Younger workers (who overall are more interested in learning) are particularly likely to be concerned about affordability. Almost half (46%) of those facing barriers or challenges to learning indicated that financial support with fees would help them overcome these barriers.

There is again evidence that IAG would be valued: 18% of members in the online survey describe there being too many options as a challenge or barrier to taking part in learning and training, and 11% say the same about not knowing how to find out about learning opportunities. Many members (43% of those who feel there are barriers) think help finding the right course would overcome this. Members also identify barriers around IT access and digital skills and would like help overcoming these.

### Views on UNISON College

Most members are highly interested and supportive of the idea of learning and training with UNISON: three-quarters are either interested (35%) or may be interested (41%). The relatively high proportion in the second of these categories indicates that UNISON will need to promote and clarify what the offer is, especially given low awareness of UNISON’s current learning offer~~.~~ When introduced to the idea of UNISON College, members were overwhelmingly positive. This suggests that the key to the success of UNISON College will be making sure that as many members as possible are made aware of the College, what it offers and how they can access learning and training through the College.

Some members have reservations about or limited interest in training delivered by UNISON College / UNISON. This tends to be because of a lack of awareness of UNISON’s current training offer or because they are satisfied with the training they are receiving from their employer, rather than any ‘active’ negative views. Focus group participants who had said they were not interested in learning through UNISON, do however see the value in IAG provided by UNISON due to it being independent from their employer, and this sentiment was also expressed in the online survey where most (81%) members say they ‘would’ or ‘might’ go to UNISON for information on training and development opportunities.

Reflecting the wide range of training and development of interest to members, there was a variety of types of training members would like from UNISON College but at the same time there was a general feeling that there needs to be ‘something for everyone’, including a variety of both work and non-work courses, training for those at different points in their career, short and more substantial training, and those that lead to qualifications or certification and those that don’t. However, it is acknowledged that given the breadth of UNISON’s membership base, being able to offer such wide-ranging training would be challenging. When asked about the level of training required, the feedback is similar, suggesting that while there is a need for some ‘basic skills’, this should not be the sole focus to avoid excluding those who have a need for more advanced learning. Qualitatively, participants felt that UNISON College could focus on ‘soft skills’ or generic / transferable skills, such as confidence and assertiveness skills, conflict resolution, having difficult conversations, and supervisory and management skills.

Top priorities were around learning for personal development (49%, tying in with this being one of the top reasons for interest in future learning in general, as reported above), for work (45%) and leisure, hobbies and well-being (40%).

Providing information on the website would meet the preference for most members who might take up UNISON’s IAG to help them navigate finding the appropriate learning offer for them. However, providing IAG via telephone and in-person with reps would also be welcomed by many, especially groups who may be more hesitant about taking up IAG (e.g., older members) and / or are sometimes disadvantaged in employment (e.g., BAME or disabled members).

## Recommendations for UNISON

**Target audiences**

* UNISON needs to raise the profile of and promote its learning offer better. Presenting evidence of experience and success would increase UNISON’s visibility as a major provider of training and learning among members, employers and partners.
* Younger, more highly qualified and higher earners are the most interested in future learning, as are those who have undertaken learning since leaving full-time education and those who are activists. These are the most likely to readily take up a UNISON College offer.
* In comparison, UNISON will need to work harder to build interest in learning amongst those members who traditionally undertake less learning and who are less likely to express interest in learning and training, particularly older, lower qualified and lower income groups. In the focus groups there appeared to be a high level of latent demand and interest among these members once the idea of UNISON College is explained. Specific campaigns or programmes addressing their barriers may be needed, as well as high-quality information, advice and guidance to help them identify suitable training opportunities. Using previous learners and activists, such as union learning reps (ULRs), as advocates could be useful
* Making the learning offer as accessible as possible will be important to ensure demand from those who may face barriers in their jobs and careers (e.g. those with a disability or those from an ethnic minority background) translates into take-up, as these groups are more likely to feel that support in overcoming barriers to accessing training will help them to participate in training in the future.

### Learning and training topics

* A major question for the College is what kind of learning to provide. Results suggest that interest is at least as high for learning for general personal development, leisure and well-being as it is for work-/career-related training. The majority of members are interested in training for general personal development, leisure and well-being, while just under half are interested in learning for work through UNISON College.
* For work-related training, given the breadth of occupations of members, UNISON may be best placed providing training delivering transferrable skills which can be applied in all workplaces, such as confidence and assertiveness skills, conflict resolution, having difficult conversations, or supervisory and management skills.
* Computer and digital skills offers are of particular interest to older members, many of whom lack confidence in this area, and feel this holds them back in their job.
* Marketing the impact of having qualifications (e.g., on progression or earnings) alongside other benefits will broaden their appeal, since obtaining a qualification is often not a motivator in itself. Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) around suitability of qualification levels may be useful.

### Delivery mode

* Offering flexibility in delivery is important for UNISON members, many of whom are interested in online learning or a mix of online and tutor-led learning. Members are interested in being able to select a style that suits their learning needs and personal circumstances.
* In person training is likely to increase the appeal to older members (who often see this as delivering higher quality, more impactful training), but it should not be assumed that all younger people are happy to access learning online.
* UNISON will need to consider that some members may not have access to devices which will provide a good quality online experience (i.e., they may only have mobile access).

**Barriers to accessing learning**

* Previous challenges faced in accessing training were most commonly about finding time given their work and personal responsibilities. UNISON needs to provide flexible ways of accessing learning and strengthen partnerships and learning agreements with employers to ensure time off for learning is provided.
* Working with employers around how to ensure members can train alongside their work commitments would be useful – as well as helping members to draw up training requests and negotiating with the employer.
* Lack of knowledge about training opportunities is a barrier for many members, and provision of free IAG for all members will help address this. High-quality, professional information and advice on training from UNISON was often welcomed because people would be able to discuss issues that they might not be able to with their employer (for example if the training was to help them change career or move job).
* Cost will need to be considered to maximise appeal, especially for younger members. Many would like direct financial support to help with any fees for training.

# Experience of learning and training

This chapter covers UNISON members’ previous learning and training experiences, their reasons for taking part in learning and training opportunities, the ways in which they took part in learning and training, and their current awareness of the UNISON learning offer.

Nearly all survey respondents have taken part in some learning since full-time education, however only a small proportion have undertaken training through UNISON, with most unaware that training outside of that required for activists exists.

## Incidence of learning and training

As shown in Figure 4.1, practically all survey respondents (94%) had undertaken some learning, training or development since full-time education. However, for over a quarter of members (26%) this training had been taken more than three years ago. Two-thirds (67%) of members had undertaken some learning in the last three years, including a fifth (20%) currently.

Figure 4.1 When last undertook learning, training or development

*Question B1: Have you or are you undertaking any learning, training or development: Base: All respondents (18,329).*

Some groups are more likely to have taken part in learning in the last three years, as shown in Figure 4.2, including UNISON activists (80%), younger members (76%), those with higher incomes (76% of those with an income over £35k) and those with higher-level qualifications (76% of those with a level 6 or above qualification).

There are also big differences by sector. Members in the Social Care, Further and Higher Education, Community / Voluntary and Schools sectors show the highest levels of learning in the last three years (all over 70%), In the Utilities sector only half of members (49%) had undertaken any learning, training or development in the past three years.

Figure 4.2 Learning, training or development undertaken in the past three years, by whether activist, gender, age and sector



*Question B1: Have you or are you undertaking any learning, training or development: Base: Activist: 1,829; Non-activist: 16,360; Male: 4,569; Female: 13,524; Under 40: 1,969; 40-49: 4,141; 50-59: 8,283; Over 60: 3,746; Social care: 2,100; Education: 1,420; Community: 318; Schools; 3,591; Environment: 280; Health care: 5,353; Local govt: 3,063; Police/Justice: 1,015; Transport: 105; Utilities: 395.*

Motivations for recent learning, training and development

As shown in Figure 4.3, most (89%) of the recent learning, training and development activity undertaken by UNISON members was for work and career purposes. This training tended to include a mix of mandatory training (e.g., GDPR, infection control, manual lifting, EDI), and career-related training (e.g., PRINCE 2, leadership / management training).

Almost one in five members (18%) undertook their most recent training for their own personal interest, with this slightly higher amongst younger members (22% of those aged under 40, compared to 17% of those aged over 50). Undertaking learning for their own personal interest was also most common members working in the Community / Voluntary sector (27%), the Further and Higher Education sector (26%) and the Utilities sector (25%).

Around one in twenty (6%) had undertaken their most recent learning activity to fulfil union-related responsibilities. This was naturally much higher amongst UNISON activists – half (49%) of whom said their most recent learning was for this reason.

Figure 4.3 Purpose of most recent learning, training or development

*Question B2: Thinking about the most recent learning / training / development you took part in, was this: Base: Those who have undertaken learning, training or development (17,144)*

## Mode recent learning, training and development

Members take part in learning and training in varied ways.

As shown in Figure 4.4, online training is now used on a significant scale – 30% of members said their most recent training was self-directed online, and 22% said it was tutor-led online learning. Focus group respondents reported that learning had predominantly been conducted online since COVID.

Members recognised benefits to online training, but several stated a preference for face-to-face training, believing it delivered more impact. One member said about online: “you read the words but you’re not really taking it in”.

*“You need matchsticks sometimes to keep awake. But they (‘online training’) serve a purpose for the mandatory training.”*

UNISON member, Group 2 (qualifications at Level 3+, higher income, interested in learning)

In the last three years, training was most commonly conducted ‘at work and on the job’ (43%). This type of training was slightly more commonplace amongst men (46%), younger members (47%), Black / Black British and Asian / Asian British members (51% and 54% respectively), and those working full-time (45%). It was also more commonplace for those working in the Social care sector (51%) and the Health care sector (47%).

Figure 4.4 Delivery method for recent learning, training or development

*Question B3: Thinking about the most recent learning / training / development you took part in, was this: Base: Those who have undertaken learning, training or development (17,144)*

## When learning, training and development took place

Nearly three-fifths of members who had recently undertaken training (58%) said this learning took place, at least in part, in their own time (26% in their own time, 32% in a mix of their employer’s time and their own time), as shown in Figure 4.5. This is particularly likely to be the case amongst younger members, among whom a third (34%) said the training was solely in their employer’s time (compared with the 42% figure among members generally).

The qualitative research found there is often a blend in terms of the training being undertaken for both work and personal interest reasons. For example, one member was studying for a PhD in evenings and weekends as they were “trying to make a difference” and felt the PhD was important to their future career, but the training was being financed by their employers. Another member working for the National Trust on a voluntary basis was doing some learning through them out of personal interest.

Some members feel that any mandatory training (e.g., safeguarding, legal issues) should be completed during work hours.

*"You have to do it because it's mandatory, but you can't do it in work time, and I'm sorry but you don't pay me for that. If you want me to sit there for an hour and pay attention, I'll be doing it at work."*

UNISON member, Group 2 (qualifications at Level 3+, higher income, interested in learning)

Figure 4.5 When most recent learning, training or development took place

*Question B4: And was this learning…*: *Base: Those who have undertaken learning, training or development (17,144)*

There are also differences by sector, as shown in Figure 4.6. Members working in the Health care and Schools sector were particularly likely to undertake the training in their own time or a mix: only a third say they completed their recent learning in their employer’s time (35% and 33% respectively).

Figure 4.6 When most recent learning, training or development took place, by sector

*Question B4: And was this learning…*: *Base: Those who have undertaken learning, training or development: Environment: 258; Transport: 97; Utilities: 333; Local Govt: 2,887; Police / Justice: 917; Education: 1,359; Social care: 2,029; Community: 300; Health care: 4,946; Schools: 3,403.*

## Organisation of recent training

Employers generally arranged or organised members’ recent learning or training. However, as Figure 4.7 shows, a third of members (33%) organised training themselves, and played an active role in ensuring it took place.

Just over two-fifths of activists (44%) said that UNISON had arranged their most recent training experience, but this fell to 7% for members as a whole.

Figure 4.7 Who organised most recent learning, training or development

*Question B5: And who was this most recent learning arranged / organised by?*: *Base: Those who have undertaken learning, training or development (17,144)*

## Awareness of UNISON’s current learning offer

As well as exploring current training activity, members were asked about their awareness and use of UNISON’s learning offer.

Just under half (45%) of members know UNISON have a learning offer, as shown in Figure 4.8, but even these members do not generally feel they know much about the offer. This was echoed in the qualitative research, with several members saying they had not known before the group discussions that UNISON was a learning provider. Some members feel that their employers provided a comprehensive training offer, so they do not need to look around at other options, and other members mentioned that they had not joined UNISON with a view to needing training and have therefore never actively looked to UNISON for this.

*“Never seen it advertised, didn’t know it was on offer.”*

UNISON member, Group 2 (qualifications at Level 3+, higher income, interested in learning)

*"It's not something I've ever looked for"*

UNISON member, Group 5 (mix of demographics, interested in learning but not with UNISON)

*"I don't think they promote it well enough to be honest, I think if there were more regular emails, sometimes there is just too much information, so if there was a specific training email or something that might make me more inclined to look at it and go and investigate"*

UNISON member, Group 5 (mix of demographics, interested in learning but not with UNISON)

Members aware that UNISON offered learning often associate it with stewardship/activist roles. This suggests that greater publicity and promotion of the UNISON learning offer would be of benefit to support a credible UNISON College launch, and that this promotion should aim to raise awareness of UNISON’s wider learning offer over and above becoming an activist.

*"What they offer at the moment seems to be very steward-heavy which is all fine and useful, but there doesn't seem to be much for non-stewards"*

UNISON member, Group 3 (interested in activist training, demographic mix)

*"I've seen emails but I haven't thought it was relevant to me, I always thought it was for people who are more involved in the union than me"*

UNISON member, Group 4 (women aged 50-59, mix of interested and not interested in learning)

Figure 4.8 Awareness of UNISON’s current learning offer

*Question E1: How much, if anything, do you know about UNISON’s current learning offer? Base: All respondents (18,329)*

Amongst UNISON activists, awareness of the learning offer is significantly higher, with 83% saying they are aware of the offer (vs. 40% among non-activists), and 15% saying they had used it (against just 2% of non-activists).

Younger members are more active in terms of learning, but have particularly low awareness of UNISON’s offer, as seen in Figure 4.9 (just 37% of those aged under 40 were aware of the UNISON current learning offer).

Figure 4.9 Awareness of UNISON’s current learning offer, by whether activist, gender, age and sector

*Question E1: How much, if anything, do you know about UNISON’s current learning offer? Base: All respondents (18,329) Activist: 1,829; Non-activist: 16,360; Male: 4,569; Female: 13,524; Under 40: 1,969; 40-49: 4,141; 50-59: 8,283; Over 60: 3,746; Community: 318; Education: 1,420; Local government: 3,063; Transport: 105; Environment: 280; Social care: 2,100; Utilities: 395; Health care: 5,353; Schools; 3,591; Police/Justice: 1,015;.*

Focus group participants who were aware of the UNISON learning offer had generally heard about it through email bulletins and newsletters, with some becoming aware through their steward training. Very little mention was made of union learning reps (ULR), although one member did say they followed their ULR on Facebook and saw posts about the learning opportunities.

*"Before I took my steward training I had no idea so much learning was on offer and I wish I would have known it sooner…I've been in the union a long time just as a member but until my stewards training, I became aware all of a sudden of all this training you could take which gosh I wish I'd known that 10 years ago."*

UNISON member, Group 4 (women aged 50-59, mix of interested and not interested in learning)

When focus group participants were told UNISON learning offer, they were generally open and positive about the idea of learning through UNISON. For example, some members feel it would be valuable if it focused on helping people who had previously missed out on getting qualifications. On the other hand, some members feel that there is already relevant and high-quality sector-specific training available and feel UNISON’s role should centre around ensuring members can access the training already available.

*"There's no point reinventing the wheel if other people are supplying."*

UNISON member, Group 5 (mix of demographics, interested in learning but not with UNISON)

*"I think maybe the union's role is more to lobby…maybe working with employers to maybe increase opportunities or funding or whether there are bursaries or something."*

UNISON member, Group 5 (mix of demographics, interested in learning but not with UNISON)

## Previous experience of UNISON training and learning

A fifth (21%) of members had ever taken part in any training or learning through UNISON, with participation much higher and near universal amongst UNISON activists (89%).

Figure 4.10 Whether undertaken any training or learning through UNISON, and when

*Question E2: Have you ever taken part in any training or learning through UNISON? Base: All respondents (18,329).*

As with awareness of the UNISON learning offer, there is little variation by member demographics in terms of having ever taken part in any training or learning through UNISON. The most marked differences are by industry sector; those who work in the Community or voluntary sector, the Environment sector and in Local government show some of the highest usage rates (31%, 31% and 29% respectively, compared to just 17% of members in the Utilities sector and 13% in the school sector).

Where training is undertaken through UNISON, this is mainly for activist training (56%), as shown in Figure 4.11, although personal development (31%) and CPD development (25%) are also mentioned but to a lesser extent. In the qualitative research members cited examples of training on the topics of sexual harassment and racism, equalities training and pensions.

Figure 4.11 Purpose of training or learning undertaken through UNISON

*Question E3: And was this learning / training through UNISON for…Base: Those who have undertaken training learning / training through UNISON (3,825)*

The learning or training from UNISON is delivered through a variety of resources, again suggesting the value of having options to choose from in any new UNISON College offering. As seen in Figure 4.12, these include a tutor from a college / independent provider (33%), closely followed by a union rep or other UNISON activists (31%), and then by a UNISON staff member (26%).

Figure 4.12 Delivery channel for training or learning undertaken through UNISON

*Question E4: Who delivered the learning or training? Base: Those who have undertaken training learning / training through UNISON (3,825)*

Overall, ratings of the UNISON learning or training experience are very positive, with nearly nine in ten (86%) of those who had undertaken UNISON training saying it was ‘excellent’ or ‘good’, as shown in Figure 4.13. In fact, a sizeable proportion rated it excellent suggesting that amongst those who have experienced UNISON training there will be a good body of ‘promoters’, important in driving a successful launch of UNISON College.

Figure 4.13 Rating of UNISON learning / training

*Question* *E5: Overall, how would you rate the UNISON learning / training? Base: Those who have undertaken training learning / training through UNISON (3,825)*

Ratings of the training are high across all member demographics, including both activists and non-activists (89% and 84% respectively rate the learning / training as excellent or good).

Key reasons for positive ratings include the content being relevant (27%), the course being well delivered (25%), and a general sense that the training was to a high standard (19%), as seen in Figure 4.14.

Other factors include good feedback from tutors, good interaction between participants, the course being pitched at the right level, appropriate pace of training, as well as good supporting administration such as well organised instructions and a good training facility/platform.

Figure 4.14 Reasons why UNISON learning / training rated excellent or good



*Question E6: Why do you say that? Base: Those who have undertaken training learning / training through UNISON and rated it excellent or good (3,284)*

In the qualitative research, members noted the interactive nature of training as making a difference to the quality and enjoyability of training, with a recognition that UNISON training has moved in this direction over recent years.

*"What I've done previously (regarding UNISON), pre-pandemic, it was all paperwork heavy...that work booklet had been there for years and you just worked through it... it got the job done but it felt like an old type of teaching."*

UNISON member, Group 3 (interested in activist training, demographic mix)

One member had been impressed by receiving a book through the post from UNISON after a training session, giving them a tangible resource to refer to and follow-up reading after the course.

Although there are very few negative comments about UNISON training, a few comments refer to the need to tailor courses to specific needs, for example through a tiered-modular approach. One member said they would have liked to have seen a longer course, whilst another wanted training for more experienced activists.

*“They were brilliant, but I wish they’d have been longer.”*

UNISON member, Group 6 (women, interested in learning)

Although most members who had undertaken UNISON learning or training were positive, some were neutral (7% described it described as average, 2% as fair) or negative (1%). Among these 385 online survey respondents, reasons for holding these views most often focused on the content being seen as not relevant, too low level, generic or repetitive (27%), the course not being interesting, including it not being interactive enough (12%), poor delivery (11%), the course being disorganised or disjointed (8%), issues with the online platform e.g. not user friendly / problems with access (8%), the timing, pace or duration not suiting their needs (7%) and poor or insufficient feedback (6%).

# Demand for learning and training

This chapter covers members’ interest in future learning and the reasons for their interest. We explore the types of learning which are most in demand, including which members are particularly interested in personal development, job / career progression, digital skills and softer skills. This chapter also explores preferences around online and face-to-face delivery.

Members show a clear appetite for learning, training and development in general, though UNISON needs to understand the nature of the demand to ensure their offer caters to it.

## Motivations for learning

Overall, 85% of members are interested in learning within the next three years, with 34% extremely interested, as shown in Figure 5.1.

Interest in learning is higher among younger members. The majority of those under 40 were extremely interested in learning in the near future (58% aged 16 to 26, 52% aged 27 to 39) compared to a quarter of those aged over 50 (27%). However, most of the over 50s group had at least some interest; women over the age of 50 were slightly more likely than men (81% compared to 78%) to be at least fairly interested in training in the future. This indicates younger members will the most likely to take up an offer, and older members may require targeted marketing to encourage take up.

Figure 5.1 Interest in learning within next three years, by age



*Question C1: How interested are you in taking part in learning, training or development in the near future (next 3 years)? This includes learning for work as well as for leisure / personal interest. Base: All respondents (18,329), aged 16-26 (106), aged 27-39 (1,863), aged 40-49 (4,141), aged 50-59 (8,283), aged 60-4 (2,911) and aged 65+ (835).*

There is evidence of appetite for learning across all sectors with at least three-quarters (77%) of members in each fairly, very or extremely interested. Members in the Community and Voluntary sector were especially likely to be extremely interested (39% compared to 34% overall and just 23% of those in the Transport sector).

Interest in future learning increased by qualification level and income. It was also higher amongst those who have participated in learning, training or development since leaving full-time education or are UNISON activists. The following groups are particularly likely to be extremely interested in future learning:

* Those with Level 6 or above qualification (46% extremely interested compared to 17% of those with no qualifications, 26% of those with Level 1 or 2[[1]](#footnote-2)).
* Those who earn over £35,000 from work (41% extremely interested compared to 27% of those who earned £11,000 and under).
* Those who have previously undertaken UNISON learning or training (46% extremely interested compared to 23% who had done no learning or training and 34% who had done any learning or training).
* UNISON activists (51% extremely interested compared to 31% of non-activists).

These findings suggest that younger, more highly qualified members and higher earners are likely to be the most likely to undertake training and to take up any UNISON training offer in the future, as are those who have undertaken learning since leaving full-time education and those who are activists.

This leaves sizeable minorities *not interested* in future learning amongst groups who may perhaps benefit most – 30% of those with no qualifications are not interested (compared to 9% of those with Level 3 or higher) and 23% of those who have not undertaken any learning, training or development since leaving full-time education are not interested (compared to 11% of those who have).

UNISON will need to work harder to build interest in learning amongst these older, lower qualified and lower income groups. Specific campaigns or programmes addressing barriers for these groups may be needed. Using previous UNISON learners and activists as advocates could be useful given their positive experiences of UNISON learning.

BAME members, and those with a disability were more likely to be extremely interested, 51% and 41% respectively compared to 32% of White members and 32% of those without a disability. This may reflect those who are more likely to encounter discrimination in employment seeing learning and training as a tool to further their careers.

Making the learning offer as accessible as possible will be important to ensure the demand from those who may face barriers in their jobs and careers translates into take-up.

The focus group discussions found that although there is general interest in learning in theory, this is often tempered by practical limiting factors such as caring responsibilities and perceived costs, or uncertainty about where to get good information about what training is available and how useful it might be.

'You say ‘Oh, I really would like to do this. But then really isn't it a bit selfish? I can't really afford it …'You think you've got young kids and you think well, wouldn't it be better if I did something for them?'

UNISON member, Group 1 (no qualifications above Level 2, lower income, interested in learning)

Others have on-going training built into their role via their employer, and whilst they value this, they would not seek additional opportunities.

### Reasons for interest in future learning[[2]](#footnote-3)

Personal development and interest are large drivers of demand amongst those who express some interest in future learning. The top two key reasons for being interested in future learning were to learn something new (51%) or for personal development, enjoyment or well-being (50%), as shown in Figure 5.2.

To improve how they do their job is also likely to be a key reason for member interest in future learning (39%), with a further 41% giving this as part of the reason.

Figure 5.2 Reasons for interest in future learning, training or development

*Question C2: Why do you want to take part in learning, training or development in future? Base: All except those not at all interested or do not know if interested in future learning (16,689).*

Around a quarter are interested in learning primarily to get a qualification (26%), though it is also partly behind the interest of a further 34%. Providing good information on the impact of having further qualifications (e.g., on progression or earnings) will help encourage demand for learning, and UNISON’s own offer. Interest in qualifications is covered in more detail in the next section below.

Reasons relating to job and career progression are also the main drivers of interest in learning for around a quarter; to earn more money (26%) and / or to help progression (24%). Wishing to change jobs or careers are less often reasons for interest in learning, but are key for around one in six (17% and 15% respectively). A fifth (20%) are interested in learning as the skills needed for their job are changing but this is part of the reason for a further 37%. Whilst developing computer or IT skills is a key reason for interest for only 23% a further 38% additionally say it is part of the reason. Other reasons, given spontaneously were to improve mental health, confidence or self-esteem (a reason for 1%) or to help others (also for 1%).

Reasons for interest in learning are multiple and over-lapping – eight of the reasons listed in Figure 5.2 were given by the majority of members. Offers which benefit members both personally and in their careers may be popular. It also shows there may be demand for modular courses covering different aspects of training – e.g., both IT skills and job-specific skills.

When asked about training and learning during the group discussions many members focussed on that needed to progress in their current jobs or for changing roles.

### Interest in gaining qualifications[[3]](#footnote-4)

Among those interested in training, three in ten (29%) were not interested in gaining a qualification. There was also much uncertainty with a further 30% unsure what level of qualification they might be interested in.

Around two-fifths of members with interest in future learning were able to identify interest in qualifications at a specific level, as shown in Table 5.1. Overall, higher level qualifications are most likely to be of interest (Level 6+ 16%, Level 4 / 5 11%).

Table 5.1 Interest in qualifications level by level of current highest qualification (column percentages)



*Question C4: Are you interested in gaining a qualification in the next three years at any of the following levels? Base: All except those not at all interested or do not know if interested in future learning (16,689).*

Members interested in qualifications are generally looking for a ‘step up’ - gaining a qualification one level higher than they already hold. Members may need guidance around which qualification levels may be of interest and those with no qualifications or lower level qualifications may need help drawing up a learning development plan to understand how they might progress through each level.

Gaining a higher level qualification is a motivation to learn for those most interested, and younger people, but for others it appears far less relevant. Generally, the same groups most likely to be interested in learning overall were those also particularly likely to be interested in gaining qualifications at a higher level. Those most interested in qualifications at Level 4 or above include people aged under 40, BAME members, activists, and those earning over £20,000.

Groups more likely to be uninterested in qualifications at any level include older members, those with no guaranteed hours, those working in the Environment sector, and those with no existing qualifications.

## Demand for types of learning content[[4]](#footnote-5)

Members most commonly report wanting to learn for work (e.g. CPD) and / or for their general personal development(46% and 44% respectively within the next year, rising to 71% and 76% over the next three years), as shown in Figure 5.3. General personal development, leisure and well-being are of interest to the majority and may be areas where UNISON could relatively easily offer provision which would be relevant for many members regardless of sector or role.

Figure 5.3 Types of learning interested in within next year, two years or three years



*Question C3: What type of learning, training or development are you interested in? Base: All except those not at all interested or do not know if interested in future learning (16,689).*

Job specific skills are of interest for 38% within the next year (rising to 51% amongst those in the Transport sector, and 41% / 42% of those in Health Care / Social Care).

Learning for work and job specific skills are major areas of interest for members – more analysis will be needed to identify the content members are looking for. Requirements may be very specific for some roles, but there may be more generic areas UNISON could develop offers for.

Leisure, hobbies and well-being learning is of interest to over a third (35%) within the next year. In the focus groups examples of such courses given by members included those that would be practically useful (e.g., woodwork, gardening or DIY) or therapeutic. Some related such course to potential job changes (e.g., sign language and other languages).

"It would just be nice to do something to take your mind away from work for an hour or two maybe once a week"

UNISON member, Group 4 (women aged 50-59, mix of interested and not interested in learning)

Digital skills are in quite high demand: within the next year 29% are interested in learning around computer / internet use, 29% for specific software programmes (e.g., Excel) and 28% for other digital skills. Overall, two-thirds of members reported that they would be interested in training in digital skills in the next three years (68%). This was consistent across age groups with the exception of those aged 16-26 who were less likely to be interested than all other age groups (53%). Those in Greater London were the most likely to be interested in acquiring digital skills in the next three years (77%) as were those who have not undertaken any learning, training or development since leaving full-time education (73%) and those with a disability (73%). The focus groups showed that often this could be interest in refreshing and updating knowledge, and keeping up with others (younger family and colleagues) rather than learning from scratch.

"I could use a brushing up on that, just presentation skills and PowerPoint, some of my computer skills I took a long time ago so getting an update on those kinds of things would be good."

UNISON member, Group 4 (women aged 50-59, mix of interested and not interested in learning)

'I want to keep on top, because I want to know what she's [daughter] going to be learning as well'

UNISON member, Group 1 (no qualifications above Level 2, lower income, interested in learning)

Softer skills such as confidence and management are of interest for around a quarter of those interested in learning within the next year (26% and 24%).

Generally, members are most interested in taking up this learning within the next year with retirement preparation a notable exception (only 17% interested in the next year but 46% were interested within the next three years).

Overall, around one in ten members would be interested in learning (more) about being active in UNISON (11%) or directly in relation to their activist role (10%) – this rises to 43% and 53% amongst those who are activists.

Functional skills development is of interest to 10% in the next year, and English / Welsh language for 5%.

Respondents in the online survey were offered the opportunity to suggest other types of learning they might be interested in, though no more than 1% who were interested in learning raised any types other than those listed above in Figure 5.3. Those mentioned spontaneously included languages, HR skills (e.g., law, ethics), counselling or life coaching, health and safety, sign language, child development, finance / bookkeeping, and working with people with disabilities / neurodivergence.

### Demand for types of learning content by sector, age and gender[[5]](#footnote-6)

There are few major differences by sector in the types of learning members are interested in, as shown in Table 5.2. Members in all sectors are most likely to be interested in general personal development. Between two-thirds and three-quarters of members in most sectors were interested in learning for work.

Table 5.2 Types of learning interested in within next year, two years or three years (combined), by sector

  
*Question C3: What type of learning, training or development are you interested in? Base: All except those not at all interested or do not know if interested in future learning.*

UNISON may want to consider specific offers in the following sectors where there is particular demand

* Further and Higher Education – digital skills and specific software programmes
* Transport – digital skills, specific software programmes and computer / internet use
* Community and Voluntary – digital skills
* Health care and Social care – softer skills of confidence and management
* Environment – job specific skills,

The majority of those aged over 50 are interested in retirement preparation (60%), compared to only 15% of those under 40. In contrast, interest in personal finance is higher amongst young people (56% of those under 27 compared to 33% of those 65 or older).

Education around retirement preparation may best be presented as part of wider financial learning for younger people, whilst for older members general personal finance management may be more appealing under the umbrella of retirement preparation.

Interest in learning around being active in UNISON, or training for a UNISON activist role is more common amongst those in the Transport and the Community and Voluntary sectors.

Computer and internet skills are of most interest to those aged 50 or above (54%), though still 25% of those aged 16 to 26 are interested. Women over the age of 50 have a more immediate interest than men of the same age, a third (33%) are interested in undertaking training in computer or internet skills in the next year compared to three in ten (29%) of men.

Computer and digital skills offers are more likely to be of interest to older members, but care should be taken to ensure younger members also feel able to take up this offer to avoid them being ‘left behind.’

Younger members under 40 are more likely than older members to be interested in learning for work (82%), job specific skills (81%) and general personal development (81%). They are also more likely to be interested in developing softer skills in confidence and assertiveness (64%), and supervisory or management skills (71%).

General personal development and CPD courses are more in demand amongst younger members, whereas older members may need a more specific motivation to sign up.

Male members are more likely than female to be interested in developing job specific skills (70% compared to 64%), as well as learning around being active in UNISON (31% compared to 22%) or for their UNISON activist role (27% compared to 18%). Female members are more likely than male to be interested in developing confidence and assertiveness (52% compared to 43%), and learning around leisure, hobbies or wellbeing (68% compared to 60%). Focus group discussion found that some women identified the need to develop confidence to change jobs – several have considered other positions but not applied as they were concerned that they might not have sufficient experience.

*"I've been in a role for a long period of time so it’s quite difficult when you're in a role to try and think about doing something else. So it’s trying to get that confidence back to go for other types of positions, even something totally different to what I do now. "*

UNISON member, Group 4 (women aged 50-59, mix of interested and not interested in learning)

## Preferred delivery methods and online access

### Preferred delivery methods[[6]](#footnote-7)

Most commonly members who are interested in learning would prefer a mix of delivery methods, including both online and in-person (45%), as shown in Figure 5.4. A further 7% reported they did not mind how learning was delivered.

Around a quarter would prefer online only, split between those who would prefer online self-directed learning (14%) or online learning led by a tutor or facilitator (13%). A fifth (20%) of members would prefer in-person delivery.

Figure 5.4 Preferred learning delivery methods, by age and sector

*Question C5: How do you prefer to access learning? Base: All except those not at all interested or do not know if interested in future learning (16,689), aged 16-26 (106), aged 27-39 (1,817), aged 40-49 (3,994), aged 50-59 (7,590), aged 60-64 (2,404) and aged 65+ (608), Social care (1,943), Health care (4,834), Further and Higher Education (1,326), Schools (3,272), Local Government (2,796), Police and Justice (932), Utilities (351), Environment (258), Transport (93), Community and Voluntary (302), Other (505).*

Across all ages, genders, sectors, qualification and income levels, members more commonly prefer a mix of delivery methods to either purely online or purely in-person. However, there are sizeable minorities preferring online or in-person delivery across all genders, age groups, sectors, qualification and income levels.

Offering flexibility in delivery will be important – courses would ideally offer content both online and in-person so learners can select a style that suits their needs.

Three in ten (30%) of those under 40 would be happy with entirely online delivery. Younger members under 40 were particularly likely to favour online delivery via a tutor (15% compared to 11% of over 50s). A quarter (25%) of older members aged 60 or above would prefer in-person learning, as would a similar proportion (23%) of those aged 26 and under.

In person delivery may increase the appeal to older members, who are less likely than average to be extremely interested in learning, but it should also not be assumed that all younger people are happy to access learning online.

Members in the Schools sector were particularly likely to prefer self-directed online learning (20% compared to 14% overall).

The qualitative research found that although many are now used to online working, face-to-face is often valued for the interaction with others it allows, particularly for those who spend all day at a computer. Face-to-face sessions were often thought of as complementary to online learning, with both having value.

However, for some in-person training created practical barriers – travel time and costs, and being able to fit around caring responsibilities. Members felt their employers were more likely to agree to online training as it meant less time out of the workplace.

"It’s easy to take an hour of your day to sit and listen to a webinar…our force has been really supportive of a lot of the things that have been put on that are beneficial to the staff in relation to wellbeing and financial assistance...[but] if we were to say to them, ‘Can we give two hundred people the morning off because they need to travel to the local College?’ They wouldn't do it, so I think people have been able to access a lot more learning with it being online."

UNISON member, Group 3 (interested in activist training, demographic mix)

### Online access

Across all members (including those not interested in learning) almost half (48%) would access online learning via their own laptop at home. Around two-fifths would use a work laptop at home (40%) and / or a PC or laptop at work (37%). A fifth (18%) would use a tablet and a slightly lower proportion (15%) a phone. Many have multiple options so their choice may depend on content and timings.

Younger members under 40 are more likely to consider use of all methods listed than those over 50. They are especially likely to use a phone (27% compared to 11% of over 50s), although as they are more likely to use all other methods too there may be relatively few who would be reliant on this.

Male members are particularly likely to report they would access online training via computer at work (43% versus 35% of female).

The majority of those in the Local Government (59%), Environment (59%), Further and Higher Education (52%) and Community and Voluntary (51%) sectors would access online learning through a laptop provided by their employer (compared to 40% overall). Those in the Further and Higher Education sector and the Police and Justice sector are particularly likely to use a computer at their workplace (47% and 42% compared to 37% overall). Members in the Schools sector are particularly likely use their own computer at home (56% compared to 48% overall).

Quite a high proportion of members in the Transport sector (13%) were unsure how they would access online learning, flagging a potential access issue.

Likelihood to be able to access online learning via a work computer (either in the workplace or at home), increases with earnings: 63% of those who earn over £35,000 would use a work laptop at home compared to only 19% of those who earn £11,000 and under. Lower earners were more likely than higher earners to use a phone (19% of those who earn £11,000 or under versus 12% who earn over £35,000). Members with no qualifications, or only entry / Level 1 qualifications, were also less likely than average to have access to a work or home computer, and 17% were unsure how they would access online learning, again indicating a potential barrier.

Whilst being able to learn from home is enabling to those with caring commitments, UNISON will need to consider that some members may not have access to devices which will provide a good quality experience (i.e., they may only have mobile access).

Amongst those interested in learning, those who would prefer online delivery are particularly likely to access this at home, either on their own computer (56% compared to 40% who would prefer in-person learning only) and / or one provided by their employer (42% compared to 33%). Some organisations prevent access to Zoom or other online platforms, so people may be unable to join online training if they are reliant on a work laptop or network.

# Barriers to learning and training

This chapter covers the main barriers to learning and training for UNISON members, and the potential solutions required to overcome these barriers. It explores the barriers experienced by members in the past and anticipated barriers to future learning. We also explore how barriers and solutions differ between groups.

The main barriers to learning and training are work and personal responsibilities which make it hard for people to find time to take part.

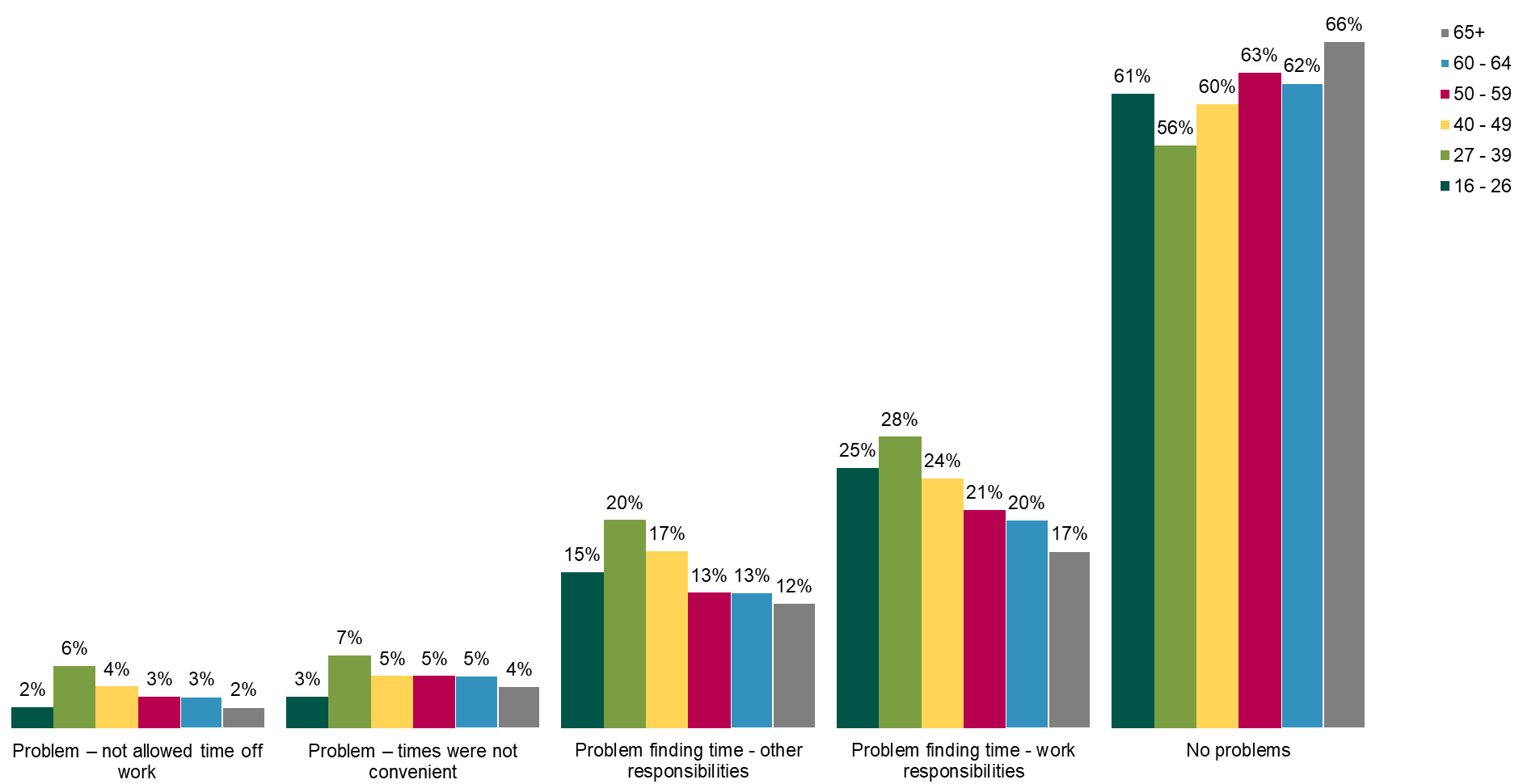
The main solutions to overcoming these barriers were felt to be financial support, support from employers (for example allowing training to be within paid work time and also provision of cover or help with usual work responsibilities while training) and help finding the right course.

## Barriers to taking part in past training

The majority of UNISON members have undertaken some form of training in the last three years.

Most (61%) members who have previously undertaken some training did not have any problems doing so and did not report any barriers to taking part, as shown in Figure 6.1. However, two-fifths had experienced challenges taking part in training, most commonly it being hard to find time for training because of work responsibilities (22%) or because of other responsibilities (15%).

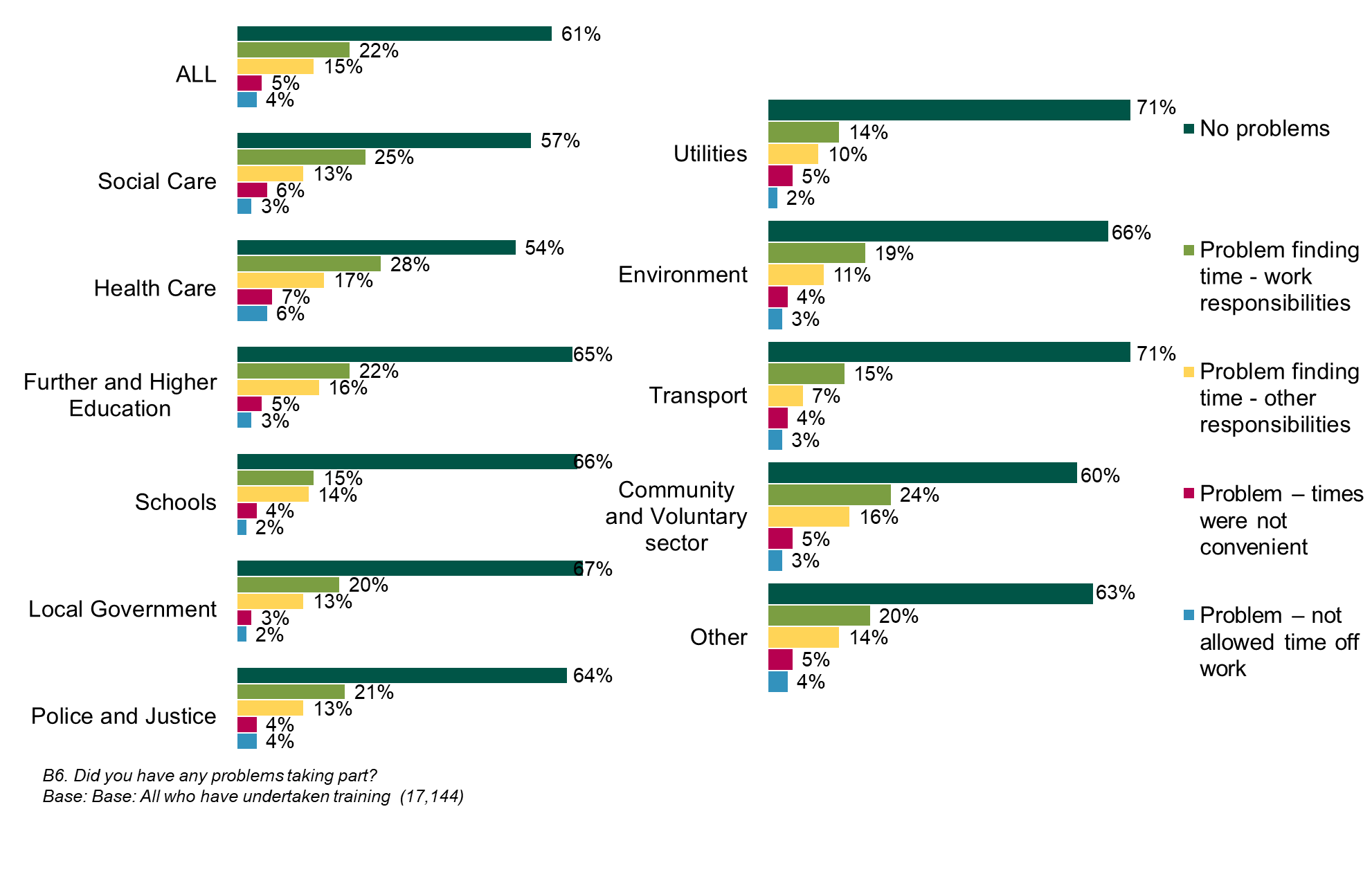
Figure 6.1 Whether previously experienced barriers participating in training and learning, and main barriers experienced, by age

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*Question B6: Did you have any problems taking part? Base: Those who have undertaken learning, training or development All (17,144), age 16-26: 89, 27-39: 1,713, 40-49: 3,836, 50-59: 7,829, 60-64: 2,735, 65+: 767*

Younger people and those working in Health and Social care are significantly more likely to have experienced work responsibilities as a barrier to taking part in training in the last three years. Differences by sector are shown in the following chart.

Figure 6.2 Whether previously experienced barriers participating in training and learning, and main barriers experienced, by sector

*Question B6: Did you have any problems taking part? Base: Those who have undertaken learning, training or development All (17,144), Social care (2,029), Health care (4,946), Further and Higher Education (1,359), Schools (3,403), Local Government (2,887), Police and Justice (917), Utilities (333), Environment (258), Transport (97), Community and Voluntary (300), Other (526).*

Focus group respondents highlighted similar difficulties that they had experienced fitting training around their work responsibilities. Training time was described as “time off” from work, and members found it hard to get this training time “off” especially if they worked in a front-line role or their workload was not covered.

"If any of the training I want to do is during work hours then it’s quite difficult to get the time off”

UNISON member, Group 4 (women aged 50-59, mix of interested and not interested in learning)

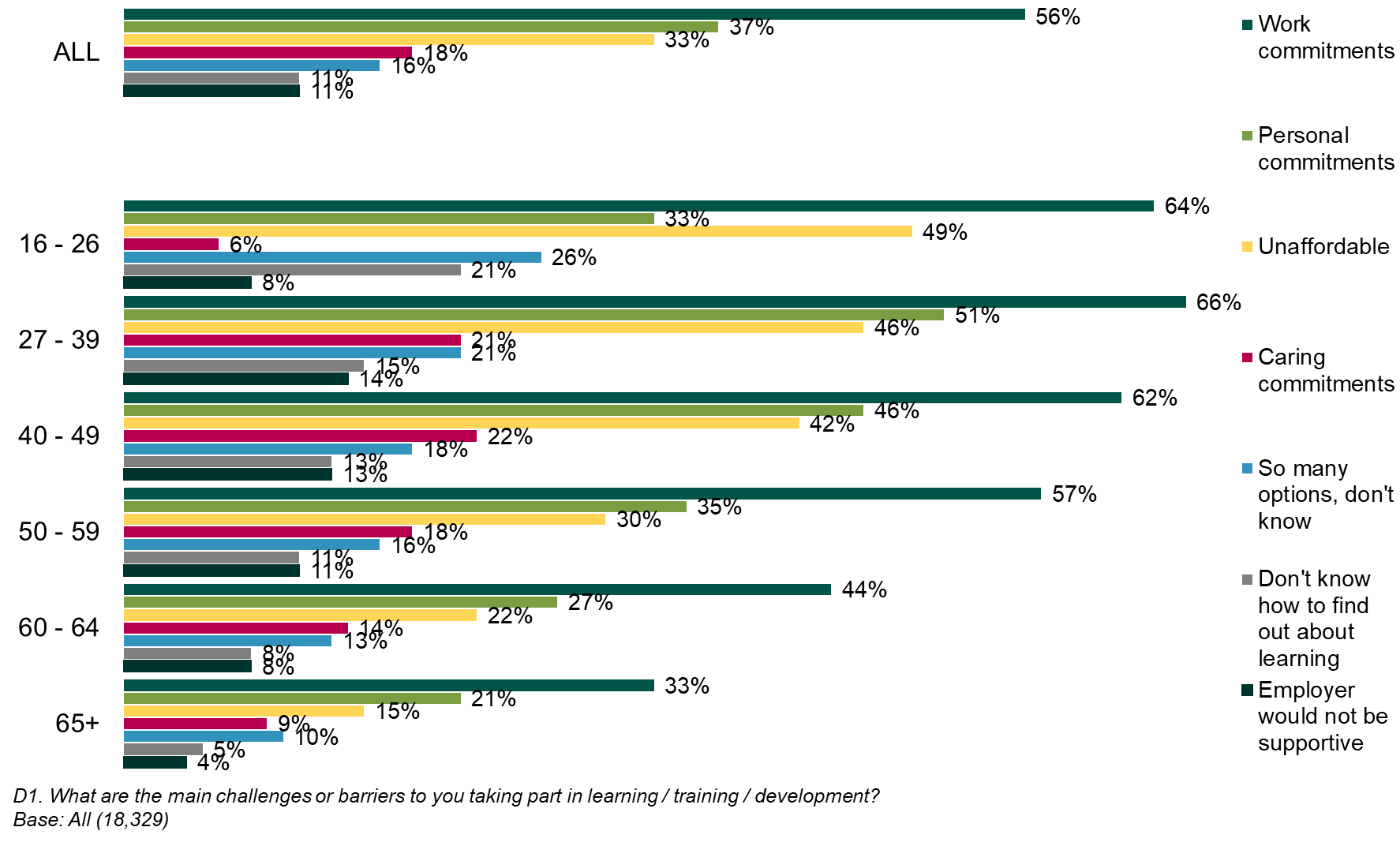
Several focus group participants took part in mandatory training (e.g., around safeguarding), often unpaid and in their own time. This made it difficult for them to take part in additional training/learning of their own choice, as they did not have enough time to do so.

Overall, the majority of members had done some training in the last three years, and most of them had no problems doing so. For those members who had experienced barriers to training, the majority of their barriers are around timing: finding it hard to find time around work responsibilities, around other responsibilities, in times that were convenient and getting time off work for learning. UNISON will need to consider how best to address these various timing issues in the UNISON College offering if they are to engage learners, particularly those who typically undertake less learning (the lower qualified, those on lower incomes etc.).

## Perceived barriers to learning

When identifying potential issues with taking part in training, a lack of time because of work commitments (56%) and personal commitments (37%) are perceived to be the main challenges, as shown in Figure 6.3. Cost and affordability are also an issue for a third (33%) of UNISON members. Other barriers include not knowing how to find out about training and learning (11%) and there being too many options (18%), suggesting that UNISON members would find additional information and guidance useful.

Figure 6.3 Main barriers to learning, training and development, by age

*Question D1:* *What are the main challenges or barriers to you taking part in learning / training / development? Base: All respondents (18,329)*

### Work commitments

Working commitments is the greatest barrier to training for all age groups, but this barrier affects younger workers much more than older workers, as does affordability of learning. If UNISON is looking to attract younger learners to the College, it will be important to make learning affordable and flexible around work commitments.

Despite work commitments being the main barrier to taking part in learning, far fewer respondents cite employers not supporting training (11%) as a barrier. Lack of support from employers may affect some groups and sectors more than others. Younger respondents and those working in the Health and Care sectors are significantly more likely to feel that employers would not support training. Lack of support from employers was also commonly mentioned in the focus groups. This is something UNISON can address via its partnership and negotiating routes.

Focus group respondents felt that taking time for training and learning could cause challenges at work for them. Some say that their workloads would not be covered while they were ‘off’. Others mention feeling guilty leaving colleagues to deal with their workload, and are concerned they would “drown” in work on their return. Some mentioned that they were prevented from doing training they had wanted to do because it was a low priority for their workplace: either it was not relevant for their current job, and / or their workplace did not have the budget for training that was not core or was for personal development.

"There was something recently, but it was 2 weeks, and I thought my god I'm going to drown when I come back if I take two weeks off."

UNISON member, Group 3 (interested in activist training, demographic mix)

For those who had not taken part in any training in the last three years, work commitments were the most commonly cited barrier (46%), but this is significantly less common than the average (56%). Barriers more likely to be mentioned by those who had not taken part in training than average were: affordability (36% vs 33% average), not knowing how to find out about opportunities (20% vs 11% average), and low support from employers (14% vs 11% average).

### Personal commitments and other barriers

While work commitments are a barrier to people undertaking learning and training, it was also clear that people have difficulties fitting in training out of working hours because of personal commitments. Almost one in five members (18%) specifically mentioned caring responsibilities as a barrier to learning and training. Others have no time or energy for training, or that they are expected to work overtime leaving them little time to do training. Some members feel strongly that work-related training should be done in paid work time (although others are required by their employers to undertake training in their own time).

*"I don't mind doing personal interest stuff in my own time, but if it's related to work in should be during work hours."*

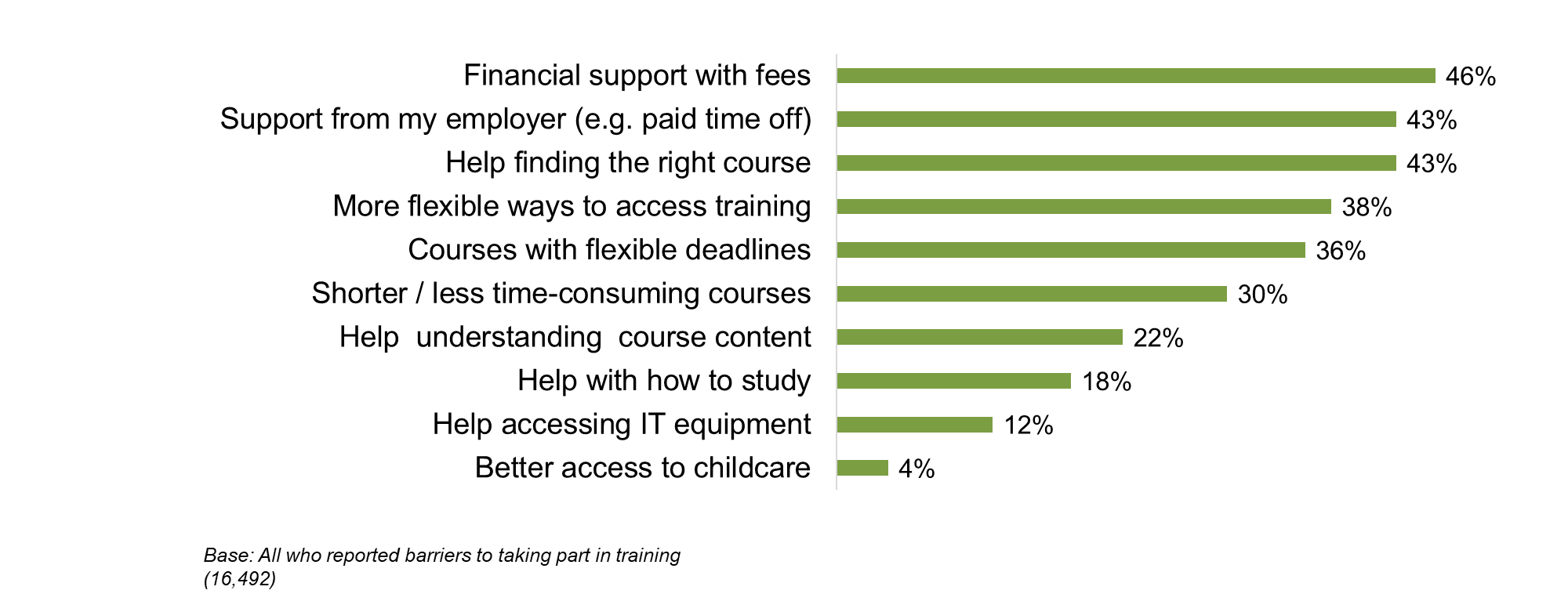
UNISON member, Group 3 (interested in activist training, demographic mix)

In addition, members raise some practical access barriers to taking part in training. These access barriers included: not having access to the required IT equipment or digital skills required; not having a quiet private space to access online courses; and finding it hard to travel for in-person courses.

## Perceived solutions to challenges / barriers

In line with perceived barriers, members mention financial support and support from employers as the top solutions needed to overcome barriers to participating in training in the future, as shown in Figure 6.4. Additional solutions cited include help finding the right course; more flexible access; more flexible deadlines; and help understanding the course content.

Figure 6.4 Top ten solutions to overcoming barriers to learning / training / development

*Question D2: What would help you overcome these challenges / barriers? Base: Those who reported barriers to participating in learning (16, 492)*

Suggested solutions to help people access training vary significantly by group. For people under 40 years of age, the top solutions are: financial support (64% vs 46% average), support from employer (58% vs 43% average), and more flexible ways to access training e.g., flexible time / location (48% vs 38% average).

For people from Black, Asian and other minority ethnic groups the top solutions are: financial support (56% vs 46% average), help with finding the right course (53% vs 43%), and support from employer (45% vs 43% average).

The member focus groups highlighted these solutions in practice and the positive impact they can have for employees. Members gave examples of financial support provided for learning and training, which had helped them gain qualifications and be valued in their workplaces.

*"My social work degree was paid for by [my employer]…so that’s a big motivator for me.”*

*"Having that commitment from your workplace that they have invested in you, I think that's important."*

Both from Group 5 (mix of demographics, interested in learning but not with UNISON)

Members revealed mixed views on paid time off and how far it could help people overcome their barriers to training and learning. While some felt it would make all the difference for others it was not seen as an effective solution to the challenges of their work commitments.

*“Paid time off is fine, but I'd still have to come back and do all the work."*

UNISON member, Group 3 (interested in activist training, demographic mix)

Overall, members are able to envisage solutions to overcome their perceived barriers to learning with financial support, more support from employers, help finding the right course and flexibility in delivery the main solutions across all groups.

# Views on UNISON College

This chapter examines members’ views and reactions to the idea of a new UNISON College. It explores the proportion of members likely to be interested in accessing learning through UNISON College and who they might be, reasons for not being interested, views on the provision of information, advice and guidance (IAG) by UNISON and priorities for learning types and delivery styles.

Most members are open to the idea of learning through UNISON but feel they do not know enough about it, causing a level of hesitation.

UNISON may want to consider how to best reach members who are ‘fairly’ interested in learning, a group who may particularly benefit from IAG to help find the right learning provision for them. Similarly, older members and those with no qualifications were particularly likely to say they would not go to UNISON for IAG – although these groups were less likely to be interested in undertaking learning in the next few years than average, they may well also be less confident about learning and training generally, and they represent a group for whom learning and training may be particularly beneficial.

## Views on the concept of UNISON College

In the online survey, members were given the following description of the College, before then being asked if they would be interested in accessing learning or training through UNISON College:

*‘UNISON College will offer support, advice and learning opportunities to every member and activist in the UK, from personal development, CPD, accredited and qualification to support with accessing degrees. Learning will be delivered by UNISON or its partners in flexible ways, online or in person, from bite sized to long term accredited courses. Would you be interested in accessing learning or training through UNISON College?’*

Just over a third were interested in accessing learning or training through UNISON College (35%). In contrast one in ten (10%) were not interested. The remainder answered ‘maybe’ (41%) or ‘don’t know’ (12%), suggesting many would need to know more about what the College will offer (the types and mode of training, costs, how it will be different to training available via their employers etc.) before being able to decide. These results suggest a high level of interest, especially if the College can develop an offer which appeals to those currently uncertain and can communicate this well to the membership.

Figure 7.1 Whether interested in accessing learning or training through UNISON College



*Question F1: question text given in the paragraph above the chart title. Base: All respondents (18,329).*

In the focus groups, members were generally very favourable to the concept of the UNISON College, with immediate reactions including “I can’t wait”, “sounds brilliant”, “I think it’s a great idea” and “sounds a bit like the Open University. You can do things part time, or bite-sized, or the full degree. It sounds good.” Some who had a reasonable knowledge of UNISON’s current offer felt the College would be a re-packaging and bringing together of the current learning offer, while those with no or limited awareness of UNISON’s current learning and training provision were interested in principle and wanted to know what training would be available through the College. Most stressed the importance to the success of the College of good communication in making members aware of the opportunities available:

“Communication needs to be front and centre because most of us didn’t know anything about there being any training.”

UNISON member, Group 5 (mix of demographics, interested in learning but not with UNISON)

“They’re not very active about shouting about what they have got on offer.”

UNISON member, Group 6 (interested in learning)

### Those not interested in learning through UNISON

One in ten (10%) members were not interested in accessing training through the College. The following were all more likely than average not to be interested:

* Those with no qualifications (33%) or with Entry or level 1 qualifications as their highest (18%). This represents a potential risk that the College ends up being mainly used by those already well qualified.
* Those on lower salaries (15% of those with annual salaries of £11k or under) and with no guaranteed hours/zero hours contracts (15%).
* Older workers (20% of those aged 60-64, 33% of those aged 65 plus).
* Those in Scotland (14%), the North East (13%) and Yorkshire and Humberside (12%).
* Those working in the Transport sector (16%).

One of the focus groups specifically explored reasons for not being interested in accessing training through the College despite these members being interested in training. The reasons given tended to fall into two groups:

* Members who felt that their employer already provides comprehensive training opportunities, and hence did not feel they needed to access training through UNISON.
* Some members do not associate UNISON with learning and training, or think UNISON’s training is specific to activists.

### Groups among whom interest is higher than average

While overall 35% of respondents in the online survey were interested in accessing learning or training through UNISON College, this was higher among the following groups:

* Younger members (50% of those aged under 40, rising to 52% of those aged 16-26. This compares to 31% of those aged over 50, and to 19% specifically among those aged over 65).
* Those working in the Community and Voluntary Sector (47%), as well as in Health (39%) and Police and Justice (38%).
* BAME members (particularly Black African / Caribbean or Black British (66%), but the figure was over half among members with mixed ethnic backgrounds (53%), Asian / Asian British ethnicity (52%) or of ‘other’ ethnicities (55%). In comparison a third (33%) of those of white ethnicity were interested.
* Members who have a qualification at Level 6 or above i.e., first degree or higher (40%).
* Those with a disability (43%).
* Members who prefer to access learning through an online course led by a tutor / facilitator (49%).
* Members who had previously undertaken training through UNISON (52%).
* The small proportion who stated their gender as ‘other’ (57%, compared to 36% of men and 35% of women).

### Confidence in UNISON as a provider

Members who took part in the survey that were interested in accessing learning or training through UNISON College (those answering ‘yes’ or ‘maybe’) were asked who they would feel most confident in providing them with training for personal and career development opportunities.

Members are most likely to select training delivered by a college or university (28%), with training provided by UNISON chosen by just under a quarter (23%) and ahead of training delivered by their employer (13%) or by an independent training organisation (9%). Quite a high proportion (25%) are unsure who they would feel most confident receiving this kind of training from – this is likely to cover both those equally happy with all types of provider, and those who feel unable to decide between them because they do not have recent experience across the different provider types.

Figure 7.2 Who members would feel most confident in for providing training for personal and career development opportunities

  
*Question F4: Who would you feel most confident in providing you with training for personal and career development opportunities? Base: Those interested in accessing learning or training though UNISON College (14,069)*

Groups more likely to select UNISON as the organisation they would be most confident about for providing them with training include:

* Men (27% vs. 22% of women).
* Those aged over 60 (30% of those aged 60-64 and 31% of those aged over 65).
* Those on zero hours contracts / who have no guaranteed hours (38%).
* Members with no qualifications (41%).
* Those with a disability (27% compared to 22% of those who do not have a disability).

It is important to note that in the focus groups it was clear that where members were not entirely confident about UNISON College or UNISON as a training provider, these views tended to be based on a lack of awareness of UNISON’s current training offer or due to being satisfied with the current training they are receiving from their employer, rather than any ‘active’ negative views.

## Types of learning of most interest to members

Respondents to the online survey that were potentially interested in accessing learning and training via UNISON College (around three-quarters of members) were presented with a list and asked which types of learning, training or development they would be interested in accessing via the College (they could also type in additional responses).

The most commonly selected responses are shown in Figure 7.3. Results show there are high levels of interest in a range of learning and training topics, and no single area dominates the list. Priorities among members broadly fell into three categories:

* Learning and training for personal development (49%) or leisure / hobbies and wellbeing (40%).
* Learning for work such as Continuing Professional Development (45%) and job-specific skills (39%), and more specifically developing supervisory and management skills.
* Computer / internet use (27%), skills for specific software packages such as MS Excel and PowerPoint (32%) and other digital skills (26%).

Around a third (30%) are interested in developing confidence and assertiveness skills (an area that may be useful both at work and in personal life), and a similar proportion are interested in development related to the transition from work to retirement (33%).

Figure 7.3 Priorities for types of learning / training / development from UNISON College

  
*Question F5: What types of learning / training / development would you be interested in from the UNISON College? Base: Those interested in UNISON training (14,069).*

As might be expected, there are differences in the relative interest of specific types of training and development between different sub-groups. For example (the following list is not intended to be exhaustive, but is intended to show some examples of differences):

* Under 40s are more interested than older members in learning for work such as Continuing Professional Development (58%), job-specific learning (56%), developing their supervisory or management skills (54%) and in developing confidence and assertiveness skills (37%);
* Overs 50s are more interested than younger members in planning for retirement (46%) and in learning and training on computers and internet use (31%);
* Women are more interested than men in improving confidence or assertiveness skills (32% vs 23% among men), They are also more interested than men (by 5 to 7 percentage points) in learning and training on general personal development, learning for work (e.g., CPD), and for leisure / hobbies / well-being.

Results show reasonably high levels of interest in learning to better understand being active in UNISON (12% of those interested in accessing learning through UNISON were interested in this) and in learning to develop their skills and knowledge for their UNISON activist role (11%). Interest in both was higher among:

* Activists, among whom 58% of those interested in learning through UNISON College are interested in learning to develop their skills and knowledge for their UNISON activist role, and 38% are interested in learning to better understand being active in UNISON (vs 5% and 8% respectively among non-activists).
* Under 40s, particularly for learning to better understand being active in UNISON (17%).
* Those in the Community and Voluntary Sector (23% for learning to better understand being active in UNISON and 18% for learning to develop my skills and knowledge for my UNISON activist role) and in Further and Higher Education (17% for learning to better understand being active in UNISON and 15% for learning to develop their skills and knowledge for their UNISON activist role).
* Black African / Caribbean or Black British members (19% for learning to better understand being active in UNISON and 18% for learning to develop their skills and knowledge for their UNISON activist role).
* Members with a disability (19% for learning to better understand being active in UNISON and 17% for learning to develop their skills and knowledge for their UNISON activist role).

The focus groups explored in more detail the areas that members thought it important for the College to focus on. There is a general feeling that it is important for there to be ‘something for everyone’ (while recognising this would be challenging), hence a variety of work and non-work-related courses at a variety of levels (and for work-related courses for those at different stages of their career), offering certification/qualifications in some cases but appreciating that others would want to develop skills or undertake learning without the need for certification, and ranging from bite sized short courses to more substantial learning.

On the *level* of the training offered, for example, there is a feeling that while basic level courses are needed (and some older members specifically admitted needing this level in relation to computer skills), this should not be the sole focus. One member commented, when asked what training they were aware of that UNISON offered, that they had seen in UNISON’s newsletter that there was “Maths and English, quite basic levels. I think also something on counselling. Again, quite low levels. Because of that I’ve not looked at it since.” Similarly, an activist felt activist training “tends to be pitched about right for activists who aren’t experienced as branch officers. I think for branch officers it’s not advanced enough.” These examples suggest the need for a broad offer in terms of level.

Participants in the focus groups often felt that UNISON College could focus on ‘soft’ skills needed for the work environment such as confidence and assertiveness, getting the best out of your team, and conflict resolution. Interest in developing confidence and assertiveness skills was particularly strong in the focus groups among women aged 50-59, who often felt this would help them progress in their careers.

As mentioned above, while there was interest in a broad training offer, some are aware how challenging this would be for UNISON given the diversity of its membership. As one activist commented:

*“One of the challenges UNISON has got in establishing a college and refining a learning offer is it’s such a big union that serves so many different roles (people in manual roles, and people who may not be able to speak English well – important especially where ESOL courses are being cut by the government - right through to those who have been trained in a profession, who need CPD to stay registered in their profession. So if you think about the workplace and individual skills, it’s a really big challenge for an organisation to provide a learning offer which can cover this whole spectrum.”*

UNISON member, Group 2 (qualifications at Level 3+, higher income, interested in learning)

As well as discussing the types of training of interest in terms of subject focus group respondents were also keen to express other important aspects of the College’s offer. The following were examples of issues raised during the focus groups:

* The need for the offer to be well communicated to members (reflecting the view that there is currently very mixed knowledge among members of UNISON’s training)
* The need for registration onto courses to be an easy process with a simple IT interface, and with a straightforward contact process if any difficulties are encountered (again reflecting the views of some that registration has not always been easy in the past)
* Interest from some in modular, transferable units: “If you start something, and then you don’t have time to do the whole thing, then you waste it because you don’t complete the qualification. So it would be good if there are different exit levels so you can continue it and build on it. And if it is transferable, so if there is a different course which is similar, you don’t have to repeat bits which are very similar across the two.”
* The quality of the training is paramount, and the trainers have to be experts / knowledgeable in their field. The type of organisation they work for did not appear to matter as “it’s all about the quality of the learning experience and the quality of the person delivering it.”

## Views on IAG offered by UNISON College

### Interest in UNISON’s IAG offer

In the online survey respondents were told UNISON can provide information and advice on training and development opportunities and asked if they would go to UNISON for this information to help them choose learning opportunities or find out what would interest them. The vast majority of members said they would (35%) or might (46%) got to UNISON for this information, as shown in Figure 7.4.

Figure 7.4 Whether would go to UNISON for IAG on training and development opportunities

*Question F2: UNISON can provide information and advice on training and development opportunities. Would you go to UNISON for this information? Base: All respondents (18,329).*

Likelihood to go to UNISON for information and advice on training was much higher among those extremely or very interested in undertaking any learning in the next three years (48%) than those fairly interested (20%) or not interested in future learning (10%). UNISON may want to consider how to best reach members who are ‘fairly’ interested in learning, a group who may particularly benefit from further advice.

Similarly, those who had undertaken previous training via UNISON were particularly likely to say they would go to UNISON for information on learning and training (54%), as were UNISON activists (67%).

Likelihood to access UNISON IAG decreased with age (44% of those under 40 would, compared to 33% of those 50 or older). Similarly, members with no qualifications were particularly likely to say they would not go to UNISON for IAG (21% with a further 16% unsure) - this group were less likely to be interested in undertaking learning in the next three years than average, but they may well also be less confident about learning and training generally and of course they represent a group for whom learning and training may be particularly beneficial.

Members working in the Voluntary and Community sector are especially interested in UNISON’s IAG offer (42% said they would use it and a further 46% might do so) as are BAME members – this reflects the fact, already discussed in the chapter, that both groups were more likely than average to want to access learning and training via UNISON.

### Accessing UNISON IAG

Members who would or might go to UNISON for IAG would most commonly prefer to access this information via the UNISON website (59%), followed by email (46%), as shown in Figure 7.5. Over one in five (22%) would want to use a dedicated learning helpline (22%). In comparison relative few would prefer face-to-face contact, either via their local UNISON learning representative (16%), another local workplace representative (14%) or by talking to fellow members (11%). These results show that there is interest in a variety of means of accessing UNISON’s IAG, and a single source such as the website cannot be relied upon.

Figure 7.5 Preferred methods of accessing IAG from UNISON on training and development opportunities

*Question F3: How would you prefer to access this information from UNISON? Base: Respondents who would go to UNISON for* *information and advice on training and development opportunities (14,783). Respondents could select more than one option.*

Providing information on the website would meet the preference for most members who might take up UNISON’s IAG. However, providing IAG via telephone and in-person with reps would also be welcomed by many, especially groups who may be more hesitant about taking up IAG (e.g., older members) and / or are sometimes disadvantaged in employment (e.g., BAME or disabled members). Members relatively more likely to prefer telephone or in-person access to IAG include:

* Those aged 60 plus are more likely than average to prefer a phone option (26%), though still over half say their preferred method was the website (52%).
* Among those aged over 50, men are more likely than women to prefer in-person access to IAG. A fifth of men aged 50 plus (19%) would prefer to approach their local ULR compared to one in seven women (14%), and one in eight men over the age of 50 would prefer to approach their local workplace rep (15%) compared to one in nine women of the same age group (11%).
* BAME members are particularly likely to prefer telephone (33% compared to 21% of White members), their UNISON learning rep (25% compared to 15%) and / or a local workplace rep (19% compared to 13%).
* Members with a disability are more likely than average to prefer to call the helpline (28%) or approach a UNISON learning rep (22%) or a workplace rep (16%).
* Those in the Community and Voluntary and in the Social care sectors are particularly likely to prefer a phoneline (31% and 27%).
* Those in the Utilities, Transport, Police and Justice and Environment sectors are particularly likely to prefer to approach a rep (e.g., 27% of those in Transport would prefer to contact their local UNISON learning rep and 21% of those in Utilities a local workplace rep).

Those who had undertaken previous learning with UNISON are more likely than average to prefer to speak to their local UNISON rep (23%), as are UNISON activists (30%). This is likely to reflect deeper engagement with UNISON and positive prior experience of UNISON’s learning offer.

### Considerations from the focus groups on UNISON information and advice

In the focus group members were very positive about the idea of UNISON offering information and advice on learning and training. A particularly appealing aspect was the possibility to discuss training issues with an impartial contact, something that particularly applied to cases where somebody might be interested in changing job or career (where they would not be able to discuss the issue with their manager or employer). Even in cases where the training might be to help them progress in their current job, some were concerned with discussing this with their manager because of their potential reaction to having time away from the workplace or their eventually progressing out of their current role.

*"That sounds like the right sort of niche for UNISON to me...It should be unnecessary where individuals are working for good managers that are committed to development of their staff but we all know, we haven't always worked for good managers throughout our career."*

UNISON member, Group 5 (mix of demographics, interested in learning but not with UNISON)

Similarly, while some tended to rely on their employer for advice on training, this would be very work-focussed, and it appealed to members that UNISON would be able to provide advice on a wider range of learning opportunities (e.g., relating to leisure activities).

Some members are aware that the UNISON newsletter lists basic course information, but to help them consider if it would work for them, they would want more practical details e.g., if it leads to a certification / qualification, the amount of ‘home’ hours likely to be required, and the exact content. A personal contact who they could approach with questions or for advice would be welcomed and some would like to speak to others who have done the course to get their opinion. Again, it appears an approach through a number of channels will be most effective.

A key requirement is that the information and advice offered by UNISON needs to be high quality, personal and tailored to the individual. For example, it needs to cover the full range of learning opportunities available, and if the training under discussion is work-related it should outline how the individual would benefit and if alternative courses would help them more given their current situation, circumstances and wishes. Members also want to know how qualifications available via UNISON College will compare with qualifications from other providers and what, if any, recognition they will be given by employers when applying for new jobs. Also important is the provision of information on the content and structure of any training, but also ideally the weighting given to different elements. (In the latter context one person complained that they recently went on a course about child exploitation, female genital mutilation and trafficking, expecting an equal balance between these elements, but 90% of the time was spent talking about female genital mutilation which wasn’t useful for them as they had already done a course specifically about that. Others agreed with this, pointing out that if they were interested in conflict resolution there was no point signing up for a course where this was covered but it ended up being just 5% of what was covered.)

Delivery of this high-quality advice and guidance was felt to be something that needed to be delivered by a careers professional, and would not be something that a union learning rep could simply tag on to their current role.

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2. This section excludes those who were not all interested or did not know if they were interested in learning in future. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. This section excludes those who were not all interested or did not know if they were interested in learning in future. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. This section excludes those who were not all interested or did not know if they were interested in learning in future. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. This section excludes those who were not all interested or did not know if they were interested in learning in future. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. This section excludes those who were not all interested or did not know if they were interested in learning in future. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)