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Adult learning in the United Kingdom: Participation trends, changing learning practices and structural challenges

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Abstract:
Drawing on the 2023-2025 Adult Participation in Learning Survey conducted by the Learning and Work Institute in the United Kingdom, this study examines recent participation trends, changing learning practices, and structural challenges in adult learning. The findings indicate that participation recovered after the pandemic but remained fragile, with the decline in 2025 suggesting the vulnerability of adult learning when employer investment, public support, and household resources come under pressure. Access to learning opportunities continues to be shaped by age, social class, prior educational experience, and employment status, indicating that the compensatory potential of adult learning has not yet been fully realised. In practice, adult learning is becoming more flexible, digitally mediated, and diverse in its motivations and perceived benefits, extending beyond skills development to include well-being, social connection, and wider forms of participation. The UK case shows that countries seeking to build inclusive lifelong learning systems, particularly developing countries and transition economies, may need to strengthen targeted support for disadvantaged groups, promote collaborative provision among government, employers, educational institutions, and communities, address digital learning divides, and recognise the broader social functions of adult learning.

1. Introduction

Amid economic globalisation, digital transformation, population ageing, and labour market restructuring, adult learning has become a central policy and research concern for countries seeking to strengthen human capital, social adaptability, and lifelong learning systems (Rott & Schmidt-Hertha, 2024). As industrial structures change and occupational roles evolve, the knowledge and skills acquired through initial schooling are no longer sufficient for individuals to respond to increasingly complex work demands. Continuous learning enables adults to update knowledge, develop skills, obtain qualifications, and expand opportunities for career progression, making adult learning an important means of adaptation to economic and social change (Billett et al., 2021). Its significance, however, is not confined to employment and career advancement. Adult learning is also associated with health and well-being, social interaction, cultural participation, community engagement, and quality of life (Merriam & Kee, 2014).

The United Kingdom occupies an important position in the history and institutional development of adult education and lifelong learning. Its adult education sector has a long trajectory and a rich body of policy and institutional practice (Xu, 2021). From workers' education and community education to the further education system, and more recently to digital, workplace, and self-directed learning, adult learning in the UK has remained closely connected to economic restructuring, social governance, and changing individual needs (Wallis et al., 2022). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, new patterns have emerged in the organisation, motivation, and support of adult learning. Online, self-directed, and informal learning have expanded the channels through which adults learn, making learning more flexible, open, and embedded in everyday life. At the same time, persistent inequalities in learning opportunities, rising costs, insufficient employer

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investment, and uneven digital capability have created new challenges for the development of adult learning (James & Thériault, 2020).

The Adult Participation in Learning Survey, conducted over many years by the Learning and Work Institute, provides an important empirical basis for examining adult learning in the UK. Since its launch in 1996, the survey has tracked learning participation among adults aged 17 and above across the country. It adopts a broad definition of adult learning that includes formal education, non-formal education, and informal learning. Compared with single-source education statistics, the survey captures not only whether adults participate in learning, but also how they learn, why they learn, what benefits they report, what barriers they face, and how participation varies across social groups. It therefore offers a systematic basis for analysing both recent developments and the structural conditions underlying adult learning in the UK.

Against this background, this article addresses three interrelated questions: how adult learning participation in the UK changed between 2023 and 2025; how learning modes, motivations, and perceived benefits are being reshaped; and what structural challenges these changes reveal for countries seeking to develop more inclusive lifelong learning systems. By linking recent survey evidence with international research on adult learning, inequality, workplace learning, and digital inclusion, the article provides a focused analysis of the UK case while identifying implications that extend beyond a single national context.

2. Literature review

International research increasingly conceptualises adult learning as a broad and life-course-oriented field that encompasses formal, non-formal and informal learning, and that takes place across multiple settings, including workplaces, communities and everyday life (Nygren et al., 2019). From a lifelong learning perspective, adult learning is therefore not confined to the acquisition of qualifications or job-related skills. Rather, it is associated with a wider range of individual and social benefits, including personal development, health and well-being, social capital, social participation and community life (Field, 2009). This broader understanding is important because adults' learning trajectories are rarely located within a single institutional setting. Instead, they are shaped by the interaction of work, family responsibilities, community life, digital environments and changing social relations (Pöyliö & McMullin, 2025). Adult learning should thus be understood not simply as participation in organised courses, but as a life-wide process embedded in the social, economic and technological conditions of adulthood.

Building on this broader conceptualisation, a major theme in the literature concerns unequal participation in adult learning. Participation is shaped not only by individual motivation and prior educational experience, but also by socioeconomic position, institutional opportunities and welfare-state arrangements (Boeren, 2017). In this regard, Lee (2018) argues that inequalities in adult learning and education participation need to be analysed through the connection between micro-level individual factors, macro-level structural conditions and institutional settings, while Rubenson & Desjardins (2009) emphasise the bounded nature of adults' agency by showing how welfare-state regimes shape barriers to participation in adult education. These studies suggest that adult participation cannot be adequately explained through individual choice alone. Rather, it is conditioned by the distribution of resources, opportunities and institutional support across different social groups. Research on adult learning and inequality further shows that adult education may provide second chances for some learners, but it may also reproduce cumulative advantage or Matthew effects when access to learning and its returns are concentrated among those who are already educationally and occupationally advantaged (Karmaeva & Kosyakova, 2022). Inequality in adult learning is therefore not only a matter of whether adults are willing to learn, but also a question of who has access to supportive conditions, recognised opportunities and meaningful returns.

A related research focuses on workplace learning and the changing organisation of adult learning. As learning becomes increasingly embedded in work practices, work-life transitions, organisational development and the future of work, the workplace has become a key site for understanding adult learning in contemporary societies (Kraiger & Ford, 2021). Workplace affordances, employer and supervisor support, job design and organisational learning cultures influence whether adults can participate in meaningful workplace learning and transform such learning into employability and career development (Decius et al., 2021). Recent research further shows that work-related learning is affected by both individual antecedents and organisational conditions, including motivation, self-efficacy, learning climate, job demands and changing work arrangements (Wijga et al., 2025). Taken together, this literature indicates that adult learning cannot be understood as an individualised process of skill acquisition detached from its organisational and labour market contexts. Rather, it is embedded in labour market structures, workplace conditions, employer support and the availability of organised learning infrastructures (Broek et al., 2024).

Alongside the growing emphasis on workplace learning, recent studies have also paid increasing attention to digital adult learning (Marshall et al., 2024). Online courses, digital learning platforms, open educational resources and artificial intelligence tools have expanded the accessibility, reach and flexibility of adult learning opportunities. However, the expansion of digital learning has also made inequalities in digital access, digital skills, learner confidence and learning support more visible (Milana et al., 2024). Digital learning may supplement existing adult education provision, but it does not automatically remove social inequalities in participation (Karger et al., 2024). The key challenge is therefore not only to expand online courses, learning platforms and digital resources, but also to ensure that adults have the digital skills, guidance, support and recognised learning pathways needed to use these resources effectively and translate participation into meaningful learning outcomes (Pirkkalainen et al., 2023). In this sense, digital adult learning should be understood as both an opportunity for widening participation and a poten-

tial mechanism through which existing inequalities may be reproduced if access, support and recognition remain unevenly distributed.

Overall, the existing literature provides a conceptual basis for analysing adult learning participation, changing learning practices, and structural challenges in the UK. It shows that adult learning is a broad, life-wide, and life-course process; that participation remains unequally distributed across social groups; that workplace conditions and employer support shape access to meaningful learning; and that digital learning generates both new opportunities and new risks of exclusion. However, recent survey evidence from 2023 to 2025 has not yet been sufficiently integrated into an analysis of how participation trends, flexible learning practices, workplace learning, digital inclusion, and lifelong learning policy interact in the post-pandemic period. This article addresses this gap by using the Adult Participation in Learning Survey to examine the UK case and to consider its implications for building more equitable and sustainable lifelong learning systems.

3. Methodology and data sources

This study uses a documentary and secondary-data-based research design. Rather than collecting primary survey data, it draws on official survey reports, policy documents, and relevant academic literature to examine recent trends, changing practices, and structural challenges in adult learning in the UK. The research design combines literature analysis, policy analysis, and secondary analysis of published survey data. This approach is appropriate because the purpose of the study is not to test a causal model, but to provide a systematic account of how adult learning participation and practice have changed in the post-pandemic period and what these changes imply for the development of lifelong learning systems.

3.1 Data sources

The main empirical source is the Adult Participation in Learning Survey conducted by the Learning and Work Institute. Running since 1996, the survey is one of the longest-standing sources of evidence on adult learning participation in the UK. It adopts a broad definition of learning, covering formal, non-formal, and informal learning activities rather than limiting adult learning to publicly funded courses or qualification-oriented provision. Respondents are asked whether they are currently learning, whether they have participated in learning within the previous three years, how they have undertaken learning, what motivates them to learn, what benefits they have gained, and what barriers they face.

The analysis focuses primarily on the survey reports published between 2023 and 2025: Adult Participation in Learning Survey 2023, Adult Participation in Learning Survey 2024, and The Workforce Learning Slowdown? Adult Participation in Learning Survey 2025. These three reports were selected because they provide the most recent evidence on adult learning in the post-pandemic period and allow participation trends, learning practices, and structural inequalities to be examined over time.

The 2023 survey was conducted through Kantar's UK online omnibus survey between August and September 2023 and included a boosted regional sample of 9,506 adults aged 17 and above, weighted to provide a nationally representative dataset. The 2024 survey was conducted between 1 and 15 August 2024 and included 5,103 adults aged 17 and above, with a weighted effective sample of 5,102. The 2025 survey was conducted between 23 June and 14 July 2025 and included 5,186 adults aged 17 and above, again weighted to represent the UK adult population. The use of three consecutive survey years makes it possible to examine both short-term fluctuations and emerging post-pandemic patterns.

3.2 Analytical procedure

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, relevant academic literature was reviewed to establish the conceptual framework for understanding adult learning in relation to lifelong learning, workplace learning, social inequality, and digital inclusion. Second, policy documents and official reports were examined to situate recent developments in UK adult learning within broader processes of adult education reform, labour market restructuring, and post-pandemic social change. Third, a secondary analysis of published aggregate data from the 2023-2025 Adult Participation in Learning Survey reports was conducted. The analysis focused on participation trends, group differences by age, social class, educational background, and employment status, changes in learning modes, motivations and benefits, and major barriers to participation.

All statistical evidence used in the study is based on the weighted results reported in the official survey publications. Because the study relies on published aggregate data rather than raw individual-level data, the analysis is descriptive and interpretive rather than causal. Survey findings are used to identify key patterns in participation and practice, which are then interpreted through the perspectives of adult learning theory, social inequality, workplace learning, and digital inclusion.

3.3 Scope and limitations

Several limitations should be noted. First, the study is based on secondary data from published survey reports, which means that the analysis is constrained by the categories, indicators, and breakdowns made available in the original publications. Second, the Adult Participation in Learning Survey relies on self-reported learning experiences. Although the survey provides a broad and inclusive understanding of adult learning, respondents may interpret 'learning' differently according to their experiences, social backgrounds, and perceptions of education and training. Third, because the survey moved from face-to-face fieldwork to online fieldwork from 2021 onwards, comparisons with pre-2021 data should be treated cautiously. The study therefore focuses mainly on the 2023-2025 period, when the survey method is more consistent and the data are better suited to examining recent developments.

Despite these limitations, the Adult Participation in Learning Survey remains a valuable source for understanding adult learning in the UK. Its broad definition of learning, long-term continuity, nationally representative samples, and detailed de-

mographic breakdowns make it especially useful for analysing not only participation rates, but also the social distribution, practical forms, motivations, benefits, and barriers associated with adult learning.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1 Participation trends and social inequalities in adult learning

Participation in adult learning reflects not only adults' engagement in learning activities, but also the interaction between individual aspirations, institutional provision and the wider policy environment of lifelong learning. It therefore offers an important entry point for examining how a lifelong learning system operates in practice (Boeren et al., 2010). Evidence from 2023 to 2025 suggests that adult learning participation in the UK has not followed a linear or consolidated pattern of post-pandemic expansion. Rather, it increased during the initial recovery period and then declined markedly in 2025. At the same time, opportunities for participation remained unevenly distributed by age, social class, prior educational experience and labour market position. Although adult learning is often associated with universal access and second-chance opportunities, the UK case indicates that participation remains strongly shaped by existing social and economic structures.

In the immediate post-pandemic period, adult learning in the UK appeared to recover to a relatively high level of participation. The expansion of online learning, self-directed learning and interest-oriented learning broadened the ways in which adults could engage in learning, enabling participation to extend beyond formal courses and institutional settings into more flexible work, community and everyday-life contexts (Nermond et al., 2024). For many adults, learning was no longer dependent solely on fixed classrooms, scheduled provision or face-to-face delivery. Instead, it was increasingly pursued through digital platforms, independent exploration and fragmented time. This shift suggests that demand for adult learning remained significant, but that its expression became increasingly mediated by new technological conditions and changing life circumstances.

However, the evidence from the three survey years also indicates that this recovery did not develop into a stable upward trend. As Fig. 1 shows, participation continued to rise between 2023 and 2024, but declined substantially in 2025. At the same time, the proportion of adults who had not participated in any learning since leaving full-time education increased. This pattern suggests that the post-pandemic growth of adult learning should be interpreted cautiously. It appears to have reflected a phase-specific recovery shaped by learning demand, digital access and wider social conditions, rather than a durable expansion of the lifelong learning system. It was also likely to have been influenced by changes in workplace training opportunities, household resources, learning costs and public support.

The findings indicate that digital and self-directed learning may reduce some temporal and spatial barriers to participation, but they are insufficient on their own to secure the long-term sustainability of adult learning. Stable participation depends on whether learning opportunities are accessible, costs remain affordable, employer investment in training is maintained, and public learning services are able to reach adults across different social groups (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2025). The post-pandemic expansion of adult learning in the UK should therefore be understood less as evidence of a fully developed lifelong learning system than as a transitional outcome produced by the interaction of individual learning needs, technological change and external social and economic pressures.

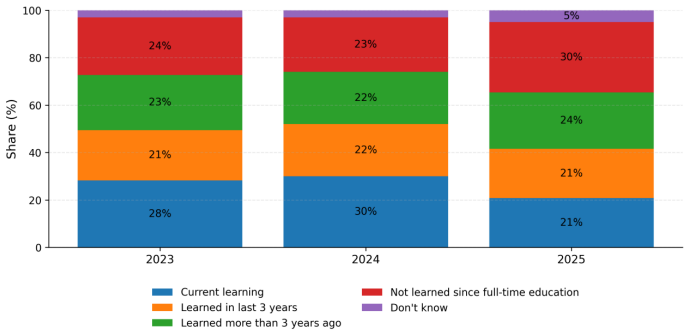

Fig. 1. Changes in adult learning participation in the UK.

Lifelong learning research frequently positions adult learning as a means of promoting educational equity and social mobility. From this perspective, adult learning may help individuals update knowledge and skills, compensate for disadvantages in initial education, expand employment opportunities and improve life chances (Kilpi-Jakonen et al., 2015). For adults who have experienced disadvantage in education or employment, learning opportunities in adulthood are expected to support re-entry into education, skill renewal and wider social participation. Yet the participation patterns observed in the UK suggest that this compensatory function is not automatically realised. Learning opportunities do not necessarily reach those who face the greatest barriers; instead, participation continues to be mediated by prior advantage and unequal access to supportive conditions.

Access to adult learning is therefore not simply a matter of individual motivation or willingness to learn. It is closely related to adults' previous educational experience, socioeconomic resources and access to organisational support. As Fig. 2 shows, participation is higher among younger adults, those from higher social classes and those who remained in full-time education for longer. By contrast, older adults, those from lower social classes and those who left education earlier are less likely to participate in continuing learning. Although adult learning may be formally open, such openness does not in itself produce equality of opportunity. Adults with stronger educational foundations, more secure economic resources and better access to information are more likely to identify, enter and sustain learning. For low-income adults, adults with lower qualifications, older adults and those at the margins of the labour market, opportunities may exist formally but remain difficult to convert into actual participation because of cost, time, confidence, information and support constraints.

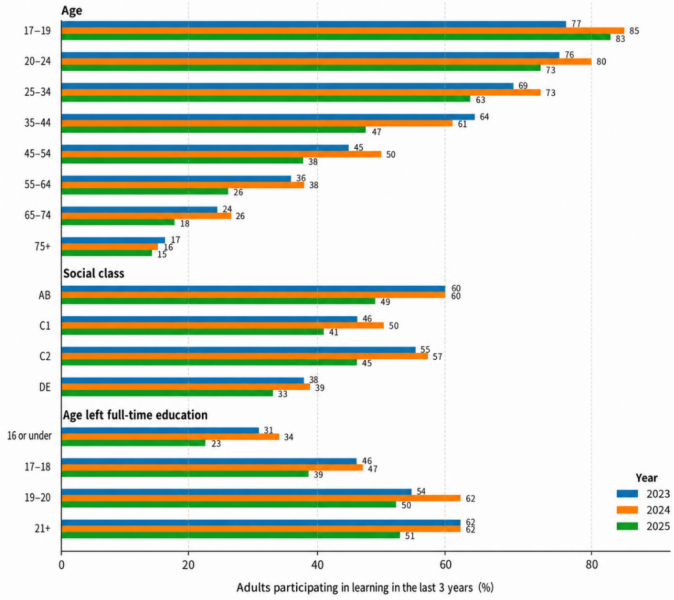

Fig. 2. Group differences in adult learning participation in the UK.

Note: Compiled from the 2023–2025 Adult Participation in Learning Survey reports published by the Learning and Work Institute. The data refer to the proportion of adults in each group who participated in learning during the previous three years. Social class AB refers to higher social classes, while DE refers to lower social classes. "Age at leaving full-time education" is used to reflect the influence of early educational experience on continued learning in adulthood.

Equity in adult learning therefore depends not only on increasing the supply of learning opportunities, but also on improving the conditions under which different groups can access, continue and benefit from learning. Without targeted public investment and support mechanisms for disadvantaged groups, adult learning opportunities are likely to follow existing patterns of educational advantage, economic resources and organisational support. In such circumstances, adult learning is unlikely to function as an automatic mechanism of social mobility (Kosyakova & Bills, 2021). The UK experience suggests that the compensatory potential of adult learning must be actively produced through policy design, financial support, community-based provision and employer responsibility, rather than assumed as a natural outcome of institutional openness.

4.2 Workplace learning and changing forms of adult learning

In a context of rapidly changing skill demands, occupational mobility, and industrial restructuring, adult learning is no longer confined to schools, communities, and training institutions (Fischer, 2000). It has become increasingly embedded in work organisations. For most adults, the workplace is not only a space in which skills are applied, but also a platform through which learning opportunities are generated, resources allocated, and career development supported (Kankaraš, 2021). Evidence from the UK suggests that continued engagement in learning is shaped not only by individual willingness, but also by labour market position, opportunities for job development, and employer-provided training arrangements.

Survey findings from the past three years, as shown in Fig. 3, indicate that groups more closely connected to the labour market are more likely to access learning opportunities. Full-time employees, part-time employees, and self-employed workers generally show relatively high levels of participation, whereas retired adults, adults unable to work, and those not working and not seeking work are more likely to remain outside the adult learning system. This difference is not merely a consequence of employment status; it reflects the organisational distribution of learning opportunities within the labour market. Employment relationships provide income, but they also facilitate access to job-related training, career development information, organisational resources, and learning incentives (Billett, 2001). Adult learning is therefore not driven entirely by autonomous individual choice (Boeren et al., 2010). To a considerable extent, it is developed through work organisations, job tasks, and employer training mechanisms.

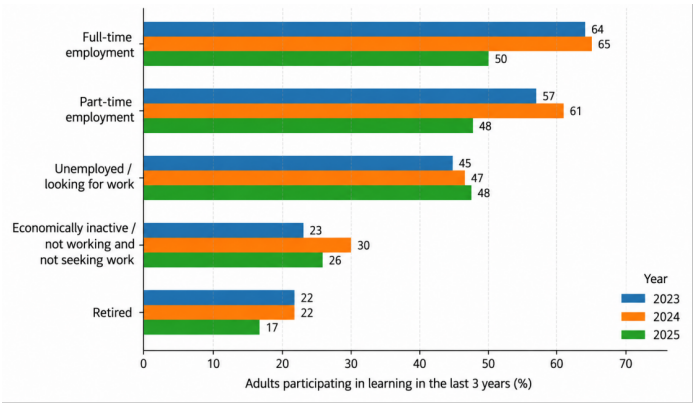

Fig. 3. Changes in adult learning participation among adults with different employment statuses in the UK.

Note: Compiled from the 2023–2025 Adult Participation in Learning Survey reports published by the Learning and Work Institute. The data refer to the proportion of adults in different employment-status groups who participated in learning during the previous three years, illustrating how adult learning opportunities are distributed across different labour market positions.

The decline in adult learning participation in 2025 further highlights the importance of workplace learning. The survey shows that reduced learning among employed adults contributed to the overall decline in participation and that the proportion of work-related learning also decreased. When the labour market cools, job mobility slows, or employer investment in training contracts, adult learning participation is directly affected. Although online, self-directed, and interest-oriented learning have expanded the forms of adult learning and enabled learning to enter everyday life more flexibly, these forms cannot fully replace the organisational support provided by the workplace (Scheidig, 2024). For many adults, sustained participation still depends on whether their jobs create de-

mand for skill renewal, whether employers provide training resources, whether work organisations offer time support, and whether learning outcomes translate into tangible benefits such as career advancement, income improvement, or job stability (Kyndt & Baert, 2013).

Adult learning should therefore not be understood simply as individual self-investment or personal capacity building. It is also shaped by labour market structures, employer responsibility, and public learning support systems (Wallis et al., 2022). If adult learning depends primarily on individuals' spontaneous investment, without stable organised provision and policy support, opportunities are likely to remain concentrated among those in stable employment and relatively favourable occupational positions (Kilpi-Jakonen et al., 2015). They are less likely to reach unemployed people, low-income workers, economically inactive adults, and other groups at the margins of the labour market. The UK experience suggests that building an adult learning system requires not only stimulating individual motivation, but also creating a learning support network across government, employers, educational institutions, and community organisations that covers adults in different employment statuses and occupational positions. Only then can adult learning function as a mechanism for career development and social mobility.

The practical forms of adult learning in the UK are also undergoing significant change as lifelong learning ideas deepen and digital technologies develop. Traditional adult education relied more heavily on stable institutional provision, such as further education colleges, adult education centres, and open university courses. In recent years, however, adult learning has moved beyond fixed places, curricula, and schedules, becoming more flexible, self-directed, and multi-situated (Fuller & Unwin, 2003). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the growth of online learning, self-directed learning, and workplace learning has meant that adult learning is no longer located only within educational institutions. It is increasingly embedded in work processes, family life, community participation, and digital spaces (Eraut, 2004).

In terms of learning sites, adult learning in the UK now involves a combination of work-related learning, independent learning, learning in formal educational institutions, and learning through community or voluntary organisations. The 2025 survey classified learning sites into these four categories (Phipps et al., 2025). Adults most commonly participated through work-related contexts, followed by independent learning, formal educational institutions, and community or voluntary organisations. This structure remained broadly stable compared with the previous two years. However, because overall participation declined in 2025, the actual number of people entering each type of learning setting also decreased. Adult learning in the UK is therefore supported by a diversified but uneven configuration of learning sites.

Within this transformation, self-directed learning has become particularly important. The 2024 survey showed that the proportions of adults learning independently and through community or voluntary organisations were both higher than before the pandemic (Nermond et al., 2024). At the same time, work-related learning increased, whereas learning in formal educational institutions remained below its 2019 level. This suggests a gradual shift away from a model dominated by institutional provision towards one that relies more heavily on learners' autonomous arrangements and multi-channel access to resources (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2021). Adult learners can choose more flexible content and modes according to career needs, life rhythms, and personal interests, drawing on workplaces, online platforms, community spaces, and home environments. Self-directed learning has become an important bridge between formal and informal learning, and between vocational and life-oriented learning.

Digital technologies have further expanded the space of adult learning. The 2025 survey showed that the overwhelming majority of adult learners used some form of technological tool in the learning process (Phipps et al., 2025). Online public videos, learning platforms, online assessments, search engines, video conferencing, and artificial intelligence have all become important media for adult learning. The proportion of adults using artificial intelligence in learning increased markedly compared with 2023, indicating that emerging technologies are entering adult learning practices at an accelerating pace. Digital technologies enable adult learning to transcend temporal and spatial constraints and make access to learning resources more open, diverse, and immediate. For adults with unstable working hours, heavy family responsibilities, or difficulty entering traditional educational institutions, digital learning provides a more flexible route to participation.

Flexibility, however, does not necessarily produce equality. Although self-directed and digital learning reduce some barriers to participation, they also place greater demands on learners' digital competence, self-management capacity, ability to select and evaluate information, and access to learning support (Scheerder et al., 2017). The 2025 survey also noted that the growth of independent learning is closely related to the digitalisation of learning provision. While this trend expands learning opportunities, it raises concerns about training quality, learning support, and the recognition of learning outcomes. Without guidance, resources, and institutional articulation, flexible learning may remain fragmented, spontaneous, and weakly supported, making it difficult to translate into sustained capability development and career opportunities (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2023).

The shift in learning modes therefore has a dual significance. On the one hand, self-directed and digital learning expand opportunities for participation and allow learning to better accommodate the changing rhythms of adults' work and lives. On the other hand, this shift requires adult learning systems to move beyond course provision towards learning support, resource integration, quality assurance, and recognition of outcomes. Flexibilisation is not a substitute for institutional provision; rather, it creates new demands for such provision. Establishing a stable, accessible, and high-quality support system while respecting adult learners' autonomy has become a central issue for the sustainable development of adult learning in the UK.

4.3 Learning motivations and the diversified value of adult learning

Motivation provides an important lens through which to understand adult learning. Unlike the relatively stable institutional arrangements of school education, adult learning takes place across multiple contexts, including job transitions, skill renewal, family responsibilities, personal interests, and social participation. Its motivations are therefore often composite rather than singular. The UK Adult Participation in Learning Survey shows that work and career development remain important reasons for participation (Phipps et al., 2025). However, adult learning no longer revolves solely around employability. Life-related needs, including personal growth, interest fulfilment, health and well-being, and social interaction, also shape adults' learning choices.

Survey findings from the past three years indicate that career development remains an important driver of adult learning in the UK. In the face of technological change, job restructuring, and labour market uncertainty, adults need to update knowledge and skills, adapt to work requirements, and maintain occupational competitiveness. The 2025 survey showed that work- or career-related reasons remained the main motivation for participation, but their proportion had fallen significantly compared with the pre-pandemic period (Phipps et al., 2025). By contrast, learning for leisure or personal interest increased markedly after the pandemic and has remained relatively stable. The report notes that the proportion of adults learning for leisure or personal interest was 20% in 2019, rose to 41% in 2021, and reached 43% in both 2024 and 2025. This shift indicates that although adult learning in the UK remains closely connected to the labour market, its motivational structure is no longer dominated by instrumental career-oriented goals.

These changing motivations reflect a broader shift from a narrowly employment-oriented model towards one that gives greater weight to both career and life development. For adults at particular career stages, learning remains a means of improving work-related competence, obtaining qualifications, seeking occupational transitions, and increasing income. For other groups, learning may also support interest development, self-confidence, physical and mental well-being, and social connection. In the 2025 survey, adult learners selected motivations related to current work, qualification acquisition, and career change, but they also frequently mentioned reasons such as 'developing myself', 'enjoying learning', 'improving confidence', and 'improving health and well-being' (Phipps et al., 2025). Adult learning has therefore moved beyond a narrow understanding of human capital investment and has become a means through which individuals construct life meaning, sustain social participation, and improve quality of life.

This change in motivational structure is closely connected to wider social transformations in the post-pandemic period. Labour market uncertainty has intensified adults' need to manage occupational risk through learning, making skill renewal and career transition important drivers of participation. At the same time, greater attention to quality of life, mental health, social connection, and personal interests has extended adult learning more deeply into the lifeworld (Hall et al., 2023).

The increasing complexity of learning motivations has important institutional implications. If adult learning systems continue to be designed primarily around vocational skills training and qualification acquisition, they will struggle to respond to adults' increasingly diverse learning needs (Broek et al., 2023). Future provision should continue to support skill renewal and career development, but it should also recognise the value of interest-based learning, community learning, health and well-being learning, and learning for social participation. Only by incorporating both career development and life development into adult learning policies and services can lifelong learning move beyond an instrumental arrangement for improving employability and become an institutional practice that supports holistic development and social inclusion.

The value orientation of adult learning is therefore central to understanding the functions of a lifelong learning system. Traditionally, adult learning has often been placed within the framework of employability enhancement and skill renewal, emphasising the role of education and training in improving labour productivity, strengthening occupational competitiveness, and adapting to labour market change (James & Thériault, 2020). Yet with population ageing, occupational mobility, and changing lifestyles in the post-pandemic period, adult learning is moving beyond a singular logic of skills training (Merriam & Kee, 2014). It is increasingly becoming a mechanism for supporting career development, physical and mental health, social interaction, and community integration (Feinstein & Hammond, 2004).

The classification of learning benefits in the Adult Participation in Learning Survey reflects this broader value orientation (Phipps et al., 2025). The survey does not assess adult learning solely through employment and income outcomes. Instead, it categorises benefits across work, learning and knowledge, health and well-being, and social and community life. Although work-related benefits remain the most commonly reported, learners also identify enhanced interest in learning, expanded knowledge, improved health and well-being, and increased social interaction. The effects of adult learning therefore extend beyond occupational skills to include quality of life and capacity for social participation.

In the work domain, adult learning continues to perform a clear career development function. It can help learners improve job-related skills, strengthen confidence at work, enhance work quality, and create conditions for qualification acquisition, occupational transition, and career advancement. For adults facing technological change and job restructuring, learning remains an important pathway for managing occupational risk, maintaining employability, and achieving career mobility. Beyond vocational benefits, adults also gain non-vocational benefits, including knowledge expansion, improved health, and enhanced self-confidence. The 2025 survey further shows that many learners motivated by leisure or personal development also reported work-related benefits, while learners whose main motivation was work-related likewise reported positive personal outcomes (Phipps et al., 2025).

This overlap indicates that adult learning cannot be divided

neatly into 'vocational' and 'non-vocational' domains. Rather, learning often generates spillover effects across work, life, and social participation. An activity initially aimed at improving job-related competence may also enhance self-confidence, social connection, and a sense of control over life. Conversely, learning driven by interest or personal development may strengthen communication skills, collaborative capacity, and occupational adaptability. The value of adult learning is therefore not oriented one-dimensionally towards economic return; it produces integrated effects across individual capabilities, psychological states, social relationships, and quality of life.

This shift has important implications for adult learning policy in the UK. If adult learning is understood merely as a subsidiary instrument of employment or skills policy, its value is narrowed to qualification acquisition, job adaptation, and income improvement. Recent survey findings show that adult learning can also support health and well-being, promote social inclusion, reduce loneliness, and enrich everyday life. The 2025 report further emphasises that lifelong learning should not only be embedded in employment and skills policy, but also form part of public policies related to health, housing, and employment services (Phipps et al., 2025). Adult learning is therefore moving from a narrow capability-enhancement mechanism towards a broader life-support mechanism.

The multidimensional value of adult learning suggests that the functional positioning of lifelong learning systems should be reconsidered. Adult learning should serve skill renewal in the labour market, but it should also respond to adults' needs for life adaptation, psychological support, social interaction, and community participation. Incorporating career development, personal growth, and social inclusion into a shared policy vision would enable adult learning to move beyond a narrow training orientation and become an institutional arrangement for lifelong development and an inclusive society.

4.4 Structural Challenges for Sustainable and Inclusive Adult Learning

Although adult learning in the UK has shown several positive developments in the post-pandemic period, including more flexible modes of participation, more diverse motivations and a broader understanding of learning benefits, its sustainable development remains constrained by significant structural challenges. Recent survey evidence suggests that the expansion of digital and self-directed learning has not automatically led to universal participation, nor has increased learning demand been matched by stable institutional support. Instead, inequalities in access, weaknesses in support systems and disparities in digital capability remain prominent. These challenges affect not only whether adults are able to enter learning, but also whether participation can be sustained and translated into meaningful personal, social and economic outcomes.

The inclusiveness of adult learning depends not only on the existence of learning resources, but also on whether different groups are able to access and use them under equitable conditions. Although adult learning in the UK is formally open to adults across the life course, opportunities for participation continue to be shaped by social class, prior educational experience, income, employment status and regional conditions. Adults with stronger educational foundations, stable employment and higher incomes are generally better positioned to identify, access and sustain learning opportunities. By contrast, low-income adults, adults with lower levels of education, older adults, disabled people and those at the margins of the labour market may encounter learning opportunities in formal terms while remaining unable to convert them into actual participation because of financial pressures, limited information, lack of confidence and insufficient support.

These inequalities are cumulative rather than isolated. Early educational experience, employment status and socioeconomic conditions interact to shape adults' capacity to enter and remain within the learning system. Adults who left school earlier may have less experience of continuing learning and lower confidence in returning to education. Low-income adults are more likely to face learning costs and living pressures, while those outside stable employment have fewer opportunities to access employer-provided training. The 2025 survey indicates that age, social class, income and age at leaving full-time education remain important factors associated with participation, demonstrating that inequalities in learning opportunities persist (Phipps et al., 2025).

The main challenge facing adult learning in the UK is therefore not only the fluctuation of the overall participation rate, but also the capacity of the system to reach adults who are structurally disadvantaged. Without targeted forms of public support, learning opportunities tend to reproduce existing lines of educational advantage, economic resources and organisational support. Adult learning then struggles to fulfil its expected functions of compensating for early educational disadvantage, supporting social mobility and enhancing social inclusion. Building a stronger lifelong learning system consequently requires a shift from formal openness towards substantive accessibility, in which participation is supported by practical, financial, informational and institutional conditions.

Unlike school education, which is usually organised through relatively continuous and institutionalised pathways, adult learning is embedded in contexts where work, family responsibilities and everyday life intersect. Whether adults can participate and remain engaged in learning depends not only on motivation, but also on time arrangements, financial costs, caring responsibilities, transport conditions, course availability and access to information and guidance (Tuckett & Field, 2016). The Adult Participation in Learning Survey shows that cost pressures, work and time pressures and uncertainty about returns are important barriers to participation (Phipps et al., 2025). In a context of rising living costs, learning expenses become particularly salient. Participation should therefore be understood not simply as an individual choice, but as an outcome shaped by living conditions and external support environments.

At a deeper level, persistent barriers point to weaknesses in the adult learning support system. The presence of learning opportunities does not necessarily mean that adults can enter learning smoothly or remain engaged over time. If courses are inflexible, costs unaffordable, information fragmented,

guidance limited and caring support absent, responsibility for learning is shifted disproportionately onto individuals (Department for Education, 2018). For low-income adults, adults in insecure employment, adults with heavy caring responsibilities and groups at the margins of the labour market, the accumulation of time, financial and opportunity costs can significantly reduce the likelihood of sustained participation (Wallis et al., 2022). The development of adult learning therefore depends not only on the volume of provision, but also on whether support systems respond to adults' real-life circumstances.

Changes in public investment and employer responsibility further affect the stability of adult learning support. The recent decline in participation appears to be closely associated with reduced learning among employed adults and a contraction of workplace learning opportunities. At the same time, long-term reductions in adult skills budgets and insufficient employer investment have made adult learning increasingly dependent on individual self-investment and fragmented resources. If public funding is inadequate, employer responsibility is weakened and local or community learning services remain limited, adult learning is unlikely to provide a stable institutional supply capable of supporting adults across different social groups and employment situations.

The sustainable development of adult learning in the UK therefore requires more than encouraging adults to learn. It requires the creation of practical conditions that make participation possible and worthwhile. Policy needs to move beyond a narrow emphasis on individual responsibility and strengthen the shared contribution of public finance, employer training, local institutions and community organisations. A comprehensive support system would include access to learning information, financial assistance, flexible scheduling, learning guidance, process-based support and recognition of learning outcomes. Such a system could help adult learning move from individualised and fragmented self-responsibility towards more stable and inclusive institutional support.

Digital technologies have created important opportunities for transforming adult learning. Online courses, video platforms, search engines, remote conferencing and artificial intelligence tools have reduced some of the temporal, spatial and place-based constraints of traditional adult education, enabling adults to access resources more flexibly (Osborne, 2024). For learners with unstable working hours, geographically dispersed places of residence, heavy family responsibilities or difficulty entering traditional institutions, digital learning may expand possibilities for participation. Digital technologies are therefore not merely tools for delivering learning resources; they are reshaping the organisation, timing and location of adult learning (Shi & Lin, 2021).

Nevertheless, the wider use of digital technologies does not automatically equalise learning opportunities. Whether technology becomes a meaningful learning opportunity depends on learners' access to devices and networks, digital skills, capacity to select and evaluate information and confidence in online learning (Storey & Wagner, 2024). For older adults, adults with lower levels of education, low-income groups and people at the margins of the labour market, digital learning may create new channels of access while also producing new thresholds for participation (Scheidig, 2024). Recent UK surveys indicate clear differences by age and social class in the use of digital technologies for learning. Some adults may be able to use basic digital tools in everyday life but still lack confidence in applying them in learning and work-related contexts. The central issue is therefore not simply whether resources are available online, but whether learners have the practical capacity and support required to use them effectively.

Digital learning also raises questions about quality, continuity and the translation of learning into recognised outcomes. Online, self-directed and platform-based learning can increase convenience, but without guidance, interaction, feedback and recognition, learning activities may become fragmented, weakly supported and difficult to sustain (Scheerder et al., 2017). As artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies enter adult learning contexts, differences in digital capability may become more consequential. Adults with stronger educational foundations, better information access and more organisational support are more likely to use new technologies to improve learning efficiency. Those with weaker digital capabilities may face higher thresholds in increasingly digitalised learning environments. Existing educational inequalities may therefore be reproduced in new technological forms.

The core challenge in the digital transformation of adult learning is therefore not simply how to expand the use of technology, but how to ensure that digital technologies contribute to inclusive learning. Adult learning systems need to expand digital resources while also providing disadvantaged groups with digital skills training, platform-use guidance, learning support and mechanisms for recognising learning outcomes. Only when technological access is integrated with institutional support, guidance and quality assurance can digital learning become an effective means of widening participation rather than a mechanism through which new forms of exclusion are produced.

5. Conclusion and implications

This study has examined adult learning in the UK through the 2023-2025 Adult Participation in Learning Survey, focusing on participation trends, changing learning practices and structural challenges. The analysis indicates that participation recovered after the pandemic but did not develop into a stable upward trajectory. Participation remained unevenly distributed by age, social class, prior educational experience and employment status, suggesting that adult learning continues to be shaped by existing social and labour market inequalities. At the same time, learning practices have become more flexible, self-directed and digitally mediated, while motivations and perceived benefits have become more diverse, extending from skills enhancement and employability to well-being, social connection and wider participation in everyday and community life.

The UK case demonstrates that expanding learning resources does not automatically produce inclusive lifelong learning. Adult learning depends on the practical conditions under which people can access, sustain, and benefit from

learning. Cost, time, information, employer support, local provision, digital capability, and recognition of learning outcomes all influence whether adult learning becomes a realistic opportunity rather than a formal right. Adult learning policy therefore needs to move beyond a narrow emphasis on individual responsibility and treat lifelong learning as a public and social support system.

For developing countries, transition economies, and countries seeking to strengthen lifelong learning systems, several implications follow. First, policy should prioritise equity and accessibility by directing financial support, guidance, flexible provision, and local services towards adults who face the greatest barriers. Second, adult learning systems should be built through collaboration among government, employers, educational institutions, community organisations, and digital platforms, so that learning is connected with work, family life, and community participation. Third, digital transformation should be accompanied by digital skills support, learning guidance, quality assurance, and recognition mechanisms; otherwise online learning may deepen rather than reduce inequalities. Finally, adult learning should be understood not only as a tool for skills training and employability, but also as an institutional means of supporting health, confidence, social inclusion, civic participation, and lifelong development.

These implications are relevant to China, but they are not limited to China. They are also important for countries facing population ageing, labour market restructuring, uneven educational foundations, and rapid digital transformation. Future research could further compare adult learning participation across countries and examine how different policy regimes, employer practices, and digital support systems affect the capacity of adult learning to promote both economic adaptation and social inclusion.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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