

# Lifelong Learning in the COVID-19 Crisis: Where Next?

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Source: [Inside Government](#)



Lifelong learning has had a good crisis – far better than we might have expected. The UK’s adult skills system entered lockdown weakened by years of cuts. Public spending on adult education and apprenticeships and other work-based learning for adults fell by 37 per cent in real terms between 2009/10 and 2018/19. [The Learning and Work Institute’s latest survey](#) of adult learning recorded the lowest level of participation since the survey began in 1996; the Institute estimates that nearly four million learners had been lost since 2010.

## Booming in Lockdown

Yet adult learning is booming, with many people using the lockdown to learn new skills. [FutureLearn](#), the UK’s largest online course platform, reports that over a million people have signed up since March. Many traditional providers have also responded; in Devon, for example, the council’s adult education service offers more than 100 online courses. Colleges report that the overwhelming majority of their students have been able to continue their studies online. In Northern Ireland, the government has set aside £1.7 million to encourage workers impacted by coronavirus to study one of the almost ninety short online courses that local colleges and universities have started offering.

## Policy Lagging Behind

So far, though, education policy has struggled to keep up. Before the pandemic, there were signs that some politicians at least recognised that lifelong learning had been neglected. In 2018, the Department for Education launched the [National Retraining Scheme](#) (NRS), aimed

at people in England whose jobs are most at risk of automation and who have not engaged actively in learning for some time. And in 2019, both the UK government and devolved administrations announced plans for investment in further and continuing education.

### **Calls to Reboot Lifelong Learning**

Since then, there has been a plethora of reports urging government to turn its attention back to adult learning. Even before the pandemic, the CBI predicted that 9 in every 10 workers would need to acquire new skills to meet the challenges of automation and environmental change. More recently the CBI urged government to create a future skills fund to support growth in areas such as digital and low-carbon enterprises. The centre-right Centre for Social Justice has called on government to 'reboot our lifelong learning offer' to help equip workers and communities to recover from the damage inflicted by the coronavirus.

### **Skills for those on Furlough**

Perhaps employers who have benefited from taxpayer support should have been asked in exchange to support upskilling for workers on furlough. Those with low skills and few qualifications will find it hardest to move into sustainable jobs, especially if they have been out of employment for any time. While many workers are enrolling on online courses, we still need to engage those who are unable to benefit fully from online – and soon blended – learning. And we know that those with the weakest essential skills – literacy, numeracy, basic digital capabilities – are least well placed to support their children's learning when schools have to reduce their teaching.

### **Moving Forward**

I wouldn't want to be too critical – the government moved quickly and decisively to subsidise employment and protect jobs, on an unprecedented scale. Providers, and many learners, have adapted quickly to the demands of digital online learning. But our lifelong learning system is far from world class; it has suffered years of underinvestment, and it urgently needs strengthening as we move into a new and unpredictable economic world.

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You can join Inside Government in November to hear from the **Department for Education**, the **CBI** and the **Social Mobility Commission** about the next steps for lifelong learning after the Covid-19 pandemic.

Source: [Inside Government](#)