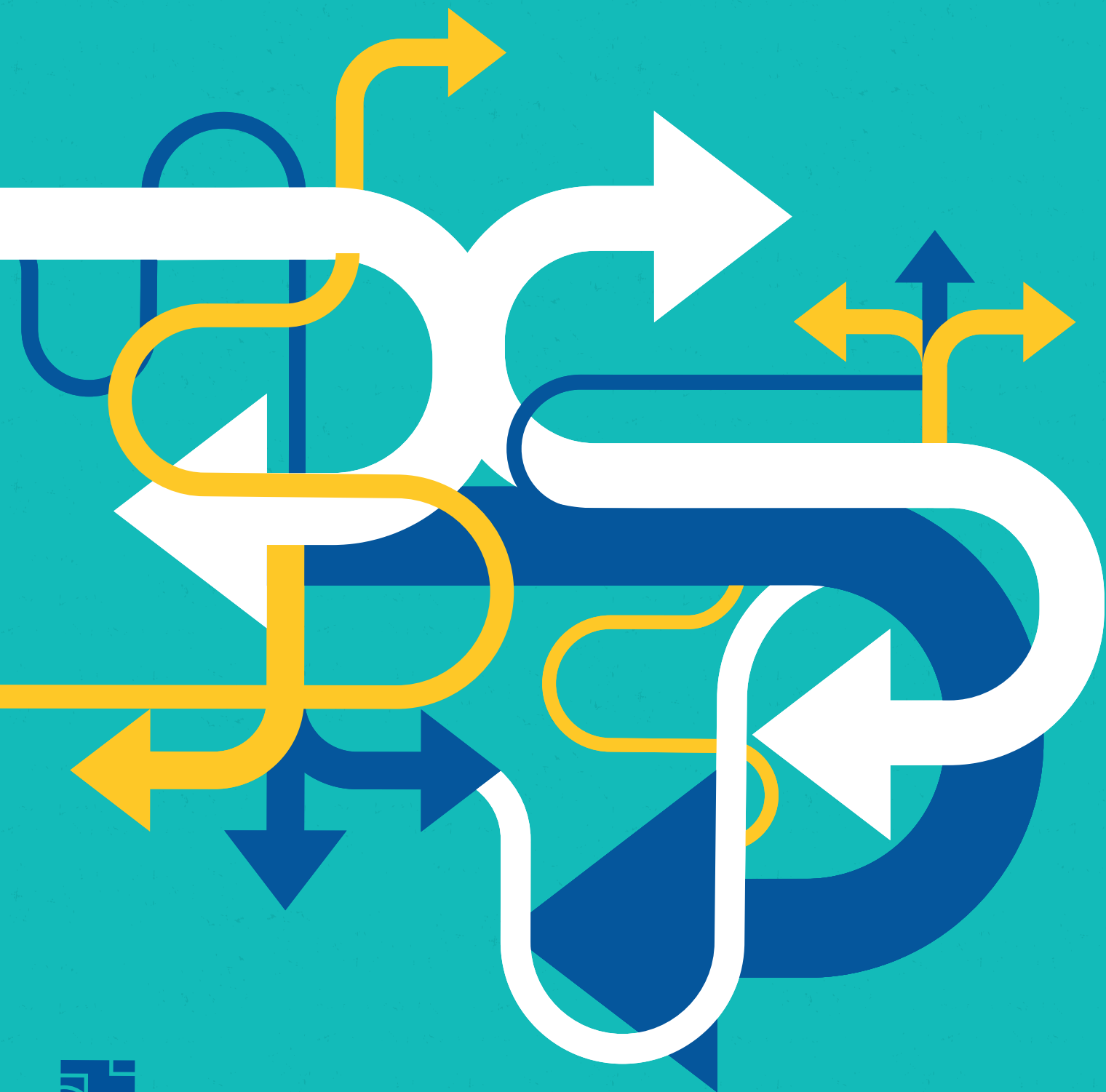


LOST LEARNERS



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Between the academic years 2010–11 and 2016–17, the number of people studying part-time at UK universities fell by 37%, with those students studying undergraduate courses part time falling by 47%. Prior research suggests that in addition to changes to the undergraduate funding system in England, factors such as the economic downturn have contributed to the reduction in the number of students able to self-fund part-time study, and a reduction in the number of employers willing to support employees through part-time study over the period in question (Student Funding Panel, 2015).

This report explores the socio-economic profile of the prospective students who have considered, but not pursued, part-time higher education since 2010. They are referred to as ‘lost learners’ in this report. They were identified through an online survey conducted across the UK, with a sample of 835 adults, undertaken for Universities UK (UUK) by Portland Communications. The research explored their reasons and motivations for considering part-time study, the reasons why they didn’t end up completing a higher education course, and the impact this has had on their lives.

The findings show that the cost of tuition fees was the most frequently cited reason for not starting part-time study. The lack of flexibility around life commitments and work during study is also a significant reason for lost learners not starting part-time higher education, and the most common reason for dropping out of study. The research also uncovered the emotional impact as well as the practical implications on life progression since not taking up part-time higher education. The data revealed that 50% of lost learners were ‘somewhat disappointed’ that they did not take up part-time study, 76% had not improved their job position and 67% did not increase their household income.

The aim of the study was to inform the UUK project on flexible learning, which examines the extent to which the UK’s productivity can be improved through greater flexible learning opportunities in higher education. UUK’s project aims to feed into the wider government review of the post-18 education and funding system.

KEY FINDINGS

REASONS FOR CONSIDERING PART-TIME HIGHER EDUCATION

- When considering studying part-time higher education, lost learners were most interested in the subjects of health, public services and care, and business, administration, finance and law, at undergraduate level.
- Lost learners were motivated to attend part-time higher education based on their own intentions rather than other, external work-related influences – around half (49%) considered studying for their own personal development, compared with 5% who were prompted by an employer.

REASONS FOR NOT ENROLLING IN PART-TIME HIGHER EDUCATION

- Financial concerns were cited frequently as reasons why lost learners chose not to take up part-time higher education. The cost of tuition fees was highlighted by 44% of respondents and the cost of living by 42%. This emphasis on financial considerations echoes previous research in the field.
- After financial reasons, the next most common reason given for not taking up part-time higher education was that studying would not fit in with their lives (35%), because the course would not have fitted around either their personal life or their employment situation.
- For ‘career changers’ and ‘career developers’,¹ the lack of flexibility from their employer was another reason respondents gave for not taking up part-time higher education, with 13% saying they couldn’t find the time to juggle work and study.
- When it came to the influence that the 2012 reforms have had on part-time higher education, 43% said they would have attended if one or more of the reforms had not happened.
- The main factors that would encourage lost learners to study in the future included cheaper tuition fees (59%) and more flexible course options to fit study around other commitments (44%). Flexibility of course options was more likely to encourage future study for career changers (50%) and less important for ‘self-improvers’ (37%).

¹ These terms (and ‘self-improvers’) are explained in the full body of the report.

EMOTIONAL IMPACT

- 45% of lost learners feel dissatisfied with their lives now, and 64% suggested that their life fulfilment would have been higher had they pursued a part-time higher education course.
- 74% admit they would have now held better qualifications, and 61% admit that they would have a greater likelihood of finding a better job reflecting their perceptions of the value of university qualifications.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

- The majority of respondents reported that they had not improved their careers. Almost all (91%) had remained in their current employment status and three-quarters (76%) in their current job.
- 9% reported that they had gone further down the job ladder, suggesting that when they moved jobs, they had been unable to enter with the same job position. A quarter of respondents had improved their household income by moving up one income bracket.

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

Earlier this year, UUK launched a study to examine the characteristics of ‘lost part-time learners’ – those potential learners who had considered but did not complete a part-time higher education course – since 2010. The aim of the study was to inform UUK’s project on flexible learning, examining the extent to which the UK’s productivity can be improved through more flexible learning opportunities in higher education. UUK’s project aims to feed into the wider government review of the post-18 education and funding system in England.

Portland Communications conducted a detailed examination of lost learners’ perspectives on their situation. This report summarises a quantitative survey of lost learners who considered, but did not end up completing, a part-time higher education course from the academic year 2010–11 onwards. The study aimed to identify lost learners among the general population – their characteristics and motivations for considering study – and to understand what impact missing out on part-time higher education has had on their lives.

METHODOLOGY

The quantitative research involved an online survey that ran from 1 May to 8 May 2018, consisting of 24 closed questions. As there was no existing demographic profile of ‘lost learners’ prior to this study, the survey was distributed to a large, nationally representative population. Respondents were screened based on a set of criteria, with 24% meeting the sample definition, and leaving a nationally representative sample of 835 UK adults that could be considered as lost learners, who responded to the remaining questions.

IDENTIFYING THE SAMPLE OF LOST LEARNERS

Responses to a set of four screening questions (see below) were used to identify the sample of 835 lost learners, from a large, nationally representative population, who then participated in the detailed survey. Research from the Department for Education (DfE) shows that there are four stages that adult learners take in deciding whether to study; Pre-contemplation, Contemplation, Determination and Maintenance (DfE, 2018a). The screener questions focus largely on the second of these where learners are actively considering study, and the latter two where some action may be taken even though study is not completed.

Since 2010, have you at any point considered studying a part-time higher education course?

Those responding 'no' were excluded from the survey. A 'part-time higher education course' was defined as spreading the study for a full-time Bachelor's degree, Higher National Diploma (HND) or Higher National Certificate (HNC), Foundation degree or Master's degree over a longer period to allow students to fit study around other life commitments such as work or family.²

When you were considering studying a part-time higher education course in the UK, which if any of the following did you do?

For this question, respondents were given the following range of activities, with those responding 'none of the above' subsequently excluded from the survey:

- spoke to an expert
- visited campus
- reviewed different courses online
- attended a careers fair
- requested a course prospectus
- spoke to an employer about higher education
- applied for a course but didn't pursue it further

How serious were you about starting a part-time higher education course in the UK?

Those indicating that they were 'really serious' or 'somewhat serious' were included in the sample, and those indicating that they were not serious were excluded.

Since 2010, have you, at any point, enrolled in and/or started a part-time higher education course in the UK?

Those who indicated that they had completed or were still studying on a higher education course were screened out and excluded from the sample.

In screening out respondents to obtain the lost learner population, it was found that of those who indicated that they were considering part-time study:

- 55% did not enrol
- 21% applied to a course but didn't pursue it further
- 12% applied but dropped out of a part-time course
- 10% began an online course that didn't lead to a higher education qualification (eg, Coursera, MOOC)
- 3% began, but dropped out from, a full-time Bachelor's degree, HND or HNC, Foundation degree or Master's degree

² Further information was provided to note that this did not include flexible full-time learning where the curriculum, location and speed of learning are personalised to the student, or online courses or in-house training at work not leading to a higher education qualification.

CHAPTER 1

UNDERSTANDING LOST LEARNERS

UNDERSTANDING LOST LEARNERS

1.1 DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF LOST LEARNERS

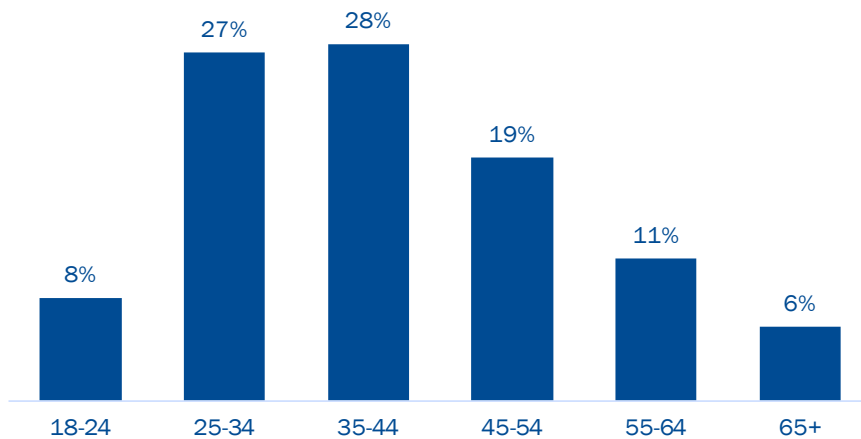
The 835 UK-based adults that were identified as lost learners were asked a set of questions to determine their demographic characteristics.

Most lost learners are currently aged 25–44 (55%), evenly split between the 25–34 and 35–44 age groups (Figure 1), with a slightly higher proportion of males (52%, Figure 2).

Compared with the general UK population, lost learners had a higher proportion of individuals aged 25–44, a smaller proportion of those aged 55+ and smaller proportion of females (Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2018a).

FIGURE 1

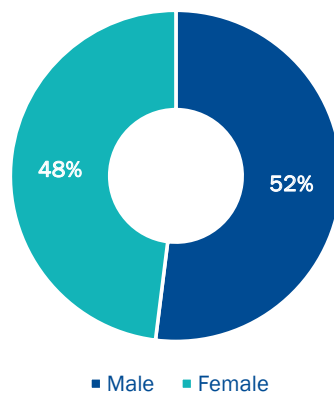
Current age of lost learner sample



Q. What age are you now? Base: 835

FIGURE 2

Gender of lost learner sample

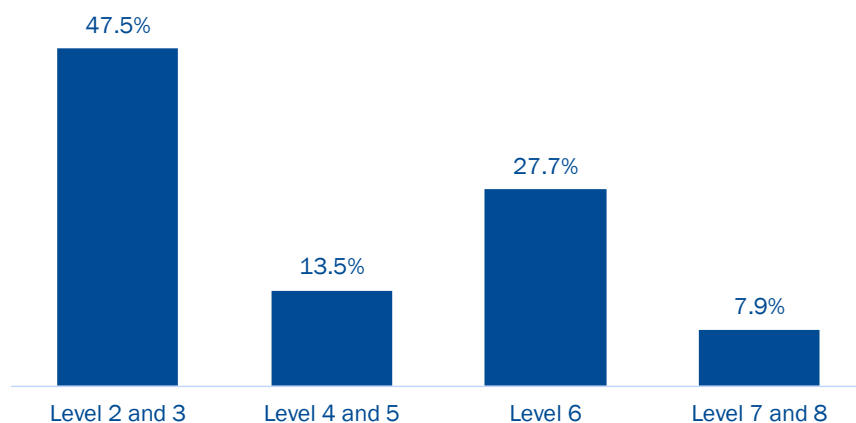


Q. What is your gender? Base: 835

Looking at educational and employment characteristics, the highest qualification currently held by lost learners was most likely to be at level 2 or level 3 (GCSE or A-level respectively), with 36% holding a degree or higher (Figure 3). This is broadly equivalent to the wider UK population.

FIGURE 3

Highest qualification currently held by lost learners

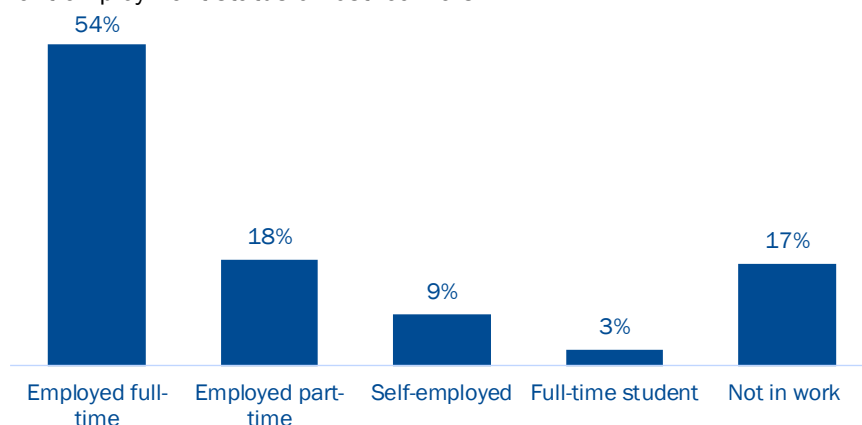


Q. What is your highest educational qualification right now? Base: 835

Lost learners were most likely to currently be in full-time employment (54%), with 18% employed part-time and 17% not in work or in retirement (Figure 4).

FIGURE 4

Current employment status of lost learners

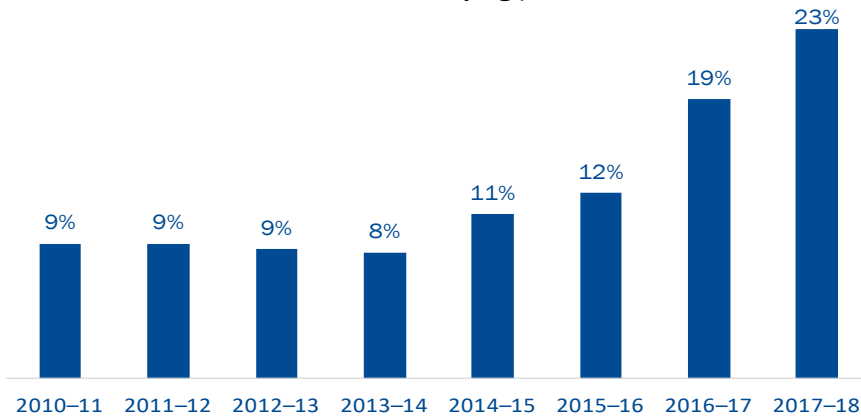


Q. What is your current employment status? Base: 835

In the survey, respondents were asked to state the year they considered studying a part-time higher education course. As considering applying to a higher education course is an ongoing process rather than a single moment in time, and respondents' memories when responding to retrospective questions are imperfect, we see answers here are skewed to the two most recent academic years (Figure 5).

FIGURE 5

Year that lost learners considered studying part-time



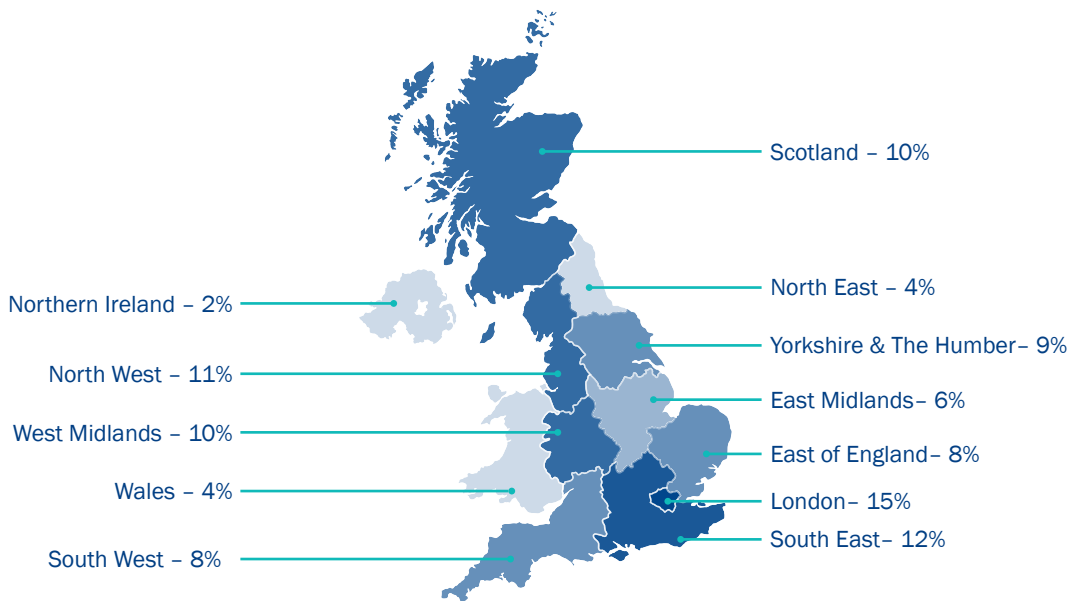
Q. Which academic year/years were you considering studying your part-time higher education course in the UK? Base: 835

The geographical distribution of the lost learner sample is broadly in line with that of the wide UK population (Figure 3)³, with 92% on average of lost learners considering part-time study in the same region in which they currently live (Tables 1a and 1b).

As the methodology used does not allow for large enough sample sizes to examine differences across the UK’s nations and regions, further analysis in this report covers the UK as a whole. The research aims to provide a representative national picture of the lost learner population across the UK, and the responses to questions concerning the motivation for study and the impact of missing out are applicable to the UK as a whole. However, given the differences in student funding policies across the devolved administrations, it can be assumed that some conclusions in relation to the 2012 reforms in relation to the 2012 reforms in England may not apply in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

FIGURE 6

Geographical distribution of regions in which lost learners currently live



³At a 95% confidence level, the confidence interval of the data drawn from this sample is 1.2%–3.5%.

Tables 1a and 1b

Comparison of geographical distribution of UK adult population and lost learner sample (by region and by country)

Table 1a

| BY REGION | UK ADULT POPULATION | LOST LEARNERS |
|--------------------------|---------------------|---------------|
| North East | 4% | 4% |
| North West | 11% | 10% |
| Yorkshire and the Humber | 8% | 9% |
| East Midlands | 7% | 6% |
| West Midlands | 9% | 10% |
| East of England | 9% | 8% |
| London | 13% | 15% |
| South East | 14% | 12% |
| South West | 8% | 8% |

Table 1b

| BY COUNTRY | UK ADULT POPULATION | LOST LEARNERS |
|------------------|---------------------|---------------|
| Northern Ireland | 3% | 2% |
| Scotland | 8% | 10% |
| Wales | 5% | 4% |

Q. In which of the following areas do you live now? Base: 835

1.2 SEGMENTS

Analysis of the data showed that the lost learner population is characterised by differences in motivation when considering part-time higher education study.

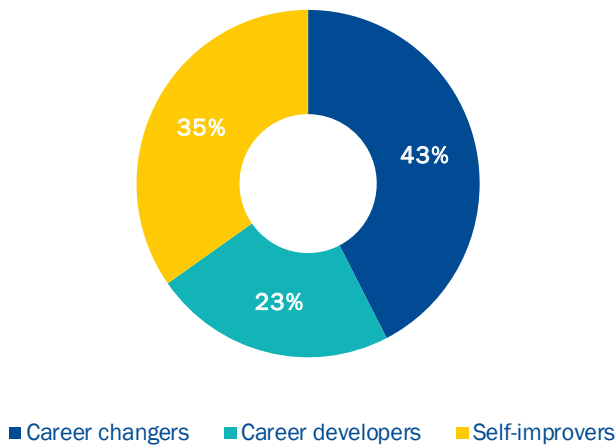
Based on responses to the question, ‘What were the main reasons for considering studying a part-time higher education course?’, groups were identified in relation to a career change (where individuals had responded ‘To change my career’, ‘To gain entry into a career’), career development (‘To enhance my existing career’, ‘Prompted by employer’) and motivations for self-improvement unrelated to career (‘To continue/develop my education’, ‘Personal development’ and ‘Interest in subject area’).

Analysis of these groups showed that taking up a course was not motivated by one single objective. In fact, many lost learners showed a combination of motivating factors. For example, while nearly three-quarters of the sample gave non-career-related reasons for higher education (such as interest in the subject), one in four of them also responded that they were looking to develop their careers. Further analysis was used to create three distinct, non-overlapping segments⁴ (Figure 7):

⁴Where respondents indicated motivating factors across more than one group, factors related to a new career were given higher priority, followed by developing within current career and finally those related to self-improvement.

- **Career changers** formed the largest group in the sample, accounting for 43% of respondents. This cohort comprises lost learners who wanted to start part-time higher education to change their career, rather than wanting to progress in their current career.
- **Career developers** accounted for 23% of the sample. They value the importance of part-time higher education for career progression reasons and are less interested in studying for personal enrichment purposes or a career change.
- **Self-improvers** accounted for 35% of the total sample. They sought out a part-time higher education course for personal development, subject interest or development of education and were motivated by non-career-related reasons.

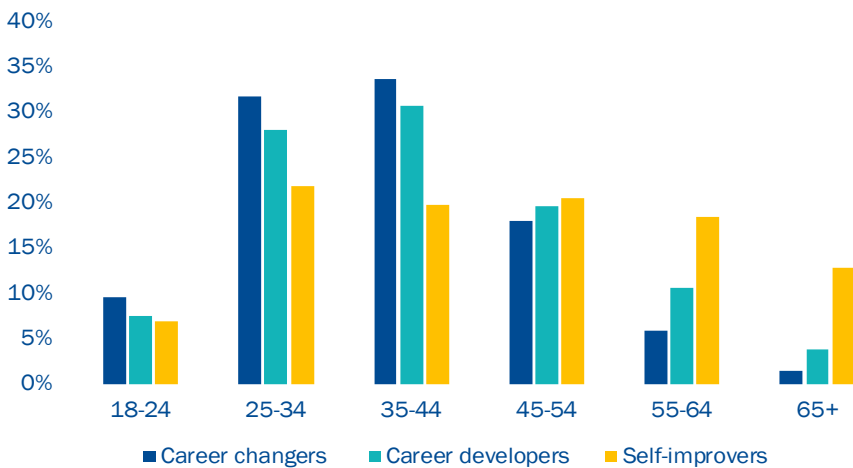
FIGURE 7
Lost learner segments



Base: 835. Career changers (357), Career developers (189), Self-improvers (289)

The age distribution across segments differed, with those aged 55 and over accounting for just under a third of the self-improvers, compared with 14% of career developers and 7% of career changers. In general, career changers tended to be younger, followed by career developers (Figure 8).

FIGURE 8
Lost learner segments, by age when responding to survey



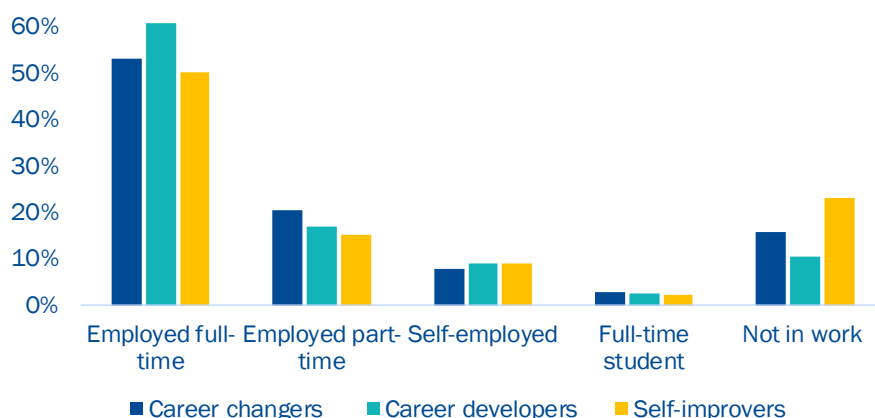
In terms of the highest qualification currently held, career developers tended to be the highest qualified, with 40% holding a qualification at level 6 or above⁵ compared with 33% of career changers and 36% of self-improvers. Career changers were the most likely to have a qualification at level 2 or level 3 (GCSE and A-level respectively) as their highest qualification (49%) (Figure 9).

FIGURE 9
Highest qualification currently held, by segment



Career developers were most likely to be in full-time employment (61%) and self-improvers were most likely to not be in work (23%), reflecting the older age profile of this group and increased likelihood that they may be in retirement (Figure 10).

FIGURE 10
Current employment status by segment



Further analysis shows that career developers were most likely to currently have a household income of over £35,000 a year, with 41% in this group, compared with 30% of career changers and 37% of self-improvers. Career changers had the highest proportion earning below £25,000 a year (47%).

Career changers were more likely to currently be in entry-level or junior roles (37%), compared with career developers (29%) and self-improvers (33%). Career developers were characterised by those in higher job roles, with 29% in roles at senior manager level or above, compared with 13% of career changers and 18% of self-improvers.

⁵ Levels are taken from on the Qualifications Credit Framework, where level 2 is equivalent to GCSE, level 3 to A-level and the International Baccalaureate, levels 4 and 5 to HNDs and HNCs, level 6 to a Bachelor's degree, level 7 to a Master's degree, and level 8 to a Doctorate.

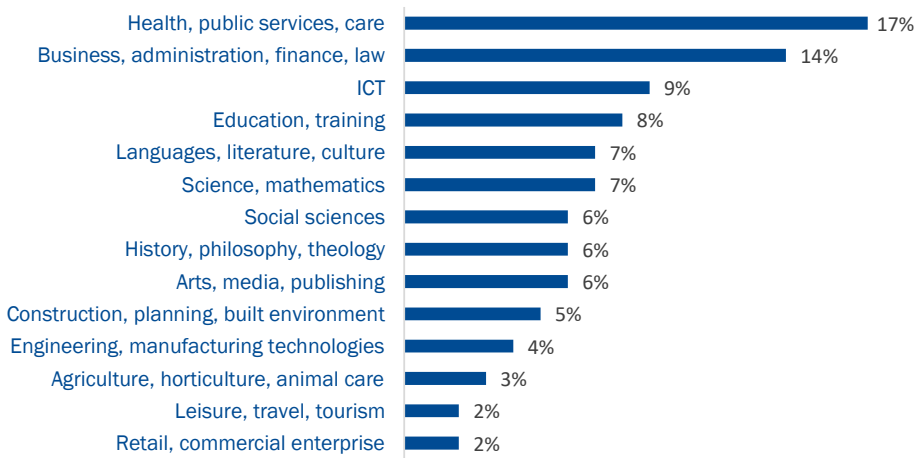
1.3 REASONS FOR CONSIDERING PART TIME HIGHER EDUCATION

Logistical considerations

The most popular subject areas considered by lost learners when deciding whether to study a part-time higher education course were: health, public services and care; and business, administration, finance and law, accounting for a third of all respondents (Figure 11). Other areas of interest included courses related to information and communications technology (ICT) and education.

FIGURE 11

Course subjects considered by lost learners

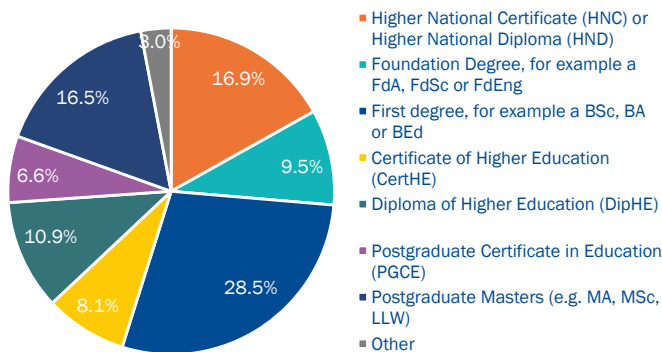


Q. What subject area were you considering studying with a part-time higher education course in the UK? Base: 835

Over a quarter considered an undergraduate degree, for example a BA, BSc or BED, with HND or HNC and postgraduate degrees both being considered by 17% of the sample (Figure 12).

FIGURE 12

Higher education qualifications considered by lost learners



Q. Which higher education degree level were you considering for your part-time higher education course in the UK? Base: 835

16% of lost learners were considering starting a part-time higher education course in Greater London. This is likely explained by the concentration of internationally renowned universities in the capital as well as the concentration of workers in the area. The North West and South East of England (12% each) were also preferred regions for study. Scotland was mentioned by 10% of the sample and Wales by 4% (Figure 13).

FIGURE 13
Geographical locations and countries considered for study

| REGION | % |
|--------------------------|-----|
| Greater London | 16% |
| North West | 12% |
| South West | 12% |
| West Midlands | 10% |
| Yorkshire and the Humber | 9% |
| South East | 8% |
| East of England | 8% |
| East Midlands | 6% |
| North East | 5% |

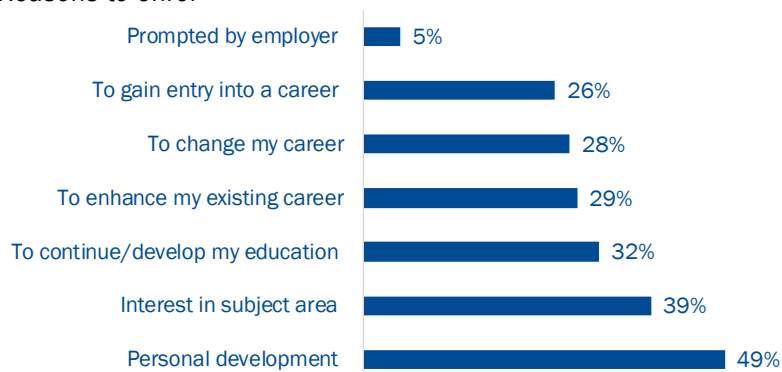
| COUNTRY | % |
|------------------|-----|
| Scotland | 10% |
| Wales | 4% |
| Northern Ireland | 2% |

Q. What UK area were you considering for studying your preferred part-time higher education course in?
Base: 835

Motivational considerations

Around half of lost learners (49%) were considering part-time higher education for personal development reasons. Interest in the subject area (39%) and to continue their education (32%) were also important. Lost learners demonstrated that they were motivated to attend part-time higher education based on their own intentions rather than being encouraged through external work-related influences, since only 5% admitted to being prompted by their employer (Figure 14).

FIGURE 14
Reasons to enrol



Q. What were the main reasons for considering studying a part-time higher education course in the UK?
Base: 835

1.4 REASONS FOR NOT ENROLLING IN OR CONTINUING WITH PART-TIME HIGHER EDUCATION

FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

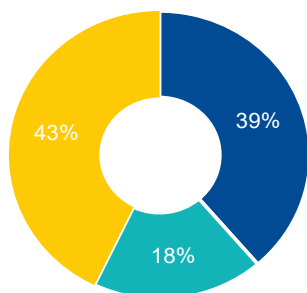
When it came to the role of the 2012 reforms, 43% of respondents said they would have attended if one or more of the reforms had not happened. The following elements of the 2012 higher education reforms were included as examples in the survey questionnaire:

- removal of means-tested fees and course grants
- increase in fees for part-time courses
- cuts to direct funding to institutions for part-time courses
- introduction of fee loans for part-time students on part-time higher education courses

18% did not consider that the reforms played a role in their choice not to attend, suggesting they did not attend for other reasons than the reforms, such as a change in family circumstances. Many (38%) remained unsure what role the 2012 reforms had had on their attempt to attend (Figure 15).

FIGURE 15

Retrospective perspective on the role of the reforms



■ Don't know ■ No, still wouldn't have attended ■ Yes, would have attended

Q. Thinking about the 2012 higher education reforms, if these measures had not happened, would you have started studying a part-time higher education course in the UK at the time? Base: 835

The data reflects findings of existing research on the role of the 2012 reforms. The study conducted in March 2018 by the Sutton Trust (Callender and Thompson, 2018) estimated that approximately 40% of the decline in England-domiciled entrants to part-time undergraduate study could be attributed to the 2012 reforms in England. Similarly, our research found that 44% of lost learners did not enrol because of considerations related to the affordability of tuition fees, with other 2012 reform-related factors such as a lack of options for part-time courses (12%) and the lack of opportunities to get a study grant or loan (8%) selected less frequently.

Research has also shown that the fall in part-time study has been influenced by a wide range of economic and policy factors – in addition to the 2012 reforms – such as falls in employment and reduced employer funding, which fell by 54% between 2010 and 2015 particularly in the public sector (ibid).

Part-time study has also been shown to be more likely to suffer during economic downturns (Hefce, 2014). This is reflected in the research covered in this report, which found that 8% of lost learners cited a lack of employer funding as a reason for not enrolling (Table 2).

TABLE 2

Factors affecting the decision not to enrol

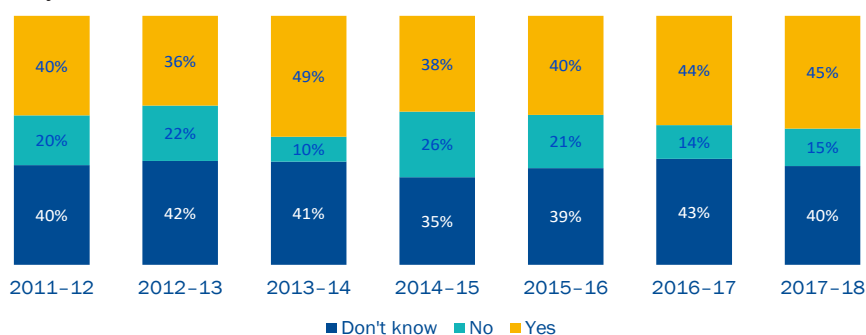
| Reason | % |
|---|-----|
| I couldn't afford tuition fees | 44% |
| I couldn't afford the cost of living while also studying | 42% |
| The course was not flexible enough to fit alongside my other life commitments | 26% |
| I had a change in my personal or family circumstances | 22% |
| I wasn't sure the benefits of studying outweighed the costs | 19% |
| A lack of options for part-time courses I wanted to study | 12% |
| My employer wouldn't provide the job flexibility I needed to study | 9% |
| I couldn't get a grant or loan to support my study | 8% |
| My employer wouldn't support my study financially | 8% |
| I decided not to change career path | 6% |
| I received a job offer or apprenticeship opportunity | 6% |
| The qualification wasn't necessary for the job I wanted | 3% |
| A change to the career/subject I wanted to study for | 2% |

Q. Which of the following factors were important in your decision not to enrol in a part-time higher education course in the UK? Base: 738

The reforms appeared to play the biggest role in respondents' decision-making process for those who planned to attend in the 2013–14 academic year, reflecting proximity to the change in undergraduate funding in 2012–13 at this point. In the last two academic years, respondents attributed more of their decision not to attend to the 2012 reforms. This can be explained by more recent memory compared with long-term memory.

FIGURE 16

Retrospective perspective on the role of the reforms by year of considered study

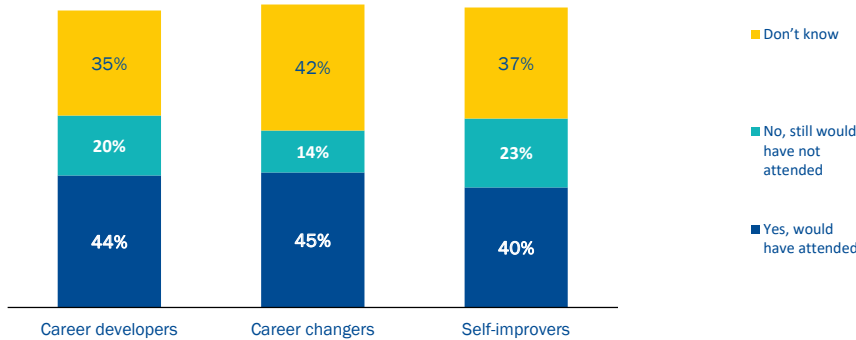


When looking at considerations not to enrol by the three identified segments, the 2012 reforms appear to have had the greatest effect on career changers' decision-making, with 45% saying they would have attended if the 2012 reforms had not taken place. Although career changers demonstrated the biggest need to gain a higher education qualification to enter a

career, career developers attributed a similar level of importance to the 2012 reforms, with 44% saying they would have studied had it not been for the reforms.

Self-improvers considered the 2012 reforms to be less important (40%) to their decision not to attend part-time higher education. Instead, just under a quarter said that they still wouldn't have taken up study even if the 2012 reforms hadn't occurred (Figure 17).

FIGURE 17
Retrospective perspective on the role of the reforms, by segment



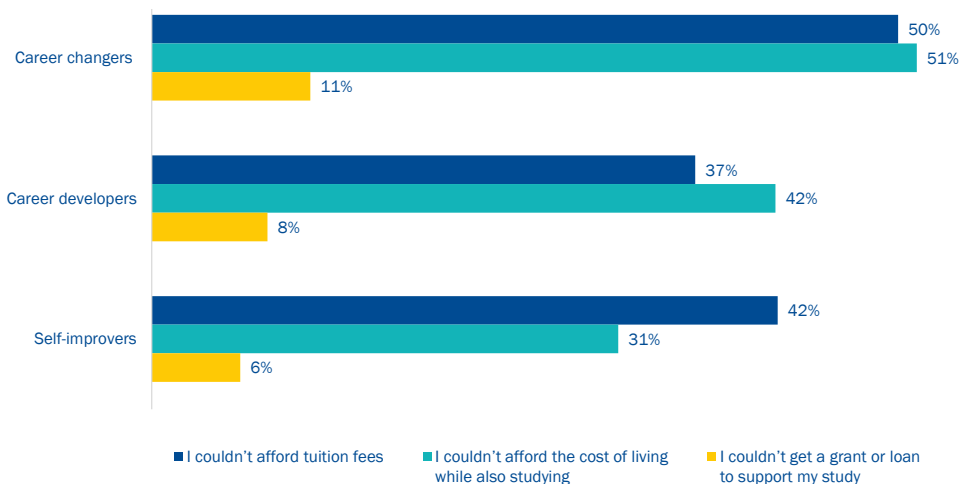
Career changers (357), Self-improvers (289), Career developers (189). Base: 835

Both career changers and career developers were more concerned with not being able to afford living costs as a reason for not taking up study (51% and 42% respectively), compared with not being able to afford tuition fees (50% and 37% respectively).

By contrast, self-improvers were considerably more concerned with fees (42%) compared with living costs (31%), potentially reflecting that many of this group may already be in retirement and receiving income from sources other than employment (Figure 18).

Across all groups, concerns related to access to grants and loans were lower, with career changers reporting the highest level of concern (11%) and self-improvers the lowest (6%).

FIGURE 18
Financial factors affecting decision not to enrol by segment



1.5 FINANCIAL FACTORS THAT WOULD ENCOURAGE STUDY IN THE FUTURE

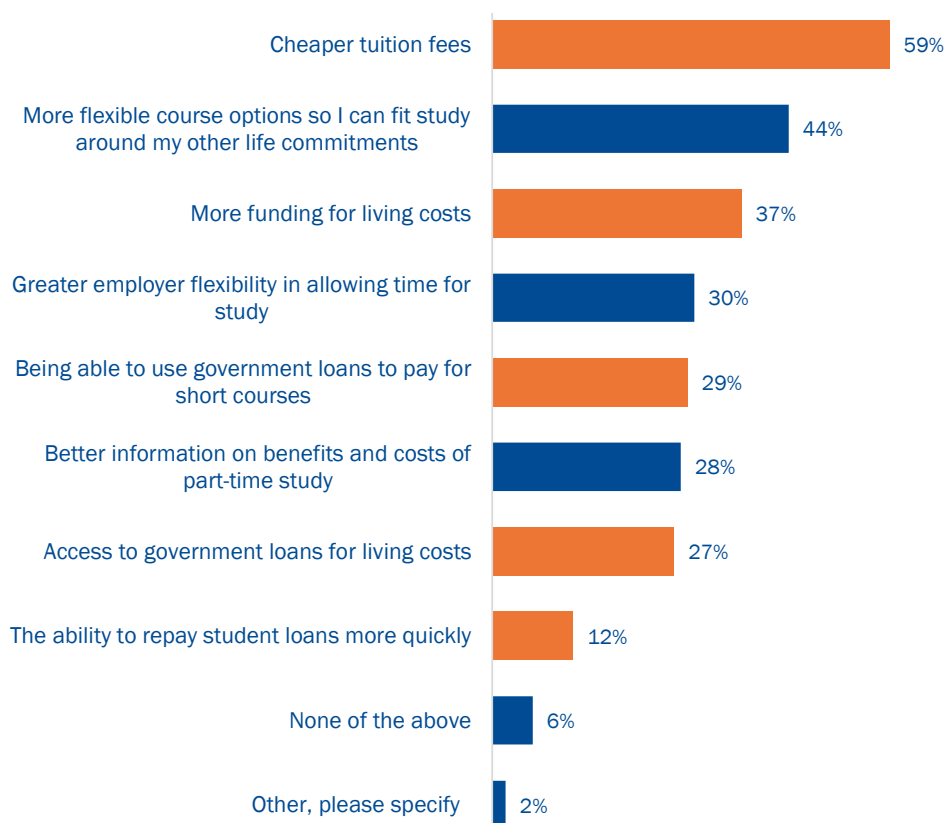
When asked what would encourage them to take up part-time higher education in the future, 59% of lost learners wanted to see cheaper tuition fees. This mirrored the 44% who said that tuition fees were one of the reasons why they did not enrol in part-time higher education. Respondents also said more funding for living costs (37%) would encourage them to take up part-time higher education in the future (Figure 19).

29% of lost learners said that a government loan to pay for short courses would encourage them to study part time in the future. Similarly, 27% of lost learners said government loans for living costs would encourage them. However, when first considering study, only 8% said they couldn't get a grant or a loan. This suggests that lost learners are concerned with rising living costs and that it should be an important point for the government to consider in its policy review (Figure 19).

Going further, 12% of respondents said that the ability to repay loans more quickly would encourage them to take up part-time higher education in the future. This echoes the results of a June 2018 study by the Department for Education (DfE) on student loan repayments, which found that only 50% of part-time students from the 2017–18 academic year will repay their loan (DfE, 2018b).

FIGURE 19

Factors that would encourage study in the future (financial factors highlighted orange)



Base: 835

FINANCIAL FACTORS THAT WOULD ENCOURAGE STUDY IN THE FUTURE BY SEGMENT

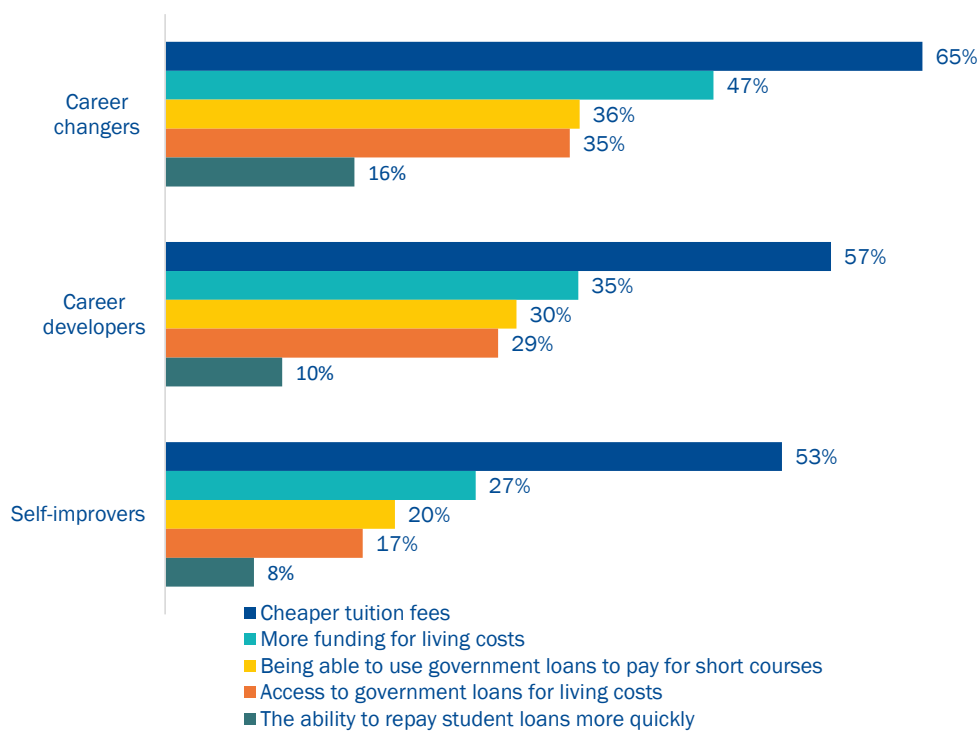
Across all segments, cheaper tuition fees were given as the main financial factor that would encourage part-time study in the future, with 65% of career changers saying they would take up study in the future if fees were cheaper, compared with 57% of career developers and 53% of self-improvers (Figure 20).

Career changers were the segment most likely to say that more funding for living costs would encourage them to study (47%), with this factor cited by 35% of career developers and 27% of self-improvers (Figure 20).

Responses to having access to government loans for living costs were lower across all groups compared with having more funding in general, suggesting a proportion of respondents in each group were less keen on loans as a source of funding. This gap was greatest for career changers, where 47% wanted more funding for living costs but only 36% wanted more government loans (Figure 20).

A third of both career changers and career developers cited access to government loans for short courses as a factor that would encourage part-time study in the future, giving this the same priority as government loans for living costs (Figure 20).

FIGURE 20
Financial factors that would encourage study in the future, by segment



Q. What factors would encourage you to take up a part time Higher Education course in the future? Base: 835

1.6 LIFE CONSIDERATIONS

Concerns around flexibility were significant. Lack of flexibility around family, work or other life commitments were among the most frequent reasons given for not completing a part-time higher education course. Even though the cost of tuition fees and living costs were the two most common reasons not to enrol, lost learners also recognised the limitations on flexibility attached to part-time higher education, with 26% feeling that the course was not flexible enough to fit around their lives.

Over a third (35%) said that the course was either not flexible enough to fit around their life commitments or the course would not have fitted around their job arrangements. Another 22% cited a change in family and personal circumstances as a reason for not enrolling. These figures are indicative of a higher education system not flexible enough to accommodate significant personal changes (Table 3).

TABLE 3

Factors affecting the decision not to enrol

| | |
|---|-----|
| I couldn't afford tuition fees | 44% |
| I couldn't afford the cost of living while also studying | 42% |
| The course was not flexible enough to fit alongside my other life commitments | 26% |
| I had a change in my personal or family circumstances | 22% |
| I wasn't sure the benefits of studying outweighed the costs | 19% |
| A lack of options for part-time courses I wanted to study | 12% |
| My employer wouldn't provide the flexibility I needed to study | 9% |
| I couldn't get a grant or loan to support my study | 8% |
| My employer wouldn't support my study financially | 8% |
| I decided not to change career path | 6% |
| I received a job offer or apprenticeship opportunity | 6% |
| The qualification wasn't necessary for the job I wanted | 3% |
| A change to the career/subject I wanted to study for | 2% |

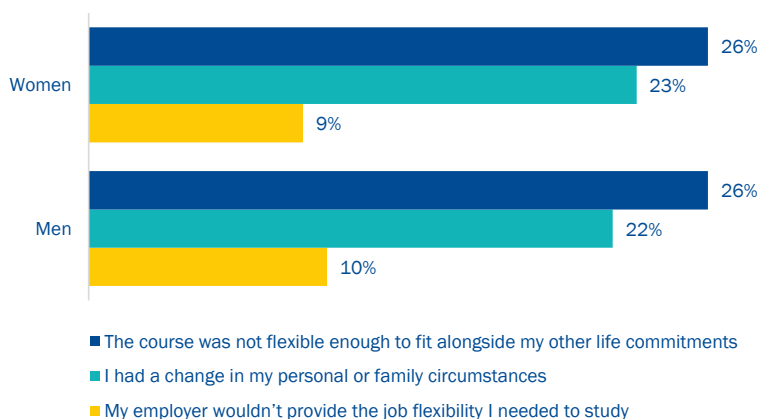
Q. Which of the following factors were important in your decision not to enrol in a part-time higher education course in the UK? Base: 738

Both career changers and career developers were concerned with the lack of flexibility when it came to their life commitments, at 29% each. Both groups also had a hard time finding time between work and study (13%), as employers would not provide appropriate job flexibility. Self-improvers were the least (4%) concerned about juggling employment and study.

The proportions of men and women were more or less equal in their considerations around flexibility, with approximately a quarter of each saying the course was not flexible enough to meet other life commitments (Figure 21). The three identified segments of lost learners were, however, separated by their reasons for not enrolling with career developers and career changers more likely to cite a lack of flexibility in courses (both 29%). Self-improvers were far less likely to give a lack of flexibility from their employer as a reason for not taking up study, reflecting that many in this group are in retirement. (Figure 22).

FIGURE 21

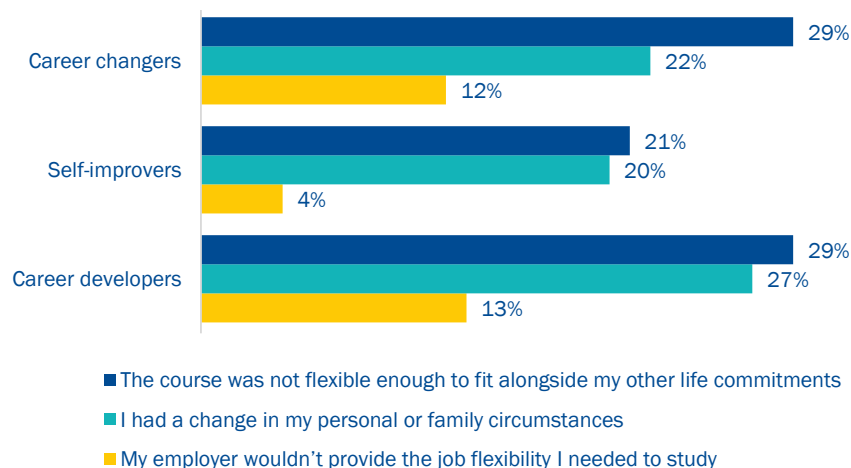
Reasons not to enrol, by gender



Base: 738. Women (363), Men (375)

FIGURE 22

Reasons not to enrol, by segment



Base: 738. Career changers (319), Self-improvers (252), Career developers (167)

FIGURE 23

Reasons for not continuing part-time education

| | |
|---|-----|
| The course was not flexible enough to fit alongside my other life commitments | 33% |
| I couldn't afford tuition fees | 29% |
| I had a change in my personal or family circumstances | 27% |
| I couldn't afford the cost of living while also studying | 23% |
| I wasn't sure the benefits of studying outweighed the costs | 17% |
| My employer wouldn't support my study financially | 14% |
| I received a job offer or apprenticeship opportunity | 12% |
| My employer wouldn't provide the job flexibility I needed to study | 11% |
| The qualification wasn't necessary for the job I wanted | 11% |
| I decided not to change career path | 8% |
| I couldn't get a grant or loan to support my study | 7% |
| A lack of options for part-time courses I wanted to study | 7% |
| A change to the career/subject I wanted to study for | 3% |

Base: 97

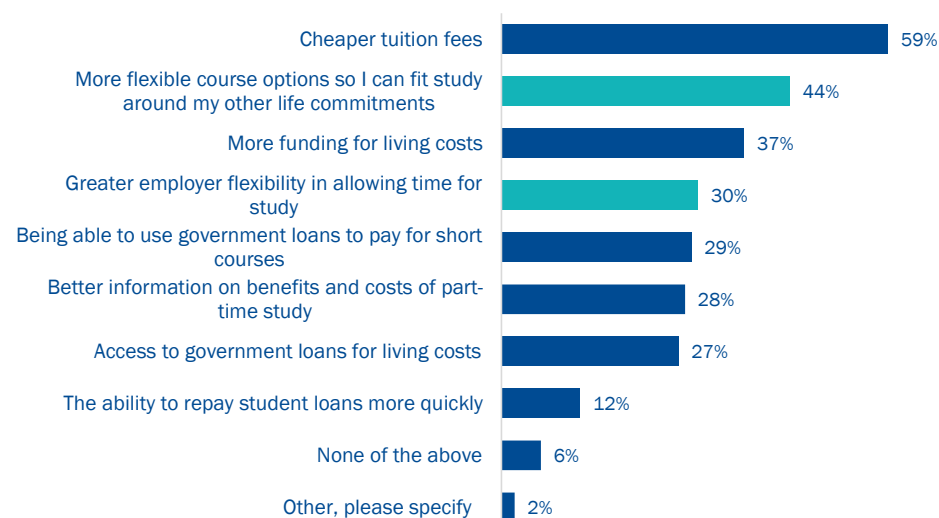
A lack of flexibility was given as the main reason for those who had dropped out of part-time study (33%), with a significant proportion also reporting a change in personal circumstances (27%) as a factor (Table 4). Not being able to afford tuition fees (29%) was less of a factor for those dropping out of part-time study than for those who considered but didn't enrol.

1.7 FLEXIBILITY FACTORS THAT WOULD ENCOURAGE STUDY IN THE FUTURE

Flexibility of study around life commitments was the second most important factor that would encourage lost learners to take up part-time higher education in the future (44%) (Figure 24). This finding is supported by a Higher Education Funding Council for England (Hefce) study, which revealed that two-thirds of part-time students have family commitments, increasing the need for courses to accommodate caring responsibilities. Almost a third (30%) of lost learners also said that greater flexibility from their employer would encourage them to study in the future.

FIGURE 24

Flexibility factors (highlighted) that would encourage part-time study in the future



Base: 835

FLEXIBILITY FACTORS THAT WOULD ENCOURAGE STUDY IN THE FUTURE BY SEGMENT

Looking at the factors that are most likely to encourage future study by segment, greater employer flexibility in allowing time for study was more important for career developers (38%) than the other segments, suggesting this group would stay in their current job while pursuing study. However, 50% of career changers said that a more flexible course to fit around life commitments would encourage them to study in the future, which was more than for both career developers (43%) and self-improvers (37%) (Figure 25).

FIGURE 25

Flexibility factors that would encourage study in the future by segment



Base: 835

Other reasons

Unpacking the other considerations for not attending part-time higher education revealed that men were much more hesitant than women to make a poor cost–benefit decision: 22% of men said they weren’t sure the benefits of studying outweighed the costs, compared with 16% of women who said the same. Other considerations that were felt to be important in decisions not to enrol include a change in career or subject of study (2%), qualifications no longer being necessary for the job respondents wanted (3%), and decision not to change career path (6%).

CHAPTER 2

IMPACT ON LOST LEARNERS

IMPACT ON LOST LEARNERS

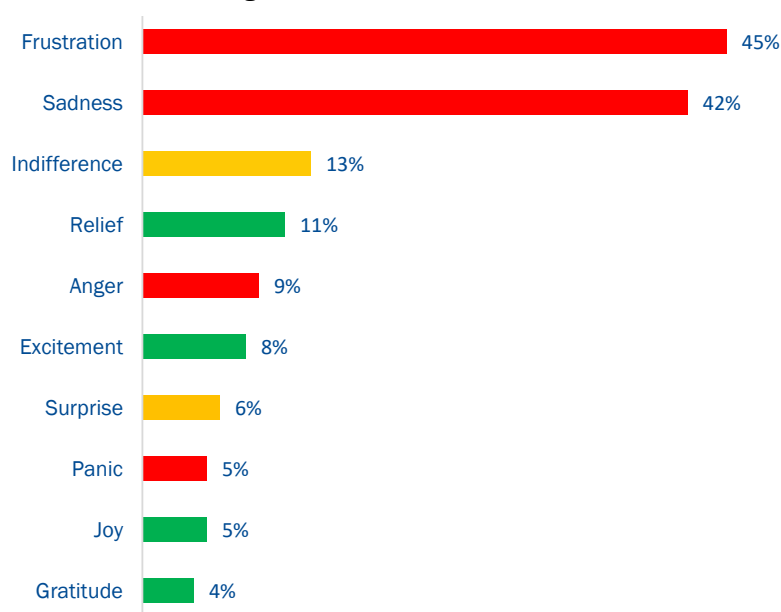
2.1 EMOTIONAL IMPACT ON LOST LEARNERS

Emotional impact at the time

The findings show that a strong majority of lost learners felt negatively about the outcome. When asked what they had felt at the time they decided not to take up part-time study, sadness and frustration were the most commonly given answers. Overall, the most common feelings lost learners felt at the time were negative ones. Positivity towards not attending was low, with only 11% relieved not to attend and 5% feeling joy about the prospect of not studying (Figure 26).

FIGURE 26

Lost learners' feelings at the time



Q. Once you had made the decision not to study a part-time higher education course in the UK, how did that make you feel at the time? Base: 835

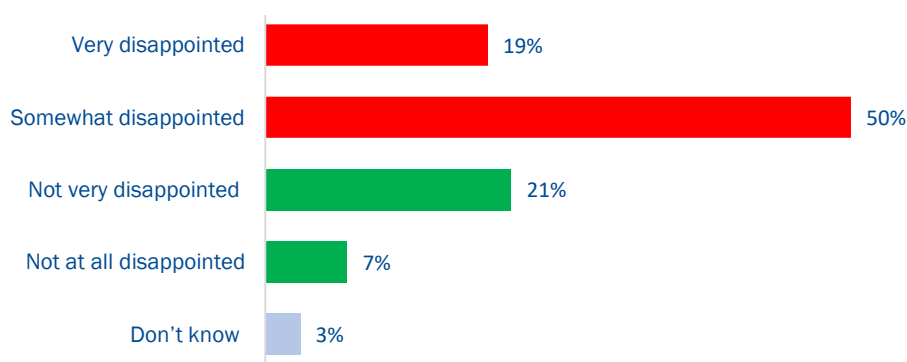
Of the three segments, career changers were the most upset at the time, with 51% stating they felt frustration and 49% stating their sadness. Career developers were slightly less frustrated at 44% and self-improvers felt the least frustration at 38%. Compared with career changers (11%), career developers (15%) and self-improvers (15%) were equally indifferent to the idea of not attending.

Emotional impact now

This negative response to not studying is also lasting. Overall, more than two-thirds (69%) of lost learners still feel disappointed today that they didn't study a part-time higher education course (Figure 27).

FIGURE 27

Level of life disappointment now



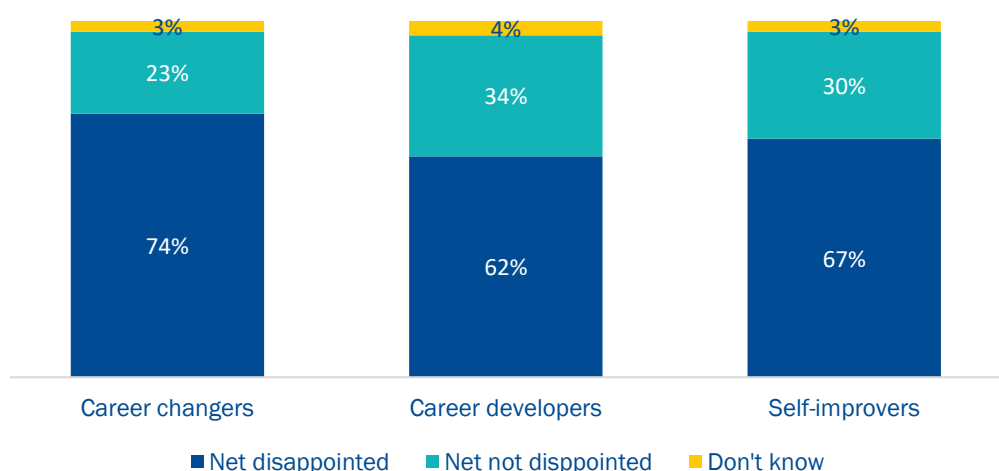
Q. How disappointed do you feel now that you didn't study a part-time higher education course in the UK?
Base: 835

By segment, career changers are most disappointed, with 74% saying they are either very or somewhat disappointed with their decision not to study a part-time higher education course. This suggests that part-time higher education played a significant role in their life plans to change careers. The least disappointed are career developers, at 62% level of disappointment.

Data detailed in the second section of this report shows that career changers more frequently found alternative routes to improve their skills and knowledge. Self-improvers also demonstrated a high level of disappointment, with 67% disappointed or very disappointed, which might appear to suggest that their subject of interest had a significant value to their lives aside from career (Figure 28).

FIGURE 28

Level of disappointment in not studying by segment

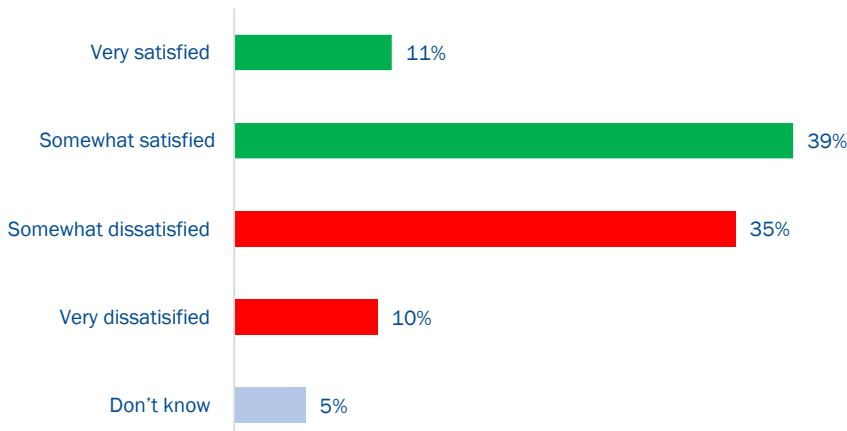


Q. How disappointed do you feel now that you didn't study a part-time higher education course in the UK?
(Net disappointed – Very disappointed, somewhat disappointed, Net not disappointed – not very disappointed, not at all disappointed). Base: 835. Career changers (357), Self-improvers (289), Career developers (189)

On the other hand, half of lost learners (50%) are either very or somewhat satisfied with their life since choosing not to study (Figure 29).

FIGURE 29

Level of life satisfaction now

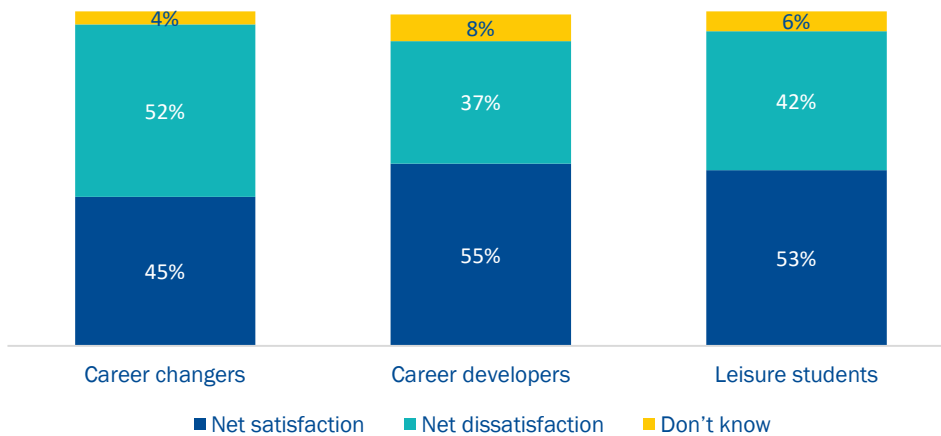


Q. How satisfied or dissatisfied have you been in your life since you chose not to study a part-time higher education course in the UK? Base: 835

A little more than half (52%) of career changers have been dissatisfied with their lives since deciding not to study. 55% of career developers have been satisfied with their lives – potentially since they were the more likely to seek additional training at work or with online courses (Figure 30).

FIGURE 30

Level of life satisfaction now, by segment

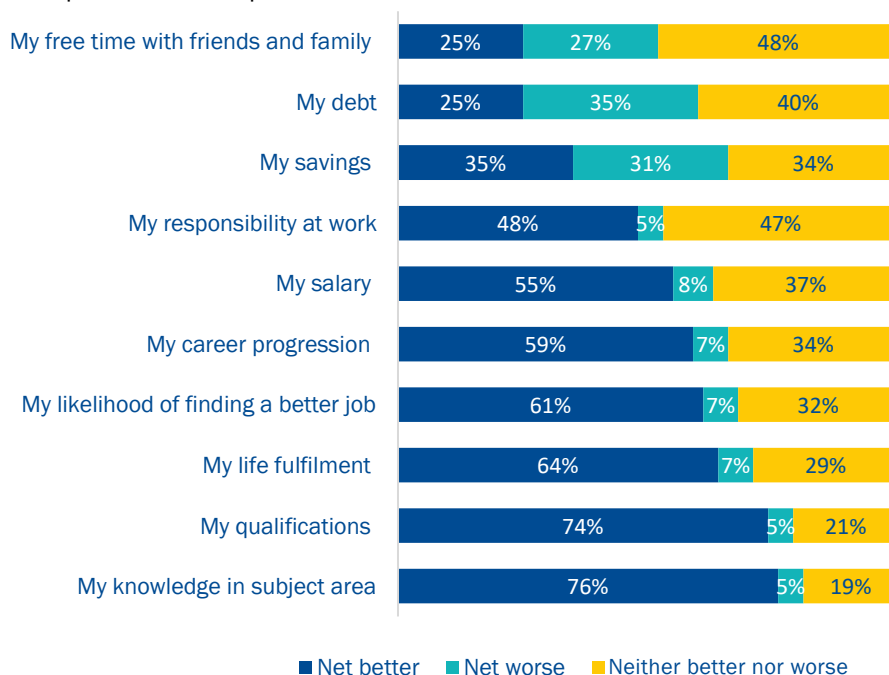


Q. How satisfied or dissatisfied have you been in your life since you chose not to study a part-time higher education course in the UK? (Net satisfaction - Very satisfied and somewhat satisfied, Net dissatisfaction Very dissatisfied and somewhat dissatisfied). Base: 835. Career changers (357), Self-improvers (289), Career developers (189)

Respondents were asked to imagine that they had taken up part-time study, and to what extent they felt they would be better or worse off in relation to a range of aspects of their current life (Figure 31). A large majority felt they would have been better off in relation to knowledge in a subject or specialist area (76%), the qualifications that they hold (74%), life fulfilment more generally (64%) and in the likelihood of finding a better job (61%).

FIGURE 31

Perceptions of life improvement



Q. We want you to imagine you had taken up part-time higher education in the UK. To what extent do you think you would be worse/better off compared with how you are now in the following aspects of your life? Base: 835

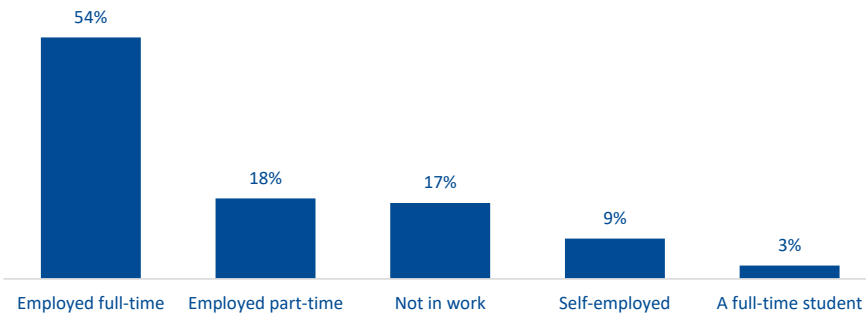
Practical implications

Over half of lost learners are employed full time (vs 18% working part time and 17% not in work), with job roles skewed to the lower end of the professional spectrum from entry level to mid-level executives (Figure 32 and Figure 33). This pattern is comparable to, but slightly lower than, the distribution amongst the overall UK adult population (ONS, 2018b). Part-time employment is a similar case, with part-time employees making up 21% of the overall UK adult population and 18% of lost learners⁶.

⁶The percentage was achieved by calculating the proportion of part-time employees who have been actively working in the last three months from the entire UK adult population. The UK adult population was sourced from ONS (2018b) (all aged 16 to 64 years old).

FIGURE 32

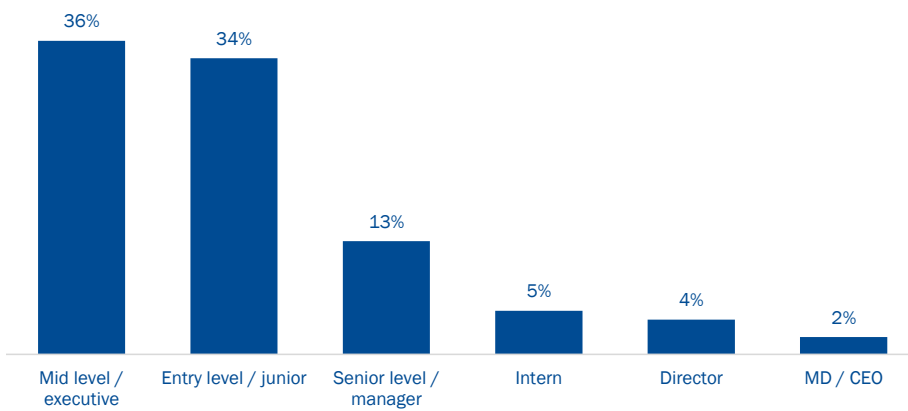
Current employment status



Q. What is your current employment status? Base: 835

FIGURE 33

Current job title



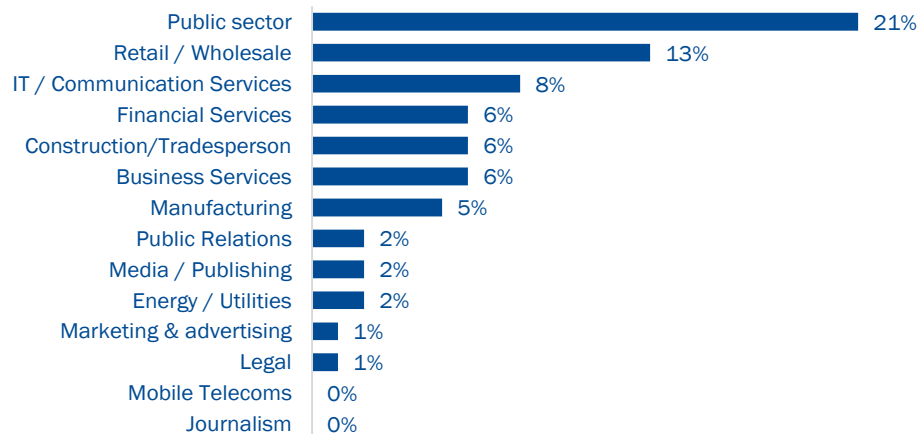
Q. Which of the following most closely matches your job title right now? Base: 670

Lost learners most commonly work in the public (21%) and retail/wholesale (13%) sectors. The percentage of lost learners working in other blue- and white-collar industries such as business services and construction is substantially lower, with as little as 6% working in these sectors (Figure 34).

Most lost learners earn an annual household income below £35,000, with only 16% receiving a household income higher than £50,000. The same proportion (16%) of lost learners have an income of less than £15,000 (Figure 35).

FIGURE 34

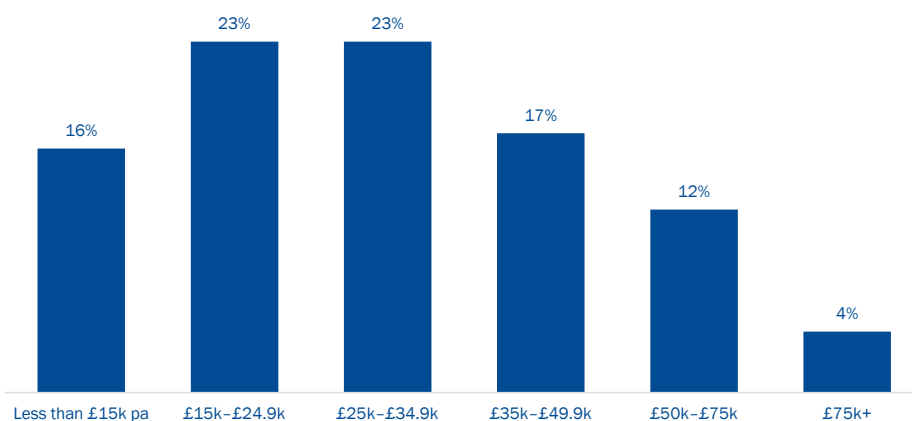
Current employment sector



Q. Which of the following sectors do you currently work in? Base: 835

FIGURE 35

Current household income

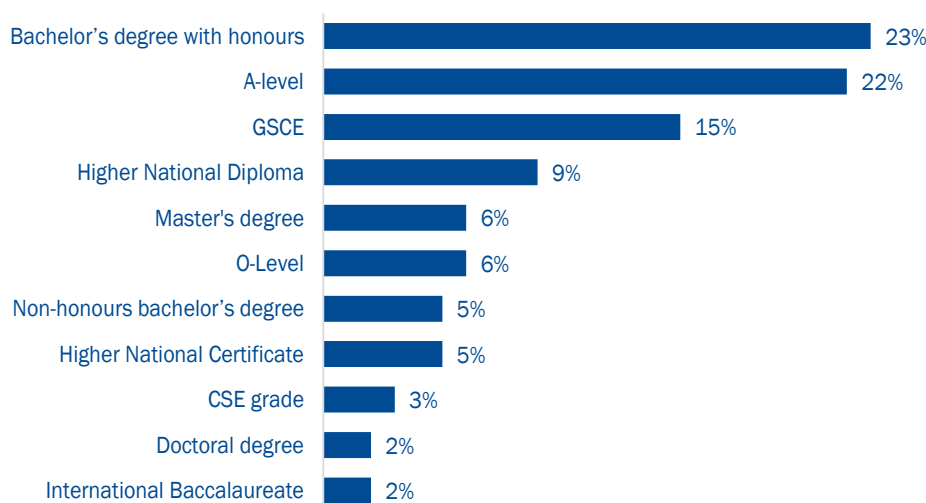


Q. What is your annual household income before tax right now? Base: 835

Close to a quarter of lost learners now hold a Bachelor's degree with honours. Fewer than one in 10 have any other higher education qualification, including Master's degree, non-honours Bachelor's degree or doctoral degree. It appears that most lost learners were considering their first higher education qualification, with slightly more than a third holding only an A-level or GSCE qualification (Figure 36).

FIGURE 36

Current educational qualification

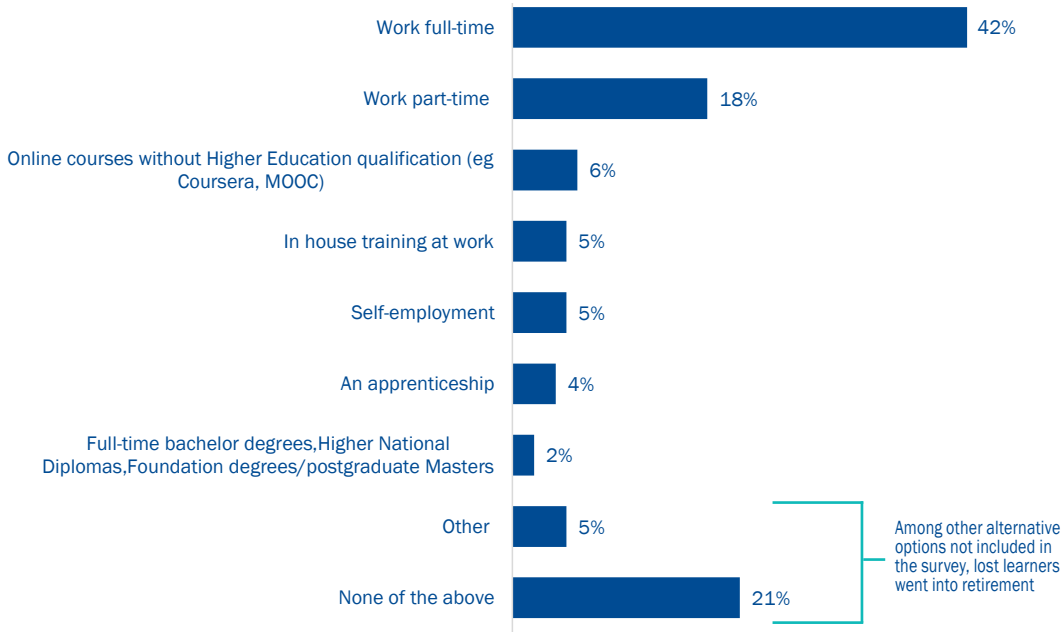


Q. What is your highest educational qualification right now? Base: 835

Lost learners widely ended up in full-time employment after not attending or completing part-time higher education. Part-time work was the second most common destination, with 18% of lost learners working around their life commitments. When it came to follow through with their education, lost learners preferred to take up an online course without a higher education qualification, and were three times as likely to take an online course than begin a full-time Bachelor's degree (Figure 37).

FIGURE 37

Alternative life routes

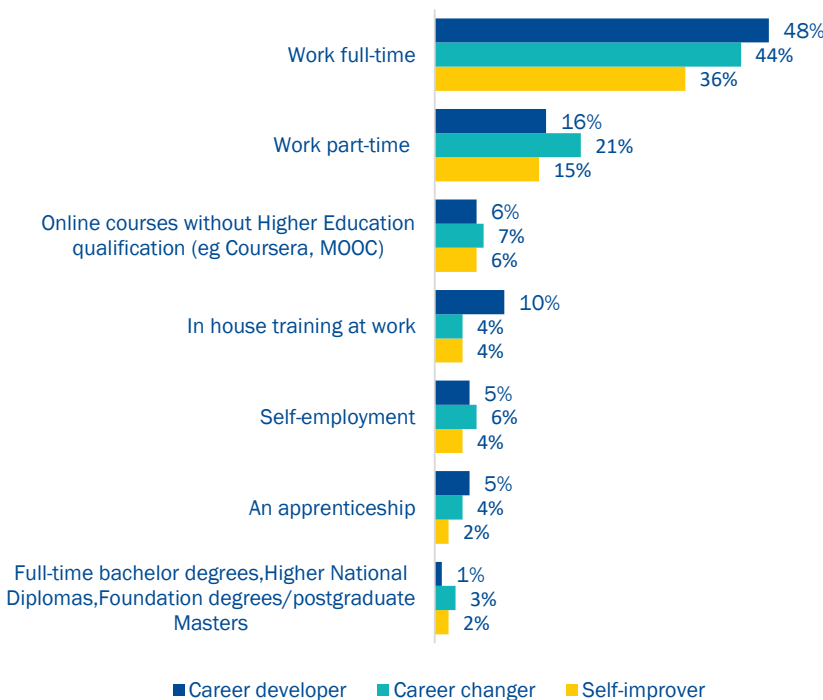


Q. Thinking about your decision not to study, what, if anything, did you decide to do instead of studying a part-time higher education course in the UK?

Focusing now on the segments of lost learners helps to illustrate the story around what they have done instead. The career developers were more likely (48%) to go into full-time work and receive in-house training at work (10%) than the other groups. Career changers were most likely to go into part-time work, and self-improvers were the least likely to go into either full-time or part-time work among all three segments (Figure 38).

FIGURE 38

Alternative life routes, by segment



Q. Thinking about your decision not to study, what, if anything, did you decide to do instead of studying a part-time higher education course in the UK? Base: 835. Career changers (357), Self-improvers (289), Career developers (189)

2.3 PROGRESS SINCE NOT TAKING UP A PART-TIME HIGHER EDUCATION COURSE

To understand what was lost or gained because of not attending part-time higher education, the respondents' demographic status was analysed before and after to highlight any changes in status. Analysis points to the fact that following their decision not to undertake higher education study, lost learners largely did not progress in their employment, job title, or household income, suggesting that one of the factors could have been because they did not attend part-time higher education. This will have implications for the opportunities available to individuals to progress in their careers and the ability of employers to improve productivity by improving the skills and knowledge of existing staff.

Employment

One of the most telling demographics was employment status and whether full-time students and those not in work progressed to either full-time, part-time or self-employment. Overall, the employment status of lost learners remained largely unchanged, with 91% staying within their initial employment status. The analysis demonstrates that only 4% of lost learners improved their employment status by moving out of unemployment into part-time or full-time employment. After deciding not to attend part-time higher education, 4% moved out of work into either unemployment or study.

Job title

Within their jobs, more than three-quarters (76%) of respondents did not improve in job title. Only 15% improved their position at work, with the majority of these moving from entry level/junior and mid-level/executive positions, to one position higher, ie mid-level/executive and senior level/managerial respectively. 9% of lost learners descended the job ladder, most likely because of a job change, where mid-level/executive or senior level/managers went back to being entry level/junior or mid-level/executive respectively.

Income

When it came to their household income, more than two-thirds (67%) of respondents had not increased their income and remained in the same income bracket that they had when initially considering starting part-time higher education. 70% of lost learners who were earning less than £15,000 per annum have remained in the same earnings group as have 66% of those who were in the £15,000 to £24,999 income bracket when considering study.

Nevertheless, a quarter (25%) of lost learners did manage to improve their household income without undertaking part-time higher education. The jump was mainly made from the £15,000 to £24,999 to the £25,000 to £34,999 income bracket. Still, 8% worsened in their household income, with almost a quarter (23%) of those dropping one income bracket from £35,000 to £49,999.

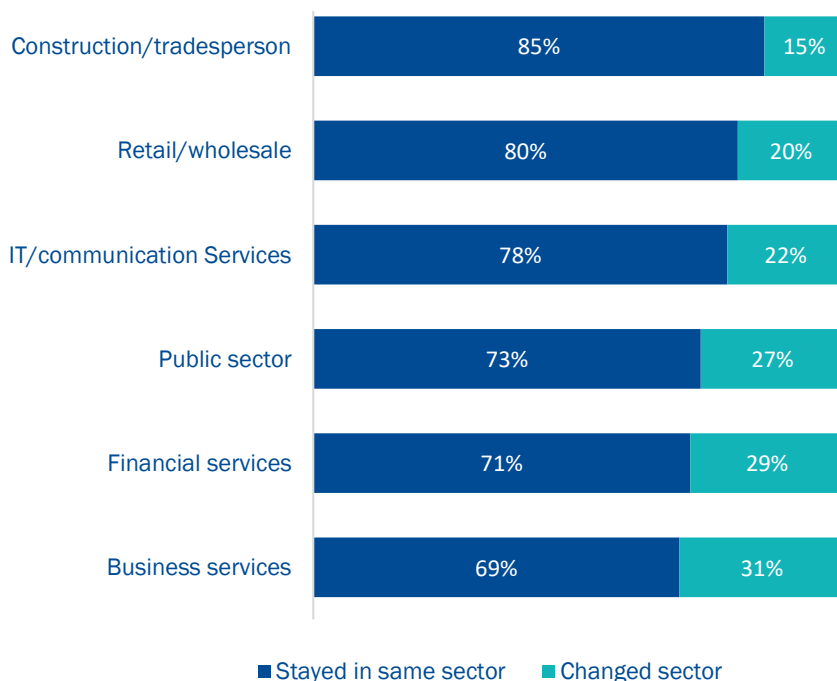
Sector

Around a quarter (26%) of lost learners moved employment sectors in the period after considering part-time study. Lost learners working in the construction, IT and retail/wholesale sectors were more likely to have stayed

in the same sector compared to other areas following their decision not to attend part-time higher education. (Figure 39).

FIGURE 39

Employment sector movement following decision not to study



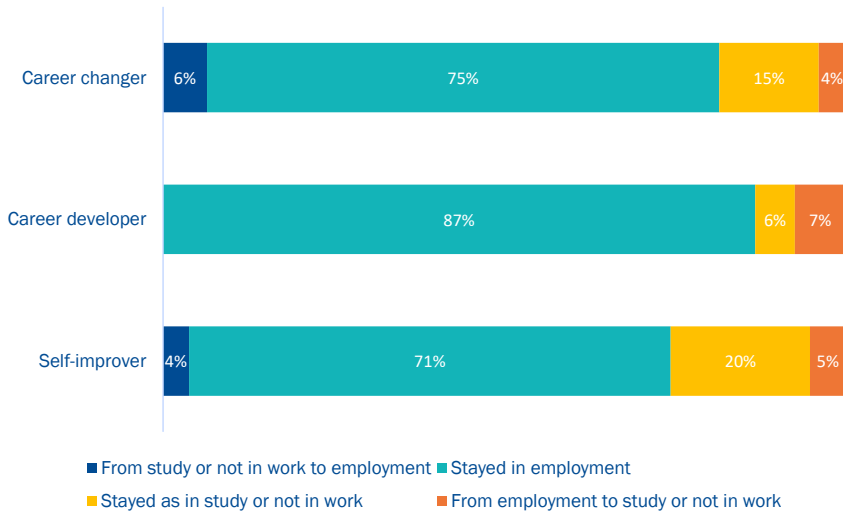
Q. Which the following sectors do you work in? Base: 835. Average sector base (45-209). Sectors with a base size below 40 were excluded from the chart, including manufacturing, energy/utilities, media, public relations, marketing, journalism and mobile telecoms.

3.4 PROGRESSION BY SEGMENT

Across all segments, the majority of lost learners saw no change in their employment status after deciding not to study part time. 7% of career developers moved from employment to full-time study (1.6%) or not being in work (5.8%), compared with 5% of self-improvers and 4% of career changers. This partly reflects the age profile of each segment, with 14% of career developers aged 55 and over likely to be moving into retirement (a similar proportion of the self-improver group were already not in work when considering study).

Among the three segments, career changers saw the most improvement in employment status, with 5% moving from not in work to employment since not taking up part-time higher education. As all career developers were already in work and were seeking part-time higher education to accelerate their career, there were none who moved into employment from unemployment (Figure 40).

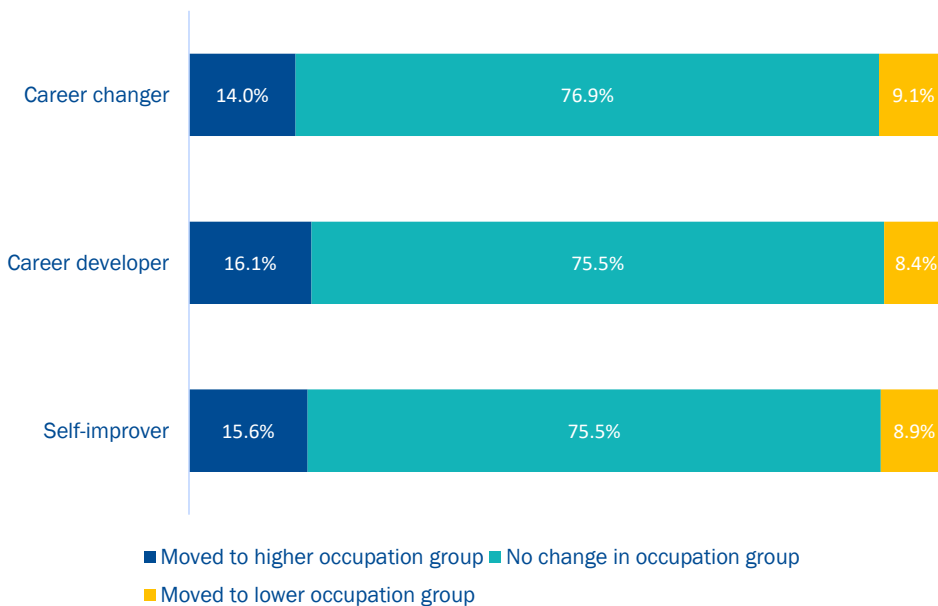
FIGURE 40
Change in employment status by segment



Again, across all segments, most lost learners (around 76% in each case) did not see an improvement in their job title – as determined by their occupational grouping – since not taking up part-time study.

Unsurprisingly, career changers were more likely to change employment sectors following their decision not to study a part-time higher education course (21%, compared to 13% for career developers). However, as 77% stayed in the same occupational group, this suggests they were unable to move to a higher role when they changed sectors, with only 14% improving their job title by moving into mid-level/executive or senior level/managerial roles (Figure 41).

FIGURE 41
Change in occupation grouping, by segment

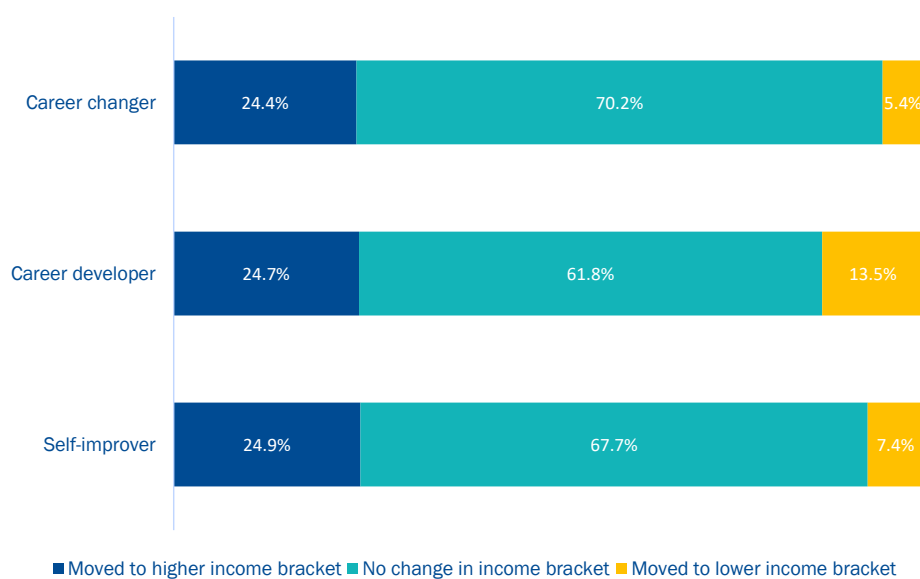


The majority of all segments saw no improvement in household income (as measured by movement to a higher bracket). Compared with career changers and self-improvers, career developers experienced the largest drop in household income since they had first considered starting part-time higher education (13.5%), again partly reflecting the age profile of this group, with a substantial minority likely to be moving into retirement over the period.

Career changers saw the smallest proportion whose household income fell (5%), with a similar proportion across each group (25%) moving to a higher income bracket. (Figure 42).

FIGURE 42

Change in household income, by segment



CHAPTER 3

POTENTIAL AREAS FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION

POTENTIAL AREAS FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION

The findings from this research suggest that many lost learners are correct in their belief that they are worse off as a result of not studying a part-time higher education course. This complements findings from existing research that suggests part-time higher education study delivers a net earnings premium for graduates (London Economics, 2018). However, there are areas for potential research which may help shed further light on the issues raised in this report.

‘Offline’ audiences

The methodology used for this research required surveying only individuals with internet access who can complete an online questionnaire. It may be that the experiences of groups of lost learners who do not have access to the internet – who tend to be older and have lower household incomes – are significantly different to those of the majority who are described in this report. Investigation of this group using a different methodology, either face-to-face or telephone interviews, could be carried out.

Qualitative research

All the studies cited above use a quantitative methodology to reach their conclusions. While the results may be less generalisable, taking a more exploratory approach by using qualitative methods may help by giving a more in-depth account of lost learners’ experiences and highlighting recommendations from lost learners themselves.

SOURCES

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