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Evaluation of the Wales Union Learning Fund (WULF) Programme

2023-2024 learners

Wavehill: Social and Economic Research

Our offices

- Wales office: 21 Alban Square, Aberaeron, Ceredigion, SA46 0DB (registered office)
- West England office: St Nicholas House, 31-34 High Street, Bristol, BS1 2AW
- North of England office: The Corner, 26 Mosley Street, Newcastle, NE1 1DF
- London office: 2.16 Oxford House, 49 Oxford Road, London, N4 3EY

Contact details

Tel: 0330 1228658

Email: wavehill@wavehill.com

Twitter: [@wavehilltweets](https://twitter.com/wavehilltweets)

More information

www.wavehill.com

<https://twitter.com/wavehilltweets>

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Report authors

Paula Gallagher, Tomasz Jablonski, Jakob Abekhon

Any questions in relation to this report should be directed in the first instance to paula.gallagher@wavehill.com

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Client details

Linsey Imms

limms@tuc.org.uk

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List of abbreviations

Acronym/Key word	Definition
WG	Welsh Government
WULF	Wales Union Learning Fund
TUC Cymru	Trade Union Congress Cymru
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation

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1. Introduction

The Wales Union Learning Fund (WULF) is a Welsh Government-funded initiative delivered in partnership with TUC Cymru and trade unions. Initially launched in 1999 it aims to promote workplace learning and skills development and has been delivered over various funding rounds.

Following the completion of the evaluation of the 2019 to 2022 WULF programme, the Wales Trades Union Congress (TUC), along with the Welsh Government, commissioned Wavehill to conduct the monitoring and evaluation of the respective programme in the 2022 to 2025 period.

Whilst each Union project had their own specific aims and objectives, the overarching aims of the WULF programme (2022 to 2025) were to:

- Raise the skills of the workforce and facilitate progression by supporting Trade Union-led¹ learning activity, in partnership with employers and others, with a focus on increasing the essential and digital skills levels and employability skills of the Welsh workforce, and also supporting workers to progress onto further learning and to gain relevant qualifications
- Support the recruitment and networking of Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) in raising demand for learning from non-traditional learners, especially workers with low skill levels and disadvantaged groups in the workplace, helping them to overcome barriers to learning.
- Be responsive to the emerging skills and employability needs of workers, helping to deliver the skills needs of both the current and future workforce.
- Work with employers to assist with workforce development including establishment of collectively bargained learning agreements and provision of advice on workplace policies and practices that encourage participation thus increasing the likelihood of progression, resulting in more workers benefiting

¹ Union-led learning is a proactive approach to education and skills development, driven by unions to enhance the knowledge, capabilities, confidence and employability of their members, and non-members in the workplace. It aims to address the specific challenges and opportunities faced by workers in a particular industry or profession, tailoring educational offerings to meet those needs. Union-led learning seeks to make education and skill development accessible to all workers, regardless of their background or circumstances.

Union-led learning is not just about acquiring skills; it's also about empowering workers to take an active role in their careers, workplaces and the wider community.

from fair work.

- Encourage employers to recognise the value of developing individuals through workplace learning in support of employability and progression.
- Increase diversity and inclusion within adult learning by removing barriers to learning and working with employers to widen access to workplace learning and skills.

This report presents an analysis of a survey conducted among WULF learners who participated in the April 2023 to March 2024 phase of the programme.

1.1 Methodological Approach

The WULF programme consists of 18 projects with trade unions across Wales.

Contact details of learners on the programme are captured through participant monitoring forms. Wavehill requested these details from each of the trade unions. These were initially shared with the Welsh Government who, in turn, securely transferred the contact details to Wavehill.

8,643 rows of data were received for learners who took part in the programme between April 2023 and March 2024. These were combined and cleaned². Some of the learner records received related to multiple learners without identifying specific individuals meaning that it was not possible to estimate a unique count of learners who took part during the programme in this period. Following the cleaning process 7,115 individuals were identified with valid contact details.

A learner survey was distributed to these individuals via email, as an online link promoted by unions and, for three unions that included telephone contact details, through contact from Wavehill's research team. In total, 809 responses were completed. This represents an 11% response rate. The survey was open between November 2024 and March 2025.

1.1.1 The learner survey

Following feedback from union project managers to say that some participants struggled with the length of the survey in previous evaluation rounds, a method was devised whereby the length of the survey would differ if the learning opportunity was up to an hour long or

² Learners were removed from the database where no contact information was provided. Learners who had been on multiple courses were combined into one entry. Minor typos and spacing issues were corrected.

the participant was taking their survey on a mobile device. The breakdown of survey types undertaken and number of responses is as follows:

Table 1.1: Survey types and number of responses

Survey type	N	%
Standard	438	54%
Short	179	22%
Short (mobile version)	196	24%
Total	813	

1.1.2 Survey sample by union

The number of contacts provided by Union, the number of responses obtained, and the associated response rate is shown in the table below. Response rates were highest for BECTU, URTU, FDA and CWU. The lowest response rates came from Usdaw and RCM.

Table 1.2: Response rates by Union to the 2024/25 survey conducted by Wavehill.

Union	Contacts	Number of responses	Response rate
ASLEF	200	21	11%
BFAWU	326	35	11%
BECTU	433	136	31%
Community	633	56	9%
CWU	261	61	23%
FBU	199	11	6%
FDA	375	89	24%
GMB	451	33	7%
NAPO	107	11	10%
NEU	630	53	8%
NUJ	185	11	6%

POA	278	46	17%
PCS	295	35	12%
RCM	188	9	5%
UNISON	1380	90	7%
Unite	925	87	9%
URTU	53	15	28%
Usdaw	196	10	5%
Total	7115	809	

1.1.3 Limitations

Whilst some demographic data was included within the contacts, there was insufficient information to determine whether the surveyed sample was representative of all learners on the programme. As only three unions provided telephone contact details, the evaluation was unable to effectively boost response rates for unions with few responses. Following changes to data collection, wider demographic data will be collected by the programme for the April 2024 to March 2025 cohort.

2. Survey Analysis

2.1.1 Demographics

The survey collected demographic data to better understand the characteristics of programme participants. However, without comparable monitoring data for all learners, it is not possible to determine how representative the survey sample is.

Nearly two-thirds (60%) of survey respondents identified as female. Notably, 9% identified as being from a non-white ethnic background, compared to 6.2% of the Welsh population (2021 census)³ indicating that WULF may be engaging proportionally more learners from minority ethnic communities. Similarly, 23% of participants reported having a disability, slightly above the Welsh population average of 21% (2021 census)⁴. Twenty-six per cent of the surveyed learners described themselves as a carers, which is more than double the percentage of the Welsh population who identified as carers in the 2021 census (10.5%)⁵, and 36% had some form of childcare responsibilities.

Consistent with data from previous programme rounds, WULF continues to attract older learners. 53% of learners were aged between 45 and 59 although the proportion of learners below 30 has doubled since 2023 (8% vs 4%).

If these demographics are representative of the wider programme then this indicates that WULF is performing well against the programme aim of ‘raising demand for learning from non-traditional learners’, particularly amongst those with caring responsibilities and older learners. Research from the Learning and Work Institute suggests that participation in adult learning tends to decrease by 4% with each additional year of age⁶.

³ <https://www.gov.wales/ethnic-group-national-identity-language-and-religion-wales-census-2021-html>

⁴

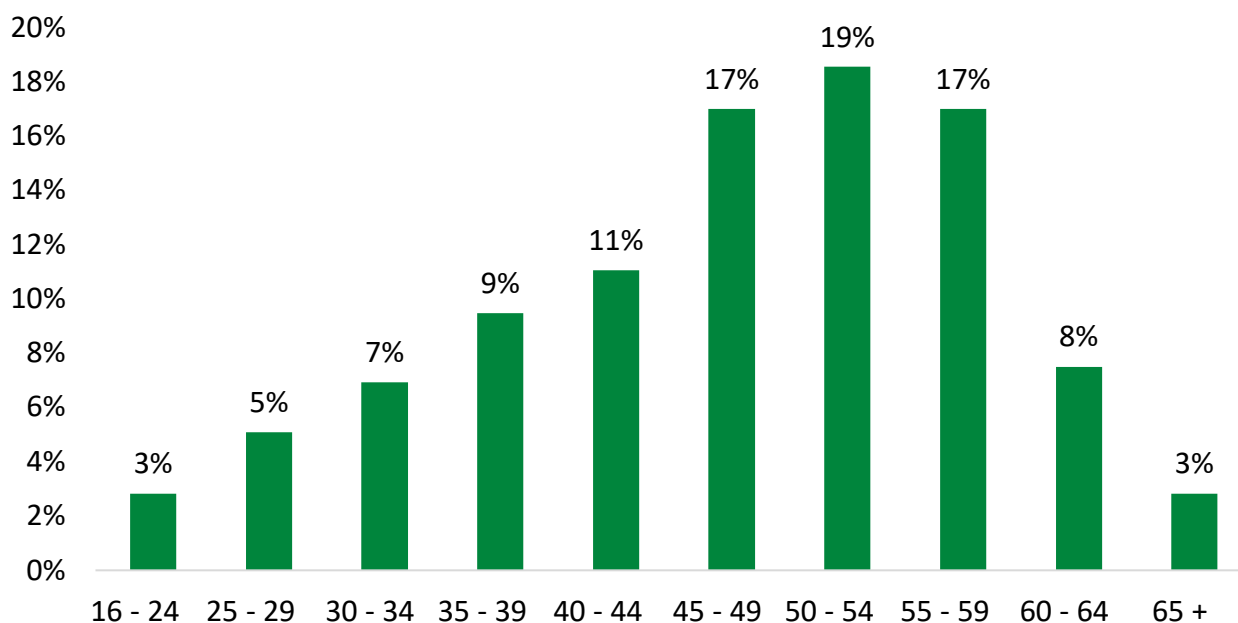
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/bulletins/disabilityenglandandwales/census2021>

⁵

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/bulletins/unpaidcareenglandandwales/census2021>

⁶ Nermond et al (2024) Adult Participation in Learning Survey 2024, Learning and Work Institute.

Figure 2.1: Age of surveyed participants



Base: N=694, excluding *Prefer not to say*

When broken down by Union, respondents from URTU and POA were most commonly aged 55 or over (50% and 44% respectively).

Table 2.1: Age of surveyed participants by Union⁷

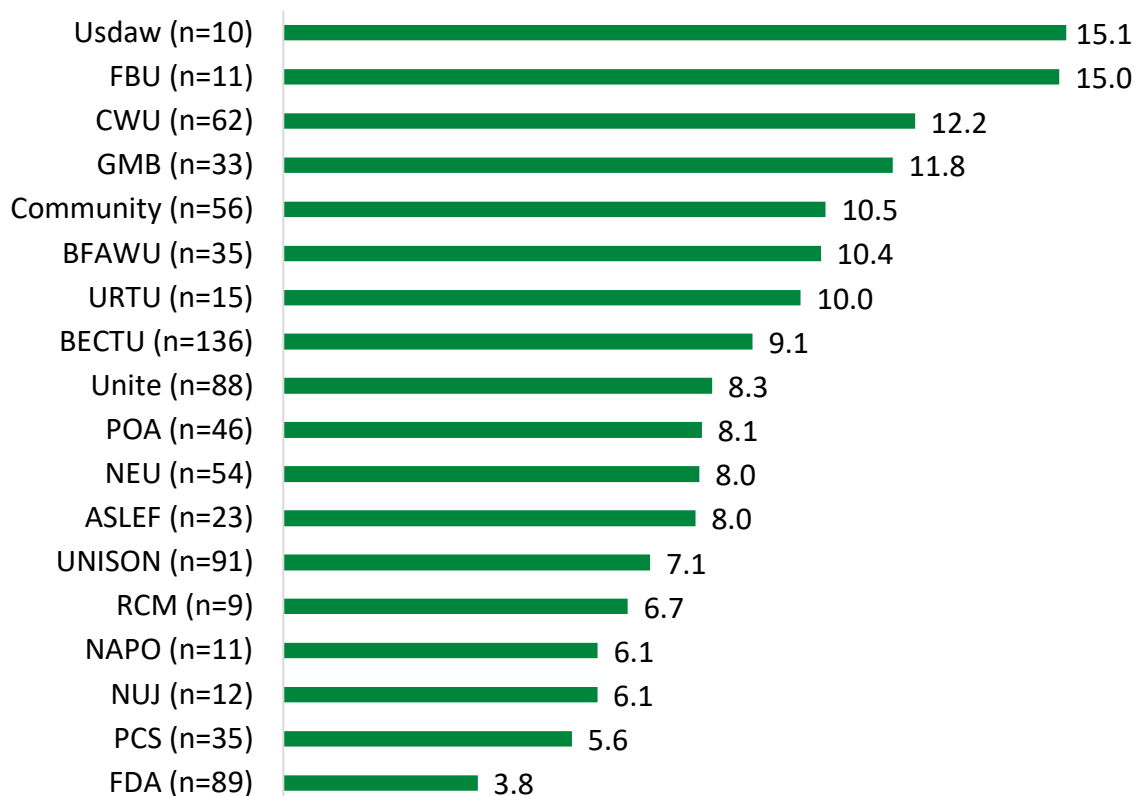
Union	Under 30	30 to 54	55 or older
URTU (N=10)	0%	50%	50%
POA (N=36)	6%	50%	44%
NAPO (N=10)	0%	60%	40%
ASLEF (N=20)	0%	65%	35%
UNISON (N=77)	5%	62%	32%
NEU (N=47)	4%	64%	32%
Community (N=46)	2%	67%	30%

⁷ Unions have been excluded where there less than 10 responses were recorded

GMB (N=28)	4%	68%	29%
CWU (N=53)	11%	60%	28%
Unite (N=78)	3%	73%	24%
PCS (N=30)	3%	73%	23%
BECTU (N=124)	19%	57%	23%
FDA (N=73)	8%	70%	22%
BFAWU (N=31)	16%	68%	16%

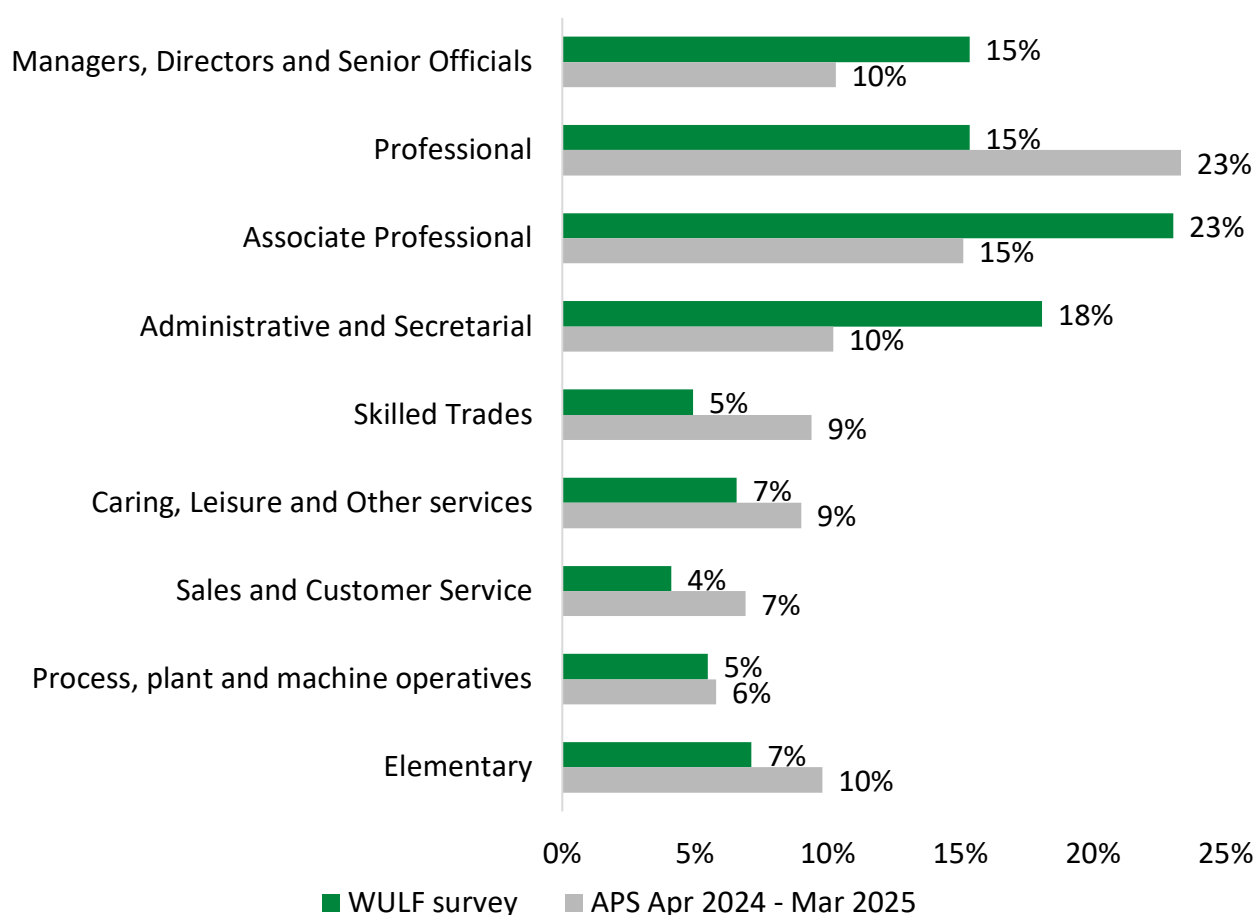
The majority of respondents (82%) were employed and had been employed in the same organisation for an average of 8.5 years. 68% of the participants had been in the same job role in the same organisation for over 3 years. Respondents from USDAW and CWU had been in their current roles for 15 years on average.

Figure 2.2: Length of time in job role by Union



Respondents were asked to give their job title and 366 responses were subsequently coded to Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) codes. The most common classification was Associate Professional occupations which comprised 23% of the sample. Comparing this data to Annual Population Survey data for Wales, 54% of the survey sample were in the top three SOC categories compared to 49% across Wales. This may not be representative of job roles across Unionised employers; however, it is not possible to test this given the lack of MI gathered on the industrial sectors of all participant learners. Despite efforts to broaden access to the survey, as described in Chapter 1.1, it is still possible that those with desk-based jobs, which tend to require higher qualifications, are more likely to respond to the survey. To further assess seniority, respondents were asked whether they were managers or supervisors of employees to which 38% responded that they were.

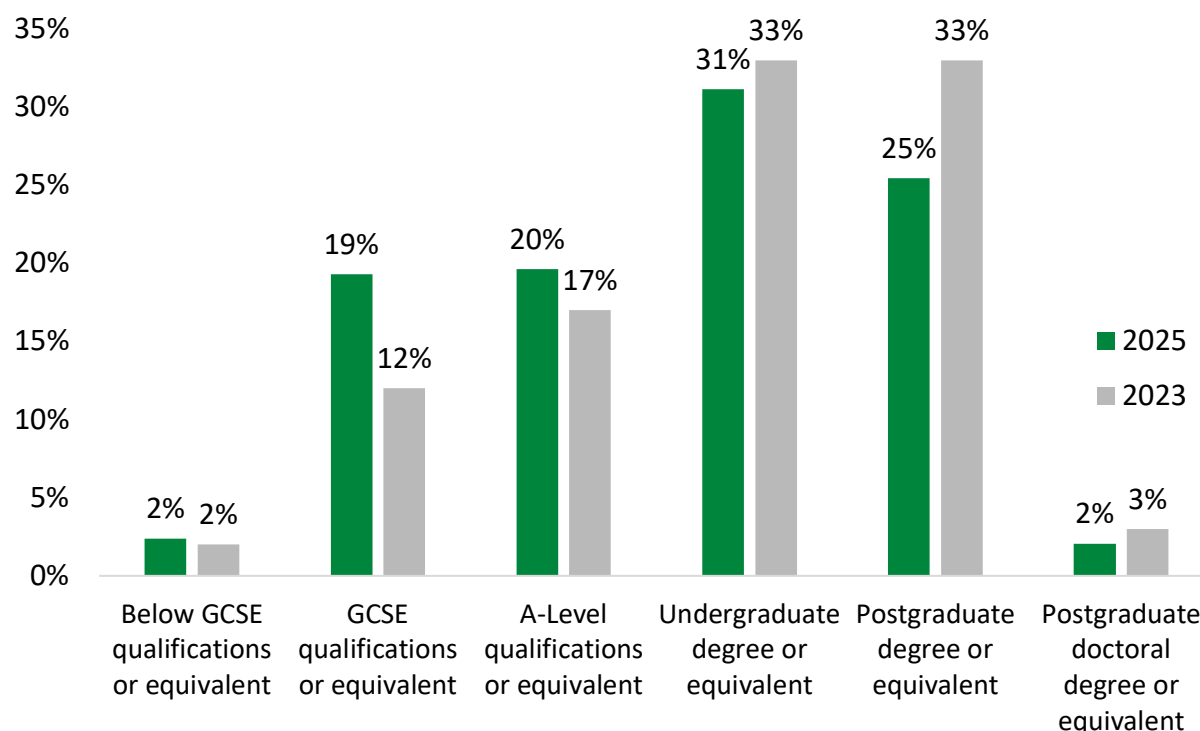
Figure 2.3: Breakdown of job roles by SOC code compared with APS survey results April 2024 to March 2025



In comparison to the previous WULF survey undertaken, a lower proportion of learners had an undergraduate degree or higher qualification prior to taking part (59% compared to 69%), and a higher percentage of individuals had qualifications at A level or below.

However, the proportion of the WULF learner sample that held a level 3 qualification or higher was greater than the Welsh working age population (78.3% compared to 68.6%⁸). Individuals with higher educational attainment are far more likely to engage in learning opportunities and therefore may not represent WULF’s target demographic.

Figure 2.4: Highest qualification level prior to engaging with WULF training



Base N=632

However, the data suggests that higher qualification levels are likely to be impacted by responses from unions, where workers require a certain level of education to undertake their roles.

⁸ <https://www.gov.wales/levels-highest-qualification-held-working-age-adults-2024.html>

Table 2.2: Highest qualification level prior to engaging with WULF training by union

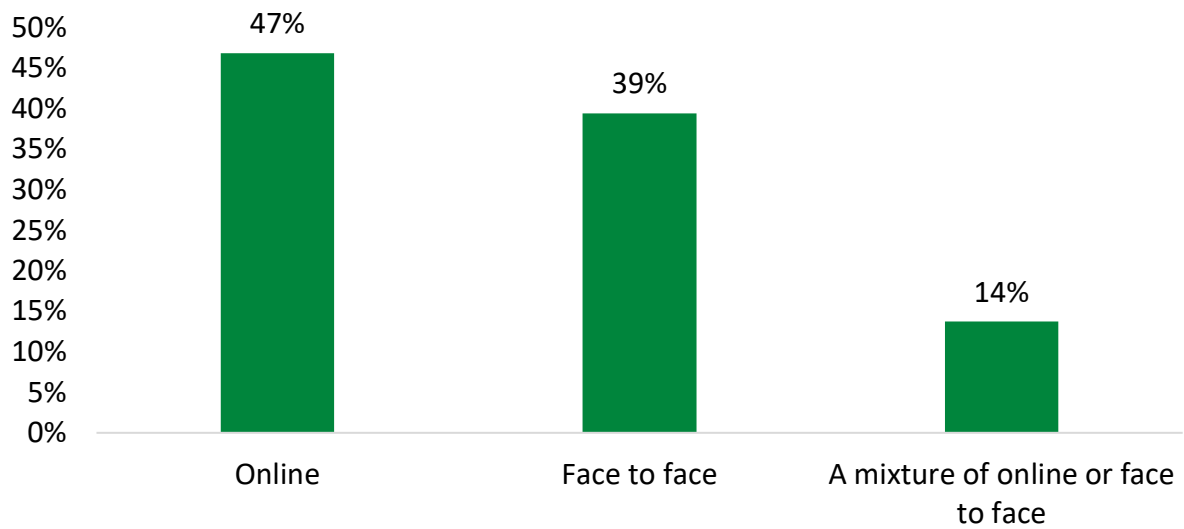
	Below GCSE qualifications or equivalent	GCSE or A-levels	Undergraduate degree or higher
NEU (N=39)	0%	8%	92%
BECTU (N=110)	1%	16%	83%
NAPO (N=11)	0%	27%	73%
FDA (N=48)	0%	29%	71%
PCS (N=27)	0%	33%	67%
UNISON (N=71)	0%	38%	62%
Unite (N=54)	0%	39%	61%
Community (N=51)	0%	45%	55%
GMB (N=27)	0%	56%	44%
POA (N=42)	0%	60%	40%
CWU (N=53)	8%	58%	34%
ASLEF (N=22)	9%	59%	32%
BFAWU (N=33)	15%	64%	21%
URTU (N=11)	18%	82%	0%

2.2 Learner Engagement

Respondents tended to access shorter courses with 22% completing courses up to an hour in length and 46% accessing courses that lasted up to a day (6 hours). Only 17% took part in learning that lasted more than 12 hours.

Learners who had taken part in courses lasting longer than a day were asked how they had accessed the training. Most were most likely to have done so online (47%).

Figure 2.5: Did the training take place...?

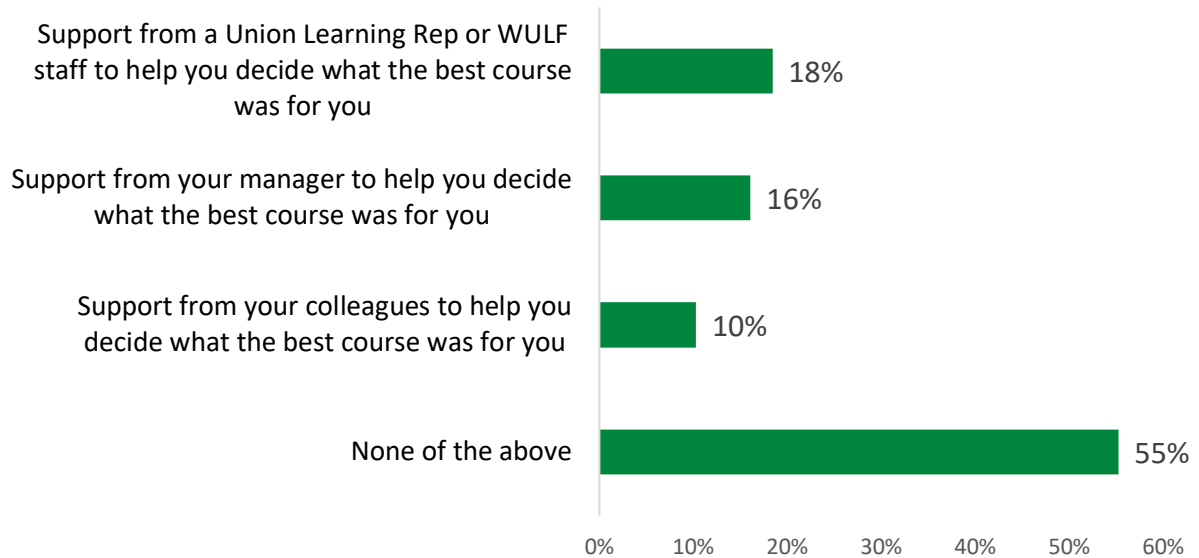


N=503

In order to participate in the training, 54% percent of learners were given full release by their employers. This is down from 61% in the 2023 survey but still up from the 41% who reported this in 2021. Full release refers to an arrangement in which the employer formally permits the employee to attend training during working hours, without requiring them to carry out any work duties at the same time. This typically includes paid time off and recognition that the training contributes to the employee’s professional development.

In the years since the pandemic, learners have increasingly been less likely to have worked with an employer to determine their learning needs (39% in 2022, 34% in 2021 vs 70% in 2020) and this has continued with only 16% of learners reporting that they had support from their line manager to determine what course would be best for them. Learners were also less likely to have received support from a Union Learning Rep (ULR) (18% vs 26% in 2022 and 27% in 2021).

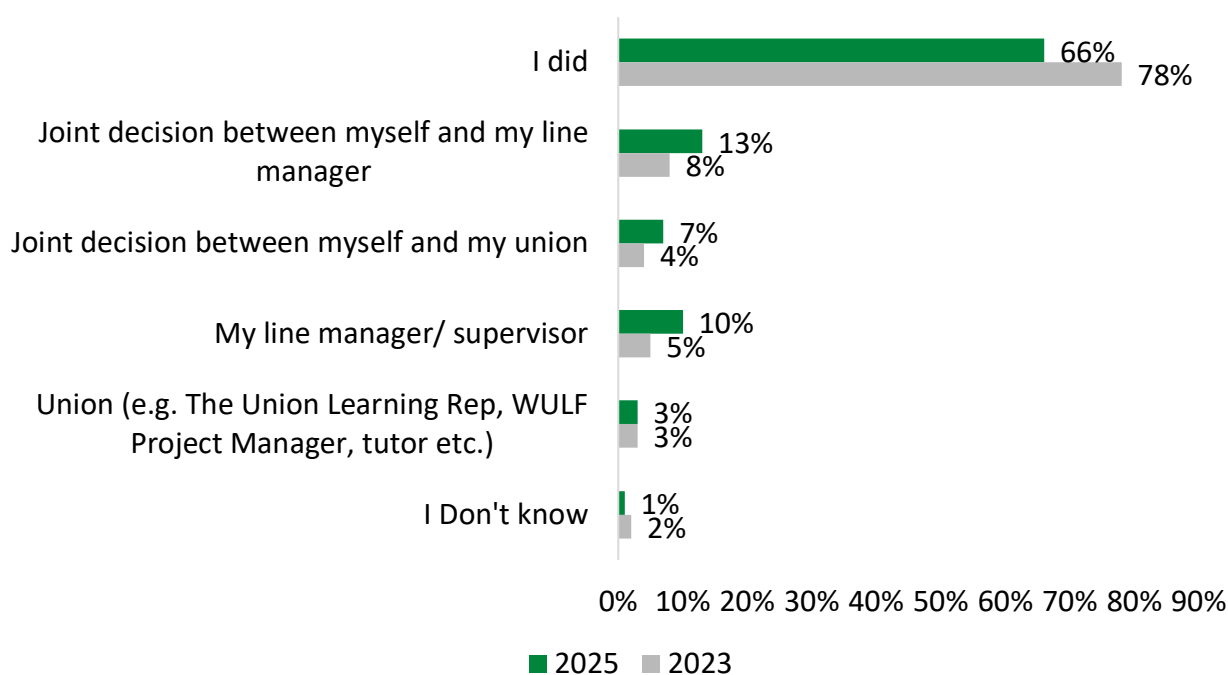
Figure 2.6: As part of applying for or taking part in WULF, did you get any of these types of support?



Base N=424

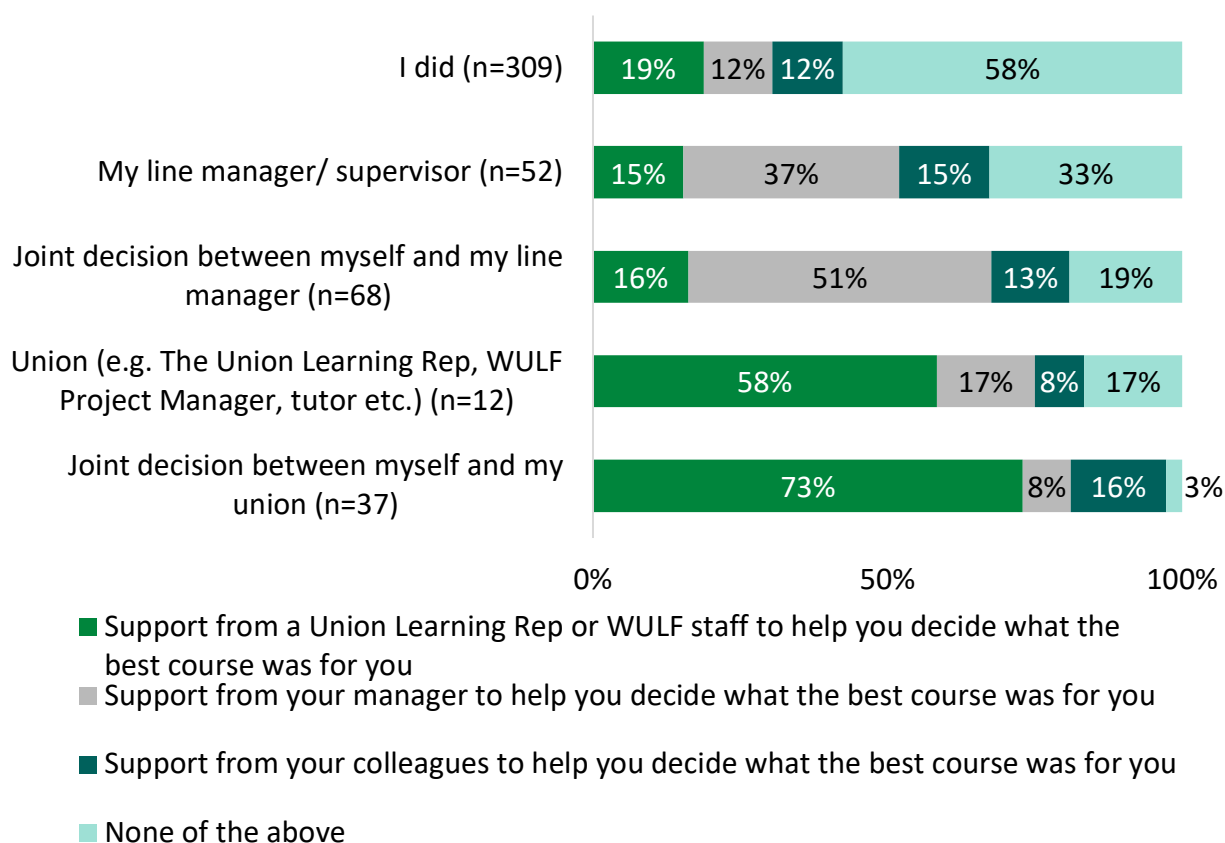
However, learners were also less likely to have decided independently whether this type of training would be beneficial to them in comparison to the final year of the previous programme round (2023).

Figure 2.7: Who decided that this type of training would be beneficial to you?



When comparing responses to these two questions, the survey results suggest that when the course decision was made by the learner’s line manager or supervisor, other sources of support were less commonly reported. In this group, 15% received support from a Union Learning Rep or WULF staff, 37% from their manager, and 15% from colleagues, while 33% reported receiving no support at all. By comparison, learners who made the decision jointly with their line manager were more likely to report support from their manager (51%) and less likely to report having no support (19%). Those who made the decision jointly with their union reported the highest levels of union support (73%) and the lowest rate of no support (3%). These figures indicate that union involvement in the decision-making process is associated with broader support, while manager-led decisions may be more limited in terms of additional guidance. Unsurprisingly, those who decided independently that this learning was suitable for them were least likely to access support.

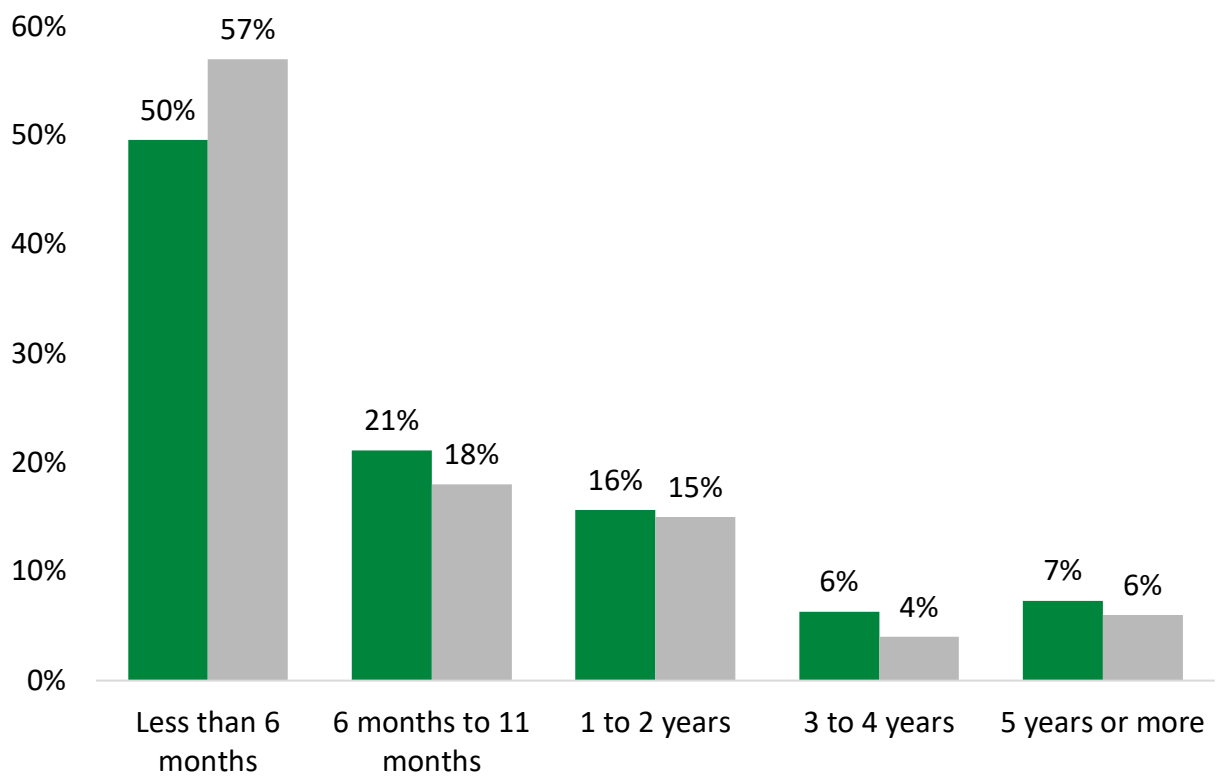
Figure 2.8: ‘Who decided that this type of training would be beneficial to you?’ Cross-tabbed by ‘As part of applying for or taking part in WULF, did you get any of these types of support?’



2.2.1 Prior participation in training

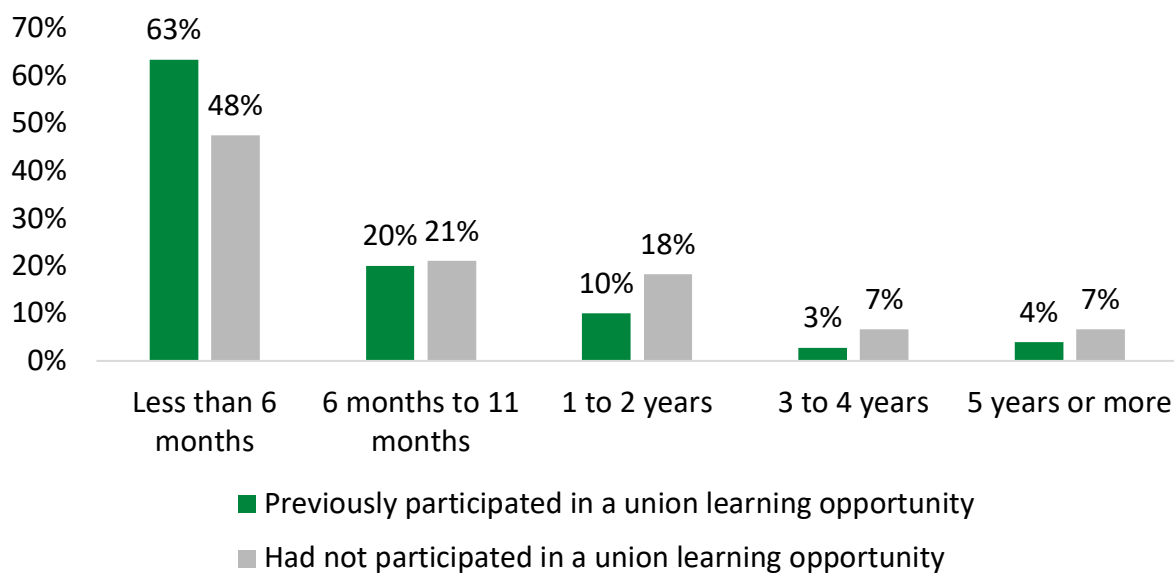
Half of survey respondents (50%) had engaged with training in the last 6 months prior to engaging with WULF provision, down from 57% in the 2023 programme report, whilst 48% had participated in a union learning opportunity prior to this training.

Figure 2.9: Before doing [a course] with WULF, how long it has been since you last took part in some sort of training?



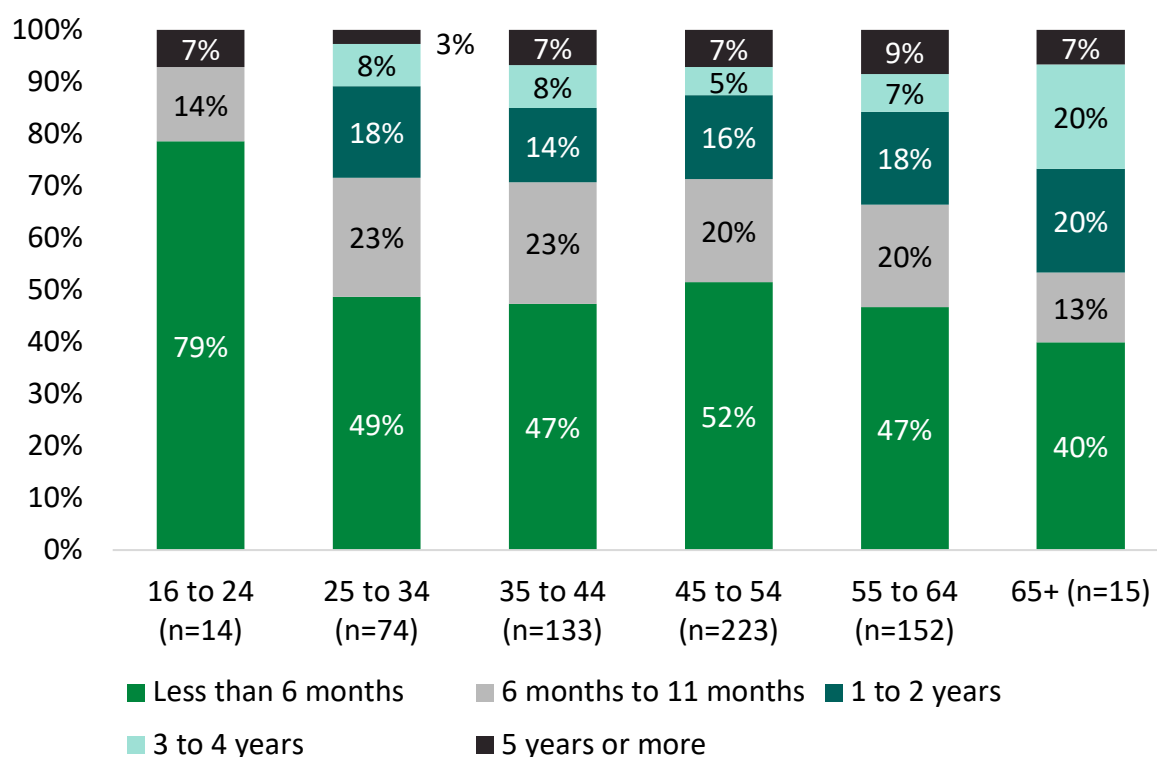
Learners that had previously engaged in a union learning opportunity were more likely to have accessed training more recently.

Figure 2.10: ‘Before doing [a course] with WULF, how long it has been since you last took part in some sort of training?’ Cross-tabbed by ‘Have you been involved in a union learning/training opportunity before?’



Participation in learning also differed by age group with older learners less likely to have undertaken training in the last 6 months. This correlates with research mentioned in Chapter 2.1.1 that participation in adult learning tends to decrease with age.

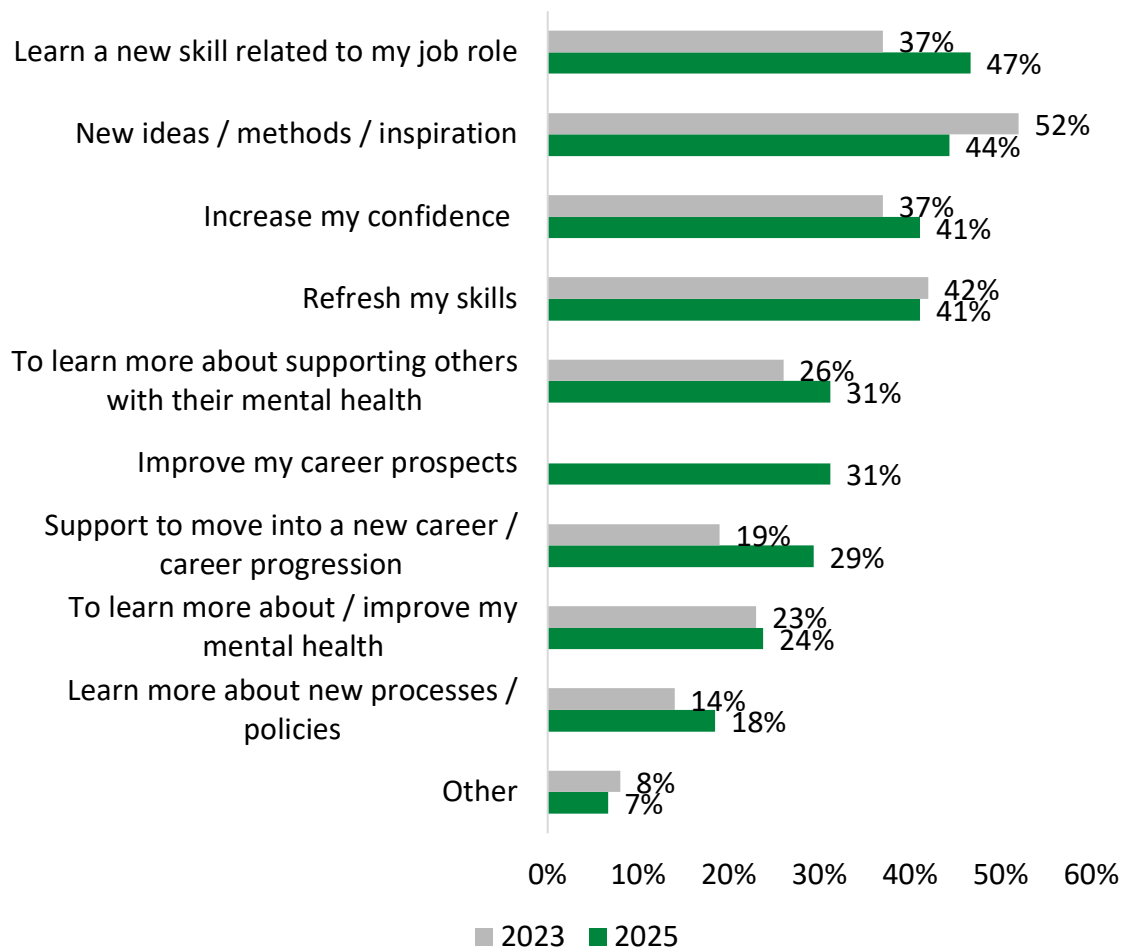
Figure 2.11: 'Before doing [a course] with WULF, how long it has been since you last took part in some sort of training?' Cross-tabbed participants' age



2.2.2 Learners' aspirations

In 2025, the most frequently selected reason for undertaking WULF training was 'learn a new skill related to my job role' (47%), up from 37% in 2023. This replaced 'new ideas, methods and inspiration' (44% in 2025 and 52% in 2023) as the most common response. 'Support to move into a new career / career progression' also increased (29% compared to 19%), while a new option introduced in 2025, 'improve my career prospects', was selected by 31% of respondents. These results suggest a stronger focus on job-related skills and career development, although comparisons with previous years should be treated with caution due to changes in response categories.

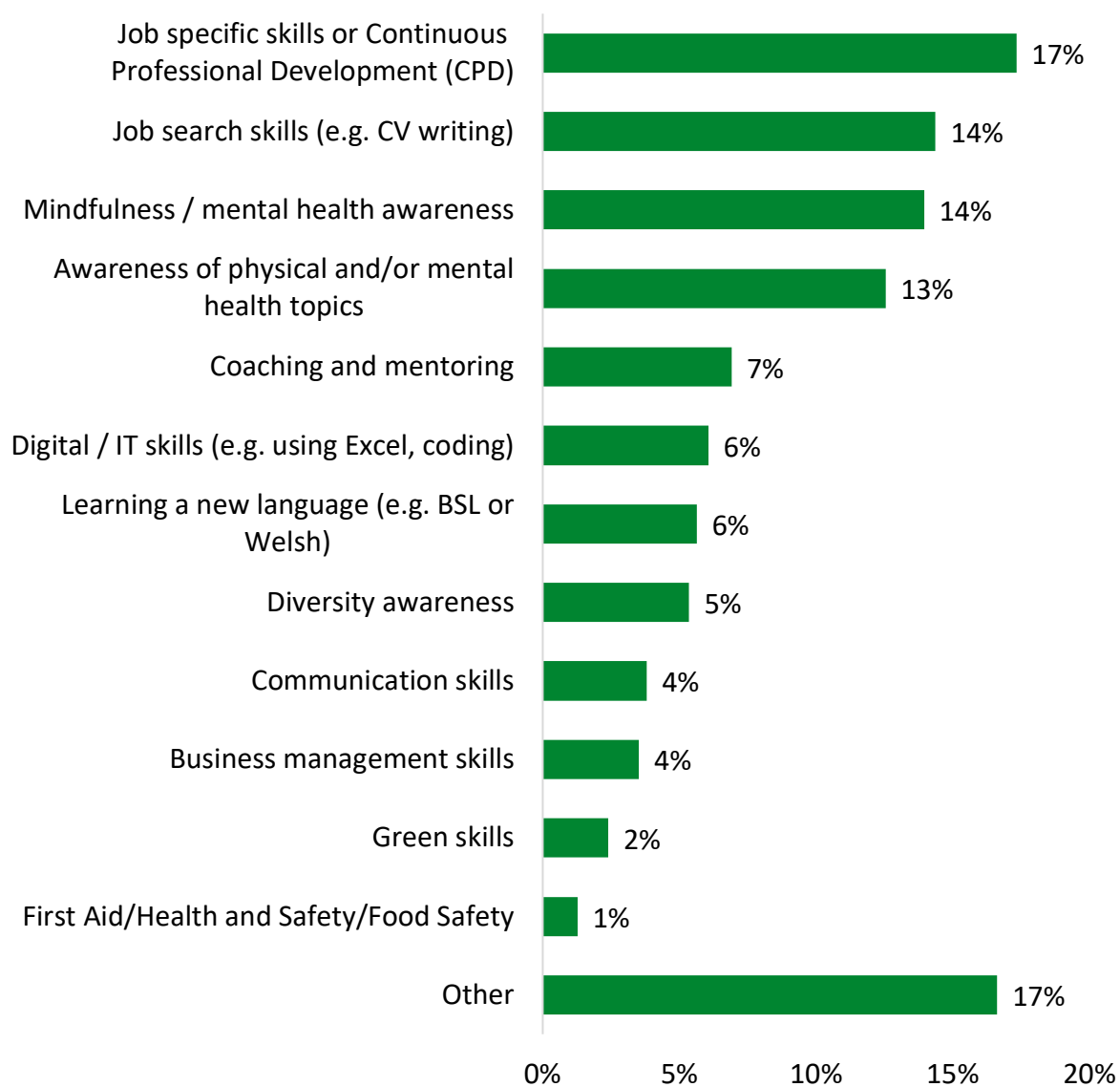
Figure 2.12: What were you hoping to get out of the training?



2.2.3 Training accessed

Learners accessed a variety of training but the most common were related to job specific skills or Continuous Professional Development (17%) and Job Search Skills (14%). Learning around mental and physical health were also frequently accessed.

Figure 2.13: Can you remember what types of training you've accessed through WULF? (multi-response)



Base N=710

2.2.4 Welsh language provision breakdown

The vast majority of learners received training in English, with 5% of courses delivered bilingually, and only 1% exclusively in Welsh, a decrease from 10% in the previous programme. However, 96% of respondents claimed that they were happy with English-only

delivery of the programme, which might indicate a low demand for courses delivered in Welsh.

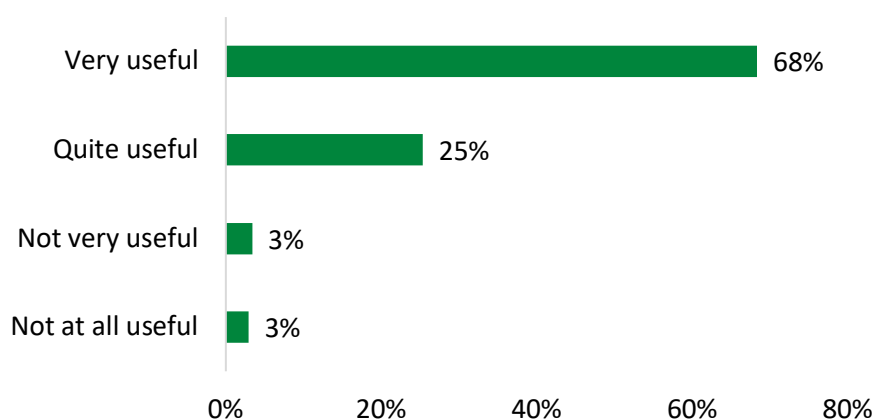
2.2.5 Reflections

Similar to the 2023 survey, respondents were generally positive about the usefulness of the training, with 68% stating that it had been very useful (vs 69% in 2023).

For learners who had undertaken longer course, the proportion of those finding the training to be 'very useful' was 10 percentage points higher for those taking part in face-to-face training compared to remote or blended formats (85%, and 75% respectively)⁹.

When asked if they would recommend participating in the training to their colleagues, 43% responded that they would, while 60% had already done so.

Figure 2.14: How useful did you find the training that you received?



Base N=442

“The training was linked with core values and the structure of my organisation. So it was very relevant.” **Learner**

⁹ Learners who undertook courses less than a day in length are excluded from this analysis as they were not asked about the mode of training delivery.

“The course went into granular detail, covering key aspects of my discipline and teaching me new skills and new ways of thinking. It enabled me to gain a qualification in my subject.” **Learner**

2.3 Impact

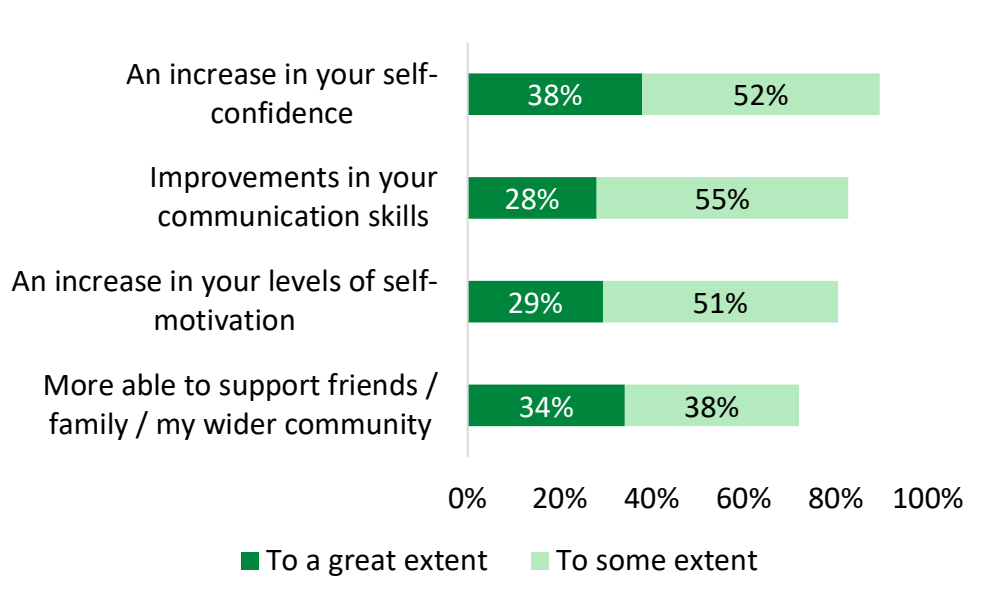
While 11% of respondents noted that they would have secured the training they participated in through another provider, a majority of respondents (51%) either would not have done any training or were unsure whether they would (21%). This suggests that WULF training offers a valuable opportunity for workers to access relevant training.

2.3.1 Impact on work performance

Survey respondents were asked to what extent, and in what ways, the training they received through WULF had benefited them. This question was amended for the 2025 survey in response to feedback regarding the length of the previous survey and taking into consideration the likely impacts for learners undertaking shorter courses. For this programme round, these benefits were split between wider softer skills asked to all learners and job-related outcomes only asked to those who had taken part in courses that were longer than a day.

For softer skills, the majority of learners indicated that they had experienced positive changes, at least to some extent. The most commonly identified impact was an increase in their self-confidence (90%).

Figure 2.15: To what extent has the training you received through WULF led to...? (Softer skills, all respondents)

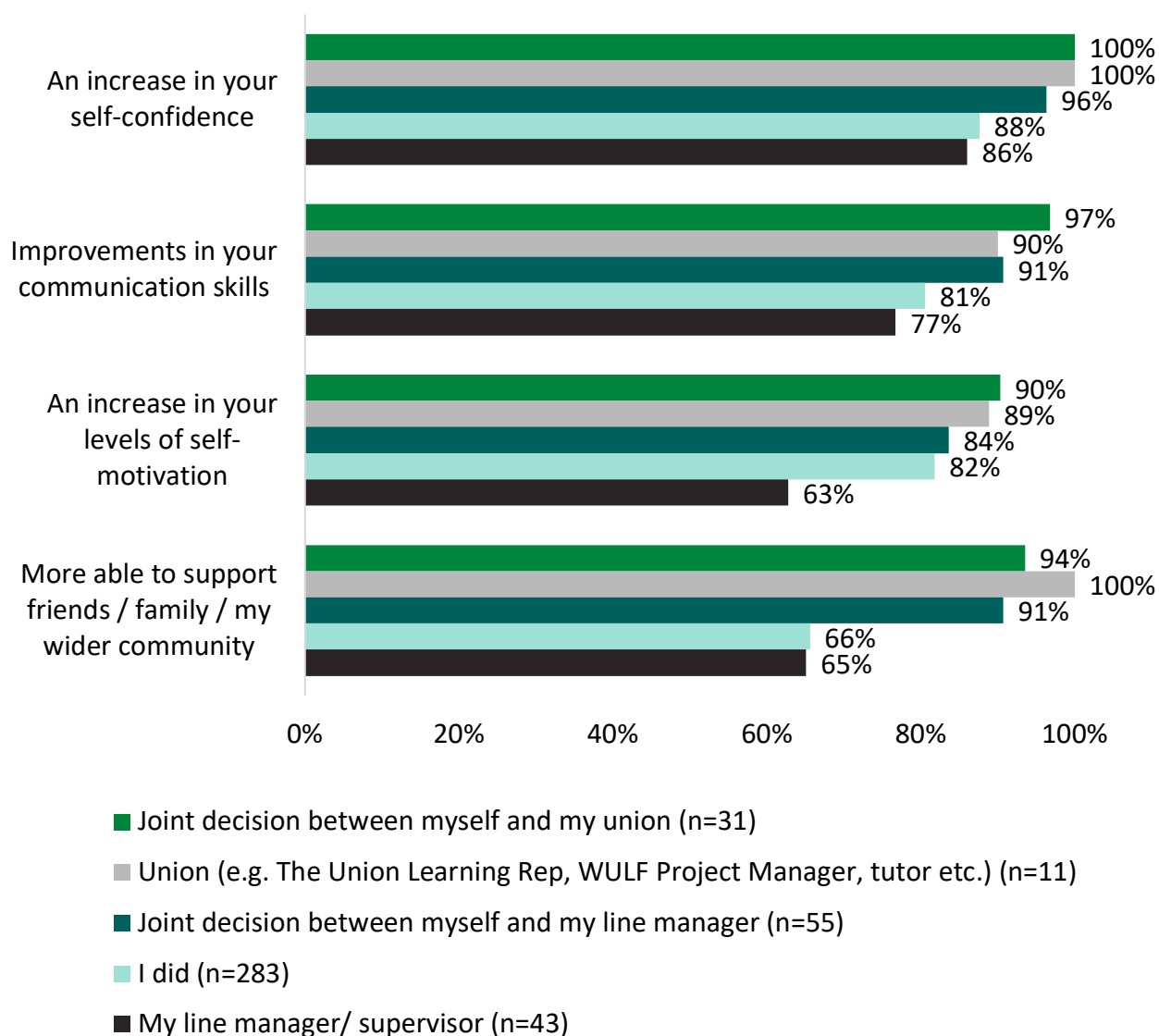


Base: N=430

“Gaining confidence, realising I can do things if I just put my mind to it and have a go.” **Learner**

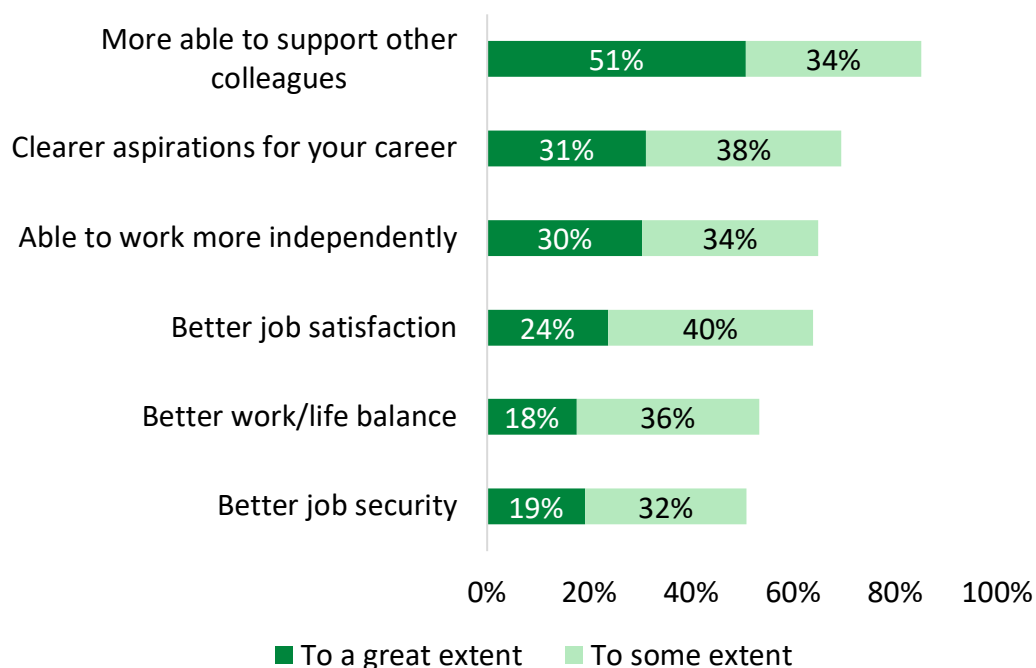
Learners who worked with their union to decide which training was right for them were more likely to report positive outcomes either to a great or to some extent. Similarly, those whose course was selected by union staff reported high levels of benefit across all areas although this finding should be interpreted with caution due to the low number of respondents in this category. Learners whose line manager or supervisor had decided that this training would be beneficial for them without their consultation were least likely to report that it had led to any of these outcomes.

Figure 2.16: 'To what extent has the training you received through WULF led to...?' (Softer skills) by 'Who decided this type of training would be beneficial to you'?



In terms of work performance, learners who had taken part in courses longer than 1 day in duration were most likely to indicate that the learning they had undertaken had meant they were more able to support their colleagues (85%).

Figure 2.17: To what extent has the training you received through WULF led to...? (Work related skills, longer course learners only)



N=169

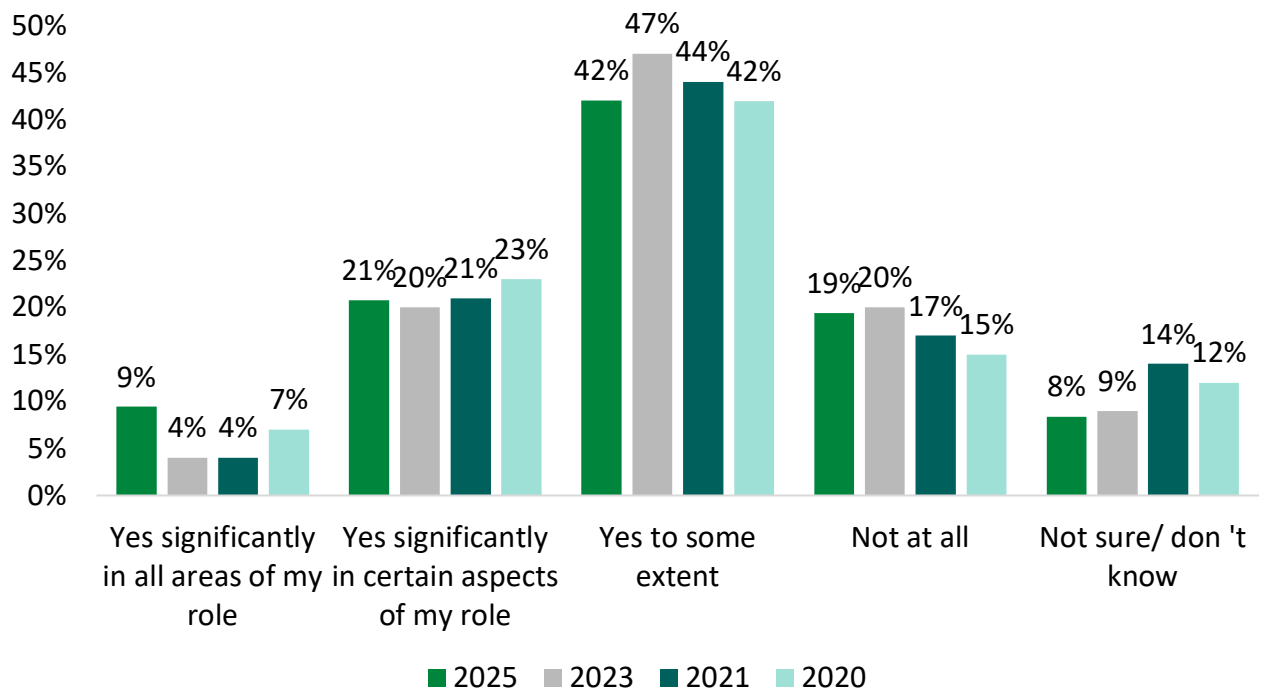
“It gave me the confidence to push forward with my training to become a counsellor and further my career in mental health.” **Learner**

“Because I have gained new skills, techniques and increased confidence in those areas that I studied in. One course had a certificate attached so this was good evidence for future employer.” **Learner**

“You often become stale in achieving new qualifications "I am too old for new things" is often cited. I now have begun setting up a new business on the back of my training.” **Learner**

The majority of respondents said that the training had improved their work to at least some extent, with 30% perceiving the training to have improved their work performance significantly in all or some aspects of their role. Most notably, the proportion of learners who reported that the training had had a significant impact in all areas of their role has more than doubled compared to the previous two survey rounds (9% vs 4%).

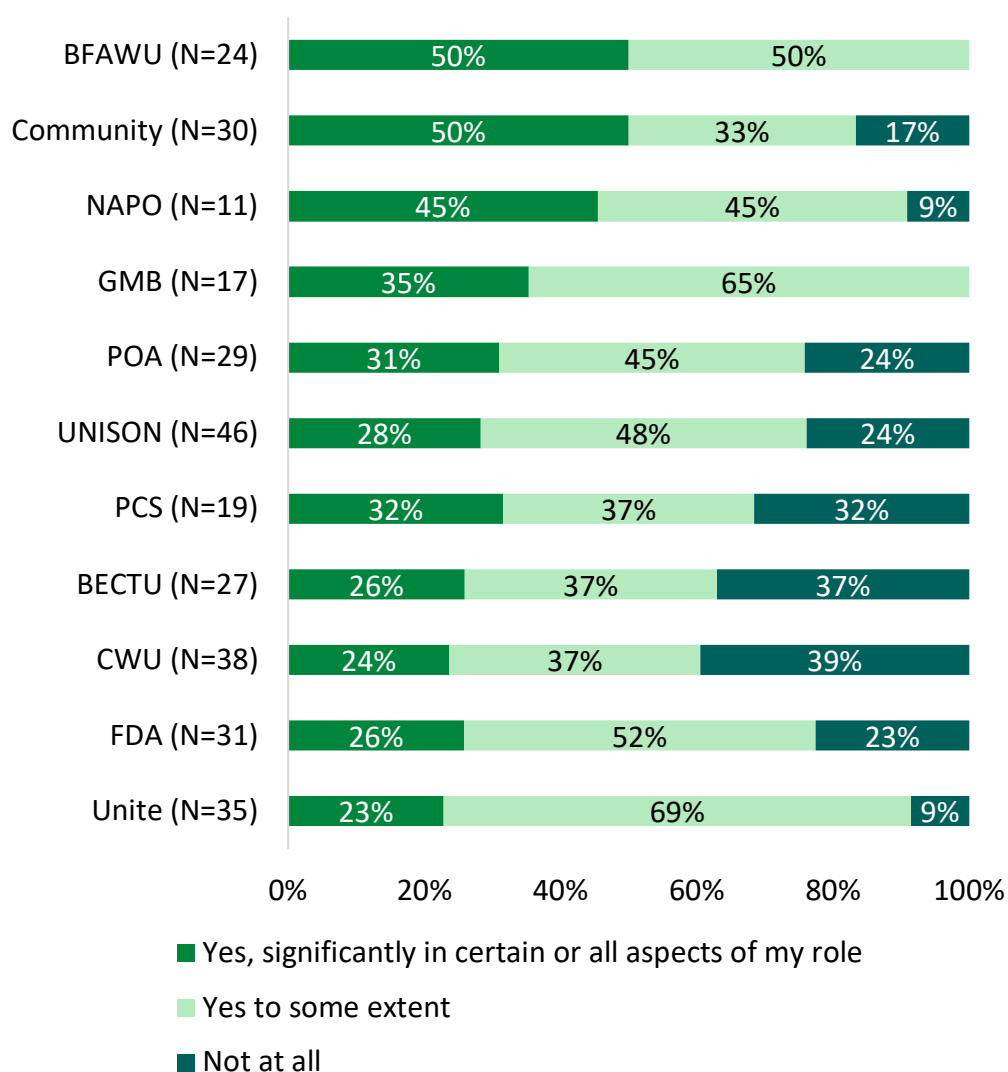
Figure 2.18: Has the training you have received improved your work performance?



Base N=371

When broken down by union, learners from BFAWU, Community and NAPO were most likely to report significant improvements in all or certain aspects of their role.

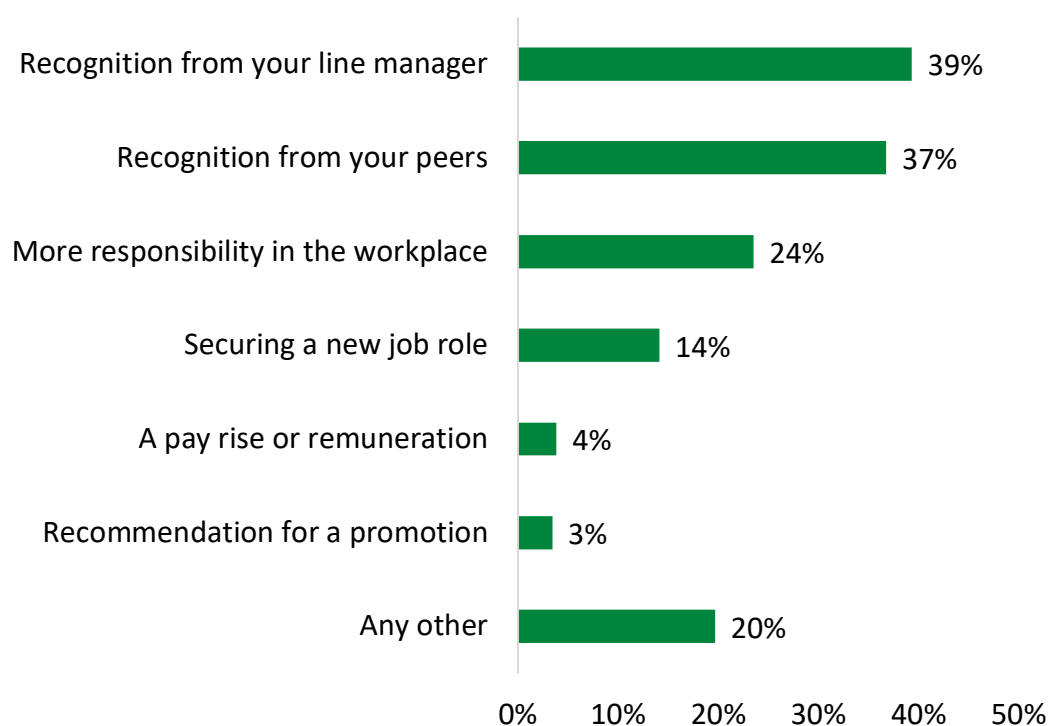
Figure 2.19: impact on work performance by union



Excludes 'don't know' responses and unions with less than 10 responses.

Learners who took part in courses lasting longer than a day were asked whether improvements in their work performance had led to any further benefits. The most commonly reported outcomes were recognition from their line manager (39%) and from peers (37%). Fourteen per cent of respondents said the training had helped them secure a new job role. Of these, 76% (24 out of 33) also reported receiving a pay increase. When combined with those who indicated they had received a pay rise or other form of remuneration, this amounted to 11% of all learners who responded to the question.

Figure 2.20: Which of the following (if any) did that change in performance lead to?



Base N=234

Among self-employed and freelance workers, the training has helped 60% (18/30) of the respondents secure more work, which aligns with the trends observed in previous surveys.

2.3.2 Retention

It is positive to note that 48% (32/67) of learners reported that the training had increased their likelihood of staying with their current employer. Where learners said that the training had not impacted on this, the most common reason given was that they would have stayed with their employer regardless (51%, 18/35).

2.3.3 Attitudes towards training/learning

When asked whether the training had changed their attitude towards training, the majority indicated that they had always enjoyed training (52%, 223/431). However, the proportion of learners saying that it had a positive impact on their attitude has increased when compared to previous survey rounds.

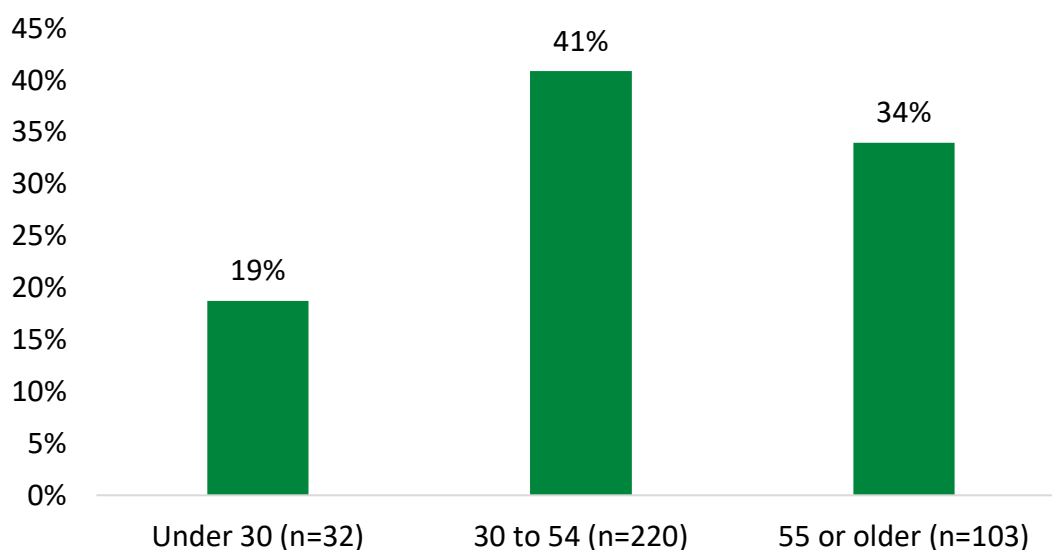
Table 2.3: Has your attitude to learning /training changed as a result of the support you have received?

	2020 Survey	2021 Survey	2022 Survey	2025 Survey
No, I have always enjoyed training	63%	59%	59%	52%
Yes, it has had a positive impact	27%	30%	27%	35%
Yes, it has had a negative impact	1%	2%	1%	1%
No, no impact at all	10%	9%	13%	12%

Base: 2020 n=519, 2021 n=674, 2022 n=497, 2025 n=431

This effect was most commonly observed in mid-career learners aged 30-54, as 41% of this sub-group indicated that the training had a positive impact on their attitude towards learning.

Figure 2.21: Proportion of each age cohort that identified a positive impact on their attitudes towards learning

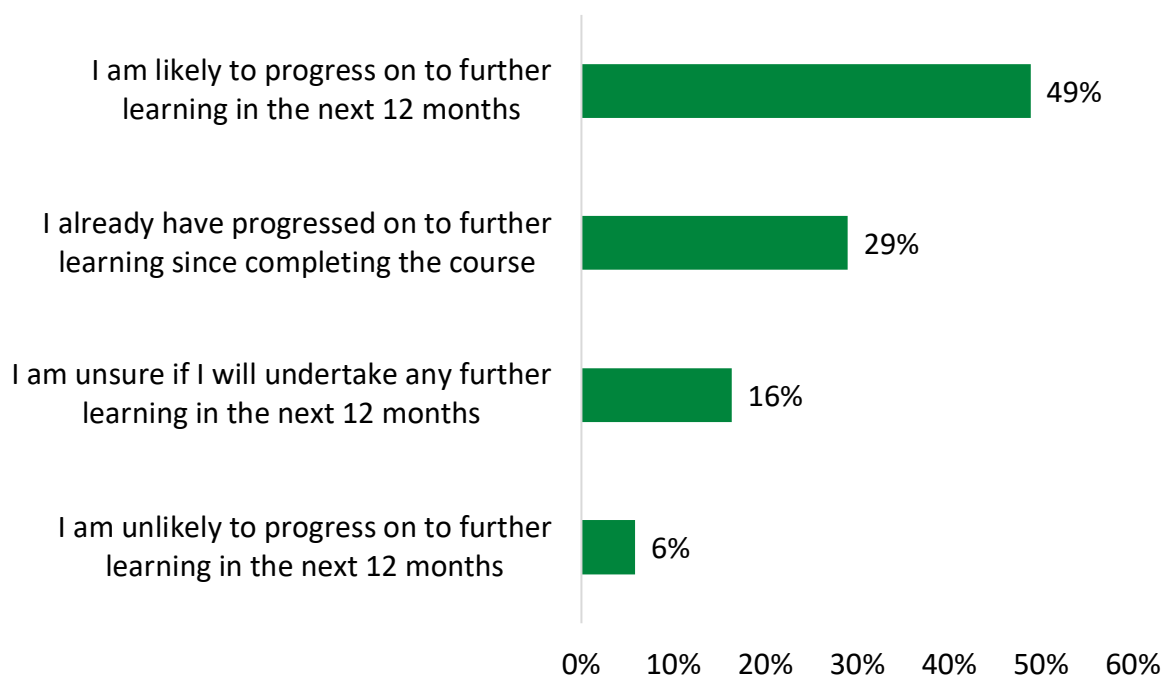


Overall, 96% of learners said that they would recommend participating in learning or training to others with 36% saying that they had already done so.

2.3.4 Progression to additional training

At the time of survey, 78% of learners had either already progressed to further learning (29%) or were likely to do so within the next 12 months (49%).

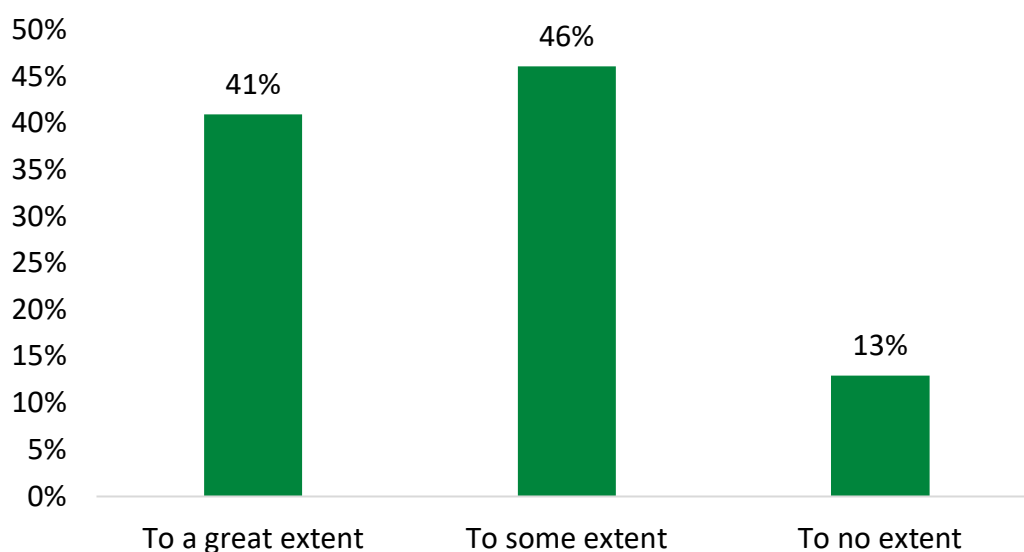
Figure 2.22: Having now completed the course, how likely is it that you will progress on to further learning?



Base N=332

87% of participants reported that taking part in the WULF-funded course had encouraged them to continue with further learning to some or a great extent, demonstrating the programme's effectiveness in supporting ongoing engagement in adult learning.

Figure 2.23: To what extent did participating in the course funded by WULF encourage you to progress on to further learning?



Base N=332

“I'm surprised there isn't more projects like this, learning is essential to all of us, it helps us focus on things and meet new people, gain skills and confidence it gets us out of our bubbles for a moment and gives us better sight. There needs to be more of this.” **Learner**

“After being able to gain access to various courses, I am surprised with how helpful and accommodating WULF are.” **Learner**

The courses that learners progress to, after their WULF training, included but were not limited to: Digital and data skills (29%), Coaching and Mentoring (13%) and Mental Health (7%). Around 30% of the respondents (30 out of 100 that provided an example of a course they attended after WULF training) indicated that the training they are continuing is directly related to one accessed through WULF provision.

“I first done the basic excel course and then done the intermediate level which has helped me a lot with my job” **Learner**

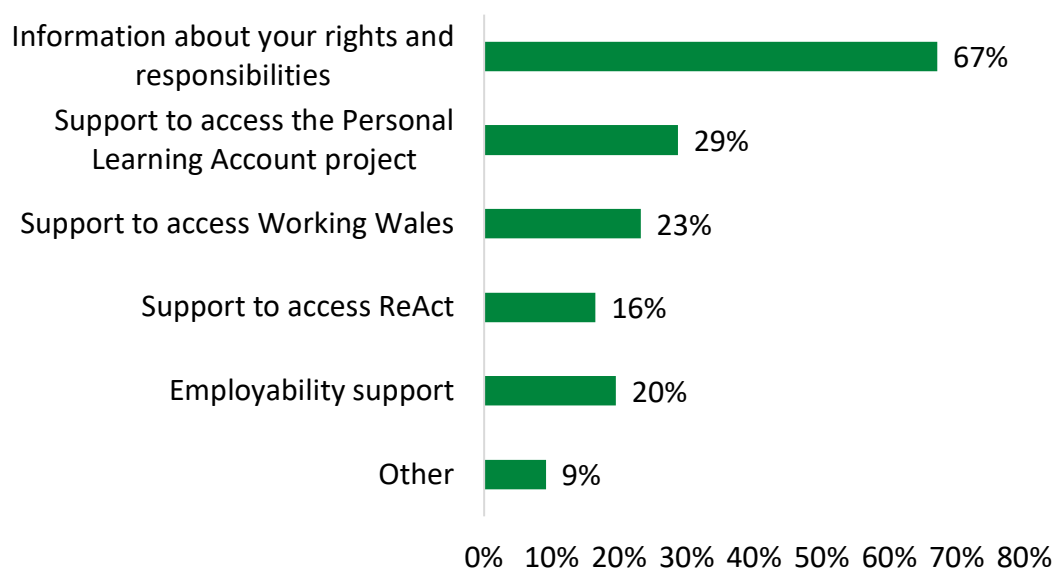
“I left school with nothing as I had no confidence in myself. I've gone on to foster and do courses in mental health and other course to help young children and young adults in believe in themselves” **Learner**

2.3.5 Union participation and wider support

The majority of learners who responded to the survey were already part of a union (71%, 570/805). Of the 206 that were not members, 6% became members after taking part in a WULF learning opportunity.

As part of taking part in the learning opportunity, 39% (164/424) received other support from the programme. The most common was information about their rights and responsibilities, however WULF also played a role in helping refer learners on to other Welsh Government employability provision.

Figure 2.24: Did you also receive any of the following support through the programme?



Contact us



0330 122 8658



wavehill@wavehill.com



wavehill.com

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