

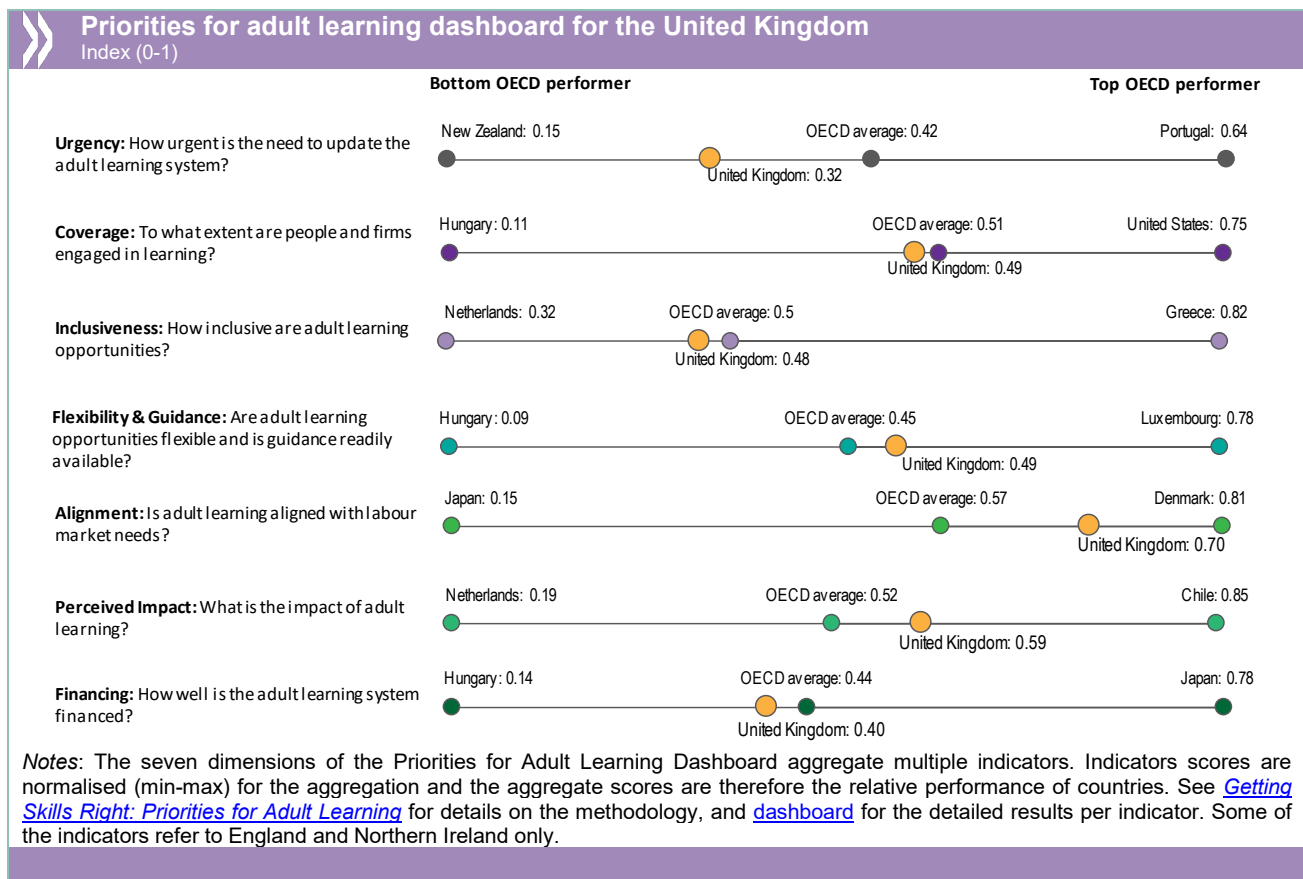


## How future-ready is the United Kingdom's adult learning system?

The world of work is changing. Digitalisation, globalisation and population ageing are having a profound impact on the type and quality of jobs that are available and the skills needed to perform them. The extent to which individuals, firms and economies can reap the benefits of these changes will depend critically on the readiness of adult learning systems to help people develop and maintain relevant skills over their working careers. To explore this issue, the OECD has developed a new [dashboard on Priorities for Adult Learning \(PAL\)](#) for comparing the readiness of each country's adult learning system to address future skill challenges.

### OECD Priorities for Adult Learning dashboard

The PAL dashboard compares the future-readiness of countries' adult learning systems in seven dimensions: i) urgency, ii) coverage, iii) inclusiveness, iv) flexibility and guidance, v) alignment with skill needs, vi) perceived training impact, and vii) financing. The dashboard focuses on adult learning that is job-related, i.e. adult education and training that is expected to have some effect on performance and productivity at work.



### The United Kingdom's PAL results

Structural changes are putting the United Kingdom's adult learning system under mounting strain, although less so than in other OECD countries. The old-age dependency ratio is expected to increase from 28% in 2015 to 44% in 2050, and trade openness and engagement in foreign demand have increased substantially in the last ten years. While the share of adults with low levels of cognitive skills is below the

OECD average, it is worrying that skill levels of young adults do not exceed those of older adults despite their higher levels of educational attainment. Unless their skills can be improved the competitiveness of the country is likely to suffer. The adult learning system should give adults more and better access to upskilling and reskilling opportunities to increase their resilience in light of these structural changes and skill issues.

According to the Priorities for Adult Learning dashboard, the United Kingdom performs around the OECD average along most dimensions, including coverage, inclusiveness, and flexibility and guidance. According to the OECD's Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC), 49% of adults participated in job-related adult learning during the previous 12 months. This share drops to 28% for low-skilled adults, and 29% for long-term unemployed. The lack of flexible training opportunities is a typical obstacle to higher participation rates; in the UK, training was organised as distance learning for only 14% of participants.

The United Kingdom scores relatively well overall in the area of alignment with labour market needs but in some areas it performs less well. Only 19% of employers report hiring difficulties and 92% of employers claim that they assess their skill needs. Nonetheless, these assessments appear to be used poorly by employers as the United Kingdom is one of the countries with the lowest correspondence between the skills reported as development priorities by employers and the skills targeted in their training activities. Also, workers facing a high risk of skills obsolescence participate significantly less in training than other workers. Workers in jobs with a significant risk of automation, for example, have a participation rate in training that is 21 percentage points lower than workers in jobs with a low risk of automation.

### Future-ready adult learning policies

The United Kingdom has already put in place several policy initiatives to improve access to high-quality training opportunities that are aligned with labour market needs. These include:

- *Coverage and inclusiveness:* The Flexible Learning Fund provides public grants to projects in England that develop methods of delivering learning that are flexible and easy to access for adults who are in work, or returning to work, with either low or intermediate level skills.
- *Alignment:* A Digital Skills Partnership has been set up to bring together government and national and local employers and charities in an effort to address the digital skills gap in a more collaborative way. From 2020 onwards, low-skilled adults in the United Kingdom will have access to fully-funded digital skills programmes, in line with the already existing maths and English programmes.
- *Impact:* The Department for Education publishes summary tables of outcome-based success measures of government-funded training programmes on its website, including sustained employment and learning rates by adult learning provider. This helps individuals and employers make informed training choices.
- *Financing:* To incentivise adults to (co-) finance their training activities, Advanced Learner Loans exist for adults in England to upskill and re-skill. Repayments are due at the end of the course but only if the beneficiaries earn more than GBP 25 000 a year.

The OECD report [Getting Skills Right: Future-ready adult learning systems](#) provides a wide range of good practice policy examples from OECD and selected non-OECD countries that could serve as inspiration for the United Kingdom to improve further the future-readiness of its adult learning system.

### What can policy makers do?

- ▶ *Improve the coverage of adult learning* by raising awareness among adults and employers about the benefits of training, and helping them make informed training choices.
- ▶ *Reduce barriers to training participation*, by making opportunities flexible and adapted to the needs of adult learners.
- ▶ *Put in place targeted training incentives and support services* to engage adults with weak labour market attachment in training.
- ▶ *Assist employers, and especially SMEs, in thoroughly assessing their skill needs* and developing effective skills development plans that address these needs.
- ▶ *Assist the transition of adults employed in jobs undergoing structural changes*, by providing targeted support measures and training incentives.
- ▶ *Put in place adequate and sustainable financing*, including through public funding and incentives for employers and individuals to contribute.

#### Further reading in the “Getting Skills Right” series:

[Future-ready adult learning systems](#)  
[Engaging low-skilled adults in learning](#)  
[Creating responsive adult learning systems](#)  
[Making adult learning work in social partnership](#)  
[Getting Skills Right: United Kingdom](#)

#### Data

Explore the [Priorities for Adult Learning dashboard](#)

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This work was prepared with the support of the JPMorgan Chase Foundation

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