Assessment Innovation: Functional Skills Online Practice Paper Solution

Evaluation report

Project Manager: Victoria Dobney

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Runway Training are a specialist provider of online Functional Skills and Leadership and Management training. Delivering training nationwide, Runway Training supports thousands of learners a year to achieve nationally recognised qualifications, offering flexible approaches to learning experiences with online, classroom and onsite training.

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Foreword

In December 2022, Runway Training were awarded funding from the NCFE, as one of the successful candidates in their Assessment Innovation Fund. The pilot aimed to investigate the impact of Runway Training's online practice paper solution to help understand the extent to which it supported Functional Skills learners, tutors and providers with robust and efficient preparation for final assessments.

This report examines the impact of Runway Training's online practice paper solution on tutors' and learners' experiences of preparing for Functional Skills exams, in comparison with traditional methods of assessment preparation. It also explores learner and tutor preference. As well as this, it provides reflections on lessons learned from this pilot for future projects.

The final results of the project are drawn from limited data due to challenges faced with learner and tutor recruitment, as well as engagement and retention, which must be taken into account in terms of the reliability and validity of the findings. However, some conclusions are drawn from the existing triangulated data gathered from Runway Training's learners between September 2023 and January 2024.

We would like to thank the NCFE team for their guidance and support throughout this project, particularly Alex Brown-Adams, Dean Blewitt and Sakina Khan. Thanks also goes to all of the FE providers who shared their time, experiences and support of the pilot, even if they weren't able to fully participate. With FE providers facing financial challenges and high staff turnover, and considerable workloads, we appreciate all of the time given – big or small. Finally, we would like to thank Alix Robertson from The Centre for Education and Youth (CfEY) for her continued support in flexibly guiding and advising us with this project.

1. Executive summary

1.1   Introduction

Over 1.7 million Functional Skills exams are taken every year in England, and with some concerning pass rates from the NCFE (2023a), City and Guilds (2013) and Pearson (2023) being as low as 40%. In this context, Runway Training has spent the last three years developing an online practice paper solution to support both tutors and learners with the process of preparing for final examinations. Unlike traditional methods of printing out paper-based practice exams, or sending pdfs to learners via email to be completed by hand, Runway Training's solution was designed to allow learners to complete practice papers in a web browser (with no need to download software) in the same format as their final online assessments. This solution includes having functions such as: an on-screen timer and calculator, as well as question 'flagging' functions etc. Runway Training's in-house markers then mark these papers quickly and reliably, having been rigorously trained and frequently moderated. Learners and tutors wait no longer than 48 hours to receive robust and bespoke feedback and scores. Learners have correct answers modelled for them, which helps them and their tutors to identify gaps in their knowledge, know which areas to focus on in their revision and pass a final exam.

Outsourcing the process of conducting and marking Functional Skills practice papers has enabled tutors who use Runway Training's online solution to develop curriculum delivery, spend more time working with learners, as well as increase time for continued professional development (CPD). With FE tutors being overwhelmed with workload, as discussed by Ofsted (2019) and Roberts (2023), Runway Training have invested in this software development not just for their learners, but for their staff too.

Runway Training saw first time pass rates at 86% in 2021-2022. Although this could be due to many factors, this pilot aims to identify the impact of their online practice paper solution as part of this success.

1.2 Limitations

Although many learners consented to participating in the pilot, there were some withdrawals, as well as general disengagement and participation from courses. It was found that even when registering learners on the pilot and gaining consent, that some of these learner still did not fulfil the pilot requirements by completing practice papers or surveys that were sent to them.

The pilot faced particular challenges with participant drop out, including Skills Training UK who went into liquidation. Other participants stated that they didn't want to overwhelm tutors and/or had large staff turnover and needed to focus on induction and retention of staff. With organisations withdrawing at various stages, the pilot faced time delays in launching and proceeding. Limited participation in the pilot did not appear to be driven by lack of interest or

confidence in Runway Training's online practice paper solution, but more by logistical and pragmatic concerns. This impression aligns with research from City and Guilds (2014), whose findings showed that 74% of FE tutors surveyed view the use of technology as useful for tests or assessments. This report also showed that 62% of tutors felt that they lacked the time to investigate available technology to support their teaching and assessment (see Section 3.3.4 for further detail).

2. Project summary

2.1   Aims

This project set out to identify the impact of Runway Training's Functional Skills online practice paper solution for learners and tutors with regards to: learner confidence, exam readiness and first-time pass rates. It also explored learner and tutor assessment preparation preferences.

2.2 Overview of design

Phase 1
Phase one required participating learners to complete surveys consisting of closed questions at three points:
- Before sitting their practice paper;
- After receiving their practice paper score and feedback; and
- After sitting their final exam, but before receiving their final result.[1]

The learners were randomly selected into two groups: Group A using traditional methods of final assessment preparation (for example, printed or emailed pdfs of practice papers marked by tutors), and Group B using Runway Training's online practice paper solution.

Phase 2
Phase two required tutors and administrative staff engaged in the pilot to take part in semi-structured interviews.

Phase 3
Phase three required tutors who had been asked to participate in the pilot, but did not do so, to complete a survey. This was included in the later stages of the pilot, as part of cyclical reflection to improve final conclusions.

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[1] Due to very limited data gathered from these surveys they will not be reflected on in this report, due to lack of validity and reliability. Additionally, the majority of these learners were deemed not ready for their final exam, so there was limited data on pass results from this sample.

2.2   Research team roles

Victoria Dobney has primarily managed the research team, with administrative support from Sam Mihalceanu and Ben Thornton. The Runway IT department has been involved in updates to the online practice paper solution system, alongside additional practice paper moderator Charlotte Bond when adding new papers from different exam boards to meet participant requirements. Our academic research partner, Alix Robertson, Head of Engagement at CfEY, provided guidance on evaluation planning, tool development and reporting.

2.3   Participant numbers

Participants included a range of organisations providing Functional Skills for their learners, such as: Childbase; Halifax Opportunity Trust; First Avenue Training; Buckinghamshire Adult Learning; and learners at Runway Training. These Functional Skills learners, and their journeys on their courses, were diverse in terms of their backgrounds and their work placements.

Table 1: Participation numbers

Training provider	Number of tutors	Number of learners	Quantitative surveys	Tutor interviews
Runway Training	3	56	98	2
Childbase	2	8	4	0
Halifax Opportunity Trust	2	19	19	0
First Avenue Training	1	9	14	1
Buckinghamshire adult learning	1	7	11	1

Due to lack of external engagement, this report will also comment on baseline and midpoint surveys conducted with all learners engaged in Functional Skills Level 1 and 2 courses at Runway Training from September 2023 – January 2024, along with first time pass rates within this period. Although this group does not provide data in equivalent numbers of learners using traditional methods of assessment preparation on paper or pdfs, it does provide some insight into experiences with Runway Training's online solution. In addition, most learners will have had experience in completing practice papers on paper/pdf historically throughout their educational career, thus providing some degree of comparative experience.

Table 2: All Functional Skills Level 1 and 2 learners at Runway Training (September 2023 – January 2024) surveys and exam result numbers

Training provider	Quantitative surveys	Final exam results
Runway Training	1,399	345

2.5 Methodology

The project methodology was developed and refined with support from Alix Robertson from CfEY. The research used a mixed methods approach, with three structured online surveys for participating learners and a semi-structured interviews with four tutors and administrative staff members from Functional Skills departments in participating organisations. In order to comply with GDPR, all learners and tutors were able to review information regarding consent to participate at all points where data was collected. These consent forms were digitally stored on a secure sit and will be removed at the conclusion of this pilot.

Due to lower learner and tutor engagement in the process than initially expected, a further survey was subsequently sent out to all providers and tutors who were initially invited to take part in the pilot. These were developed and supported by staff within the NCFE, with a vested interest in understanding lack of pilot participation.

Evaluating both qualitative and quantitative data aimed to triangulate findings, endeavouring to provide reliable and valid data. It was decided by the research team to include the additional surveys from Runway Training learners, despite the lack of third surveys, for further comparison. Reflecting upon these first two surveys with the first time pass rate results would help aid analysis and conclusions.

2.5.1 Phase 1: September 2023 – December 2023
Learner surveys: the surveys consisted of closed questions regarding learner confidence and preference in exam preparation (either online using Runway Training's online practice paper solution, or traditional method of delivering practice papers – mainly on paper or using pdfs). The surveys aimed to capture learner's insights before sitting practice papers, after sitting papers and receiving feedback and marked work, and after their final exams (but before results were given). These surveys were sent out digitally, either embedded within the online practice papers or emailed to learners by tutors or administrative staff within the specified timeframes. Questions were answered using Likert Scales.

2.5.2 Phase 2: December 2023
Tutor and Functional Skills administrative staff interviews: these semi-structured interviews were conducted at the closing stages of the pilot. They were designed to capture tutor and administrative staff perspectives in

terms of their preferences in how to prepare learners for their final exams, and the impact of using both Runway Training's online practice paper solution, as well as traditional methods of delivering practice papers. Project manager, Victoria Dobney, conducted interviews, which were recorded and transcribed using Microsoft Teams.

2.5.3 Phase 3: December 2023

Non-participating tutor surveys: these surveys consisted of open and closed questions for tutors and providers who were contacted regarding pilot participation, but who did not end up taking part. The surveys were designed to gain insight into: barriers to taking part in the pilot; Functional Skills first time pass rates; current views of subject content delivery; delivering of assessment preparation; and what tutors and administrative staff thought would be best for tutors and learners regarding final exam preparation.

3. Pilot Findings

3.1. Phase 1 – learners

It is challenging to compare the data between the surveys completed by those who did Runway Training's online practice paper solution and those who used paper/pdf base practice exams, as the sample size was much smaller in the later (see Table 1). The validity of data collected was therefore compromised and so this pilot also analyses further baseline and midpoint surveys from all Runway Training Functional Skills learners (for both Levels 1 and 2) within the time period of September 2023 and January 2024 (see Table 2). As these were embedded in all of the Runway Training's online practice papers, following pilot protocols, this data is comparable to the other pilot learners. The planned third survey was not automated for these learners and therefore not completed, but reflections can be made on the first time pass rates for Runway Training's Functional Skills learners within this time period.

The following trends can be seen from drawing on all survey results:

3.1.1 Data from the baseline surveys compared to that of the midpoint surveys, showed that learners completing paper/pdf based practice exams showed a decline in disagreement that online exam preparation would make them feel confident (see Fig. 1 and 2)

Fig. 1 (all percentages rounded)   *Fig. 2 (all percentages rounded)*

Baseline survey - paper based/pdf practice papers

Midpoint - paper based/pdf practice papers
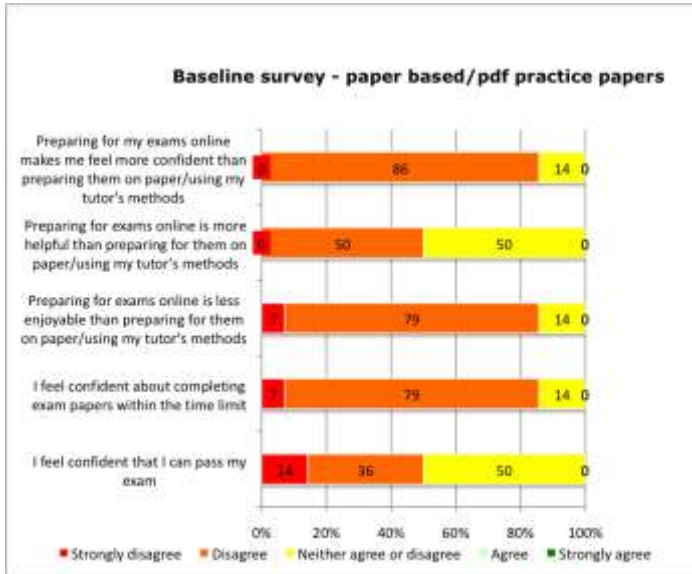
Within this group, there was no change in the learner's view that online exam preparation made them feel more confident for preparing for exams than paper/pdf based practice assessments. The baseline surveys showed that 86% did not agree initially, but this decreased to just 10% in the midpoint surveys. This could suggest more indifference or openness to consider online assessment preparation as being a tool to support learner confidence.

3.1.2 Learners using Runway Training's online practice paper solution reported some increase in preference for completing practice papers using this system, with regards to their confidence (see Fig. 3, 4, 5 and 6)

Pilot learners disagreement rate went from 38% - 14% and RT learners from 21% - 12%. Pilot learners agreement rate went from 36% - 30% and RT learners from 52% - 59%. Although the pilot learners agreement rate did decrease slightly, those disagreeing decreased, and indifference (neither agree or disagree) increased.
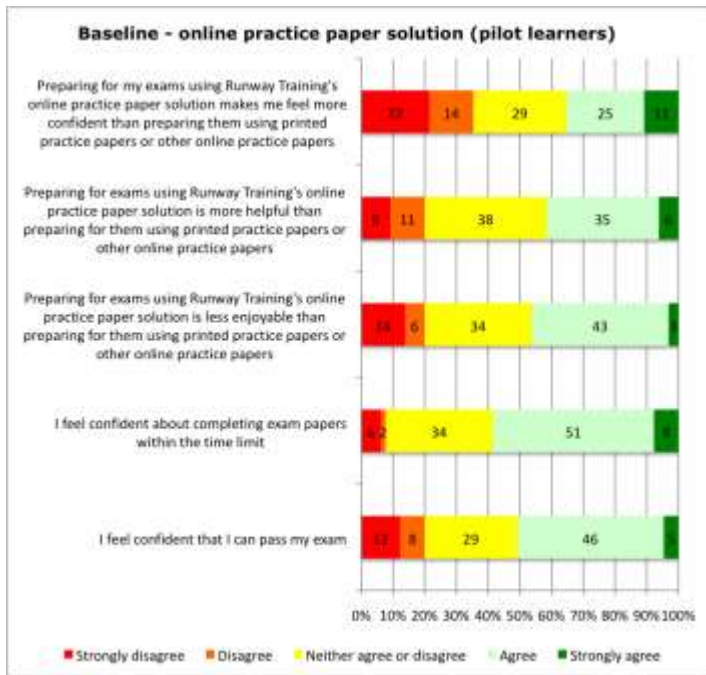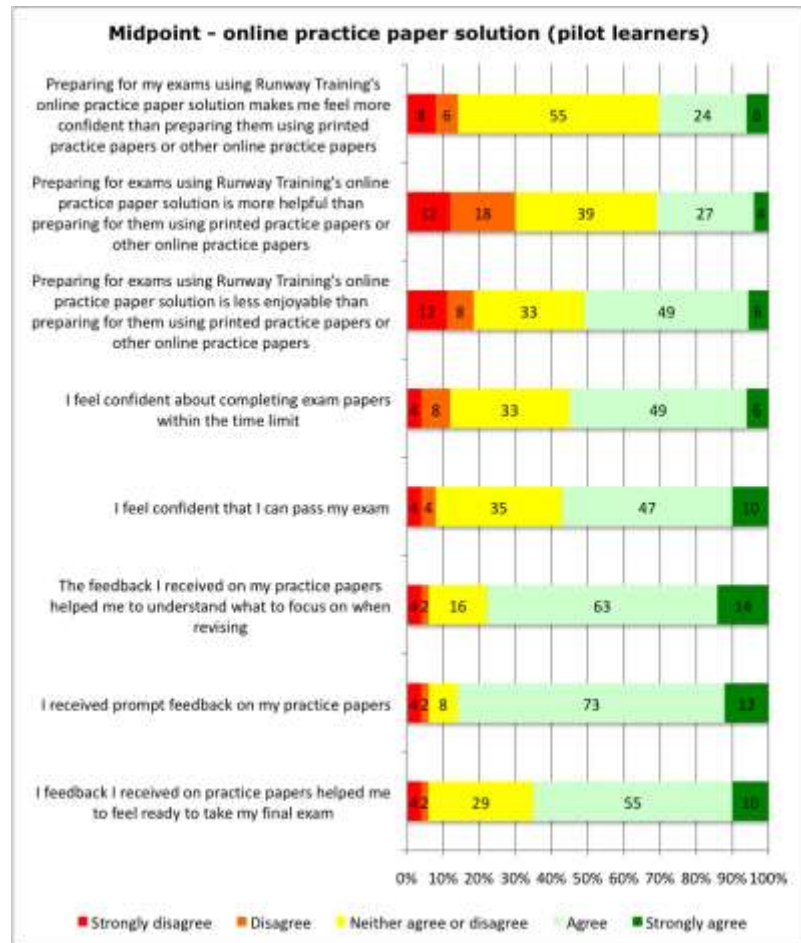
Fig. 3 (all percentages rounded)   *Fig. 4 (all percentages rounded)*

Baseline - online practice paper solution (pilot learners)

Preparing for my exams using Runway Training's online practice paper solution makes me feel more confident than preparing them using printed practice papers or other online practice papers — 12 | 14 | 29 | 25 | 11

Preparing for exams using Runway Training's online practice paper solution is more helpful than preparing for them using printed practice papers or other online practice papers — 9 | 11 | 38 | 35 | 8

Preparing for exams using Runway Training's online practice paper solution is less enjoyable than preparing for them using printed practice papers or other online practice papers — 14 | 6 | 34 | 43 |

I feel confident about completing exam papers within the time limit — 12 | 34 | 51 | 8

I feel confident that I can pass my exam — 13 | 8 | 29 | 46 |

Legend: ■ Strongly disagree ■ Disagree ■ Neither agree or disagree ■ Agree ■ Strongly agree

Midpoint - online practice paper solution (pilot learners)

Preparing for my exams using Runway Training's online practice paper solution makes me feel more confident than preparing them using printed practice papers or other online practice papers — 8 | 6 | 55 | 24 | 9

Preparing for exams using Runway Training's online practice paper solution is more helpful than preparing for them using printed practice papers or other online practice papers — 12 | 18 | 39 | 27 | 4

Preparing for exams using Runway Training's online practice paper solution is less enjoyable than preparing for them using printed practice papers or other online practice papers — 12 | 8 | 33 | 49 |

I feel confident about completing exam papers within the time limit — 4 | 8 | 33 | 49 | 5

I feel confident that I can pass my exam — 4 | 4 | 35 | 47 | 10

The feedback I received on my practice papers helped me to understand what to focus on when revising — 2 | 16 | 63 | 14

I received prompt feedback on my practice papers — 2 | 8 | 73 | 13

I feedback I received on practice papers helped me to feel ready to take my final exam — 2 | 29 | 55 | 10

Legend: ■ Strongly disagree ■ Disagree ■ Neither agree or disagree ■ Agree ■ Strongly agree

3.1.3 Midpoint surveys illustrated mixed preference for both online and traditional methods of practice papers with regards to helpfulness (see Fig. 2, 4 and 6)

It is interesting to note here that for the RT learners (with a larger sample at 533 surveys) 58% said that they found the online practice paper solution more helpful than traditional methods. The legacy of this preparation system might have provided more positive responses, as the pilot did not change their learning journey. For those taking part in the pilot using the online practice paper system, the agreement rate was lower, at 31%.

The proportion of learners' completing paper/pdf based papers reported that they found the online practice papers more helpful than paper-based or pdf options, increasing by 20%. However, the proportion reporting the opposite also increased by 30%. These changes in survey responses from the baseline to the midpoint may have been influenced by learner fatigue or mood changes after getting practice paper results.
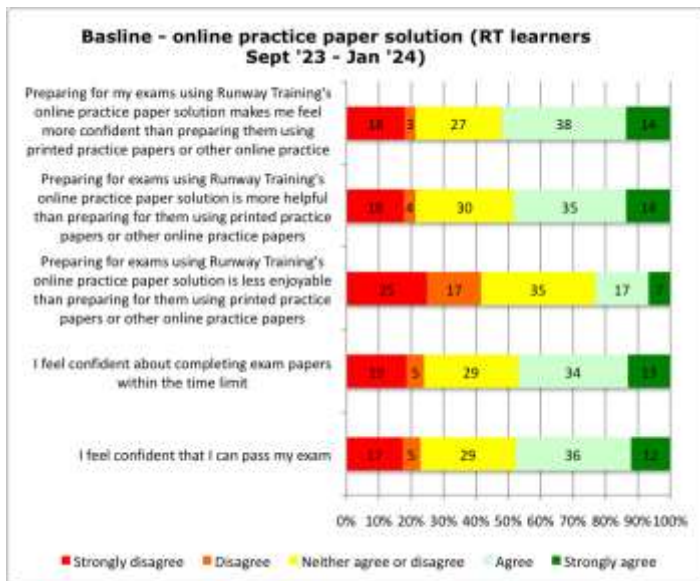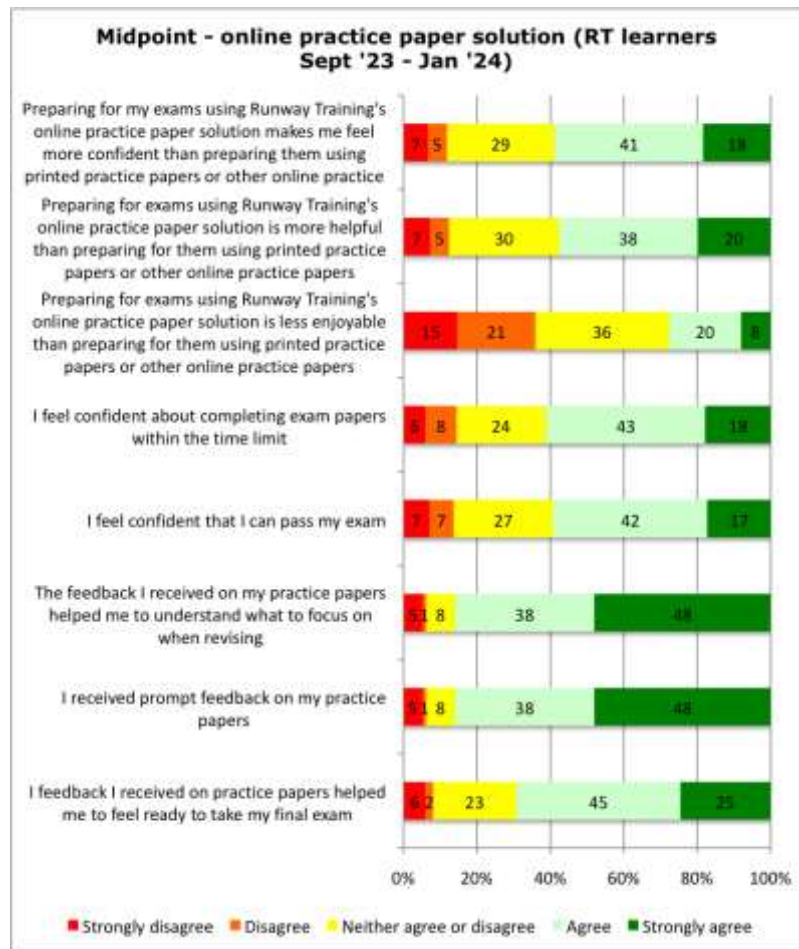
Fig. 5 (all percentages rounded)   Fig. 6 (all percentages rounded)

Basline - online practice paper solution (RT learners Sept '23 - Jan '24)

Midpoint - online practice paper solution (RT learners Sept '23 - Jan '24)

3.1.4 Learners completing practice papers with Runway Training's online practice paper solution showed some agreement for this method being less enjoyable (see Fig. 7)

Fig. 7 (all percentages rounded)

Midpoint surveys - 'preparing for exams using Runway Training's online practice paper solution is less enjoyable than preparing for them using printed practice papers or other online practice papers'
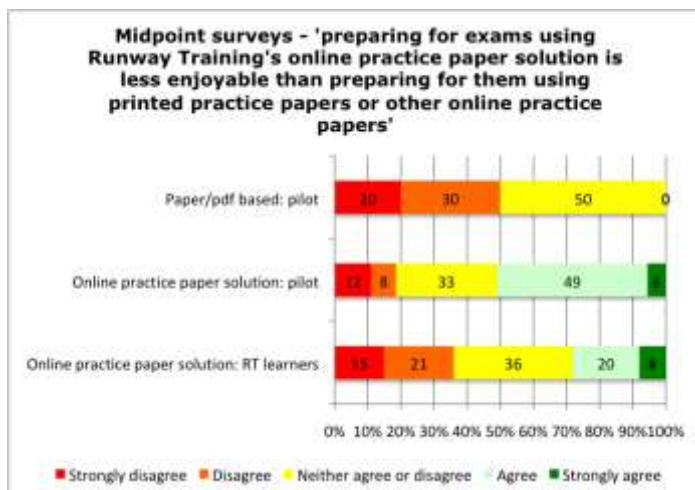
The results for these questions did not show much change from the baseline to midpoint surveys.

Factors, which may have affected results could be: personal preference in learning style; SEND or age (to be discussed in Section 3.2.2.2); anxiety around subject content; or anxiety around a change in exam preparation. There was limited change to learner view on this from the baseline to midpoint surveys.

3.1.5 Confidence in completing exams within the time limit after completing a practice paper was higher for those sitting paper/pdf practice papers than using the online practice paper solution.

This higher rate was at 90% (Fig. 2) in comparison to the learners using Runway Training's online practice paper solution, at 55% (Fig. 4) and 61% (Fig. 6).

3.1.6 Confidence in passing exam increased from baseline to midpoint surveys for all practice paper methods, but to a much higher rate for those using Runway Training's online practice paper solution

Learners completing paper/pdf based practice papers saw confidence in passing exams increased from 0% - 20% (Fig. 1 and 2). For those learners in the pilot using Runway Training's online practice paper solution, this rose from 51% - 57% (Fig. 3 and 4). For all RT learners using the online solution, it rose from 48% - 59% (Fig. 5 and 6).

3.1.7 Midpoint surveys from learners using Runway Training's online practice paper solution illustrated higher levels of agreement that the feedback from their practice papers helped them understand what to focus on when revising

Pilot learners using the online practice paper solution agreed with 77% (Fig. 4) and RT learners with 86% (Fig. 6). The pilot learners using paper/pdf based papers agreed that the feedback was helpful for revision at 60% (Fig. 2).

3.1.8 Midpoint surveys from learners using Runway Training's online practice paper solution illustrated higher levels of agreement that they received prompt feedback from their practice paper

Pilot learners using the online practice paper solution agreed with 85% (Fig. 4) and RT learners with 86% (Fig. 6). The pilot learners using paper/pdf based papers agreed that practice paper feedback was prompt at a much lower percentage of 30% (Fig. 2). Reasons for differences in promptness of practice paper return will be discussed later in Section 3.2.2.3.

3.1.9 Midpoint surveys from learners using Runway Training's online practice paper solution illustrated higher levels of agreement that their feedback from their practice papers made them feel ready to take their final exam

Pilot learners using the online practice paper solution agreed with 65% (Fig. 4) and RT learners with 70% (Fig. 6). The pilot learners using paper/pdf based

papers agreed that practice paper feedback helped them feel ready to take their exam at a lower percentage of 40% (Fig. 2). The analysis from Section 3.1.8 and here could be linked, as promptness of the return of marked practice papers could have an impact on whether the learner feels exam ready.

Considering impact – online practice paper solution legacy

The larger group of Runway Training learners, who have tutors who have benefited from the reduced workload of marking practice papers, were more likely to pass their practice papers – 55% passed from Runway Training, in comparison to 16% from the external providers (see Fig. 8 and 9). This difference in practice paper results could reflect on the type of learner sitting the papers; many Runway Training learners are contracted by corporate companies, in contrast to some of the external learners who took part in this pilot and are completing their Functional Skills as part of Level 2 courses.
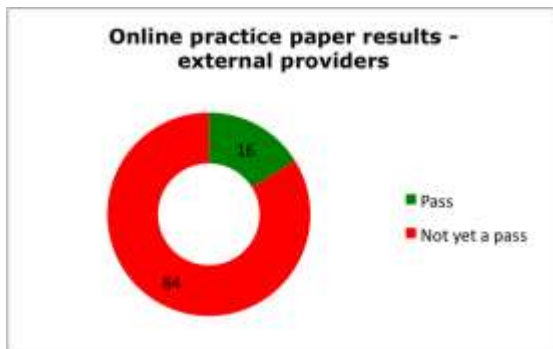
Fig. 8 (all percentages rounded)

Online practice paper results - external providers
- Pass: 16
- Not yet a pass: 84

Fig. 9 (all percentages rounded)

Online practice paper results - Runway Training
- Pass: 55
- Not yet a pass: 45

With additional time to focus on content delivery, CPD and skills in reducing maths and exam anxiety, it is possible that these tutors are less overwhelmed than non-Runway Training tutors and more able to deliver improved quality courses. This may have contributed to their more positive survey feedback, thus skewing some data.

Furthermore, as show in Fig. 10, the first time pass rates for all Functional Skills exams sat by Runway Training learners from September 2023 – January 2024 (the time period of survey collection) is high, particularly when compared to the national averages published by NCFE (2023a), Pearson (2023) and City and Guilds (2023). Although this report is unable to fully assess the impact of

Runway Training's online practice paper solution on first time pass rates due to lack of data, the levels of confidence, exam readiness and promptness in feedback from practice papers from learners using their system (seen from the midpoint surveys), could be part of Runway Training's success.

Fig. 10 First time pass rates of 345 exams sat from September 2023 – January 2024 by all Runway Training learners on Functional Skills programmes (percentages rounded)
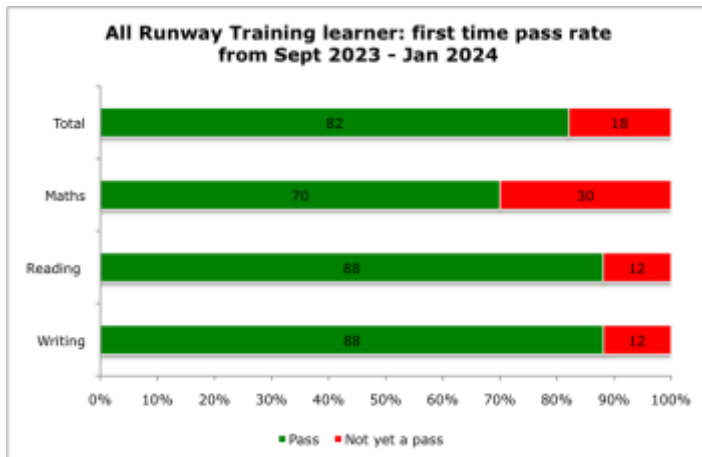
3.2 Phase 2 – participating tutors/administrative staff

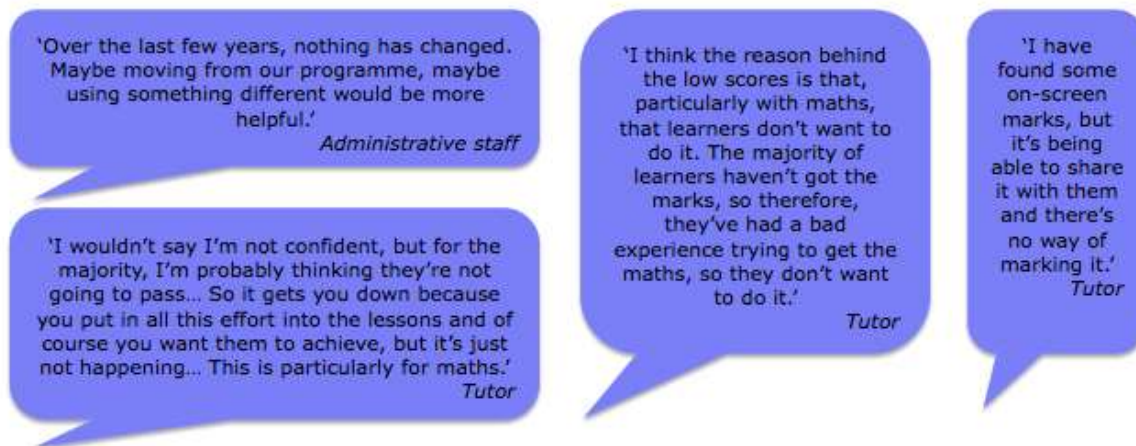**Tutor/administrative staff interviews**

In regards to what went well, the feedback regarding Runway Training's online practice paper solution was, on the whole, positive (see Fig. 12) highlighting the importance of it being 'user-friendly'. In particular, it was commented by one tutor that some apprenticeship learners with high work commitments had benefitted from Runway Training's online practice paper solution, as the flexibility was conducive to evening and weekend time allocation for practice papers (see Fig. 13). As well as this, one tutor emphasised that Runway Training's solution filled a gap in online practice paper provision, which they felt was much needed as their learners mostly complete their exams online.

3.2.1 Current practice

External tutors and administrative staff in interviews highlighted several issues that affect their current practice in preparing learners for exams, including:

- A lack of learner engagement with and enthusiasm for their courses;
- A lack of online practice paper options that replicate final exam conditions, resulting in a lack of confidence that pass rates from paper or pdf practice exams will reflect pass rates in online final exams;
- A lack of innovation in course delivery and
- Low pass rates, particularly in maths.

Fig. 11 – Tutor and administrative staff responses regarding current practice

'Over the last few years, nothing has changed. Maybe moving from our programme, maybe using something different would be more helpful.'
Administrative staff

'I wouldn't say I'm not confident, but for the majority, I'm probably thinking they're not going to pass... So it gets you down because you put in all this effort into the lessons and of course you want them to achieve, but it's just not happening... This is particularly for maths.'
Tutor

'I think the reason behind the low scores is that, particularly with maths, that learners don't want to do it. The majority of learners haven't got the marks, so therefore, they've had a bad experience trying to get the maths, so they don't want to do it.'
Tutor

'I have found some on-screen marks, but it's being able to share it with them and there's no way of marking it.'
Tutor

3.2.2 Learner and tutor preference

3.2.2.1 Runway Training's online solution reduced workload for tutors and administrative staff

Runway Training administrative staff reflected on the legacy of using the Runway Training's online solution and how it helped reduce administrative tasks and marking time for tutors, therefore allowing them to focus on other work duties. Fig. 12 quotes administrative staff highlighting the ease of Runway Training's online practice paper solution, as well as it being 'user friendly'.

Fig. 12 – Tutor and administrative staff responses to tutor preferences

'So for those that sort of went into their final exam, I feel like it did prepare them... It's been easier than how we do it now.'
Administrative staff

'I thought it was really user friendly.'
Administrative staff

'I think that learners have that experience and having the mock exams are pretty close to the real exam... So they've got that experience, they're ready for when their sit their final exam. There's not as much anticipation I'd say.'
Administrative staff

'It's just easier on the [online] system. We don't have to send papers out, then have them being returned back to ask, then asking them to be forwarded to mark. It just goes straight to you, so it cuts out a massive chunk of my job to be honest. If it is online, it's a lot quicker, more streamline.'
Administrative staff

'Currently, one of our tutors will sort of look at the people through a screen whilst they do a practice paper to make sure they're not cheating. So it takes that sort of out. It takes out the tutors time and from that, yes, I'd say that's the main thing that has gone well.'
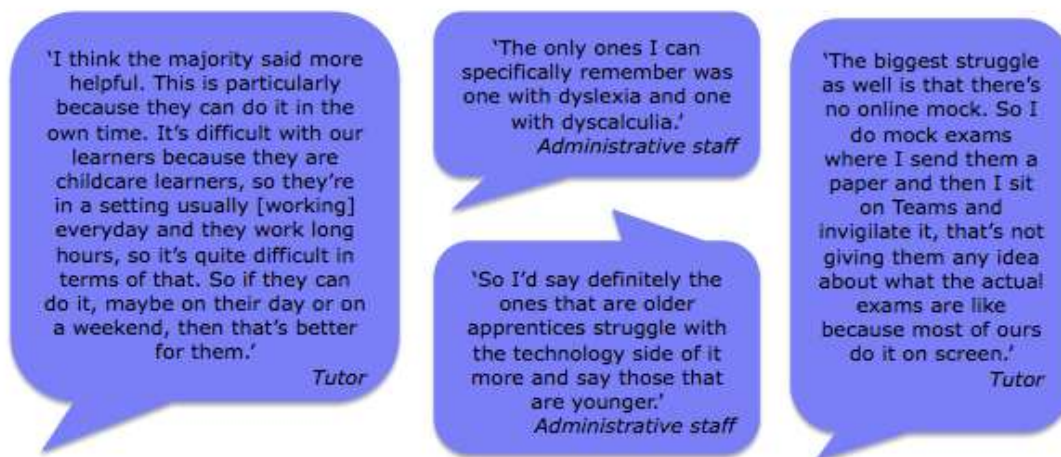*Administrative staff*

As discussed, with an overwhelmed FE workforce with challenging government budgets to direct resourcefully, one could see how using efficient technology to relieve tutor and administrative work commitments, such as Runway Training's

online practice paper solution, could provide the breathing space that these interviewees (although limited in number) suggest.

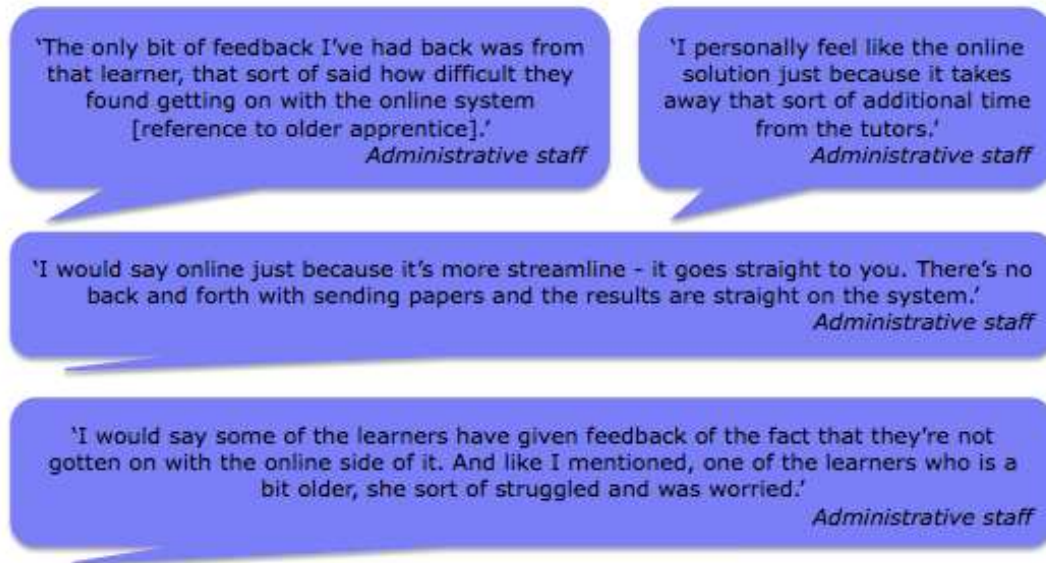### 3.2.2.2 SEND and age can affect preference of exam preparation

Feedback regarding learner preferences showed that learners with SEND (including dyslexia and dyscalculia) and mature learners preferred traditional methods of assessment preparation, rather than Runway Training's online practice paper solution (see Fig. 13 and 14). For those less confident or experienced in using IT, the anxiety of having to do practice papers online caused barriers to completion, meaning their marks did not reflect their ability. For these learners, both at Runway Training and with external providers, paper based exams are often requested for the final assessment as well. Despite this trend, one tutor felt that age was not necessarily a factor preventing learners from accessing and feeling confident with doing practice papers online.

Fig. 13 – Tutor and administrative staff responses to learner preferences

'I think the majority said more helpful. This is particularly because they can do it in the own time. It's difficult with our learners because they are childcare learners, so they're in a setting usually [working] everyday and they work long hours, so it's quite difficult in terms of that. So if they can do it, maybe on their day or on a weekend, then that's better for them.'
Tutor

'The only ones I can specifically remember was one with dyslexia and one with dyscalculia.'
Administrative staff

'So I'd say definitely the ones that are older apprentices struggle with the technology side of it more and say those that are younger.'
Administrative staff

'The biggest struggle as well is that there's no online mock. So I do mock exams where I send them a paper and then I sit on Teams and invigilate it, that's not giving them any idea about what the actual exams are like because most of ours do it on screen.'
Tutor

Tutors, and administrative staff in particular, voiced preference for Runway Training's 'streamline' approach to the administration of practice papers, collection of results and process for informing them when to book final exams (Fig. 14).

Fig. 14 – Tutor and administrative staff responses to tutor and learner preferences

> 'The only bit of feedback I've had back was from that learner, that sort of said how difficult they found getting on with the online system [reference to older apprentice].'
> *Administrative staff*

> 'I personally feel like the online solution just because it takes away that sort of additional time from the tutors.'
> *Administrative staff*

> 'I would say online just because it's more streamline - it goes straight to you. There's no back and forth with sending papers and the results are straight on the system.'
> *Administrative staff*

> 'I would say some of the learners have given feedback of the fact that they're not gotten on with the online side of it. And like I mentioned, one of the learners who is a bit older, she sort of struggled and was worried.'
> *Administrative staff*

The results of this section of the interview showed praise for Runway Training's solution and interested consideration of its impact if rolled out to all learners.

3.2.2.3 Tutors and administrative staff were all satisfied with the time taken to mark and return online practice papers

Tutors and administrative staff commented on how having papers returned within two days was helpful for learners who still had the papers 'fresh in their mind' in terms of their revision and exam scheduling. One external tutor, who have to juggle teaching and marking, commented on how marking practice papers 'can take two weeks to complete'.

3.2.2.4 External tutors showed equal confidence in Runway Training's practice paper markers to their own tutors

External tutors all agreed with marks given to their learners and did not express any concerns regarding marks allocated and feedback given. Runway Training administrative staff follow protocol that learners can only schedule final exams after they have achieved 70% on their practice papers; their trust in the marking and feedback provides confidence in booking.

3.3   Phase 3 - non-participating tutor surveys

Ninety-two tutors and those in management roles in Functional Skills departments were asked to voluntarily complete a survey about their experiences in preparing learners for their Functional Skills exams. Six responded and the results were as follows:

### 3.3.1   Maths Functional Skills pass rates are of some concern to tutors and those in management

67% of Functional Skills tutors and managers expressed that they had concerns with pass rates in maths, with 33% not having concerns with and Functional

Skills subjects. The concern with pass rates for maths is similar to the findings in Section 3.2.1.

3.3.2   Provision to prepare Functional Skills learners for final exams is of some concern

With 67% of respondents agreeing that provision for preparing learners for their final exams was required, in comparison to the 17% respondents who didn't agree, we see consistency in Functional Skills provider voice from Section 3.2 regarding concerns. Respondents were more secure in subject content delivery and preparation for assessment delivery with regards to Functional Skills pass rates, with no participants agreeing with the need to revise content delivery and only 20% warrenting revision for delivery in assessment preparation.

Fig 15. Concerns highlighted by non-participating Functional Skills tutors and managers (all percentages rounded)
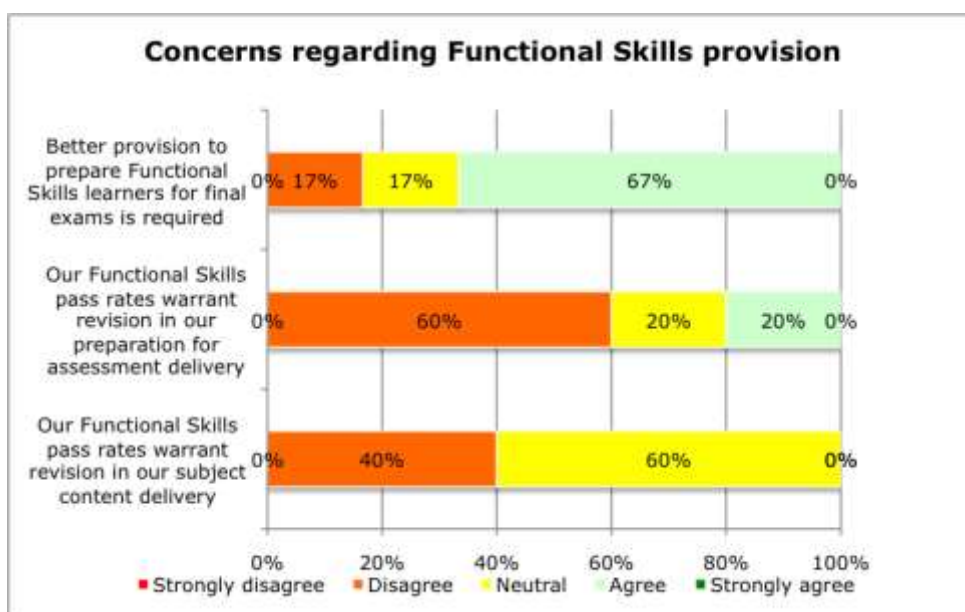
3.3.3   Runway Training's online practice paper solution would be helpful for tutors and learners

No respondents disagreed that Runway Training's online practice paper solution would be helpful for tutors and learners. 88% agreed it would be helpful for tutors and 67% agreed it would be helpful for learners (see Fig. 16). This anticipation of a positive impact of Runway Training's solution on learners and tutors has helped inform Section 4.5.

Fig. 16 Consideration of the helpfulness of Runway Training's online practice paper solution by non-participating Functional Skills tutors and managers (all percentages rounded)
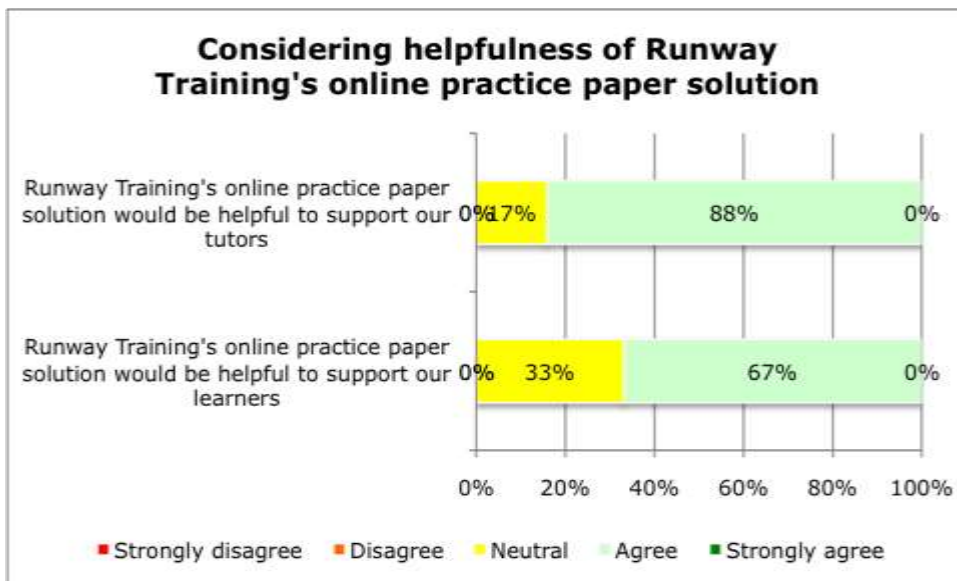
3.3.4 Tutor workload was a barrier to pilot participation

In the final question regarding main barriers to taking part in the pilot, the following was submitted:

- **50%** stated that they thought **workload was too high** to dedicate time to the pilot
- **33%** thought that taking part would **take up too much time**

The following were completed as an optional open text response, to uncover unanticipated barriers:

- 'Didn't have the right learners at the right time'
- 'Our students sit paper maths exams'
- 'Simply due to time restraints – these had to be completed much sooner than our target assessment dates and the nature of our learners would not cope with such a significant change on their timetables.'

Although the data from this report is limited in terms of sample size and thus in validity to suggest that this is the view of all FE providers delivering Functional Skills, initial discussions with providers at the start of the pilot, on the whole, reflected concerns voiced in this survey. Workload was sited as being high, as was turnover of staff, so dedicating time to a pilot could have been perceived by management as yet something else to add to the workload of a fragile workforce.

4. Conclusion

Feasibility

FE providers face a multitude of challenges and restraints on a daily basis. With big players such as Skills Training UK going into liquidation (who were to make up a significant number of learner participations in this pilot) coupled with workload overwhelm inhibiting continuing professional development, as highlighted as a significant factor by Roberts (2023), and low levels of well-being across the sector as highlighted by Ofsted (2019), initiating stakeholder engagement and retaining interest and enthusiasm to follow through with pilot participation was challenging.

Unprecedented fluctuations and retention of provider engagement was a real challenge to manage throughout the delivery of this pilot. An invitation for participation was sent out to over 100 providers and advertised on the NCFE website as well as on FE News by Dobney (2023) and did gain interest and traction initially, but this subsequently dwindled or diminished. This is highlighted in Section 3.3.4, in the results of the external tutor survey, where 50% expressed a barrier to committing to the pilot was due to high workload and 33% to concerns about the time it would take to adhere to pilot procedures (despite 88% agreeing that Runway Training's practice paper solution would be helpful to support tutors, see Fig. 16).

Evolution to technology usage recognised

Although patterns in results for maths and English GCSEs and Functional Skills (particularly maths) continue to stagnate or decline – as highlighted by Camden (2023) - evolution of examination preparation is limited to meet the demand of the learners. Research by City and Guilds (2014, p4) highlights this issue, explaining that although FE tutors have a "positive attitude towards using technology within teaching, learner and assessment" - with 74% saying it was useful for tests or assessments - 62% felt that tutors lack the time to investigate all options properly. Similarly, Deepwell and Laurillard (2014, p5) also found in their research that the biggest barrier to innovation with learning technology was "lack of resource to provide release and support for staff to enable them to incorporate technology into their practices". In further open questions to FE tutors, they voiced that lack of time and tensions over time for CPD were other significant barriers.

Similar to findings from Cosgrove (2021) and Briggs (2022) the emphasis on the time and space for tutors to reflect and engage with interventions focusing on subject content delivery could have had a positive impact on learning, and therefore confidence and exam-readiness. Being willing to consider and develop the use of digital tools and contextualised learning, as encouraged by Wakeling (2022), is vital for progress, but time for this without the removal of time-consuming practice paper responsibilities is hard to squeeze into the overwhelming workload that Functional Skills tutors are face.

4.1 Phase 1

Undeniably, the quantitative data collated in this pilot has its limitations (particularly in terms of impact on first time pass rates and the lack of data

collected for this pilot). The learner surveys do, however, suggest that learner confidence increases when doing any practice papers, but feel more confident with Runway Training's online practice paper solution.

It isn't, however, agreed that this online solution is the most enjoyable method of examination practice. Midpoint surveys suggest an encouraging impact across the board with Runway Training's online solution, with all other pilot questions indicating positive learner experiences and effects on them. Exam anxiety and lack of confidence from historical experiences could be a factor in negative views on the enjoyment of practice exams in general.

The larger scale surveys from Runway Training learners, coupled with the high first-time pass rates within the same time period, show a positive impact of Runway Training's online practice paper solution on confidence, exam preparation preference and first-time pass rates for learners. Strong correlations can be seen in terms of confidence and exam readiness; it is just enjoyment that this method of assessment preparation seems to lack.

4.2 Phase 2

From the tutor and administrative staff interviews, it is clear that there are some concerns about Functional Skills pass rates, particularly maths (as evident in the previously mentioned pass rates from Functional Skills exam boards). The decrease in pass rates for maths and English GCSEs in the last year means that there will be more learners looking to Functional Skills to supplement further education. The legacy of moving to more online learning and assessment from the Covid-19 pandemic means that more Functional Skills practice papers are completed online. It is encouraging that some tutors are quoted as saying that having an online practice paper solution, like Runway Training's, could give their learners the robust online preparation to help them achieve these functional skills.

However, as always within education, Runway Training's solution is not a perfect fit for all learners, with some (such as those with SEND and more mature learners) preferring to do their practice papers and final exams on paper. For these learners, the stress and anxiety caused by working is simply not conducive to a positive learning environment for them.

Tutors within Runway Training commented on the legacy of having all practice assessments online making their administrative tasks 'more streamlined' and enabling 'reducing tutor input'. Although this feedback was not heard from external tutors and administrative staff (possibly due to having to use both online and traditional methods of practice papers), these participants did comment that it was 'user friendly'. If rolled out to whole cohorts (see Section 4.5) different outcomes might be seen.

4.3 Phase 3

As suggested in historical research referenced, it is not surprising that high workload and concerns about the infringement of pilot participation on tutor time

were cited as being referenced as a barrier to enrolment on the pilot. Although this sample size is small, several Functional Skills providers who were approached about participating also expressed similar concerns.

It is important to note the results of this survey - see Fig. 16 - indicating that a high percentage of those surveyed felt that Runway Training's online practice paper solution would be helpful for learners (at 66%) and for tutors (at 88%).

4.4 Lessons learned

- This pilot aimed to quantify the impact of Runway Training's practice paper solution on a large range of areas. This, coupled with the provider retention, was not attainable to the degree that this study wanted to examine. Future investigation (as discussed in Section 4.5) would be to refine and reduce the research questions.

- Runway Training found significant traction in interested and committed providers after publishing '*Why a new online solution could be the key to increasing first-time pass rates in Functional Skills'* by Dobney (2023*)* on the FE News website (who have a significant audience in the FE market). This was in the final quarter of the pilot, after losing participants for reasons already described. Relying on historical professional contacts, advertisements on both Runway Training and NCFE's websites, as well as sharing content on LinkedIn, was simply was not enough to meet the participant targets initially proposed. Increased publicity of similar pilots, with clear expectations of commitments of participating bodies, should be prioritised and accelerated from the outset.

4.5 Suggested next steps

Considerations must be made on how to research this further and provide more reliable and valid data. These include:

1. Improving sustained participation from external providers, for example through the development of a stakeholder network.
2. Conducting a longitudinal study including up to five training providers that would use Runway Training's service with their learners for a year. This would enable researchers to see the full impact across a timescale that more accurately reflected the learner journey. Impact on first time pass rate, as a sole focus of research, could then be compared to previous years. This would provide:
   a. More learner data;
   b. Ease of use for tutors, as it would require only one method of assessment preparation;
   c. Fewer surveys for learners, reducing the impact of survey fatigue and the number of administrative tasks that tutors are required to carry out;
   d. Consistency in the way that all surveys are completed. Surveys could be taken at the same time in the same way, to address the

issue in this project of differing numbers of surveys respondents across the groups;
   e. More confidence in tutors using the online system.
3. Continuing to be an active voice within the FE sector regarding Functional Skills exam preparation.
4. Continuing to champion the advancement of technology within this area, investigating the potential use of AI and other technologies to continue to support Functional Skills learners and tutors.

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