

**Impact Evaluation Report on
Level 2 International Trade and Customs Practice course pilot
October 2024-February 2025**

Informing future developments of modified training courses

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Data was collected through focus groups with students attending the pilot cohort of a L2 International Trade and Customs Practice course.

The authors of this review—Dr Katherine Neary and Dr Konstantina Skritsovali—obtained ethical approval from Liverpool John Moores Ethics Committee to conduct the data collection and analysis for this review.

Participant information remains anonymous.

This impact report was conducted for academic purposes only and received no funding.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	3
Introductory Background	4
Aims of course – Aims of Freeport/Freeport Skills Academy	4
Local Context	5
Participant Demographics and Recruitment Methods	5
Alignment with Regional Development Strategy and Inclusive Economic Growth	8
Student-Learner profiles	9
Motivation for Joining the Course	9
Success and Impact	10
Challenges Anticipated and Occurring	11
Recommendations	12
Conclusion	15
Appendix 1: Level 2 International Trade and Customs Practice curricula	16

Executive Summary

This impact evaluation report reviews the Level 2 course on International Trade and Customs Practice. The report focuses on a pilot cohort of the course which was co-designed by the Chartered Institute of Export and International Trade Liverpool City Region Freeport. Evidence from the evaluation shows that the course offers participants greater opportunities to develop transferable soft and hard skills, such as hope, optimism, persistence, self-efficacy, and resilience, which can enhance their employability and professional careers. Additionally, it helped improve their theoretical understanding of international trade and customs. Despite these strengths, evidence from the evaluation indicates that participants would benefit from a modified course, better aligned to their learning styles and career aspirations.

An updated course should aim to support an advanced learning environment while contributing to future regional and economic priorities. Therefore, the following recommendations are proposed to support the strategic development of LCR Freeport Skills Academy in a constructive and proactive manner that aligns with the aims and mission of LCR Freeport:

- Revisit Course Level and Relevance
- Introduce Route-Based Learning Pathways
- Enhance Accessibility and Digital Inclusion
- Clarify Employment Outcomes and Regional Opportunities
- Expand Practical and Experiential Learning
- Develop Post-Course Alumni Support Networks

Introductory Background

In July 2024, the pilot cohort of a pioneering new course for LCR residents commenced, and students completed the course at the end of February 2025. The Level 2 International Trade and Customs Practice is an innovative adult learning course that offers a new pathway to contribute to the regional development agenda. The course materials were developed with £20,000 of funding obtained from the Department for Education. This report provides stakeholders with an evidence-based understanding of the areas of impact emerging from the pilot cohort. The findings suggest how the course supports the establishment of Liverpool City Region Freeport (LCRF) to strengthen international trade within Liverpool City Region (LCR) and to support the Local Skills Improvement Plan.

The report begins by outlining the local context and the demographics of the student learners. An overview of the process of operationalising the course follows. The report then presents the results of data collection conducted by academic staff from Liverpool Business School, Liverpool John Moores University. This involved three focus groups where course attendees shared their experiences. These findings were analysed and organised into themes to highlight areas of current strength and impact. The final section provides recommendations to course leaders and decision-makers to better align the course aims with city regional development agendas and current course design.

Aims of course – Aims of Freeport/Freeport Skills Academy

The Level 2 International Trade and Customs Practice course is equivalent to a GCSE level of study, designed to maximise accessibility for LCR residents from diverse backgrounds. The course prerequisites require learners to have a GCSE in Maths and English at Grade C or above.

Learners commit to studying for 40 hours over a period of 4 to 6 months to complete 7 modules (see appendix 1). The course utilises a hybrid approach, combining virtual learning materials with in-person meetings and Teams calls.

The course was co-designed by The Chartered Institute for Export and International Trade and the LCRF staff to address a local knowledge and skills gap related to the digital Customs Declaration system, which is essential for companies operating within the LCRF zone.

The curriculum also includes an introduction to the current UK commercial and regulatory environment, along with the fundamentals of customs practice and procedures. Notably, practical elements involve demonstrating how to prepare customs declarations for both exports and imports.

Ensuring that LCR residents possess these skills is crucial for supporting businesses to trade internationally within the LCRF and to comply with HMRC requirements.

Local Context

LCR has a long history in international trade. The current challenging economic climate reinforces the importance of regional development plans like LCRF to support and sustain international trade activity in LCR. Often, national quantitative reports highlight the substantial socioeconomic challenges in the region, which is home to 1,551,500 inhabitants (ONS 2021). Yet, the vibrancy, pride and warmth of LCR continue to inform regional development plans to strengthen and innovate the local landscape for business and residents.

Pathways to support LCR who are lifelong residents, recent arrivals or living here whilst they study is an important part of resourcing the diverse range of employment opportunities which will be created as the LCRF becomes active in the region. Businesses operating with the Freeport zone will require employees at all levels. It is therefore imperative that talent is upskilled and retained within the region.

Participant Demographics and Recruitment Methods

The pilot course sought to recruit 20 students from LCR who would benefit from the learning experience. To align with the aims of the Freeport Skills Academy and be representative of the needs of the LCR particular attention was paid to providing opportunities to participants who had an aspect of deprivation or marginalisation in their background. Applications to be part of the course were made by 24 individuals. Applications were reviewed and 20 students were approved to start the course. Participant demographics were diverse, as shown in Table 1. Learners were recruited using a network of local organisations including Households into Employment, local charity user networks including an Army Veterans charity, LCR colleges e.g. Hugh Baird College and HEI's including Liverpool John Moores University. During the course period of completion, four participants withdrew due to personal circumstances or offers of employment. Sixteen learners completed the course.

Demographics of student course participants

Recruited by/from	Student residing in	Current Status	Interested in	Notes
LJMU	CH7	Full time University Business Student	Future employment	Retain graduate talent
IOE&IT	L22	Student	Future employment	Seeking initial full-time role in LCR – currently NEET
Liverpool In Work	L37	International Sales Representative (Taiwan LIGA Global Co)	Future employment	International Network, transferable experience, bi-lingual
LJMU	L19	Full time University Business Student	Future employment	Retain graduate talent
LJMU	L7	Full time University Business Student	Future employment	Retain graduate talent
Colleague from ESF Global sent via LinkedIn	L37	Import / Export (ESF Global)	Upskilling/ Future employment	International Network, transferable experience
Hugh Baird	L32	Unemployed	Future employment/Apprenticeship	Seeking initial full time role in LCR – currently NEET
Linked in	WA12	Warehouse Manager	Future employment/ Upskilling - Redundancy	Redundant – seeking employment
Liverpool City Council – Prevention Team	L8	Guidance Officer (Liverpool City Council)	Future employment	Upskilling – transferable experience

Linked in	L9	Country Specialist Spain/Portugal (Santander UK)	Future employment /Upskilling	Upskilling – transferable experience
LCRCA	L12	Government Relations (LCRCA)	Future employment /Upskilling	Upskilling – transferable experience
Sovereign	L11	Business Development Manager (Sovereign)	Future employment /Upskilling	Upskilling – transferable experience
Citizens Advice Halton	WA7	Service Adviser (Virgin Media)	Future employment	Upskilling – transferable experience
Word of Mouth	L14	Finance Advisor	Future employment	Upskilling – transferable experience, strong existing network
Referral from Hsiu-Ai	L13	Just finished training	Future employment	Job seeker – transferable skills, Mandarin/Cantonese speaker
The Block Armed Forces Foundation	L8	NEET – casual part time work	Upskill/support to stable employment post Army	Seeking employment
LinkedIn	L13	Employed	Upskill - career change.	Upskilling/Career change, financial experience
Referral from another participant	L5	Employed by Local Solutions	Yes	Upskilling/Career change
University of Liverpool	L1	Student (UoL)	Yes	Retain graduate talent
Liverpool City Council –	L8	Guidance Officer (Liverpool City Council)	Yes	Upskilling/Career change

Prevention Team				
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Alignment with Regional Development Strategy and Inclusive Economic Growth

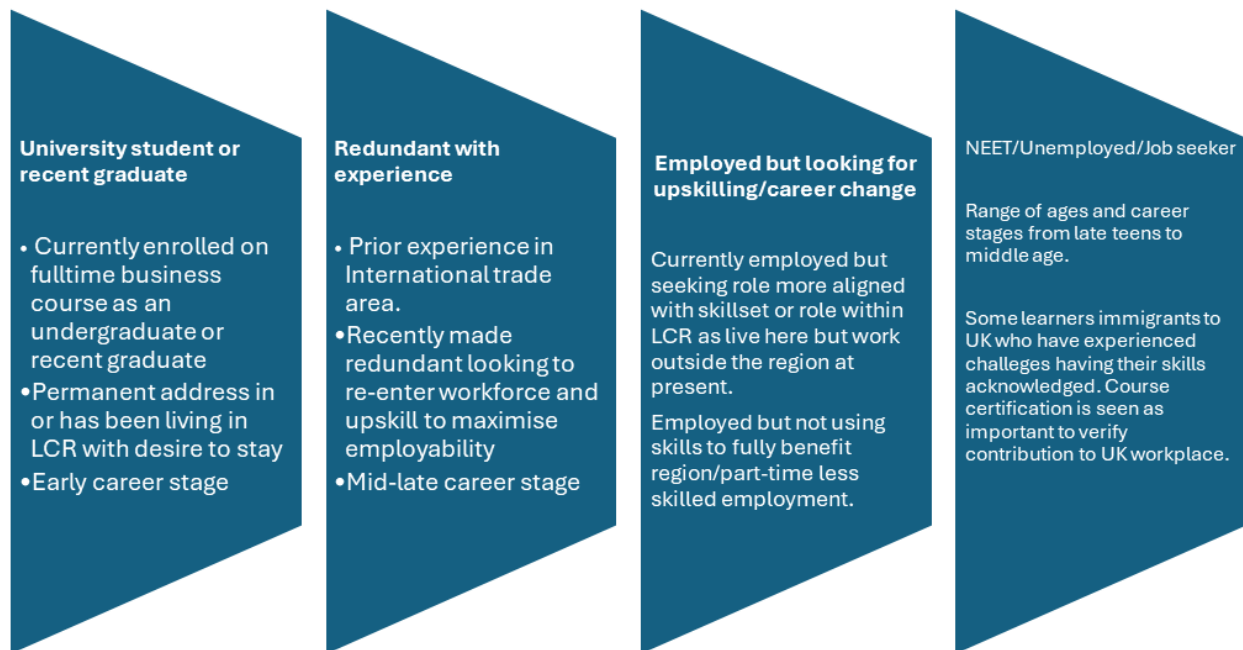
The course is a unique and practical example of how targeted, inclusive learning programmes can support individuals from a wide range of backgrounds—including those facing disadvantage—into meaningful employment at any stage of life. It aligns with Skills England’s Priorities for 2025, particularly in simplifying access to skills, understanding nationwide future skills needs, and improving the skills offer. It also mobilises and co-creates solutions with local partners and employers to help shape a highly skilled workforce. It also aligns with the Quadruple Helix framework, as it is a real demonstration of how collaboration between academia, industry, government, and civil society can drive systemic innovation in skills development. Therefore, the course has multiple benefits, ranging from enhancing individual employability to fostering wider socio-economic resilience and regional economic growth and development.

The course supports talent retention within the Liverpool City Region (LCR) by equipping individuals with job-ready, relevant skills and competencies that can be added to the LCR Digital Talent Bank, a vital pillar of the LCR Skills Improvement Plan—a regional strategy that aligns skills training with employer demand and economic opportunities. The role of the Liverpool City Region Freeport (LCRF) is vital to this effort. In partnership with the Combined Authority and the Chartered Institute of Export and International Trade, the Freeport supports the delivery of needs-based training designed to address structural inequalities, support trade expansion, and underpin green and digital economic transitions. The LCR Freeport Skills Academy specifically capitalises on the Freeport’s employment-generating potential by providing structured, accessible pathways into sectors including logistics, customs, manufacturing, and business services. This includes entry-level positions (e.g., driving, warehousing, security) through to advanced administrative and managerial roles, ensuring a ladder of progression that supports social mobility and workforce progression.

To ensure that training and employment pathways are inclusive, efficient, and capable of responding to both individual and employer needs, the course is being delivered in collaboration with a broad stakeholder base, including national government departments (e.g., the DWP and Department for Education), employers, education providers (eg, LJMU), and the voluntary sector. Finally, the initiative is helping to catalyse wider economic regeneration by supporting the creation of high-value jobs and inclusive growth. The alignment of education, skills planning, and economic strategy ensures that LCR can fully

harness the benefits of innovation, digitalisation, and sustainability while ensuring no one is left behind.

Student-Learner profiles



Motivation for Joining the Course

Participants of the Level 2 course in International Trade and Customs are drawn by a range of motivating factors that reflect both personal and professional aspirations.

- A key driver is the opportunity to gain an accredited qualification, which provides formal recognition of their skills and knowledge.
- Many view the course as a gateway to new career pathways, particularly in the fields of customs and international trade. It is seen as a valuable tool for career development, offering the chance to improve understanding of complex trade practices and customs regulations. In doing so, it supports learners in enhancing their professional competencies and broadening employment prospects.
- The course also raises aspirations, especially among those who previously felt disconnected from opportunities in this field. By presenting a clear and accessible route into a specialised area of work, it empowers individuals who may have lacked direction or hope prior to enrolling.

- d. The curriculum provides valuable insights into regional economic and social considerations, which is especially beneficial for individuals who are new to the area and lack prior knowledge of the local context. This aspect ensures the course serves as a solid foundation for both newcomers and those transitioning into this field.
- e. The course's hybrid learning model offers essential flexibility, enabling participation for those with caring responsibilities or irregular employment, such as part-time or zero-hour contracts. Learners also benefit from access to local career networks, helping them forge relevant connections and stay informed about employment opportunities.
- f. The course is designed to build practical and transferable skills, ensuring that progress is not limited by prior experience. Instead, it provides a structured environment in which learners can grow professionally, regardless of their starting point.

Success and Impact

a. Theoretical understanding

Participants develop a competitive theoretical understanding of international trade and customs, which has enabled them to explore new professional avenues and collaborative opportunities. For example, some participants now feel equipped to engage in professional negotiations that have the potential to lead to significant investments and business growth. These transferable skills not only enhance individual employability but also contribute to regional economic development through increased business activity and investment readiness.

b. Development of Psychological Capital

Participants consistently report a boost in confidence, resilience, and optimism after completing the course. These qualities are particularly valuable in professional contexts, supporting improved communication, decision-making, and adaptability. For example, participants reported they feel confident articulating the benefits of local initiatives—such as Freeport zones—to businesses, showing how their expanded knowledge directly benefits the region.

c. Raising of aspirations

Participants expressing a desire to combine existing qualifications (e.g., degrees) with course content to pursue careers in which both skill sets are utilised. This suggests the course plays a role in retaining graduates and skilled individuals within the Liverpool City Region (LCR), countering the risk of brain drain.

d. Career transitions

The course provides a clear pathway for career transitions, helping participants at crossroads—such as those re-entering the workforce or shifting fields—to move confidently into roles within the trade and customs sector. For those with previous industry experience, hands-on exposure to customs systems during the course helps rebuild confidence, ensuring their existing skills remain relevant and marketable.

e. Delivery method

The hybrid delivery method is seen as a strong success factor, as it supports the flexible participation of mature participants, particularly those with caring responsibilities or irregular employment. This accessibility ensures a wider range of participants can benefit from upskilling and apply for more diverse roles in the sector.

Challenges Anticipated and Occurring

a. Depth and Breadth of Theoretical Content

One recurring concern is the theoretical nature of the content, which some learners find difficult to relate to. This can hinder comprehension and engagement, especially for those transitioning from diverse career backgrounds. Moreover, the depth and complexity of the material is perceived by some as being above Level 2 expectations, raising concerns about the course's accessibility and appropriateness for beginners.

b. Barriers to inclusion and professional development

Participants have also highlighted barriers to inclusion and professional development, particularly among immigrants in the LCR. Those with transferable skills from overseas sometimes feel overlooked or uncertain about whether equal opportunities for progression and integration are truly available through the course or within the local employment landscape.

c. Digital inclusion

Digital literacy and access to necessary technology present tangible obstacles. Learners with limited experience using digital platforms or who lack reliable access to devices and the internet can find participation challenging, making the course feel less inclusive for some.

d. Interaction

The lack of face-to-face interaction—a byproduct of hybrid or fully online delivery—has been reported to negatively affect learner engagement and understanding. The absence of in-person support can be particularly difficult for those who benefit from direct communication and peer interaction.

Recommendations

Based on feedback from Cohort 1, analysis of course outcomes, and alignment with regional and national priorities—including Skills England 2025 and the LCR Skills Improvement Plan—the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the course’s inclusivity and impact:

a) Revisit Course Level and Relevance

- Despite being a Level 2 qualification, many participants, including university graduates, found the course content intensive and conceptually challenging.
- It is recommended that the academic level be reviewed to ensure it aligns with expectations, and that more accurate entry-level descriptors be provided.
- If the course is to remain accessible to a broad and inclusive audience, differentiation in content complexity and delivery methods should be considered.

b) Introduce Route-Based Learning Pathways

- To accommodate diverse learner backgrounds and career goals, it is recommended to restructure the course into two pathways:
 - Managerial/Administrative Route
 - Technical/Operational Route

- All learners would complete shared core modules focused on foundational trade knowledge and employability, followed by route-specific modules tailored to career aspirations.
- Alternatively, a route structure could be based on prior experience and knowledge (novice vs. experienced), allowing for differentiated pedagogy and peer learning within ability-appropriate cohorts.

c) Enhance Accessibility and Digital Inclusion

- The current hybrid learning model assumes digital access, confidence, and self-direction—factors not guaranteed for all participants.
- Given the high rates of digital poverty in Merseyside ¹, adaptations are recommended, including:
 - Provision of loaned devices or digital bursaries.
 - Increased in-person learning options or supported hybrid formats.
 - Embedded digital skills training to raise confidence and resilience.

d) Clarify Employment Outcomes and Regional Opportunities

- Students expressed uncertainty regarding post-course job roles and their link to local opportunities.
- Strategic recommendations include:
 - Clearer articulation of employment pathways and links to LCR growth sectors, Freeport-related roles, and international trade careers.
 - Active signposting to job vacancies, employers, and recruitment events in the LCR to encourage regional talent retention.
 - Reframing international career interest not as a failure to retain talent, but as a sign of ambition and global competitiveness.

e) Expand Practical and Experiential Learning

- Students found hands-on activities particularly beneficial and memorable.
- To maximise engagement and workplace readiness:
 - Expand the use of simulation tools, dummy systems, and case-based learning.

¹ The University of Liverpool's Heseltine Institute estimate there are over 325,000 digitally excluded working-age individuals in the city region who are limited or non-users of the internet, with additional research by the Good Things Foundation, University of Liverpool and Loughborough University estimating more than 50% of households with children in LCR do not meet the newly established Minimum Digital Living Standard (Source: <https://www.liverpoolcityregion-ca.gov.uk/news/more-than-1400-people-helped-online-in-the-liverpool-city-region-as-digital-inclusion-scheme-ramps-up-for-final-phase>).

- Introduce field visits to Freeports and trading hubs to enhance industry exposure—especially important for learners unfamiliar with trade environments.
- Align experiential learning with real-world logistics, customs, and compliance scenarios.

f) Develop Post-Course Alumni Support Networks

- To sustain outcomes and track long-term impact:
 - Establish an alumni network for graduates to connect, share employment leads, and reflect on their professional journeys.
 - Use alumni data for longitudinal monitoring of course impact on employability, career progression and contribution to regional/national development.
 - Offer post-course mentoring and networking opportunities to ease transitions into work.

g) Formalise Peer-Learning and Mentorship

- Informal peer support emerged organically during the course and was viewed positively.
- It is recommended to formalise peer learning structures through:
 - Buddy systems that pair participants with complementary skills or experiences.
 - Group activities that encourage knowledge sharing and cross-cohort collaboration.
 - Encouraging intergenerational or mixed-career-stage cohorts to facilitate reciprocal mentoring and perspective sharing.

Conclusion

This report highlights the wide-ranging benefits of an International Trade and Customs Practice skills-based course for learners and key institutions across the Liverpool City Region (LCR). Raising awareness and providing core knowledge to raise visibility of the scope and potential of Freeport within the wider trading landscape requires dedicated and accessible provision. Through this course, learners develop relevant knowledge and practical skills to support Freeport's growth and consequently support regional development. The pilot course has delivered meaningful learning outcomes, equipping participants with valuable experiences that align with regional development priorities and the needs of businesses operating with the LCR Freeport.

By offering accessible opportunities to individuals from diverse backgrounds, the course supports pathways into employment within key Freeport sectors. It plays a vital role in addressing the need for upskilling, in terms of knowledge and also soft skills such as confidence, hope, and resilience. The learning environment is flexible and benefits from in person opportunities to engage more closely with tutors and the wider cohort. These aspects of the learning process are significant in meeting the needs of learners and mitigating challenges raised as barriers to achieving their potential within a trade-based role within LCR.

As part of a broader talent pipeline, the course represents an innovative step in preparing learners at various transition points for future roles in the Freeport workforce. Its content, delivery methods, and pedagogical approaches can be adapted to better reflect the diverse needs of the region's population, enhancing its relevance and impact. The recommendations demonstrate the clear potential to inform evidence-based modifications to this course, as part of a suite of Freeport Skills provision. It can also support the design and delivery of similar training courses at other Freeport sites in the UK and internationally.

Appendix 1: Level 2 International Trade and Customs Practice curricula

Introduction to Trade and Customs

- International trade
- UK and the European Union
- What has changed since the UK left the EU
- The role of customs
- Customs legislation and regulation

Customs Processes and Procedures

- Customs import process
- Release for free circulation
- Transit
- Storage
- Special procedures
- Processing
- Export

Import Duty

- Tariff classification of goods
- Origin of goods
- Value of goods for customs purposes
- How is import duty calculated?

Customs Declarations

- Types of customs declarations
- Who can lodge a declaration?
- Information requirements
- Customs procedure codes

Logistics and Transport

- Channels of distribution
- How goods are moved internationally
- Who are the key parties in a supply chain
- The benefits of different modes of transport
- International transport documents

Export and Import Controls

- Prohibitions and restrictions
- Export and import measures
- Other forms of control

Other Matters

- VAT related to import and export
- Simplified procedures
- Risk and compliance