

Lifelong learning amongst adults in Ireland

Quarter 4 2023

June 2024

Ireland's lifelong learning participation rate was

14%

in quarter 4 2023

Up from 11.8% in quarter 4 2022

Learning type¹

Formal learning **4.6%**

Job-related non-formal **5.6%**

Other non-formal **4.8%**

388,700

adults (25-64 years) engaged in lifelong learning activities in quarter 4 2023

20% more learners compared to quarter 4 2022

Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data²

- 1 Some learners engage in more than one learning type; as a result, the total lifelong learning rate is slightly less than the sum of the different learning types.
- 2 The SLMRU are grateful to the CSO for facilitating access to the Labour Force Survey Research Microdata Files. Results relating to quarter 4 2023 and quarter 4 2022 in this report are based on analysis of strictly controlled Research Microdata Files provided by the Central Statistics Office (CSO). The CSO does not take any responsibility for the views expressed or the outputs generated from this research.

Introduction

Measuring lifelong learning, targets & time frame

Lifelong learning comprises formal, non-formal and informal learning activities that individuals may undertake throughout their lives. While Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025 and the EU's goals for Education and Training for 2020 each set a target for adult participation in learning activities in the preceding **four weeks**, the more recent EU Pillar of Social Rights 2030 target for adult participation in learning focuses on learning activities in the preceding **12 months**. Partly as a result of this difference in timeframes (4 weeks versus 12 months), the current EU target, at 60%, is considerably higher than the earlier EU 2020 and National Skills Strategy targets (15% for 2020 and 2025 respectively); these lifelong learning measures, however, are not comparable.

Data

Using the CSO's Labour Force Survey (LFS), we provide a profile of lifelong learning participants in Ireland and identify the extent to which different population cohorts vary in terms of the share that engaged in lifelong learning (participation rate) in quarter 4 2023. In addition, an EU comparison is also included, using Eurostat's LFS annual average data for 2023. Both datasets (quarterly from the CSO and annual average from Eurostat), measure lifelong learning participation in terms of adult engagement in formal and/or non-formal learning activities in the preceding four weeks. Finally, we provide the headline figures drawn from the Adult Education Survey – an EU-wide survey, carried out in Ireland by the CSO every 5-6 years – where adult engagement in learning activities in the preceding 12 months is gathered.

Definitions

EU and CSO measures of lifelong learning activities and their components are based on Eurostat's Classification of Learning Activities as follows:

Lifelong learning comprises formal, non-formal and informal education and training; however, statistics presented in the CSO's Labour Force Survey as well as in the Eurostat data do not cover informal learning, and the data presented here refers to individuals aged 25-64 years who had engaged in formal and/or non-formal learning activities only. Targets set by both the EU and Ireland's National Skills Strategy are based on the formal and non-formal components only.

Formal education corresponds to education and training in the regular system of schools, universities, colleges and other formal educational institutions that normally constitute a continuous 'ladder' of full-time education for children and young people.

Non-formal education and training is defined as any organised and sustained educational activities that do not correspond to the definition of formal education. It may or may not take place in educational institutions and cater to persons of all ages. It may cover educational programmes to impart adult literacy, basic education for out-of-school children, life skills, work skills and general culture.

Key Points

In quarter 4 2023, of the nearly 2.78 million adults aged between 25 and 64 years, **388,700 persons had engaged in formal and/or non-formal learning** activities in the preceding four weeks. This is the highest number of adult lifelong learners to date.

Ireland's lifelong learning (LLL) rate was 14% in quarter 4 2023, an increase on the 12% observed in quarter 4 2022. The LLL rate³ in quarter 4 2023 was made up of

- formal learning: 4.6%
- job-related non-formal learning: 5.6%
- other non-formal learning: 4.8%.

As in earlier years, **LLL rates decreased with age but increased with greater educational attainment:**

- at 19%, the rate amongst 25-34 year-olds was more than twice that of 55-64-year-olds (9%)
- at 22%, the rate for those with NFQ level 9/10 qualifications was more than four times that of those with qualifications at NFQ level 3 (5%).

When compared to quarter 4 2022, **the number of LLL participants grew by a fifth**, with 64,700 extra learners. The largest increases were for:

- job-related non-formal learning (40,700 additional learners, a rise of 36%)
- females (52,000 extra learners, a rise of 28%).

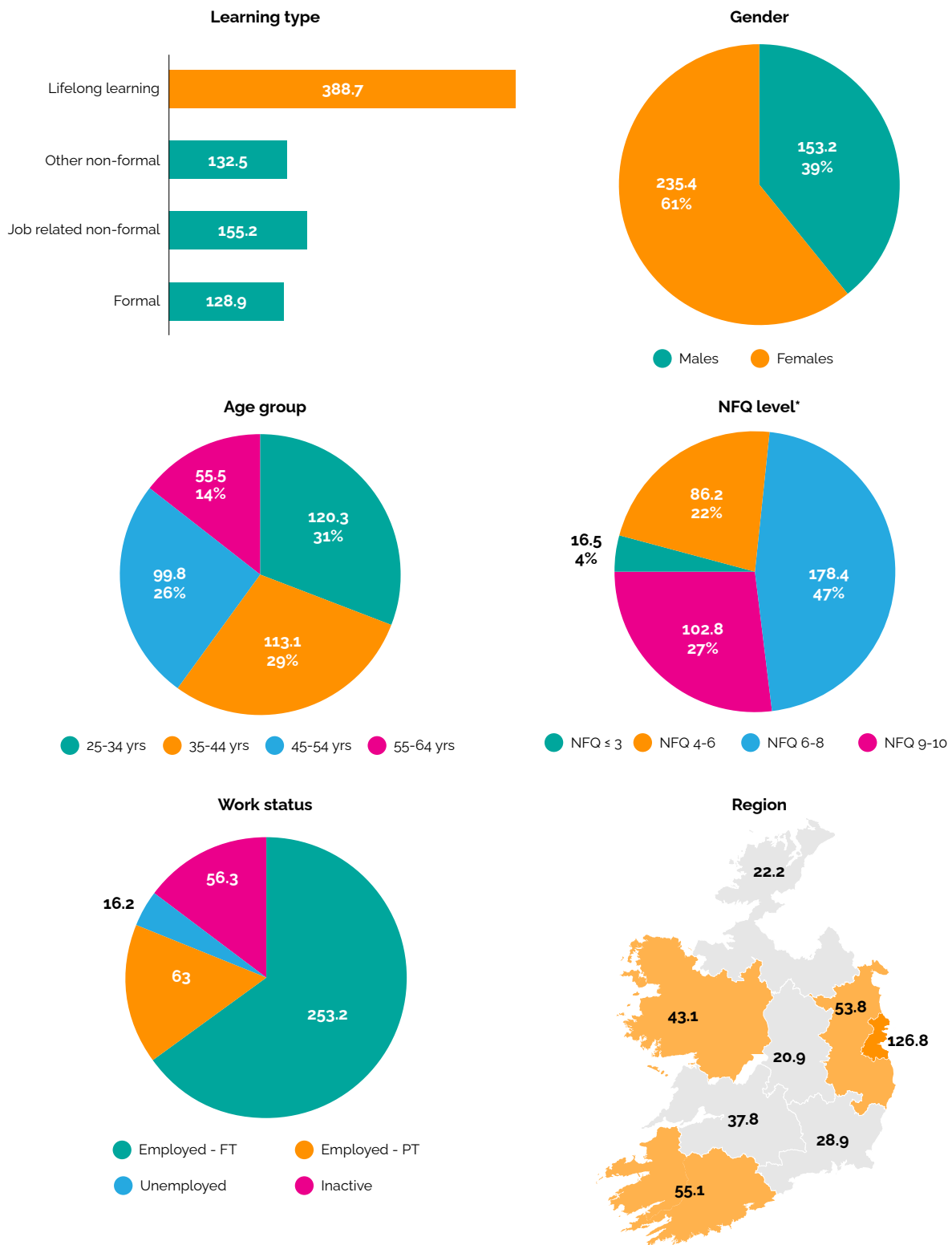
Results from the Adult Education Survey (learning over the previous 12 months) show that:

- 54.8% of adults aged 25-64 years in Ireland had engaged in lifelong learning activities, **well above the EU average** of 46.6%
- but the mean number of instruction hours per participant in Ireland was **lower** than the EU average
- the main reason for not participating in lifelong learning in both Ireland (23.8%) and across the EU 27 (22.8%) was **due to scheduling conflicts**, followed by family reasons (22.5% and 14.4% for Ireland and the EU 27 average respectively).

³ Approximately 1% of the 25-64-year-old cohort participated in both formal and non-formal learning; as a result, the total lifelong learning rate (14%) is less than the sum of the formal and non-formal (job-related and other) learning rates.

Who were Ireland's lifelong learners in quarter 4 2023?

Figure 1. Lifelong learners (000s) by type⁴, gender, age, NFQ level, work status & region, Q4 2023

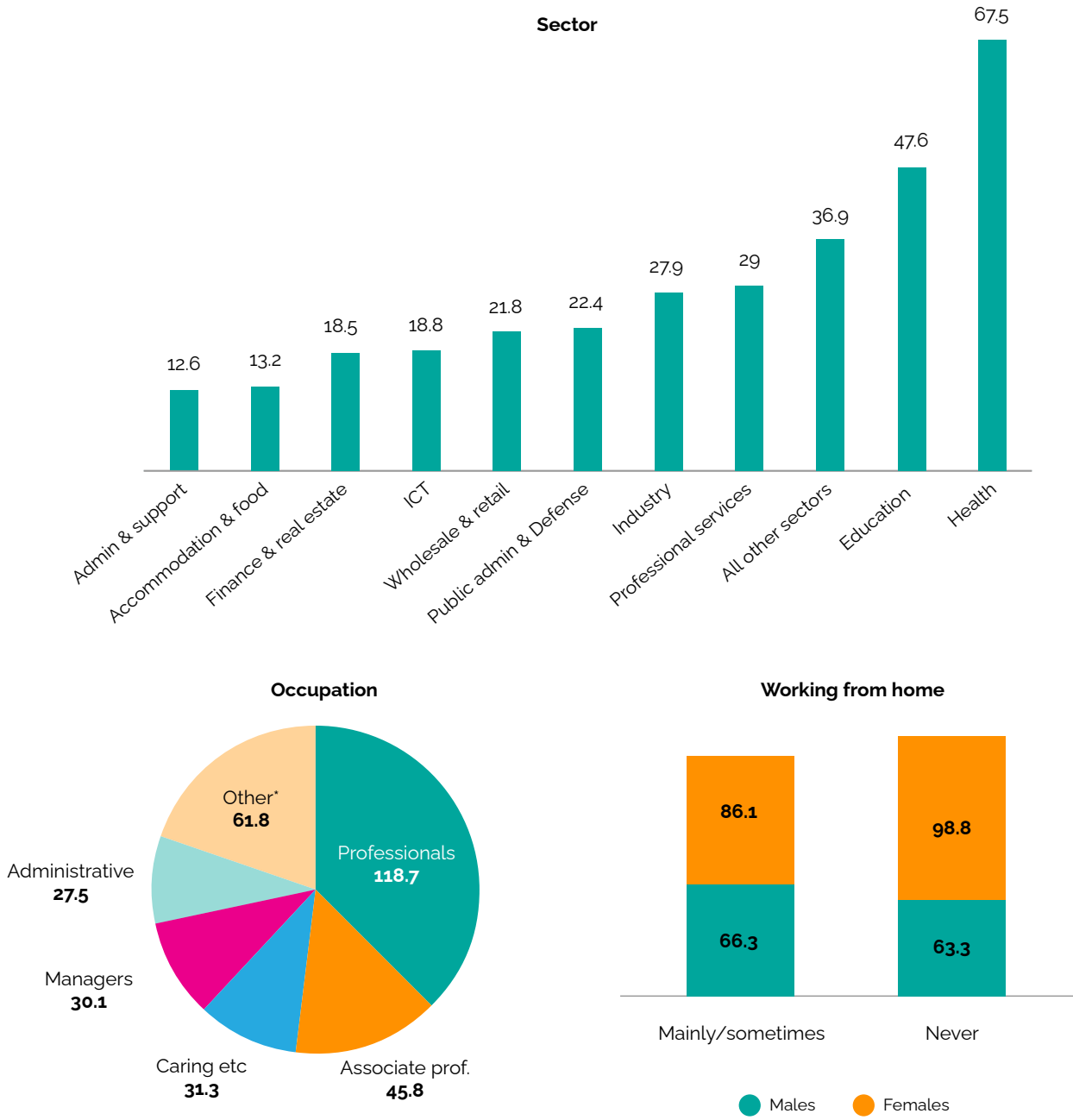


Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS data)

* Excludes not stated

⁴ Nearly 28,000 persons participated in both formal and non-formal learning; therefore the total number of lifelong learning participants is less than the sum of formal and non-formal (job-related and other) learning.

Figure 2. Employed lifelong learners (000s) by sector, occupation and working from home, Q4 2023



Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS data)
 *Other occupations include skilled trades, sales, operatives and elementary.

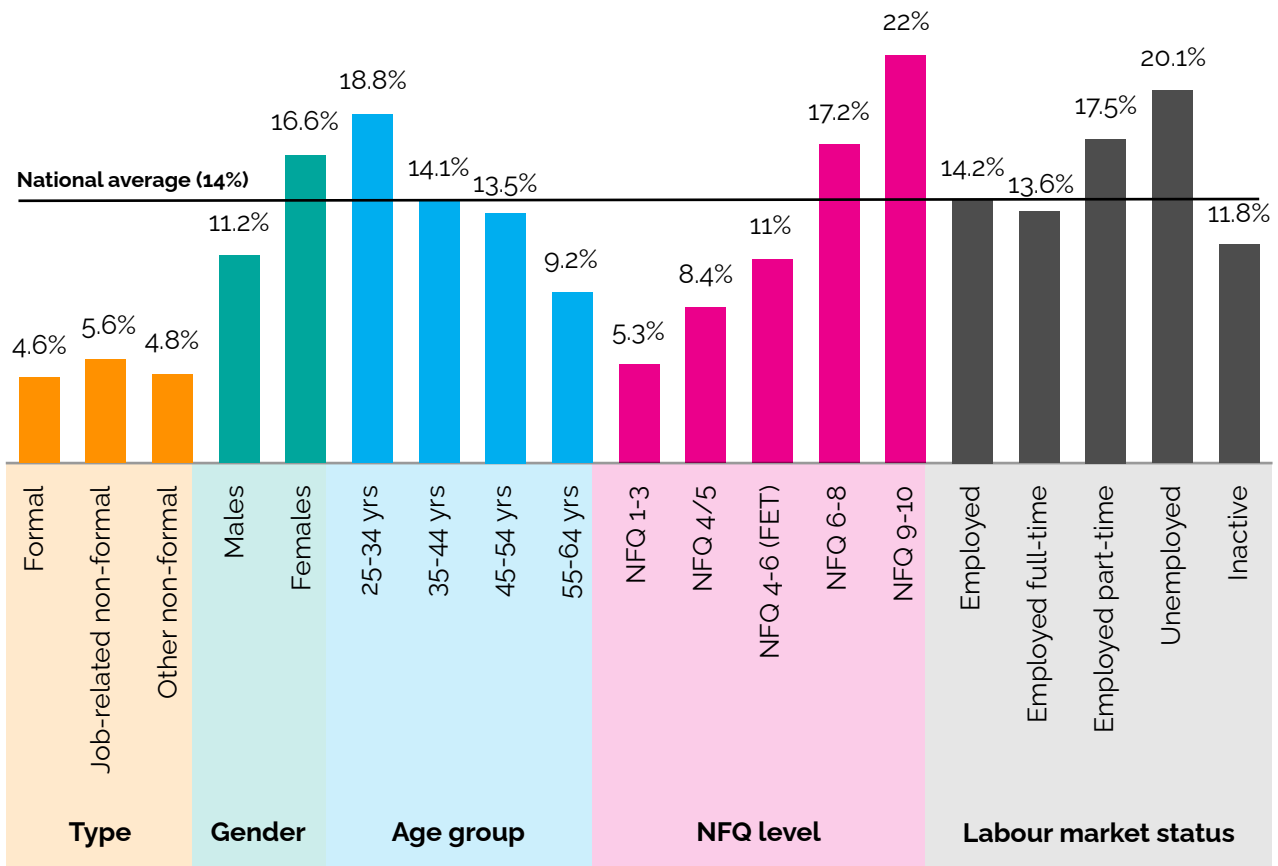
It is estimated that 388,700 adults (aged 25-64 years) had engaged in formal and/or non-formal learning activities in the preceding four weeks in quarter 4 2023, higher than in quarter 4 of any other year. Of these,

- nearly 40% (155,200 people) had participated in **job-related non-formal** learning; of the 128,900 formal learning participants, over two thirds (68%) had studied third level programmes, with most of the remainder in FET programmes

- **females** made up 61% of all lifelong learners
- most lifelong learning participants were young – 60% were **aged less than 45 years**
- nearly three quarters **held third level qualifications** at levels 6-10 on the NFAQ
- four fifths (316,200 learners) were **in employment**
- more than one third (36%) were working in the **health or education sectors** and more than one half were in **professional or associate professional occupations**
- just over one half (162,100 learners) never worked from home, although the pattern for males was slightly different, with just 49% never working from home
- Dublin accounted for one third of all lifelong learners (126,800 persons).

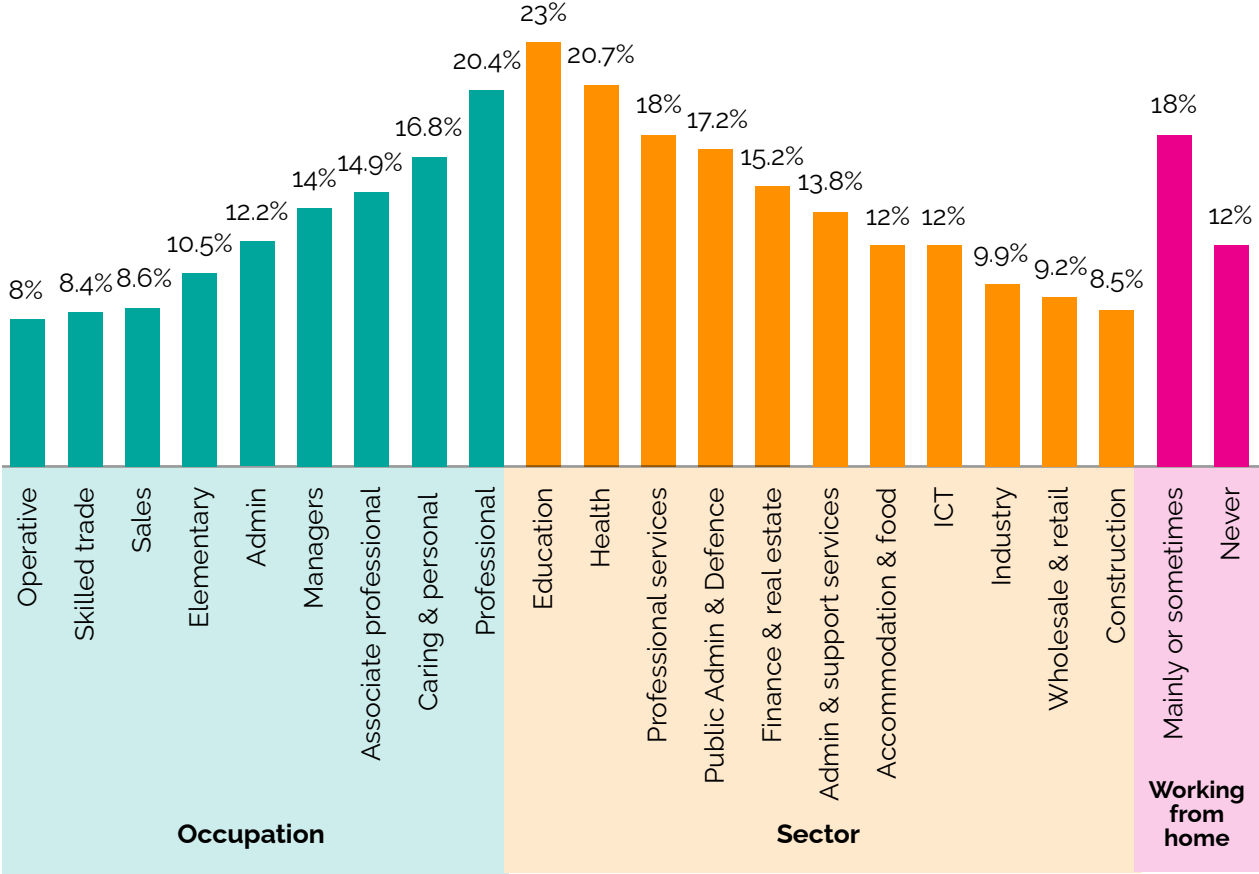
Who was most likely to participate in lifelong learning?

Figure 3. Lifelong learning participation rate (%) by type, gender, age, NFAQ and labour market status, Q4 2023



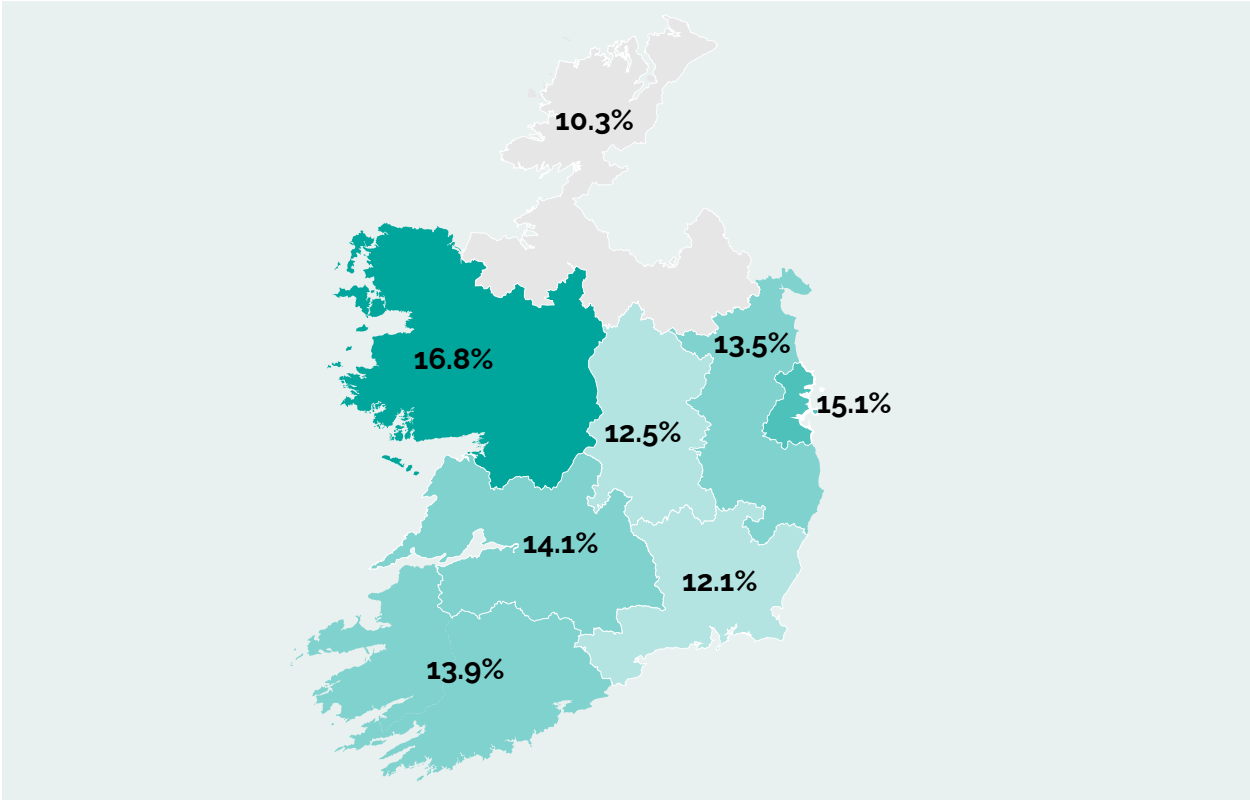
Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS data)

Figure 4. Lifelong learning participation rate (%) amongst the employed, by occupation, sector* & working from home, Q4 2023



Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS data); *Excludes other sectors (comprising agriculture, arts, entertainment, etc., transport & not stated)

Figure 5. Lifelong learning participation rates by region, Q4 2023



Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data

In quarter 4 2023, the lifelong learning participation rate amongst adults in Ireland was 14%, made up of formal learning (4.6%), job-related non-formal learning (5.6%) and other non-formal learning (4.8%). The lifelong learning rate, however, varied by cohort:

- **rates tend to decline with age:** lifelong learning participation amongst 25-34-year-olds (18.8%) was twice that of 55-64-year-olds (9.2%) (Figure 3)
- **the higher the NFQ level, the higher the participation rate**, with more than a fifth (22%) of those with level 9/10 qualifications having participated in learning activities, compared to just 5% for those with at most a level 3 (e.g. Junior Certificate) qualification (Figure 3)
- the **unemployed** (20.1%) and **part-time employed** persons (17.5%) also had **higher than average participation rates**, although in terms of numbers (See Figure 1), they are small cohorts
- amongst the employed (Figure 4), **lifelong learning rates were highest** for those working in **professional occupations** and for those working in the **education and health sectors**.
- persons who **mainly or sometimes worked from home** were more likely to engage in lifelong learning that were those who never worked from home (Figure 4).
- lifelong learning participation rates **varied by region**, ranging from 10.3% in the Border region to 16.8% in the West region (Figure 5).



What has changed since last year?

Between quarter 4 2022 and quarter 4 2023, the number of adults who participated in lifelong learning activities grew by 64,700 persons (20% rise); as a result, the lifelong learning rate increased by just over two percentage points, going from 11.8% to 14.0% year-on-year. Although the absolute number of learners has never been higher, due to an increase in the size of the relevant age cohort overall, lifelong learning rates remained slightly below the peak observed in quarter 4 2019 (14.7%).

Figure 6 shows some of the cohorts for whom the relative growth in participant numbers was above average (20%). Of particular note were the increases in job-related non-formal learning and in the number of female participants:

- while the number of participants increased for each lifelong learning type, the largest, in both absolute and relative terms, was **for job-related non-formal learning** (40,700 extra learners, or 36%)
- of the formal learning participants, the strongest growth was for those engaging FET (NFQ 4-6) level education (+7,300 learners, or 30%)
- the **number of female participants also grew** strongly, with a 28% increase in the number of female learners (52,000 extra - compared to 12,600 additional males).

In absolute terms, the increases in participant numbers were small for some cohorts; this was particularly the case for those working in elementary occupations, where the [28%] increase resulted in 3,600 extra learners, the administration & support services sector (an [85%] increase with 5,800 extra learners), and the accommodation & food sector (48% increase with 4,300 extra learners).

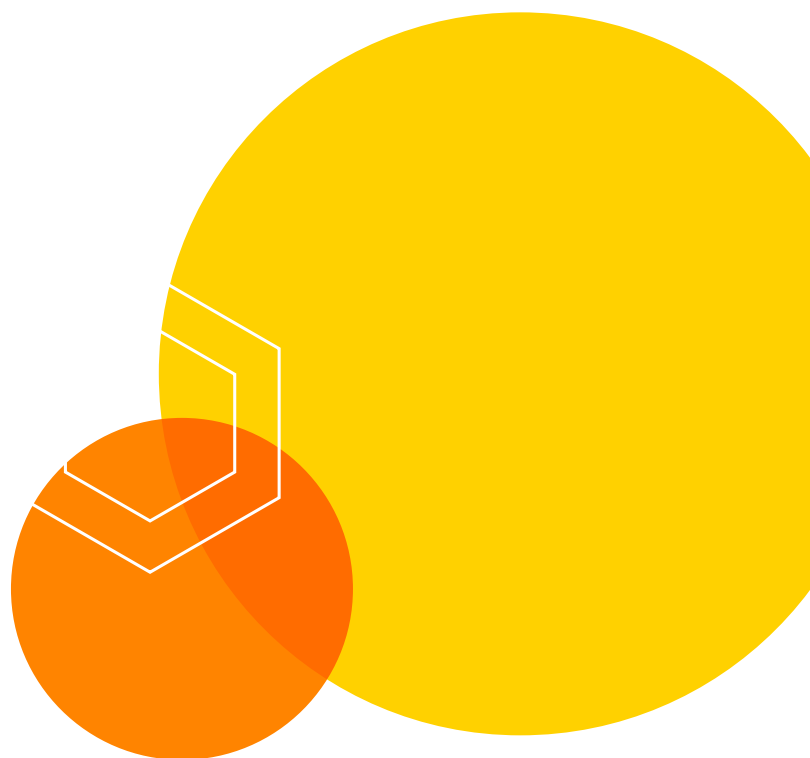
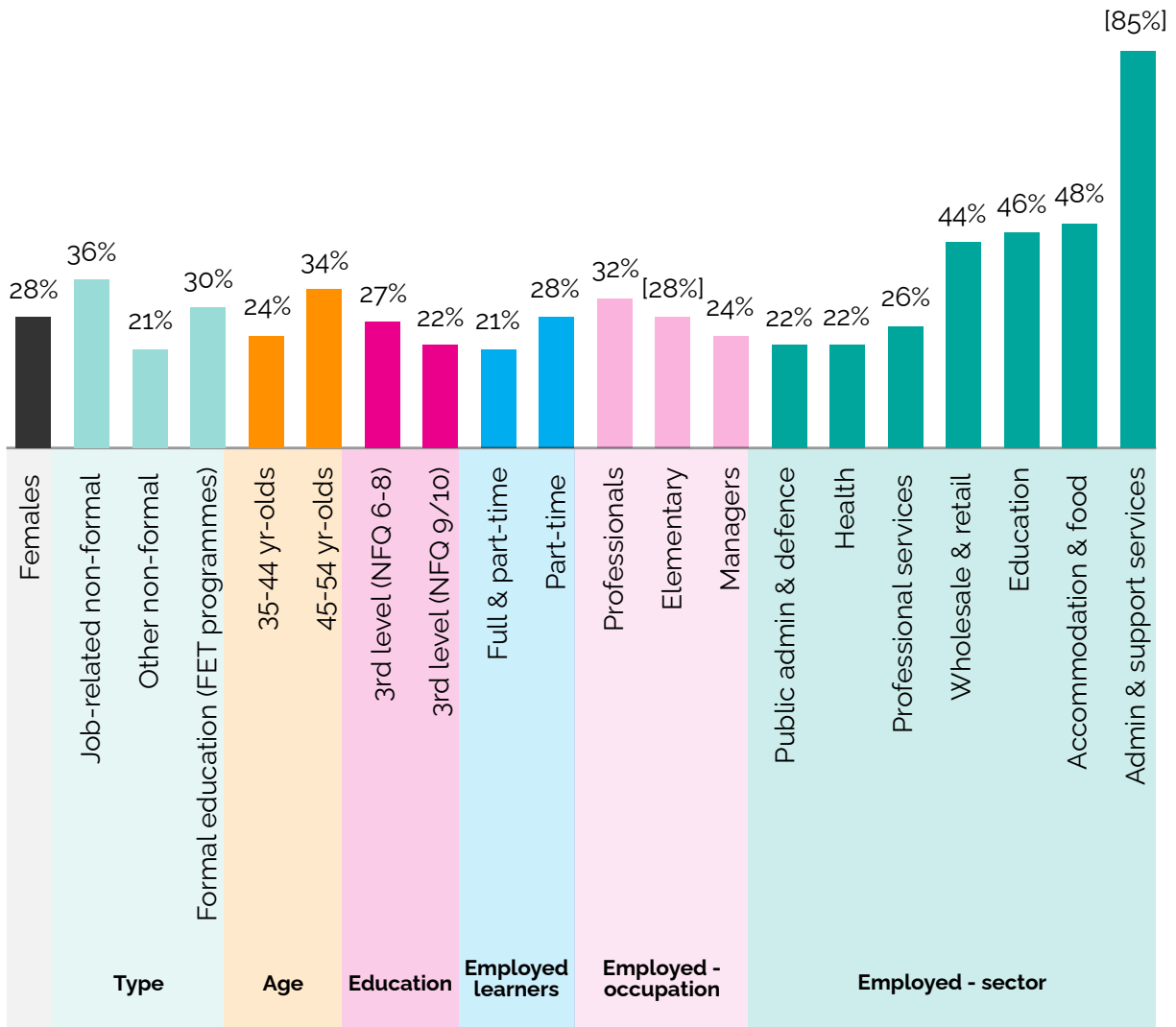


Figure 6. Q4 2022-Q4 2023 % growth in LLL participant numbers, selected cohorts



Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data; Numbers in square brackets are small and should be interpreted with caution.

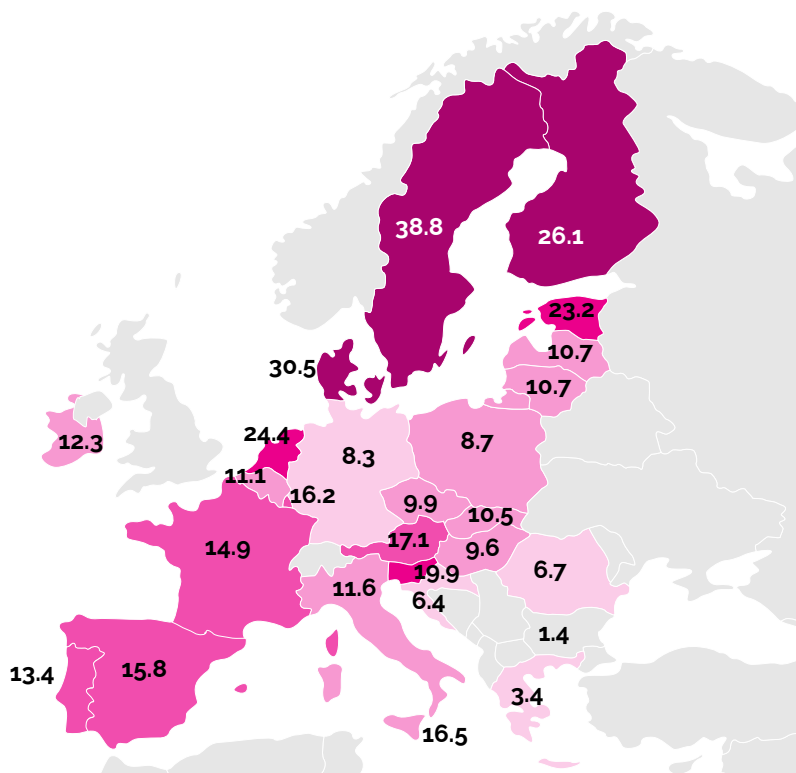


How does Ireland compare with other EU countries?

In 2023, on average, 12.7% of adults had participated in lifelong learning activities in the preceding four weeks across the EU. At 12.3%⁵, Ireland was almost at the EU average but well behind the top performing countries (Sweden (38.8%), Denmark (30.5%) and Finland (26.1%) (Figure 7).

- **Learning type:** the share of adults participating in formal learning however was slightly higher in Ireland (4.5%) than the EU 27 average (3.3%), as was the share who had engaged in non-job related non-formal learning (4.1% for Ireland vs 2.8% in the EU). In contrast, Ireland's job-related non-formal lifelong learning rate was considerably below the EU average (4.5% vs 7.1% for the EU).
- **Gender:** the female participation rate in lifelong learning was higher in Ireland (14.3%) than the EU 27 average (13.9%); conversely, Ireland's males had a lower rate (10.3% vs 11.5%).
- **Employed persons:** compared to their EU 27 counterparts, lifelong learning participation amongst employed persons in Ireland was lower (12.4% for Ireland, compared to an EU average of 13.5%); the gap between Ireland and the EU 27 average was even higher when looking at engagement in job-related non-formal learning, with a rate of 5.4% amongst Ireland's employed compared to 8.3% on average across the EU.

Figure 7. Lifelong learning participation rates (%) across the EU, 2023



Source: Eurostat

⁵ This lifelong learning rate refers to the annual average in 2023 and differs from the 14% rate mentioned earlier (which refers to quarter 4 2023).

Data from the Adult Education Survey

In 2022, the EU's Adult Education Survey (AES) was conducted in Ireland by the CSO and examined engagement in learning activities in the preceding 12 months rather than in the previous 4 weeks. In addition, the AES's measure of non-formal learning includes *guided on-the-job training*, which is excluded from the Labour Force Survey measure⁶. Partly as a result of these differences, participation rates, for both Ireland and other EU countries, tend to be considerably higher in the AES. The CSO⁷ provides detailed information on the AES findings, but some of the key points are detailed in Table 1 below.

Ireland's lifelong learning rate was 54.8% in 2022, more than eight percentage points (pp) higher than the EU 27 average (46.6%), ranking Ireland sixth out of 27 EU countries. At more than nine pp, the gap between Ireland and the EU average was even greater for adults engaging in job-related learning activities that were sponsored by the employer (42.8% of adults in Ireland vs nearly 33.7% for the EU average).

Mean number of instruction hours per participant: with 131 hours per learner, Ireland ranked 10th out of 27 EU countries, and slightly below the EU average (144 hours); Ireland's formal learning participants had, on average 321 instruction hours, among the lowest across the EU: only Malta (302 hours), Lithuania (294 hours) and Luxemburg (284 hours) had a lower mean number of hours.

Table 1: Lifelong learning participation by gender, type, and mean instruction hours, 2022

	EU 27	Ireland
Lifelong learning	46.6%	54.8%
Males	46.0%	53.4%
Females	47.2%	56.1%
Formal	6.3%	10.9%
Non-formal	44.0%	50.4%
Job-related non-formal	38.1%	45.3%
Employer sponsored job-related	33.7%	42.8%
Not sponsored by employer job-related	4.4%	2.5%
Mean instruction hours by participant - LLL	144 hrs	131 hrs
Mean instruction hours by participant- non-formal learning	84 hrs	76 hrs
Mean instruction hours by participant - formal learning	512 hrs	321 hrs

Source: Eurostat

⁶ Guided on-the-job non-formal learning is also excluded from the EU 2030 target of 60%.

⁷ <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-aes/adulteducationsurvey2022/>

Reasons for non-participation in lifelong learning: in order to improve lifelong learning participation rates, it is important to understand reasons for non-participation. Of those who had not participated in lifelong learning in 2022, the top three reasons for Ireland and the EU 27 average were similar (Table 2). Scheduling reasons were the largest obstacle to participation in lifelong learning for 23.8% of non-LLL participants in Ireland, and 22.8% of those in the EU on average. However, family reasons and costs were considerably higher for Ireland (22.5% and 20.2% respectively) compared to the EU average (14.4% and 13.7% respectively).

Table 2. Reasons (%) for non-participation in lifelong learning, 2022

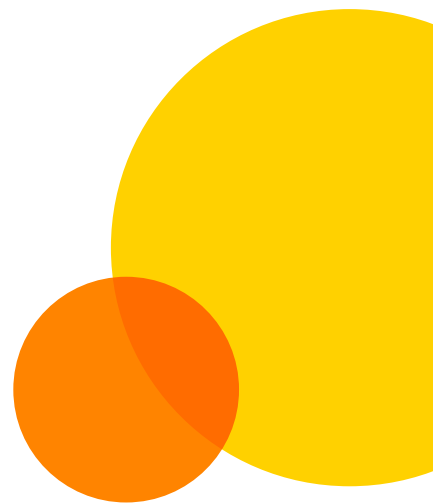
	EU 27	Ireland
Schedule ⁸	22.8	23.8
Family reasons	14.4	22.5
Costs	13.7	20.2
Health or age reasons	6.0	6.3
No suitable offer for education or training	7.0	5.3
Lack of support from employer or public services	7.6	5.2
All other reasons (inc no response)	28.6	16.7
Total	100	100

Source: Eurostat

Other reasons (for which responses from Ireland were too small to report included distance, course booked out, too few registrations, among others.)



⁸ Learning activities conflicted with work schedule/s or were organised at inconvenient time.



Skills and Labour Market Research Unit

SOLAS
Castleforbes House
Castleforbes Road
D01 A8NO
Dublin 1

Aonad Taighde um Scileanna agus Margaidh Saothair

SOLAS
Bloc 1, Teach Chaisleán Foirbis
Bóthar Chaisleán Foirbis
D01 A8NO
Baile Átha Cliath 1

E: slmru@solas.ie
www.solas.ie

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