

# Research Bulletin 23/5 Lifelong Learning in Northern Ireland

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## Summary

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This research bulletin examines differences in the participation of education or training among different groups of people aged 25-64 in Northern Ireland as an indicator of lifelong learning. The data gathered makes comparisons across a number of variables, including age, sex and qualification levels. The information and data used was collected using local and worldwide statistical organisations such as Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) and Eurostat.

Some interesting findings emerge from this. Northern Ireland consistently has lower participation rates in learning for those aged 25-64 (lifelong learning) compared with the UK average. In general, in Northern Ireland, higher rates are associated with being female, possessing higher level qualifications and being relatively younger (under 50).

Countries such as Sweden have made lifelong learning part of their culture, with 36% of adults participating in learning in 2022, ranking it the top European country on this measure.

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## What is Lifelong Learning?

Lifelong learning is any education or training that takes place after compulsory schooling has been completed. It is therefore self-motivated, with the main goal of improving knowledge or skills. Although it mainly relates to improving employment skills, it can also include personal, civil and social skills.

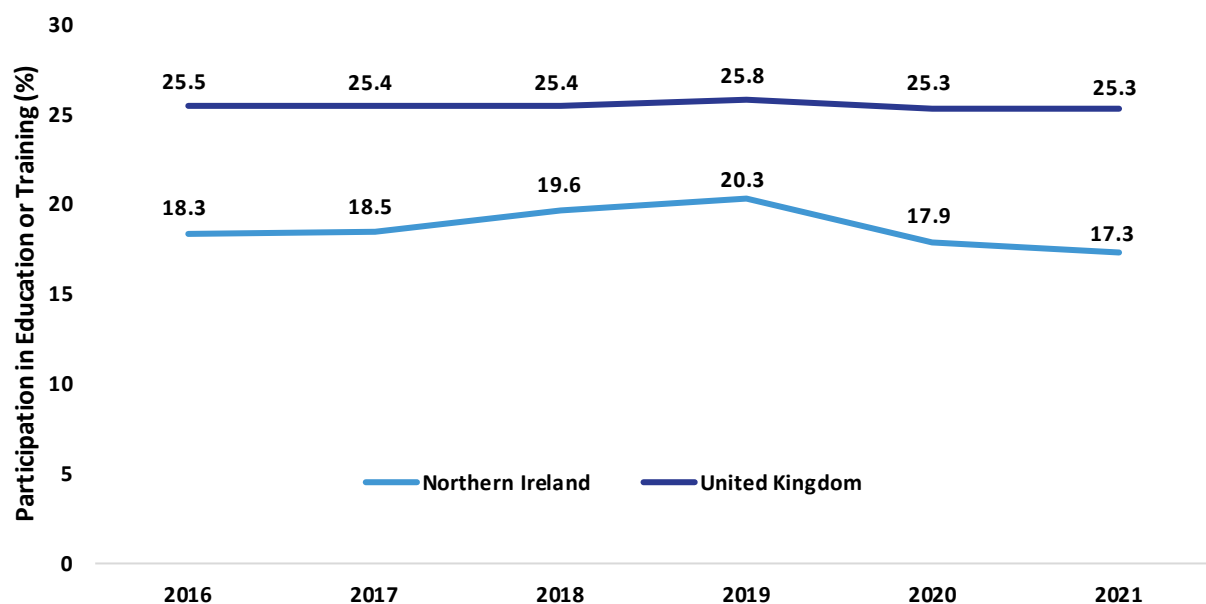
There are a wide range of options that are considered lifelong learning, from degree level courses to essential skills training, as well as including enrollees on courses waiting to start job-related training, tuition or taught classes. The lifelong learning indicator aims to capture the level of participation in education or training following the completion of formal education.

In Northern Ireland (and the UK), NISRA in its measurement of lifelong learning has defined it as those aged 25 to 64 currently participating in education or training and those who received informal training during the last three months; whereas the Eurostat measure is limited to the last four weeks.

## Lifelong Learning in Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland has consistently had a lower rate of lifelong learning than the UK average<sup>i</sup>. Figure 1 shows that in 2016, 18.3% of adults were engaged in lifelong learning in Northern Ireland, compared with the UK average of 25.5%. Over the next three years Northern Ireland saw annual increases in the rates of lifelong learning up until 2019 (20.3%), which saw the gap between NI and the UK average narrow slightly to 5.5 percentage points, from 7.2 percentage points in 2016. However, in recent years this gap has since widened, with the rate of lifelong learning in Northern Ireland falling to 17.3% relative to the UK average of 25.3%.

**Figure 1: Proportion Participating in Education or Training, NI and UK (25-64), 2016-2021**



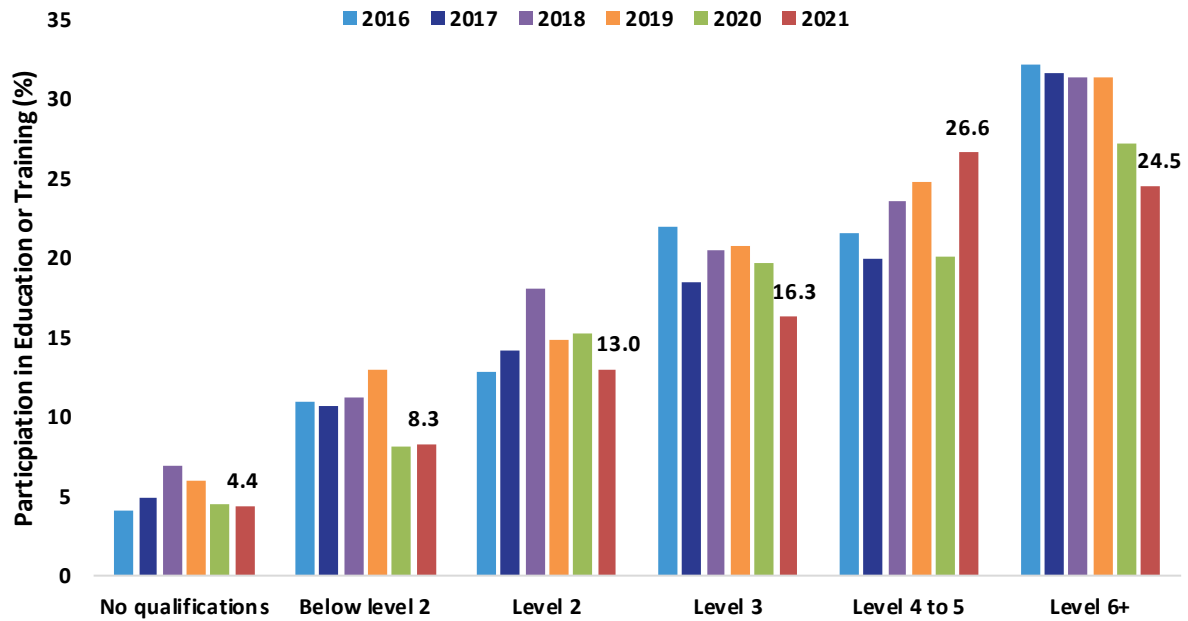
Source: NISRA

## Highest Qualification

We can see from Figure 2 that participation in education or training increases with the level of education obtained. In 2021, the participation rate for those with no qualifications was 4.4%, almost half that of those with below level 2 qualifications (8.3%) and a third of that of those with level 2 (13%). At the higher end of the qualification scale, the rate was 26.6% for persons qualified to level 4 or 5, and 24.5% for level 6 and above.

Interestingly, 2021 saw a change in the trend in this series where the rate for level 6 and above was always the highest, but two annual decreases have led to the rate of lifelong learning being highest in those with level 4 or 5 qualifications (equivalent to a Foundation Degree, HND, HNC, higher apprenticeship).

**Figure 2: Participation in Education or Training by Highest Qualification Level Held, (%), Aged 25 to 64, NI, (2016-2021)**

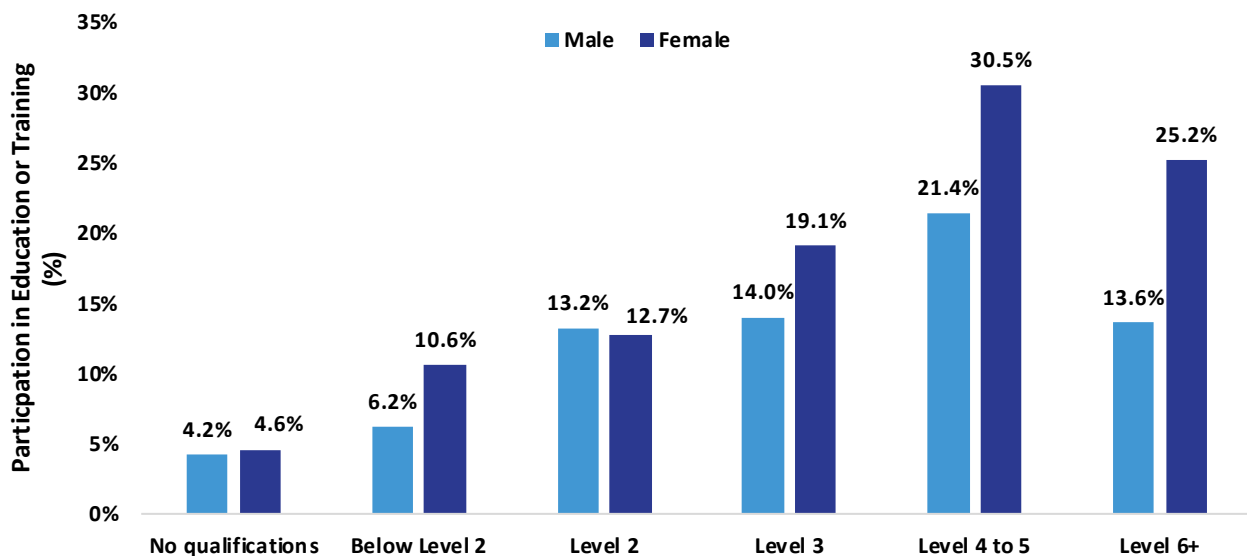


Source: NISRA

### Difference by Sex

In Northern Ireland, females are more likely to engage in lifelong learning than males. In 2021, 19.4% of females participated in lifelong learning compared with only 15.1% of males. Larger gaps emerge when analysing the results by sex and highest qualification (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Participation in Education or Training by Highest Qualification Level Held and Sex (%), Aged 25-64, NI, 2021**



Source: NISRA

Rates for females are higher at all levels except level 2. Mirroring the overall picture, rates are highest for those with level 4 to 5 qualifications for both sexes. The gap is noticeably different at higher levels, with only 13.6% of males with level 6 or above qualifications involved in education or training compared with 25.2% of their female counterparts.

Furthermore, within the male cohort, a lower proportion of males with the highest credentials (level 6 and above) were in education or training than those with level 3 qualifications (14.0%), and only slightly higher than those with level 2 (13.2%).

### Disability Status

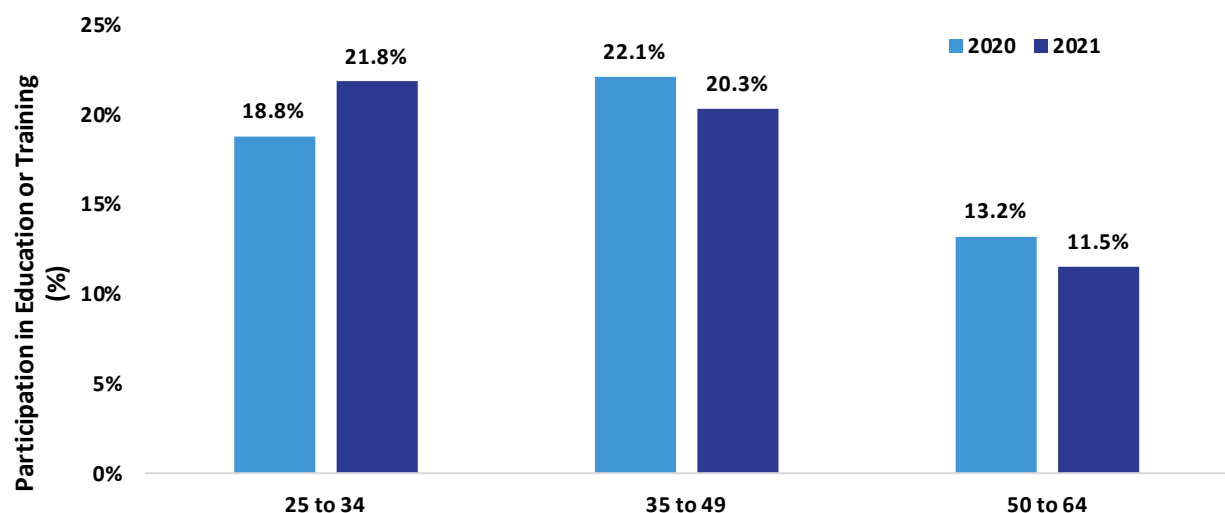
According to NISRA figures for 2021, 12.3% of persons aged 25 to 64, with a disability, participated in education or training. This compared to 19.0% of persons without a disability. Figures for 2020 were similar, at 11.7% and 20.0% respectively.<sup>ii</sup>

### Age Breakdown

The most recent figures show that in 2021 (Figure 4), the age group most likely to be engaged in lifelong learning was those aged 25-34 (21.8%), followed closely by 35-49 (20.3%). The rate for the 50-64 cohort is markedly lower, and currently stands at 11.5%.

Looking closer at this age category (age 50-64), data shows this group have the lowest proportion attaining qualifications at level 3 and above, and the largest proportion with no qualifications by some margin (21.4% compared with 9.3% for those aged 35-49, and 6.6% for those aged 25-34). Given it has been established that those least qualified are less likely to participate in education or training, it is therefore unsurprising this older age group exhibits the lowest rate.

**Figure 4: Participation in Education or Training by Age Group (%), 25-64, NI, 2020 and 2021**

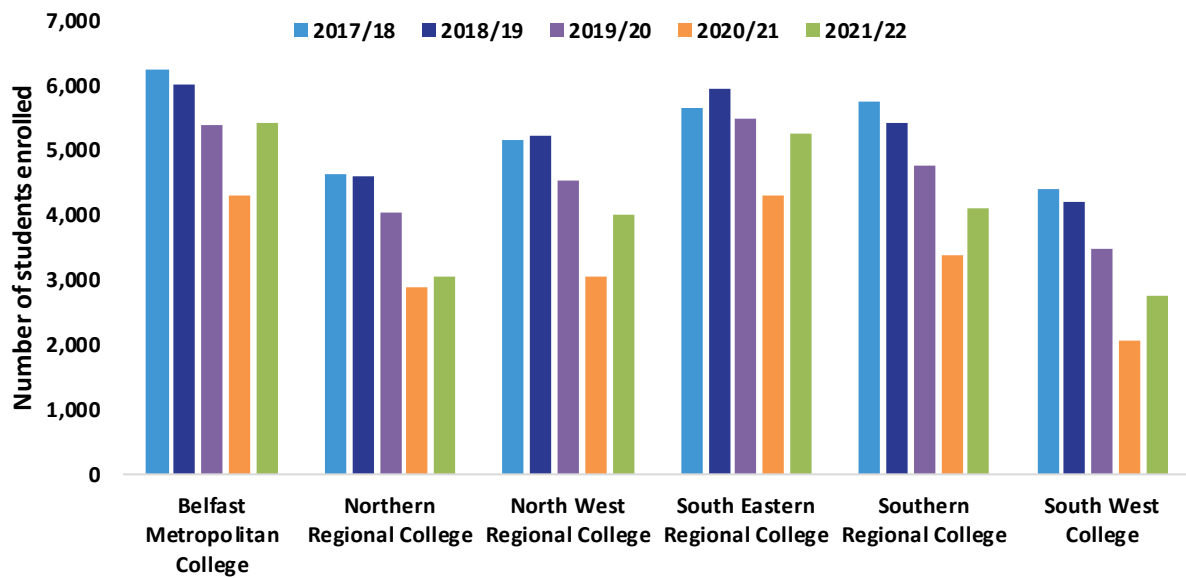


Source: NISRA

## Further Education

The number of students aged 25 and over enrolled at further education colleges has fallen in all institutions from 2017/18 to 2021/22. Whilst Covid-19 accelerated this decline, it is not the sole cause, as a downward trend existed prior to 2020<sup>iii</sup>. The number of students enrolled aged 25 and over slightly rebounded in 2021/22.

**Figure 5: Student Enrolments Aged 25 and Over by Further Education College, 2017/18 to 2021/22**

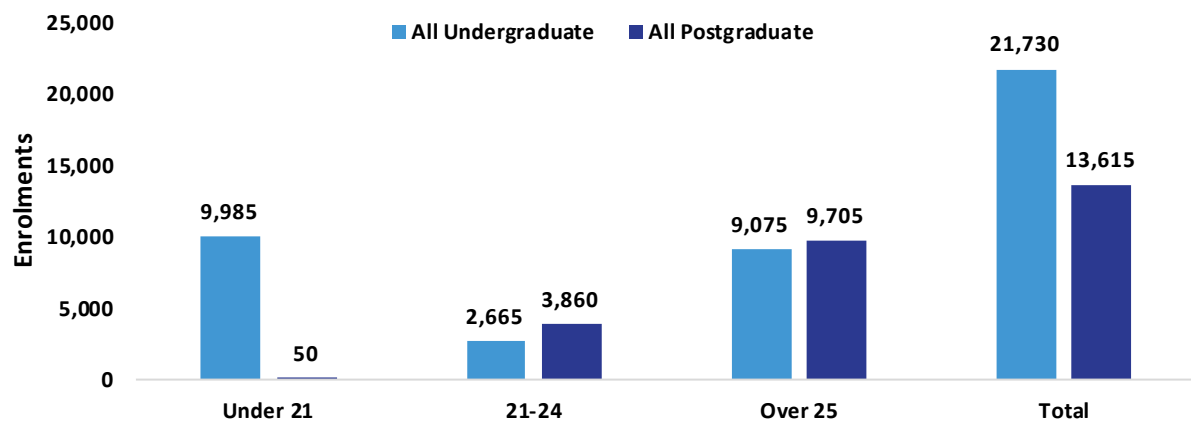


Source: Department for the Economy

## Higher Education

The total number of first year student enrolments in Northern Ireland higher education institutions in both undergraduate and postgraduate courses was 35,345 in 2021/22<sup>iv</sup> (Figure 6). Of these, 53% were by students who were aged 25 and over. Of all first-year undergraduates, 42% fall into the 25 and over age group, the majority of which are enrolled part-time (90%).

**Figure 6: First Year Enrolments in Higher Education Institutions (NI) by Age Group, 2021/22**



Source: Department for the Economy

First year undergraduates have been heavily influenced by non-UK domiciled students<sup>v</sup>, which has increased more than tenfold since 2018/19, going from 355, to over 4,500 aged 25 and over in 2021/22 (approximately 98% are students in part-time courses).

Focusing solely on UK domiciled students, figures show that 31% of first year undergraduate student enrolments in Northern Ireland higher education institutions were by students aged 25 and over.

Northern Ireland has the lowest proportion of people in employment receiving job related education or training of any UK region and has recorded lower proportions of the workforce engaged in this type of learning consistently over time<sup>vi</sup>. In a tight labour market the ability to offer support to employees to upskill is an important recruitment method, and there is currently a mismatch between employees and employers. Since 2020 there has been a reduction in numbers receiving job related education or training, with Northern Ireland experiencing a much steeper fall relative to the UK, highlighting a potential missed opportunity for workers to accumulate skills to assist career progression.

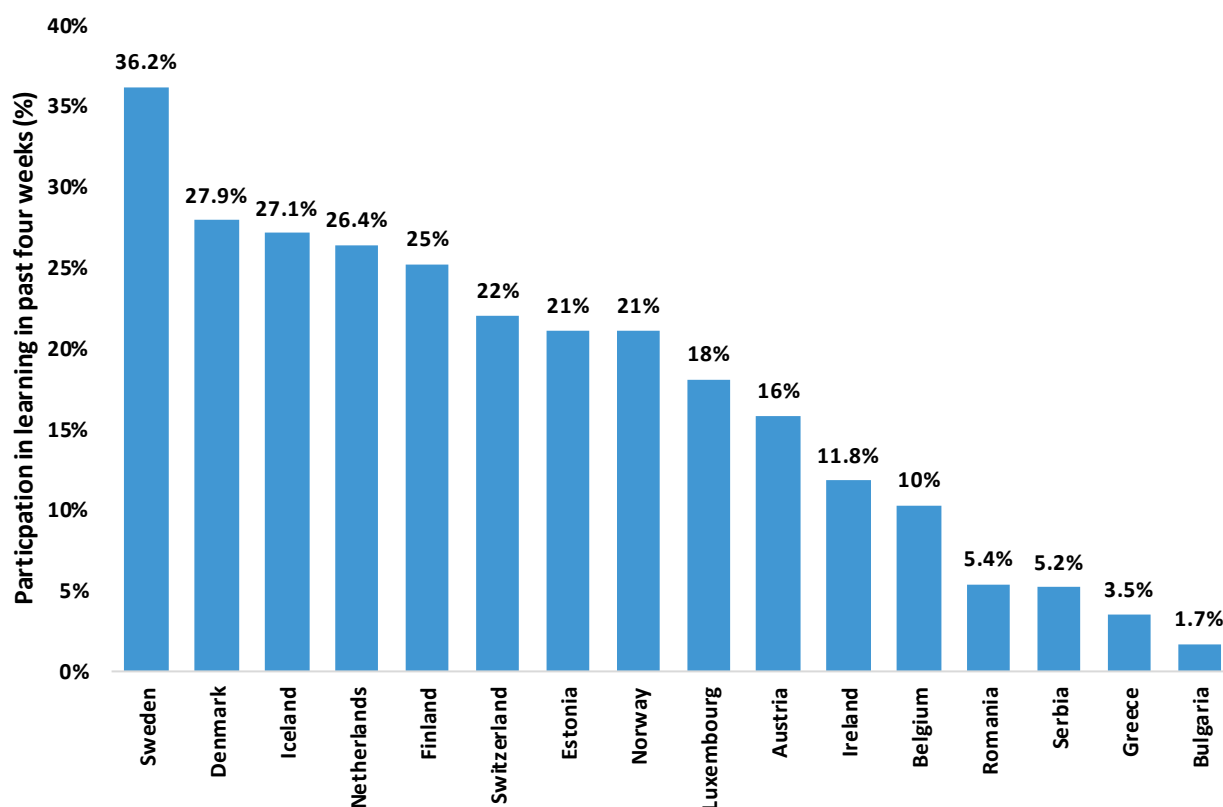
## **Lifelong Learning across Europe**

According to Eurostat data, the Nordic countries have the highest participation rates in lifelong learning in Europe. Sweden had the highest participation in 2022 (Figure 7) with 36.2% of adults between the ages of 25-64 participating in some type of formal or informal learning within the last four weeks<sup>vii</sup> (not comparable with NISRA's measure capturing the last three months). In 2016, more than half (53.2%) of the economically inactive in Sweden were in formal or non-formal training<sup>viii</sup>, double the UK rate at the time. In this sense, lifelong learning can be an effective way of rehabilitating the labour market.

In contrast, Bulgaria has a low lifelong learning participation rate relative to the rest of Europe with only 1.7% adults (25-64) engaged in learning in 2022. In 2012, only 1.5% of Bulgaria's population group was participating in both formal and informal learning activities, which failed to meet the 5% goal set in the previous national strategy<sup>ix</sup>. This is attributed to factors including the global economic crisis and school dropout rates. Over the course of 10 years, the participation rate has only risen by 0.2 percentage points.

Ireland's lifelong learning participation rate ranked 11th out of 16 economies analysed, with a rate of 11.8%. Ireland has a national target to increase the participation of the population aged 25-64 in lifelong learning to 15% by 2025<sup>x</sup>, however, 42% of adults in Ireland are disengaged from adult learning and do not participate in the opportunities available for adult learning<sup>xi</sup>. Compared to the average disengagement rate of all the OECD countries which is 50%, Ireland has a slightly more engaged population for adult learning.

**Figure 7: Adult Participation in Learning in the Past Four Weeks (25-64), Selected Countries, 2022**



Source: Eurostat

## Conclusion

Northern Ireland consistently has a lower participation rate in lifelong learning compared with the UK average. In general, higher rates are associated with being female, possessing higher level qualifications and being relatively younger (under 50).

There are particularly interesting findings from analysing first year enrolment statistics at Northern Ireland's higher education institutions. Over half of first year undergraduate enrolments are aged 25 and over, driven by non-UK domiciled students. Excluding non-UK domiciled first year undergraduates, 31% of first year enrolments in 2021/22 were aged 25 and above.

Countries such as Sweden have made lifelong learning part of their culture as 36% of adults had participated in lifelong learning in 2022, ranking it top of the European countries examined.

Overall, Northern Ireland has scope for improvement in terms of engagement in lifelong learning, to be placed amongst the most competitive small advanced economies in the world on this particular measure.

Creating a culture of lifelong learning is one of the three major policy objectives of the 10X Skills Strategy and since its publication, the Department for the Economy has launched Skill Up, a programme that offers free qualifications to anyone aged 18 and over in areas of economic priority<sup>xii</sup>.

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For further information or queries please contact [AnalyticalServices@economy-ni.gov.uk](mailto:AnalyticalServices@economy-ni.gov.uk).



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- i [Highest qualification level and participation in education/training 2021](#)
  - ii [Highest qualification level and participation in education/training 2021](#)
  - iii [Further education sector activity in Northern Ireland: 2017/18 to 2021/22](#)
  - iv [Enrolments at UK HE Institutions: Northern Ireland Analysis 2021/22 | Department for the Economy](#)
  - v From 2019/20, Ulster University introduced a new part time module for those undertaking the Objective Structured Clinical Exam (OSCE) of the NMC Test of Competence (ToC). The ToC is for overseas nurses and midwives seeking registration as a nurse and/or midwife in the UK. The NMC Competence Test Centre (CTC) at Magee campus of UU is one of five CTC test centres across the UK and has been open since 2018. However, 2019/20 was the first year this module has been offered alongside registration for the exam. This is a stand-alone, credit bearing course, which means that while students will receive credit for undertaking the module, no qualification will be awarded, and, hence, they will not appear in the qualification statistics.
  - vi [NI Skills Barometer 2021](#)
  - vii [Adult participation in learning in the past four weeks by sex](#)
  - viii [Participation rate in education and training by labour status](#)
  - ix [Bulgaria: National Strategy for Lifelong Learning for the period 2014–2020](#)
  - x [Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025](#)
  - xi OECD Skills Outlook - [Ireland](#)
  - xii [Skill Up](#) – the Flexible Skills Fund