

Research Bulletin 23/7 | The Labour Market & Qualifications Profile of the Adult Population, using Census 2021 Findings

10X Skills and Inclusion Branch, Analytical Services Division, Department for the Economy

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Summary

This Research Bulletin provides an overview of analysis produced using findings from the 2021 Northern Ireland Censusⁱ. The analysis has a particular focus on the labour market and qualifications.

This article shows that that one in four (24%) adults in Northern Ireland possess no qualifications. It also finds that those younger are relatively higher qualified than those relatively older. Furthermore, that those employed hold higher level qualifications on average compared to those unemployed or economically inactive.

Almost three-in-five adults who have never worked hold no qualifications. There are stark differences in the qualification profile between a person who has any health condition compared to those that don't (on average).

Introduction

A census usually takes place once every ten years and is the largest and most complex statistical exercise undertaken in Northern Ireland. Census statistics are a vital source of information, and are widely used by government, public bodies, academia, commercial businesses and others to develop policies, allocate resources and help deliver services. The 2021 census had an overall return rate of 97.2%, thus meaning its coverage across households in Northern Ireland was high.ⁱⁱ

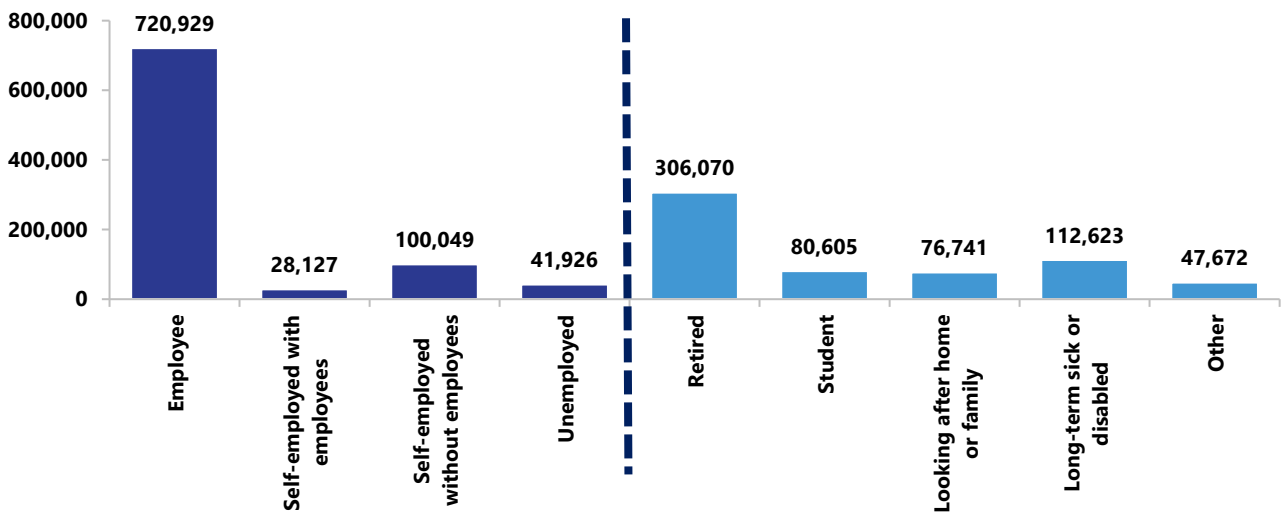
This Research Bulletin provides an overview of analysis produced using findings from the 2021 Northern Ireland Censusⁱⁱⁱ and presented to the Skills, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion sub-committee of the Northern Ireland Skills Council in November 2023.^{iv} The analysis has a particular focus on the labour market and qualifications. Comparisons are made across a number of categories, including by age groups, industry, occupation, as well as those with health conditions and those without.

The 10X Vision (May 2021) stated that in developing an economy and society that works for everyone, we must focus on supporting individuals to achieve higher level qualifications; qualifications which have real labour market relevance and provide access to quality jobs, creating a culture of lifelong learning.^v For individuals, those with higher qualifications (on average) tend to have higher levels of life satisfaction, are more likely to participate in work and earn higher wages.^{vi}

Labour Market Overview – aged 16+

Almost 900,000 are economically active in Northern Ireland, with the majority of these employees. Of those inactive, the biggest factor is retirement (although this does include the 65 and over age group). The next biggest reason is long-term sick or disabled. This is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Labour Market Overview – Aged 16+

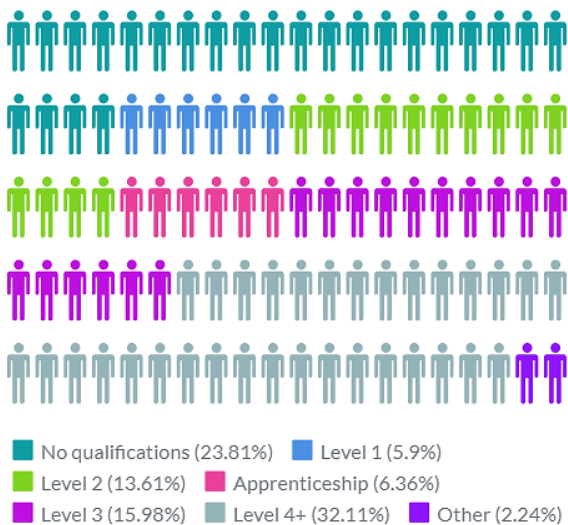


Source: NI Census, NISRA 2021

Highest Qualification Overview^{vii}

Almost one in four (24% or 361,000) adults aged 16 and over had no qualifications at all. A further 123,000 (or 8%) had other or Level 1 qualifications. Almost one-third (32% or 486,000) of the 16 and over population had a Level 4+ qualification.

Figure 2: Highest Qualifications of all Adults in Northern Ireland (Aged 16+)



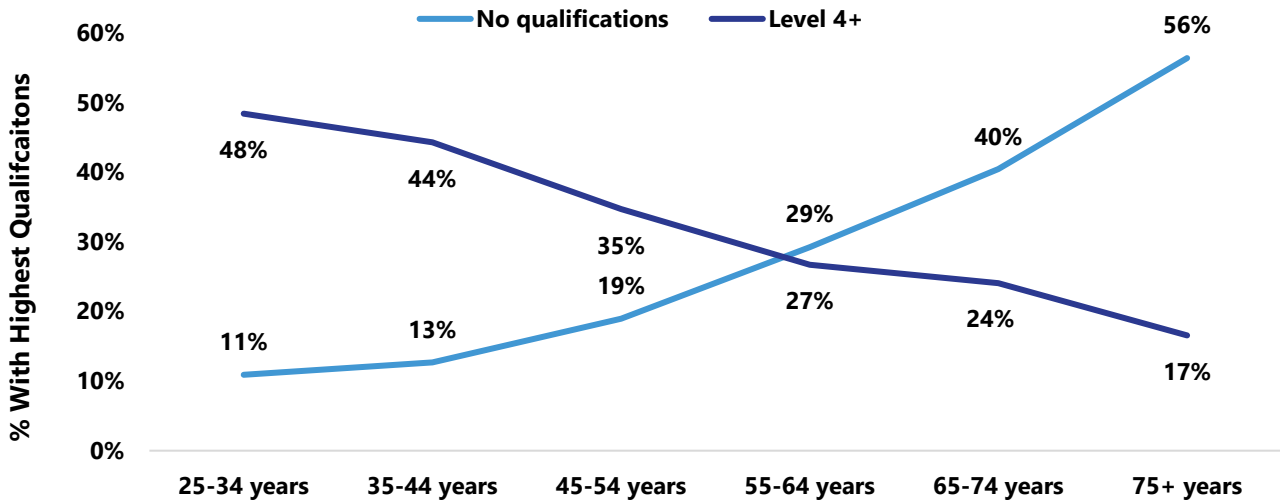
Level	Description
1	1 to 4 GCSEs, O levels, CSEs (any grades); 1 AS Level; NVQ level 1; or equivalent
2	5 or more GCSEs (A*-C or 9-4), O levels (passes) CSEs (grade 1); 1 A level, 2-3 AS Levels; NVQ level 2, BTEC General, City and Guilds Craft; or equivalent
3	2 or more A Levels, 4 or more AS Levels; NVQ Level 3, BTEC National, OND, ONC, City and Guilds Advanced Craft; or equivalent
4+	Degree (BA, BSc), foundation degree, NVQ Level 4 and above, HND, HNC, professional qualifications (teaching or nursing, for example), Masters, PhD or equivalent
Other	Other qualifications, equivalent unknown

Source: NI Census, NISRA 2021

Highest Qualification by Age Group

The relatively younger age groups have higher qualifications on average, and vice versa. Almost half (48%) of 25 to 34 year olds hold Level 4+ qualifications (highest of any age group), with a further 20% with Level 3 qualifications. One in ten (11%) have no qualifications (lowest of any age group). This compares with the oldest age group (75+ year olds), where over half (56%) hold no qualifications and only 17% hold a Level 4+ qualification.

Figure 3: Age Group by Highest Qualifications of all Adults in Northern Ireland (Aged 16+)

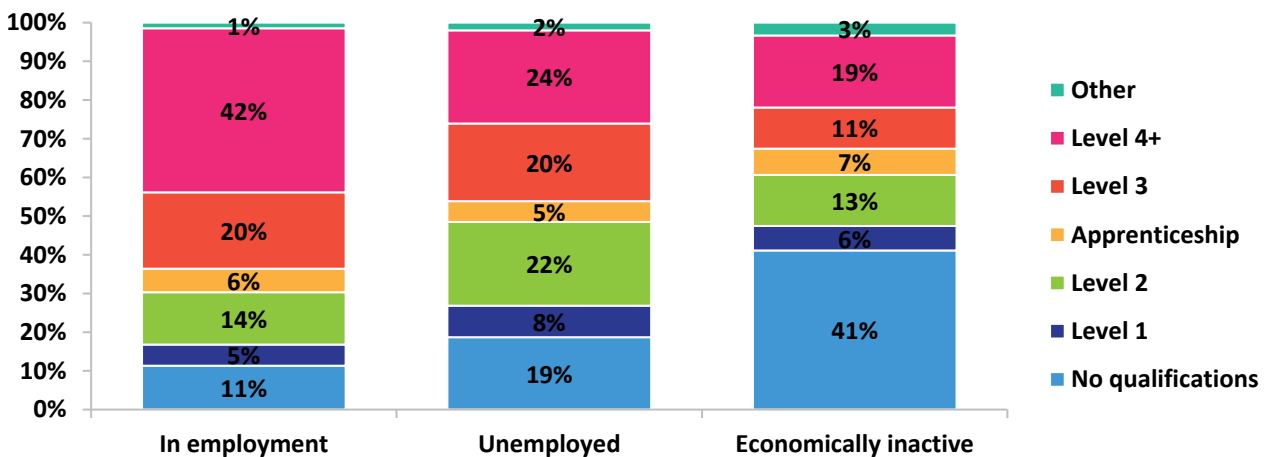


Source: NI Census, NISRA 2021

Highest Qualification by Economic Status

On average, those employed hold higher level qualifications compared with those economically inactive. Two in five (42%) of those employed hold a Level 4+ qualification; this compares with just 19% of those inactive. One in ten (11%) of those employed hold no qualifications compared with 41% of those inactive.

Figure 4: Highest Qualification by Economic Status for Adults Aged 16+

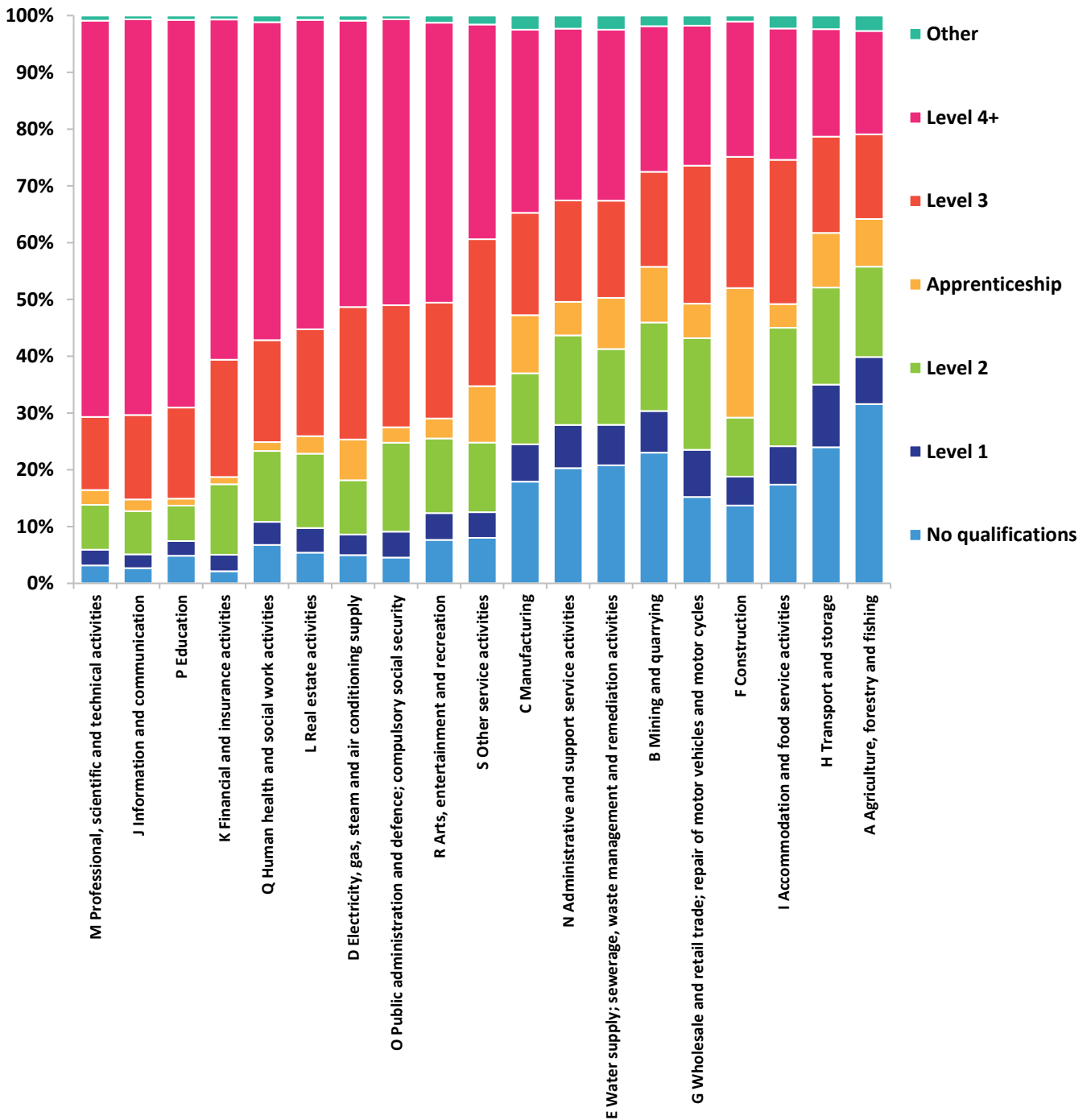


Source: NI Census, NISRA 2021

Highest Qualification by Industry and Occupation

The Professional Services; ICT; and Education sectors had proportionally the most workers with Level 4+ qualifications. Construction; Manufacturing; and Other Services have the highest concentration of workers with apprenticeships. Agriculture; Transport; and Mining and Quarrying have proportionally the most workers with no qualifications.

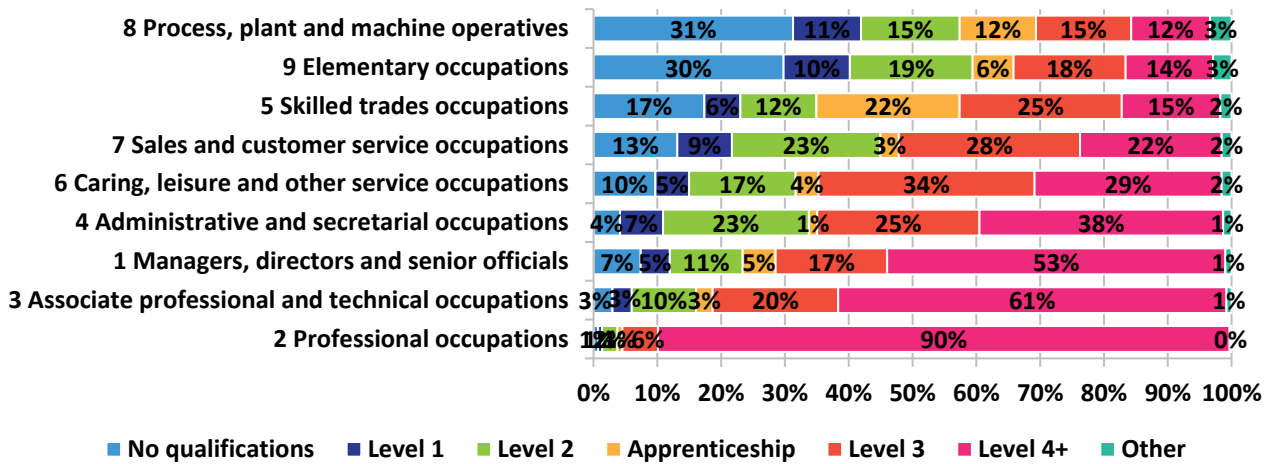
Figure 5: Highest Qualification by Industry



Source: NI Census, NISRA 2021

Professional occupations had proportionally the most workers with Level 4+ qualifications. Process, plant and machine operatives had proportionally the most workers with no qualifications, closely followed by workers in Elementary occupations. Workers in Skilled trades occupations had proportionally the most with apprenticeships.

Figure 6: Highest Qualification by Occupation

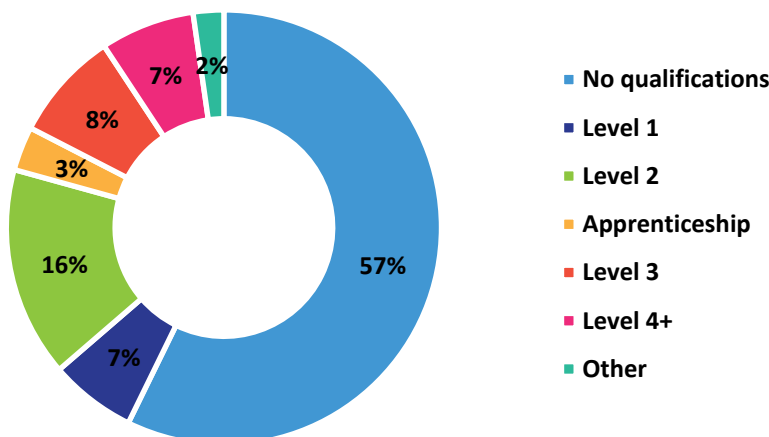


Source: NI Census, NISRA 2021

Highest Qualification for Adults who have Never Worked

Just over 200,000 adults (aged 16+) in Northern Ireland have never worked. Almost three-in-five adults in Northern Ireland who have never worked hold no qualifications. Nearly one in ten (7%) of adults who have never worked hold a Level 4+ qualification. When broken up by age, 92,000 of adults who have never worked are aged 16-39; 54,000 are aged 40-64; and 57,000 are aged 65+.

Figure 7: Highest Qualification for Adults who have Never Worked

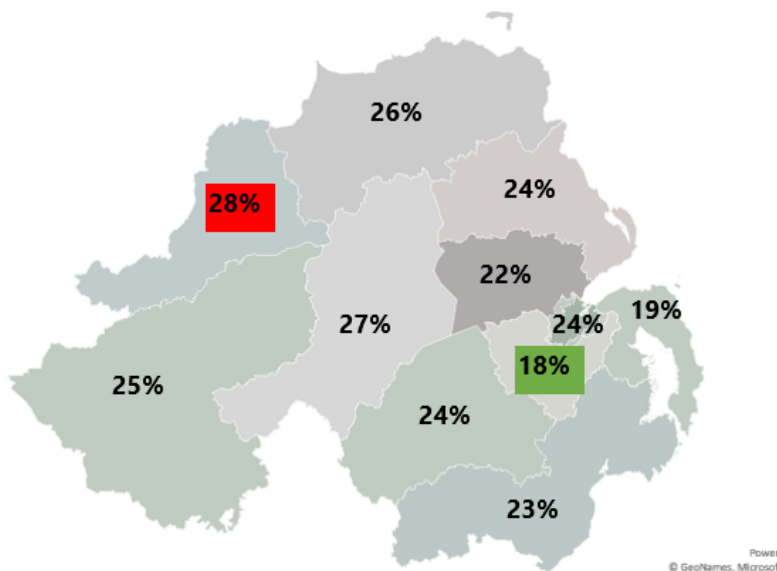


Source: NI Census, NISRA 2021

Highest and No Qualifications by Local Government District

Over one in four (28%) adults in Derry City and Strabane possess no qualifications, 10 percentage points higher than in Lisburn and Castlereagh.

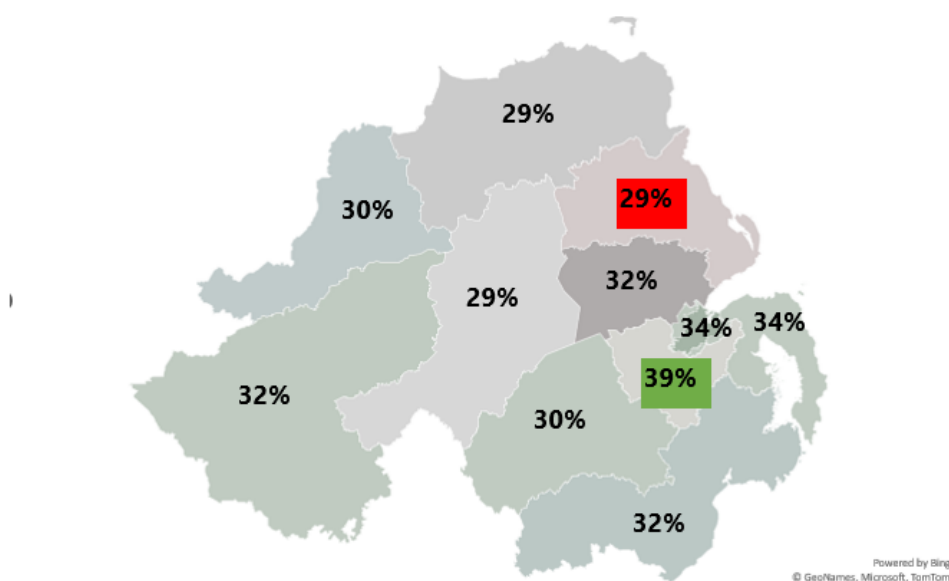
Figure 8: Proportion of Adults with no Qualifications by Local Government District



Source: NI Census, NISRA 2021

Almost two-fifths (39%) of adults in Lisburn and Castlereagh have a Level 4+ qualification. This falls to 29% for the lowest ranked area (Mid and East Antrim).

Figure 9: Proportion of Adults with Level 4+ Qualifications by Local Government District



Source: NI Census, NISRA 2021

Health Condition

There are stark differences in the qualification profile between a person who has any health condition compared with those that don't (on average). Analysis was carried out to consider each of the health conditions stated in Census 2021 and what the difference was in qualification attainment between those that had a stated health condition compared with those that do not. This is presented visually in the **Annex**. Across all health conditions, at least one-third of adults had no qualifications, and this was always higher when compared with those that did not have the stated health condition.

Conclusion

The 2021 Census is a rich source of information. With an overall return rate of 97.2%, its coverage across households in Northern Ireland was high. Interesting findings from this analysis of Census 2021 include:

- that one in four (24%) adults in Northern Ireland possess no qualifications;
- that those younger are relatively higher qualified than those relatively older;
- that those employed hold higher level qualifications on average compared to those unemployed or economically inactive;
- almost three-in-five adults who have never worked hold no qualifications; and
- there are stark differences in the qualification profile between a person who has any health condition compared to those that don't (on average).

There are still substantial pockets of adults with no qualifications in Northern Ireland and these are the currency for skills. Improving the qualification profile of adults, especially those that are relatively older or have a health condition could support more people to participate in the labour market. However, it is likely that qualifications is not the only inhibitor and there will be many factors at play.

The 10X Skills Strategy contains three overarching Strategic Goals that were created to measure overall strategic progress by 2030:

1. Increasing the proportion of individuals leaving Northern Ireland higher education institutions with first degrees and post-graduate qualifications in narrow STEM subjects, from 24% (2019-20) to 27% (2029-30).
2. Increasing the proportion of the working age population with qualifications at Level 2 and above (i.e. at least 5 GCSEs at grades A* to C or equivalent), from 76.3% (2020) to 85-90% (2030).
3. Increasing the proportion of the working age population with qualifications at Level 3 and above (i.e. at least A Levels (2 or more advanced level passes) or equivalent), from 56.0% (2020) to 70-75% (2030).

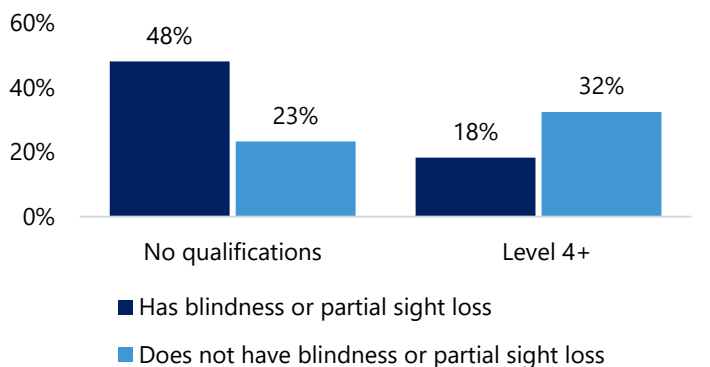
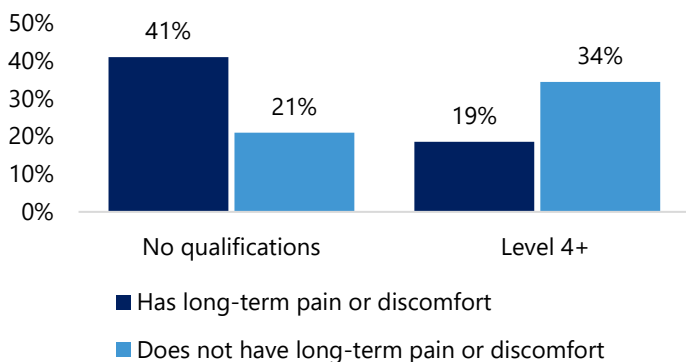
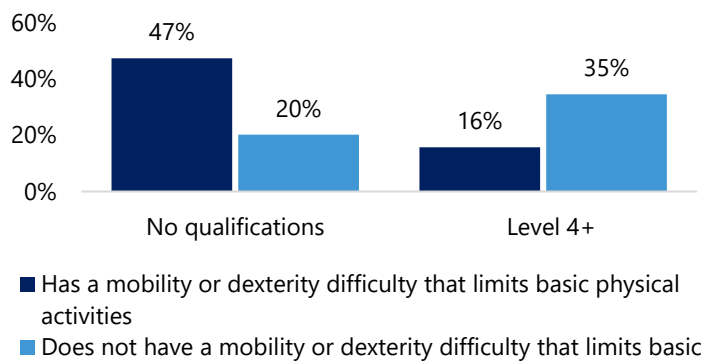
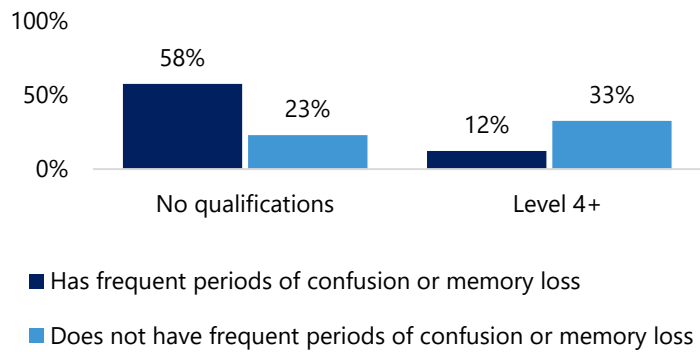
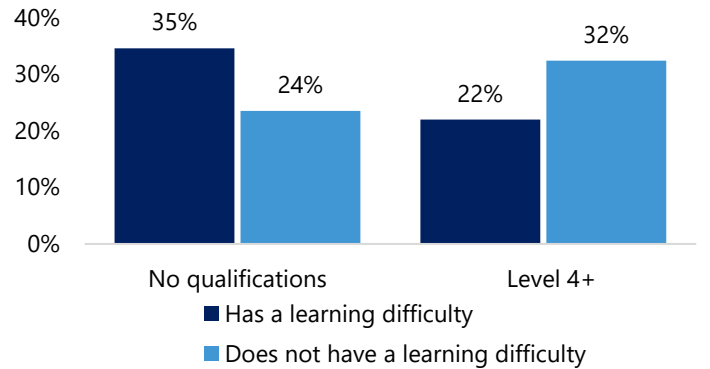
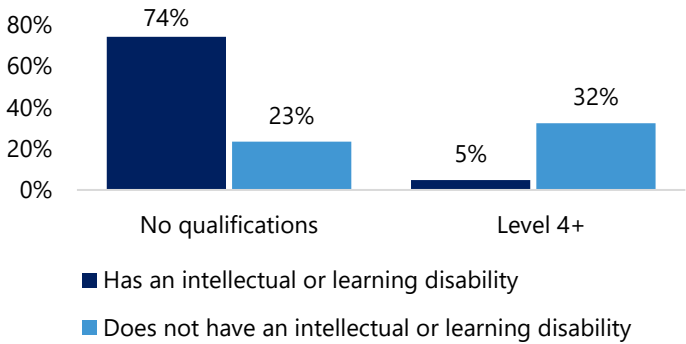
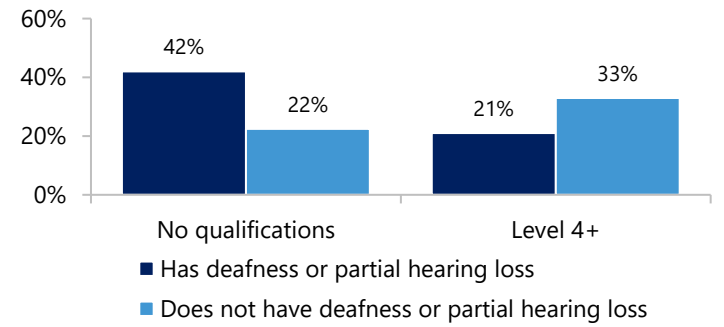
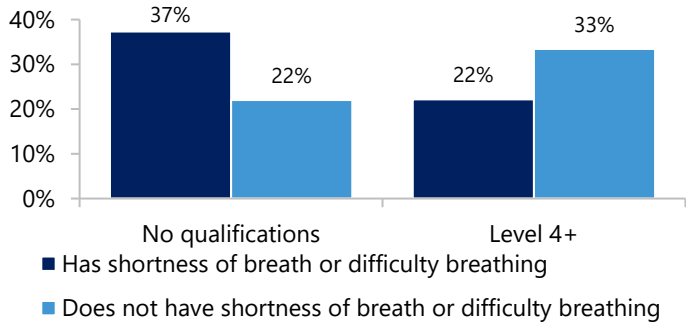
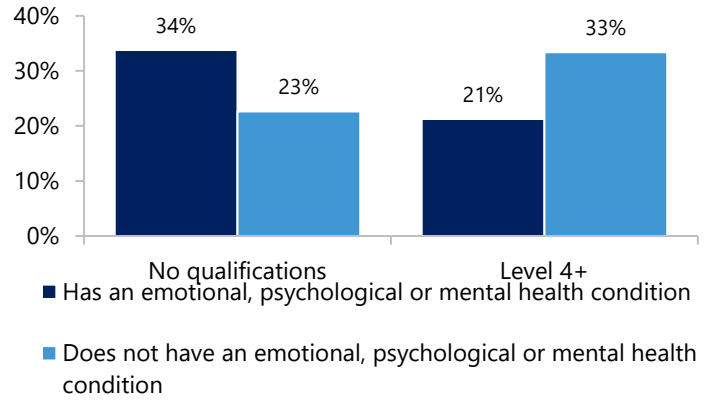
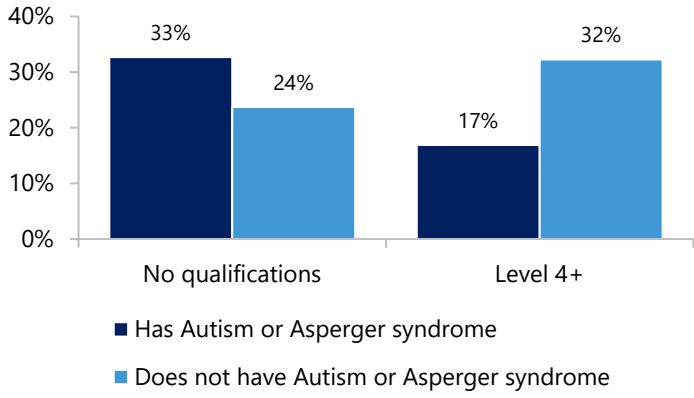
The Department for the Economy intends to create a 'Culture of Lifelong Learning'. Whilst not a Strategic Goal in itself, Recommendation 37 in the 10X Skills Strategy included a target to increase participation in adult learning from a baseline of 18.2% to the UK average of 25% by 2030.

Further information on progress against these targets, and more, can be found in the 1st Annual Monitoring Report for the Northern Ireland Skills Strategy, published earlier this year (March 2023).^{viii}

10X Skills and Inclusion Branch

For further information or queries please contact analyticalservices@economy-ni.gov.uk

Annex - Qualification Profile by Health Condition



ⁱ 2021 Census findings <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics/census/2021-census>

ⁱⁱ [Census 2021 Outputs and Dissemination Webinar - September 2023 \(nisra.gov.uk\)](#)

[Census 2021 operational report | Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency \(nisra.gov.uk\)](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ 2021 Census findings <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics/census/2021-census>

^{iv} NI Skills Council <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/articles/northern-ireland-skills-council>

^v [10x Economy - an economic vision for a decade of innovation | Department for the Economy \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

^{vi} [Northern Ireland Skills Strategy Skills for a 10x Economy - 1st Annual Monitoring Report \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

^{vii} Notes:

Level 1: 1 to 4 GCSEs, O levels, CSEs (any grades); 1 AS Level; NVQ level 1; or equivalent.

Level 2: 5 or more GCSEs (A*-C or 9-4), O levels (passes) CSEs (grade 1); 1 A level, 2-3 AS Levels; NVQ level 2, BTEC General, City and Guilds Craft; or equivalent.

Level 3: 2 or more A Levels, 4 or more AS Levels; NVQ Level 3, BTEC National, OND, ONC, City and Guilds Advanced Craft; or equivalent.

Level 4 and above: Degree (BA, BSc), foundation degree, NVQ Level 4 and above, HND, HNC, professional qualifications (teaching or nursing, for example), Masters, PhD, or equivalent.

Other: Other qualifications, equivalent unknown.

^{viii} [Skills for a 10x Economy - 1st Annual Monitoring Report | Department for the Economy \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](#)