

# Lifelong learning amongst adults in Ireland

Quarter 4 2025

April 2026

Ireland's lifelong learning rate

**15.7%**

in Q4 2025

Down slightly from **16%** in Q4 2024

**454,600** lifelong learners in Q4 2025

Compared to Q4 2024 down slightly



**3,300** fewer learners

In Q4 2025, the **highest lifelong learning rates were for**

- Third level graduates (20.3%)
- 25-34-year olds (19.7%)
- Professionals (22.5%)
- Education sector workers (26.5%)
- The unemployed (21.8%)

EU Comparison

- Ireland's older age groups **are more likely** to participate in lifelong learning (3 percentage point gap)
- Engagement in job-related non-formal learning is considerably **lower** than across the EU 27 average (7 percentage point gap).

# Introduction

Lifelong learning is a strategic priority across the European Union (EU). Under its Pillar of Social Rights, the EU has set a target of 60% adult participation by 2030, a recognition of the crucial role of ongoing skills development for economic growth as well as broader societal well-being.

This paper examines two distinct measures of lifelong learning, each derived from the Labour Force Survey (LFS). The first looks at the extent to which adults aged 25-64 years engaged in formal and non-formal learning activities **over the preceding 4-week period**. This data, based on the LFS research microdata files, allows for a detailed profile of lifelong learning rates and participants in Ireland; the most recent data relates to quarter 4 2025<sup>1</sup>.

The second lifelong learning measure looks at the same age cohort and type of learning activities (formal and non-formal), but this time covering **a 12-month period** and **providing a comparison with other EU countries**. This data is available every two years (from 2022) from Eurostat (the EU's statistical database), and while it is less detailed than the 4-week measure, it is closest to the EU target measure due to the 12-month timeframe<sup>2</sup>.

## Ireland's lifelong learning participants: Q4 2024-Q4 2025

In quarter 4 2025, an estimated 454,600 persons aged 25-64 years had participated in lifelong learning activities in the previous 4 weeks, 3,300 (0.7%) fewer than in quarter 4 2024 (Figure 1).

### Learning Type

- The overall decline in lifelong learning was driven largely by a 10% fall in formal learning, resulting in 13,800 fewer learners; the decline in other non-formal learning was smaller, at 5,000 fewer learners.
- Despite the slight overall decline in participant numbers, there was a shift towards greater participation in **job-related** non-formal learning activities, with 11,700 additional learners in quarter 4 2025 compared to quarter 4 2024.

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1 The SLMRU are grateful to the CSO for facilitating access to the Labour Force Survey Research Microdata Files. The 4-week measure reported here is based on an 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.

2 The EU's lifelong learning target was set using the Adult Education Survey (AES). Lifelong learning rates derived from the two surveys (AES and LFS) tend to differ considerably. While Eurostat ([EC 2024](#)) views the AES as the more appropriate measure, the fact that the AES is carried out only once every six years means analyses of both the detailed 4-week and the 12-month LFS indicators can serve as a regular update on the progress being made in lifelong learning in the intervening years. The LFS measures also allow for the identification of patterns of participation amongst different cohorts and highlights areas where policy interventions may be most needed and or most effective. See the Appendix for further details on differences between the various measures of lifelong learning available.

## Sex

- With 265,900 learners in quarter 4 2025, **females outnumbered males** (188,800 learners).
- The decline in total lifelong learning numbers **was due entirely to a 3.5% fall in the number of males**; in contrast, the number of female learners grew (1%, or 3,500 extra).

## Age group

- Persons aged 55-64 years formed the smallest age group, with just 68,400 lifelong learners (15% of total) in quarter 4 2025.
- When compared to quarter 4 2024, **the only age group where lifelong learning numbers grew was the 45-54-year-old cohort**, with 2,500 extra persons.

## NFQ level

- Most (76%) of **lifelong learning participants are highly educated**: with 343,500 learners holding higher education qualifications at NFQ 6 or above in quarter 4 2025.
- Lifelong learning participants fell across most NFQ levels, with the exception of those with level 6-8 qualifications (where numbers grew by nearly 5%, or 9,600 extra learners).

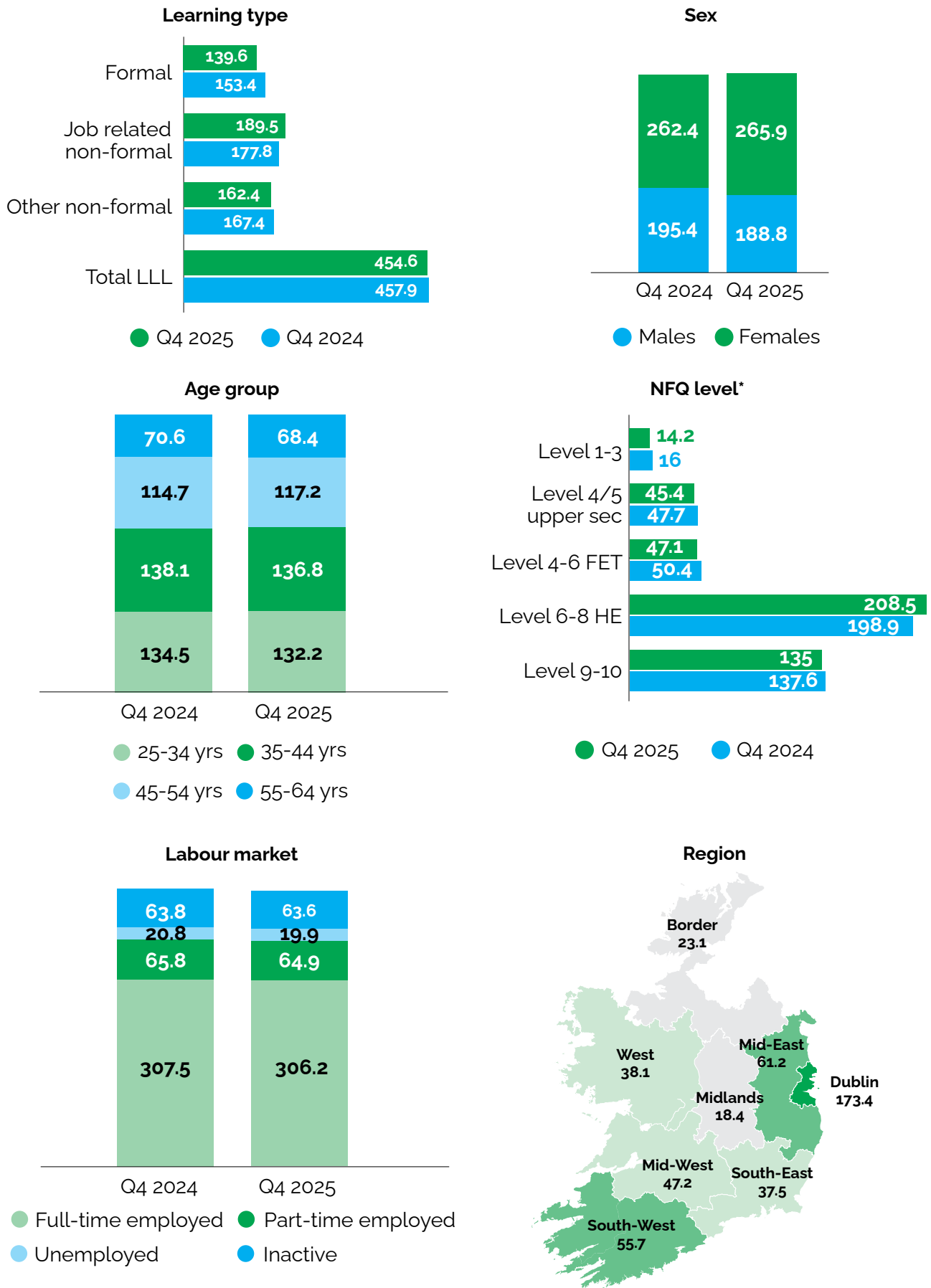
## Labour market status

- **Most (82%) lifelong learning participants were in employment**: 306,200 learners were in full-time employment and a further 64,900, in part-time employment.
- Compared to quarter 4 2024, learners in all labour market status groups fell, although the decline for economically inactive persons was negligible, with just 200 fewer learners.

## Region

- Dublin, followed by the Mid-East and South West had the largest numbers of lifelong learning participants, and combined represented nearly two thirds of total learners.
- There were declines in the Border, West, Midlands, and the South West, with increases in all remaining regions.

**Figure 1: Ireland's lifelong learning participants (000s)<sup>3</sup>, Q4 2024-Q4 2025**



Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data; excludes not stated.

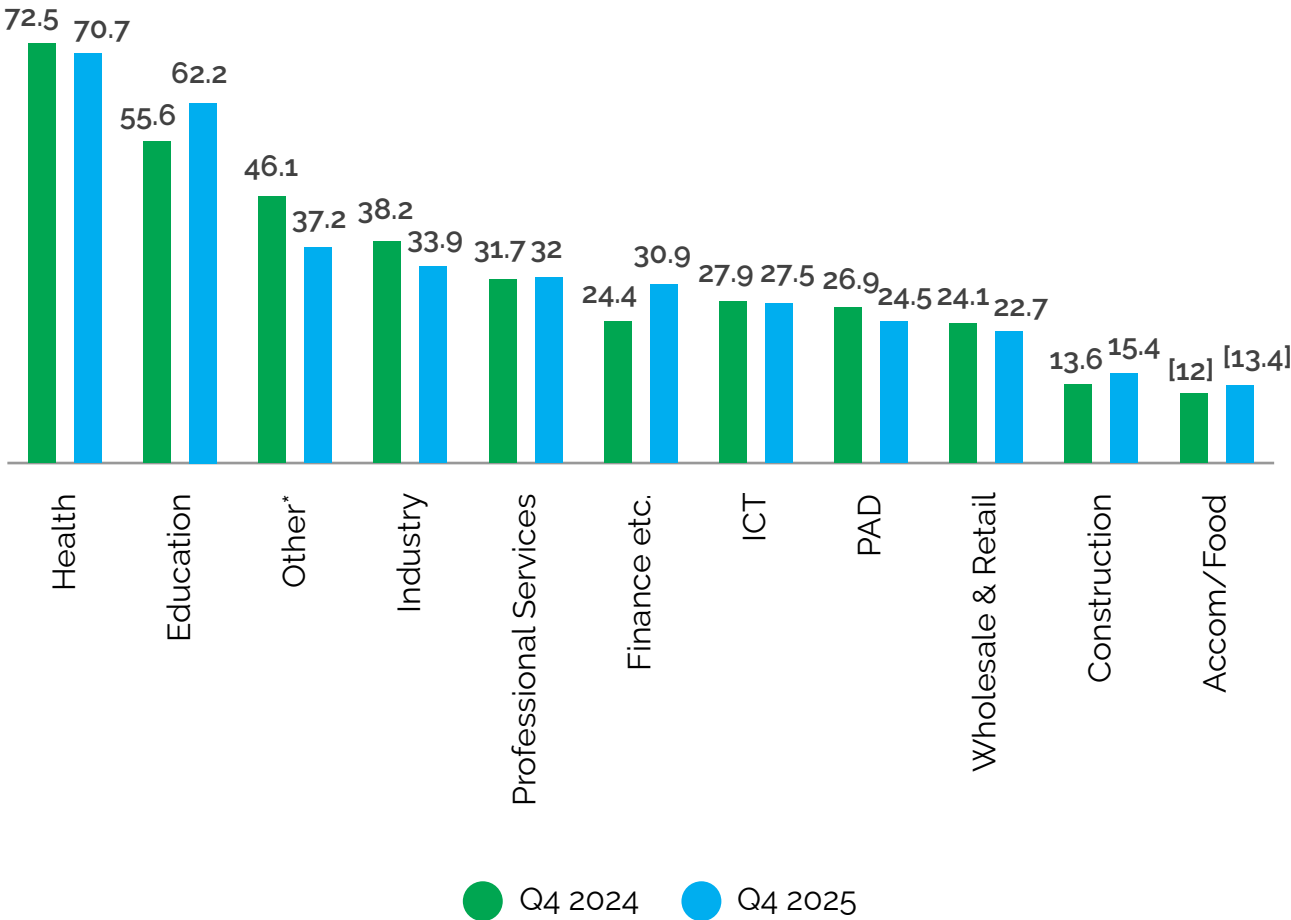
<sup>3</sup> Some learners undertake both formal and non-formal learning activities, and as a result the total number of lifelong learning participants is smaller than the sum of participants by learning type.

# Employed lifelong learning participants, Q4 2024-Q4 2025

## Sector

- Of the employed lifelong learning participants, **sectors associated with the public sector employment** (health, education and public administration & defence (PAD)) combined **made up more than two fifths (43%)**, representing 157,400 learners.
- Of the 11 sectors illustrated in Figure 2, lifelong learning participant numbers grew in just four: education (+6,600), finance (+6,500), construction (+1,800) and accommodation/food (+1,400). Participant numbers in the professional services remained almost unchanged with just 300 extra learners.

Figure 2: Employed LLL participants (000s) by sector, Q4 2024 and Q4 2025

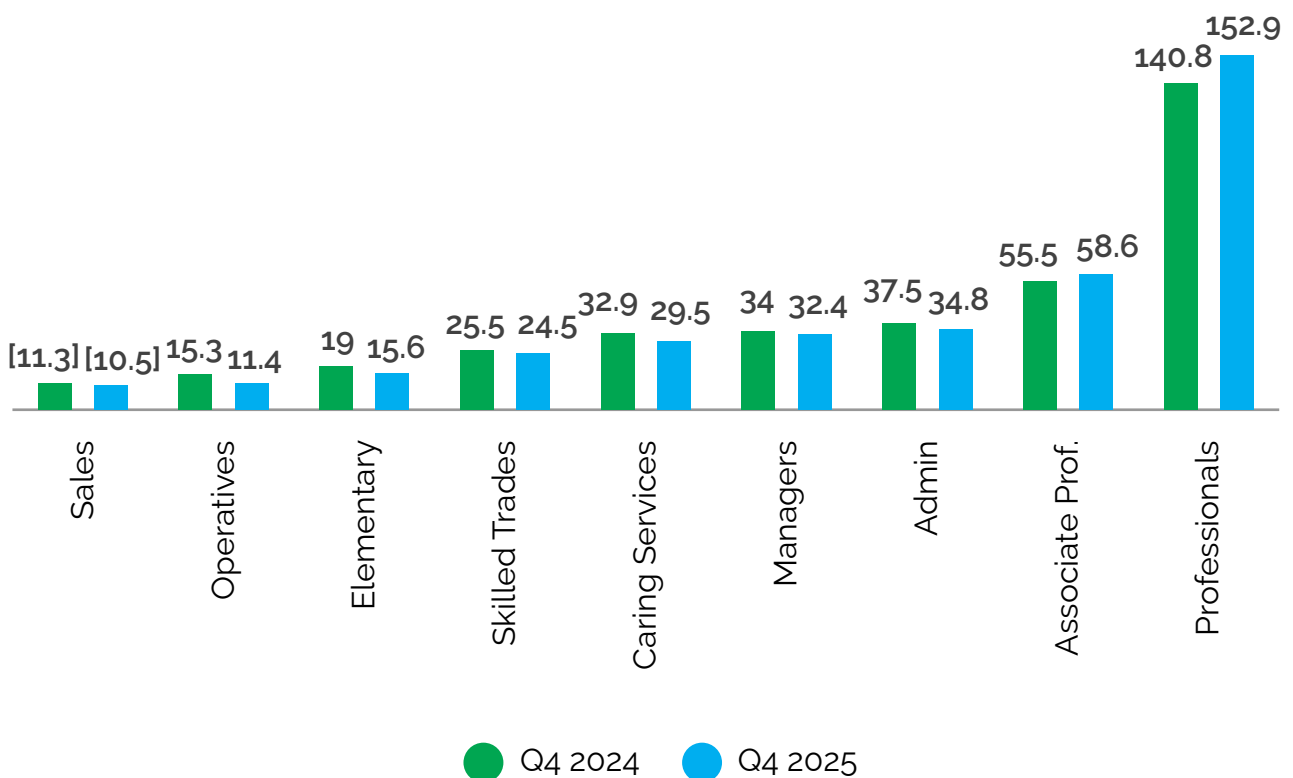


Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data; excludes not stated  
 Square brackets ( [ ] ) denote values based on small sample sizes and should be interpreted with caution.  
 \*Other includes admin/support, transport, agriculture and other NACE activities.

## Occupation

- Engagement in lifelong learning was **concentrated in higher skilled occupations**, with professionals (152,900 persons), associate professionals (58,600) and managers (32,400 persons) combined making up two thirds of all employed lifelong learning participants (Figure 3).
- The number of lifelong learning participants fell in all occupational groups except professionals (+12,100) and associate professionals (+3,100 learners); the strongest decline in both absolute and relative terms was for operatives where the number of learners fell by 3,900 (25%), followed by elementary occupations (-3,400 learners, or -18%).

**Figure 3: Employed LLL participants (000s) by occupation, Q4 2024 and Q4 2025**



Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data; excludes not stated

Square brackets ( [ ] ) denote values based on small sample sizes and should be interpreted with caution.

## Lifelong learning participation rates, Q4 2024-Q4 2025

In quarter 4 2025, of the nearly 2.9 million<sup>4</sup> persons aged 25-64 years in Ireland, 454,600 had participated in lifelong learning, amounting to a lifelong learning rate of 15.7%. This represents a decline on the 16.0% observed in quarter 4 2024, due mostly to growth in the size of the relevant age cohort (nearly 41,000 extra persons) between quarter 4 2024 and quarter 4 2025.

Figure 4 shows the lifelong learning participation rates by learning type, age, sex, education level, and work status in quarter 4 2024 and quarter 4 2025. In quarter 4 2025, the lifelong participation rates were highest for:

- **younger age cohorts:** at 20%, the rate for 25-34-year-olds was almost double the 11% observed for those aged 55-64 years.
- those with **higher education qualifications:** the 20% rate for those with qualifications at level 6-10 masks an even higher rate of 23% rate for those with postgraduate qualifications at levels 9 and 10.
- **unemployed** persons: at 22%, the unemployed had the highest participation rate of all; however, due to small numbers of unemployed people in the labour force overall, this translated into fewer than 20,000 learners (see Figure 1).
- **females**, whose participation rate, at 18%, was two percentage points higher than the average and nearly five percentage points higher than that of males

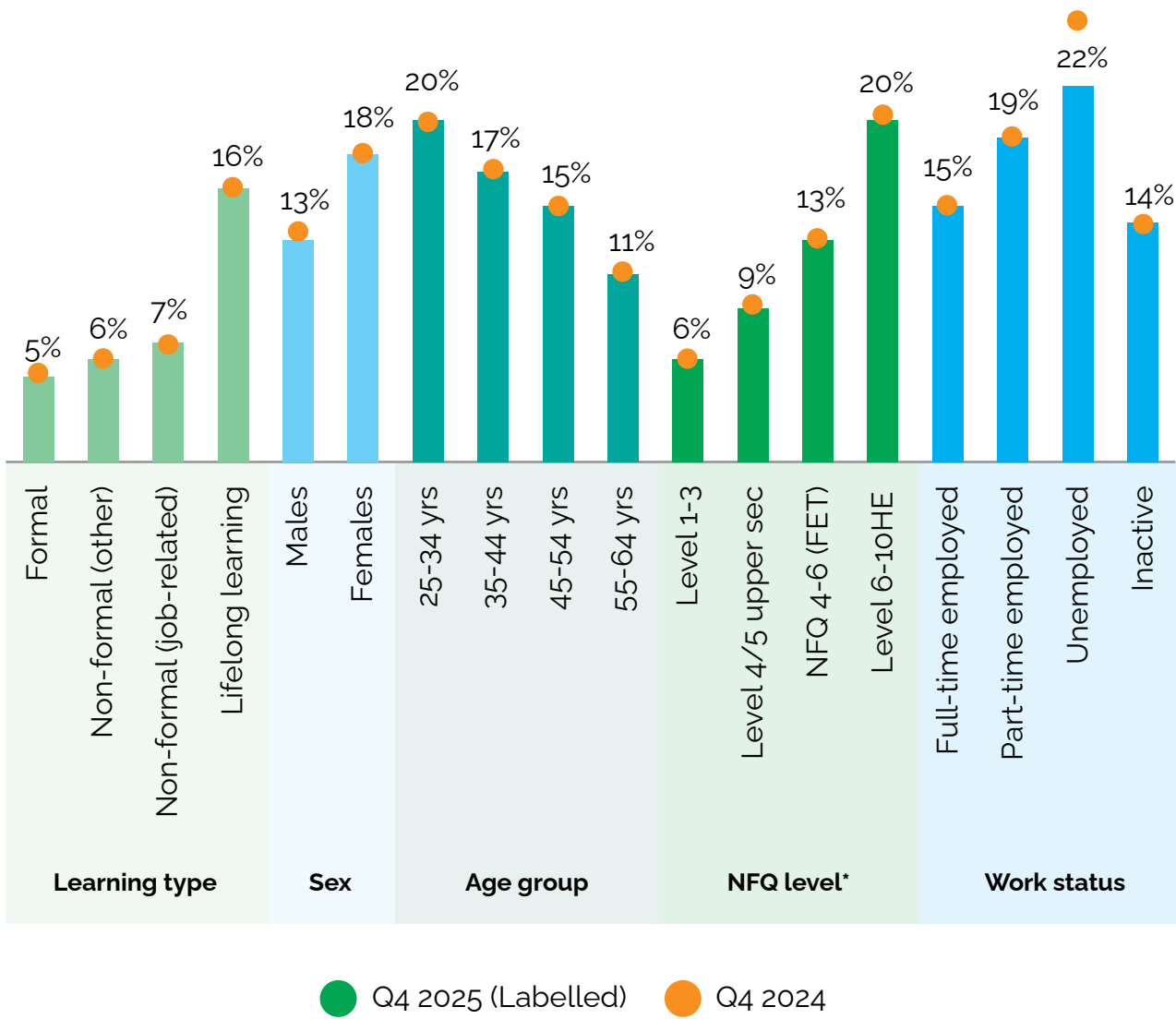
When compared to quarter 4 2024, lifelong learning rates declined for most of the cohorts outlined in Figure 4.

- The largest decline was a 4.6 pp fall in the lifelong learning rate of the unemployed (related to an increase in overall unemployment levels in Ireland, as the actual numbers remained mostly unchanged, with just 900 fewer learners - see Figure 1).
- Cohorts which did not experience a decline remained largely unchanged, with rate increases of less than 0.5 pp for females, the economically inactive, part-time employed and those engaging in job-related non-formal learning.

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<sup>4</sup> Excludes not stated.

**Figure 4: Lifelong learning participation rates by type, sex, age, NFQ level, and work status, Q4 2024-Q4 2025**



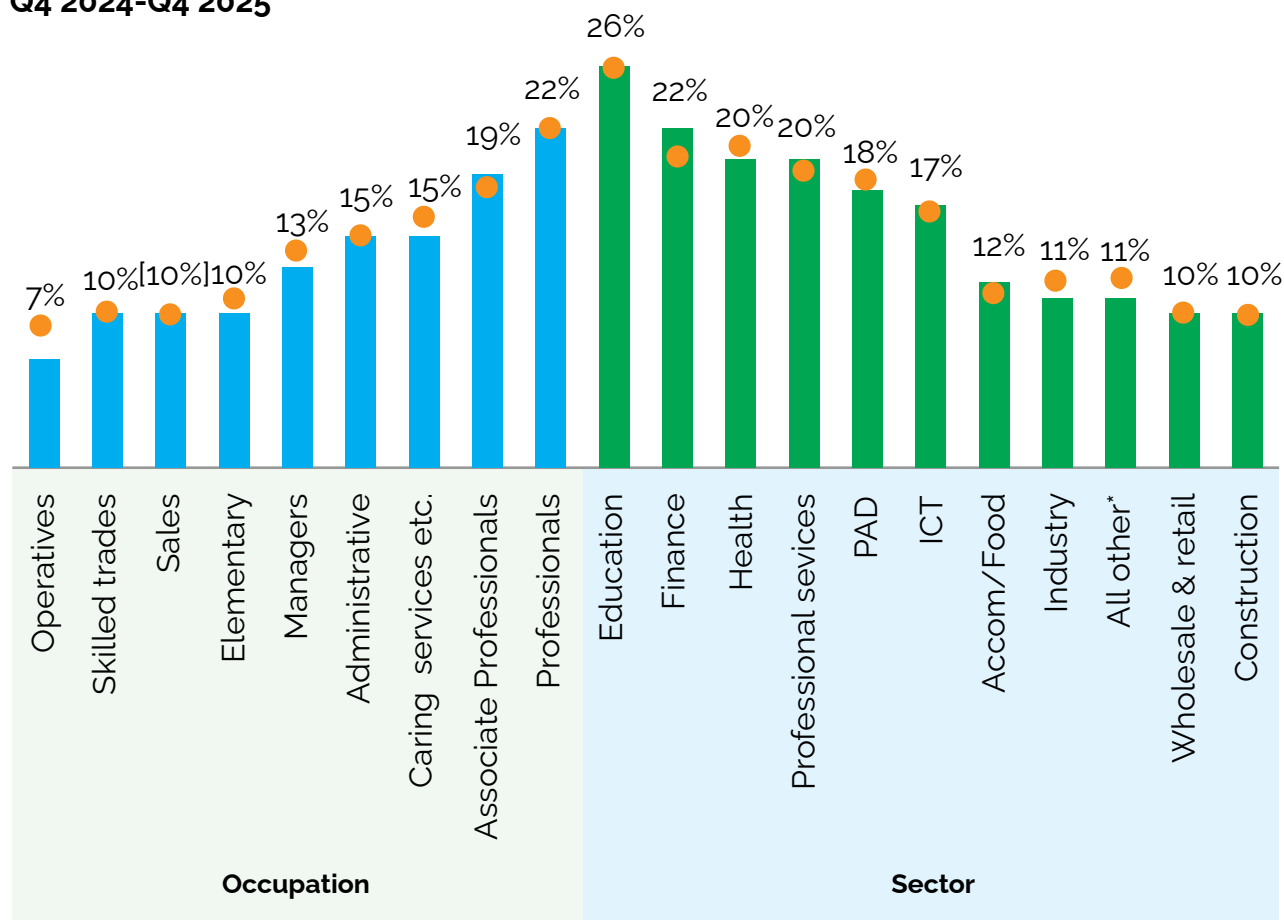
Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data; \*excludes not stated

## Employed lifelong learning participation rates, Q4 2024-Q4 2025

Figure 5 shows the lifelong learning participation rates amongst employed persons, by sector and occupation, in quarter 4 2024 and quarter 4 2025. The highest lifelong learning rates were observed for those working in professional occupations, or the education, finance, health, or professional services sectors, each of which had lifelong learning participation rates of at least 20%. When compared to quarter 4 2024,

- the largest percentage point increases in lifelong learning rates were for those working in associate professional occupations (+1.7 pp), as well as those in the financial (+3.5 pp), professional services (+1.5 pp) and accommodation/food (+1.4 pp) sectors. Smaller increases of less than 1 percentage point were observed for those in ICT, education, and construction.
- The largest declines were for operatives (-3.1 pp), managers (-2.5 pp), caring service occupations (-2.4 pp), as well as those working in other\* NACE sectors (-2.8 pp) and industry (-2 pp).

**Figure 5: Lifelong learning participation rates by occupation and sector, Q4 2024-Q4 2025**



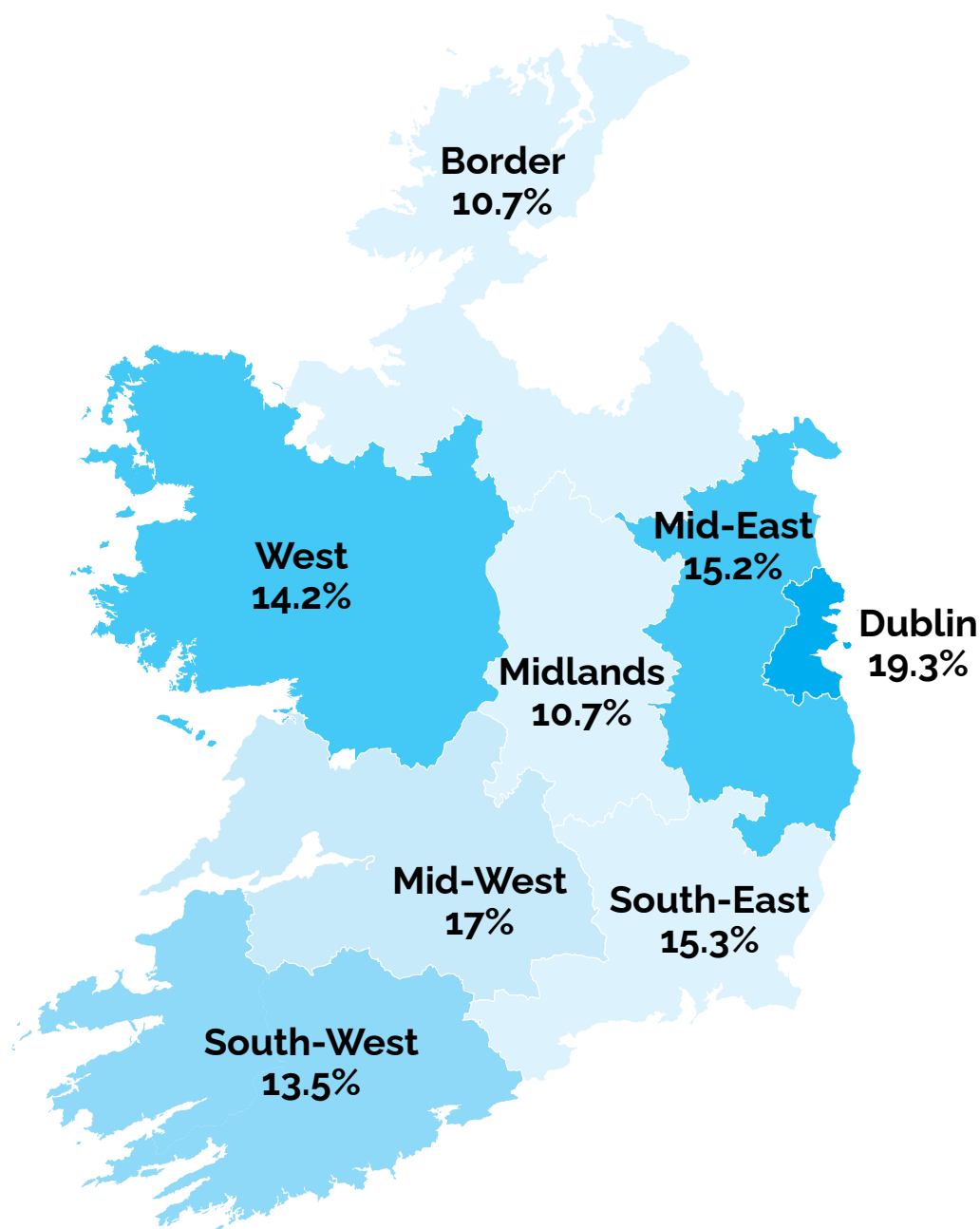
Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data; excludes not stated

Square brackets ( [ ] ) denote values based on small sample sizes and should be interpreted with caution.

\*Other includes admin/support, transport, agriculture and other NACE activities.

In quarter 4 2025, the highest lifelong learning participation rate was in Dublin (19.3%), while the lowest rates were in the Border and Midlands regions (10.7% each) (Figure 6). When compared to quarter 4 2024, the lifelong learning rate fell in four regions, South West (-3 pp), Midlands (-7 pp), West (-4 pp), and Border (-4 pp), and grew in the remainder by between 1 pp and 3pp each. It should be borne in mind that in many regions (except Dublin), the numbers of lifelong learning participants are relatively small, so small absolute changes tend to amount to relatively large percentage point changes.

**Figure 6: Lifelong learning rates by region, Q4 2025**



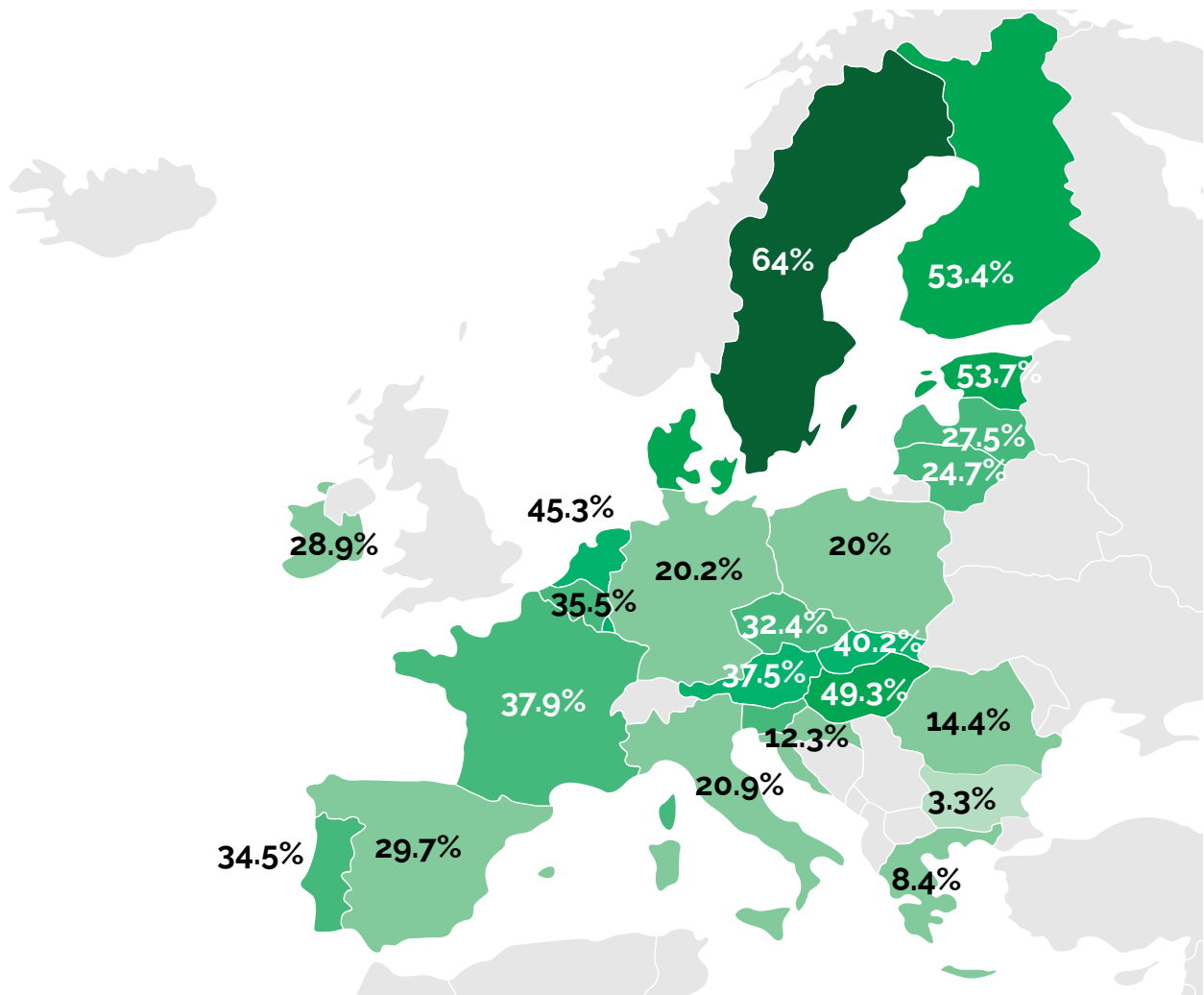
Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data; excludes not stated

## EU Comparison

This section examines the latest available data from Eurostat on engagement in lifelong learning activities in 2024 in both Ireland and the EU. The data, which is available every two years, covers lifelong learning rates over the course of a year (rather than 4 weeks, as was the case in the preceding section of this report).

In 2024, at 28.9%, Ireland's lifelong learning participation rate over the last 12 months was slightly higher than the EU 27 average, ranking Ireland 18th out of 27 EU countries (Figure 7). Ireland's performance lags considerably behind that of the top performing countries, namely, Sweden, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, and Hungary, where participation rates were at least 20 percentage points higher than that of Ireland (and in the case of Sweden 35 percentage points).

**Figure 7: Lifelong learning participation in the last 12 months across EU countries, 2024**



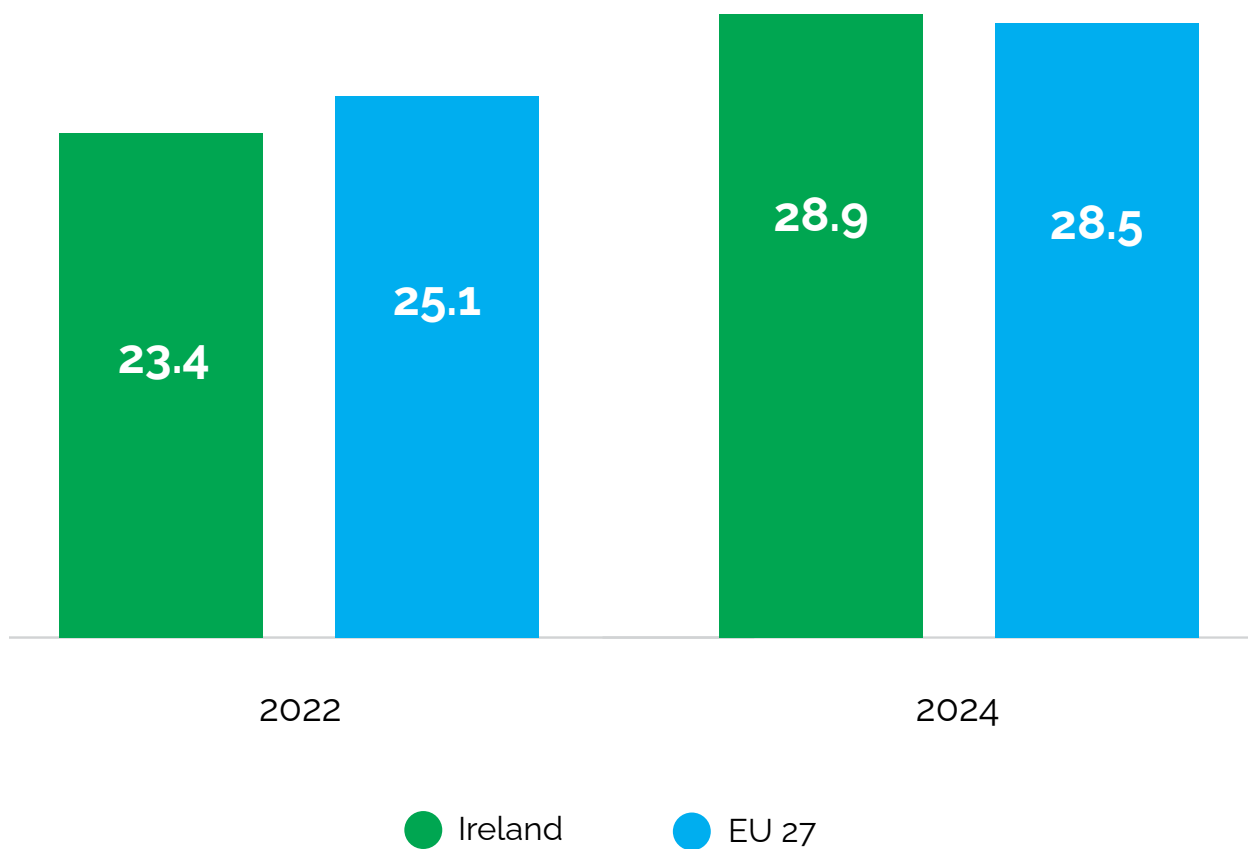
Source: Eurostat (Labour Force Survey)

Not labelled in map: Denmark 55%; Malta 39%; Lux 38%; Cyprus 29%; Slovenia 40.3%.

When compared to 2022, the share of adults participating in lifelong learning in the last 12 months grew by 5.5 percentage points in Ireland, compared to 3.4 percentage points for the EU 27 average (Figure 8).

**Figure 8: Lifelong learning participation (%) in Ireland & the EU 27 average, 2022 and 2024**

**The gap between Ireland and the EU 27 has narrowed – going from 1.7 percentage points (pp) in 2022, to -0.4 pp in 2024.**

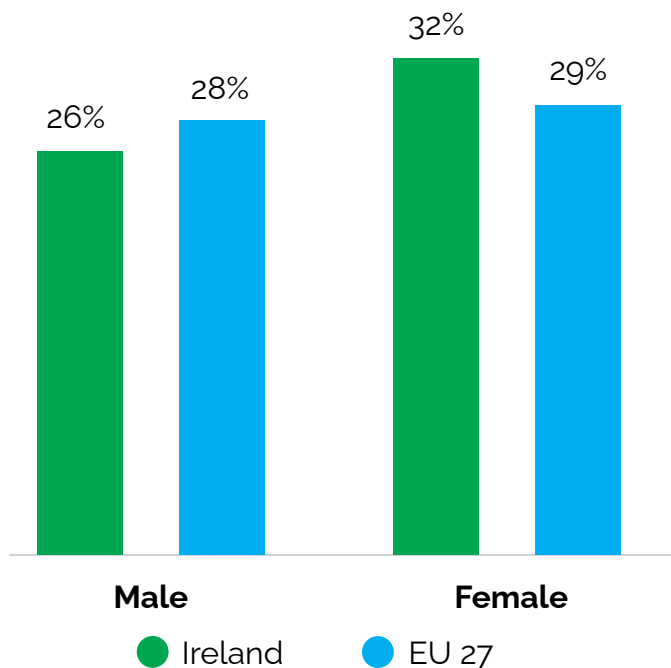


Source: Eurostat (Labour Force Survey)

# Participation patterns: Ireland and the EU 27 average

Many of the patterns of participation in Ireland are mirrored in the EU 27 average data. In both Ireland and the across the EU 27 average, lifelong learning rates are higher for females than for males, and for those with greater educational attainment (Figures 9 and 11); however, rates decline with age as well as lower degrees of urbanisation (Figures 10 and 14). Ireland's pattern of participation, however, differs from the EU average in terms of work status (Figure 13) and learning type (Figure 12).

**Figure 9: Lifelong learning by sex, 2024**

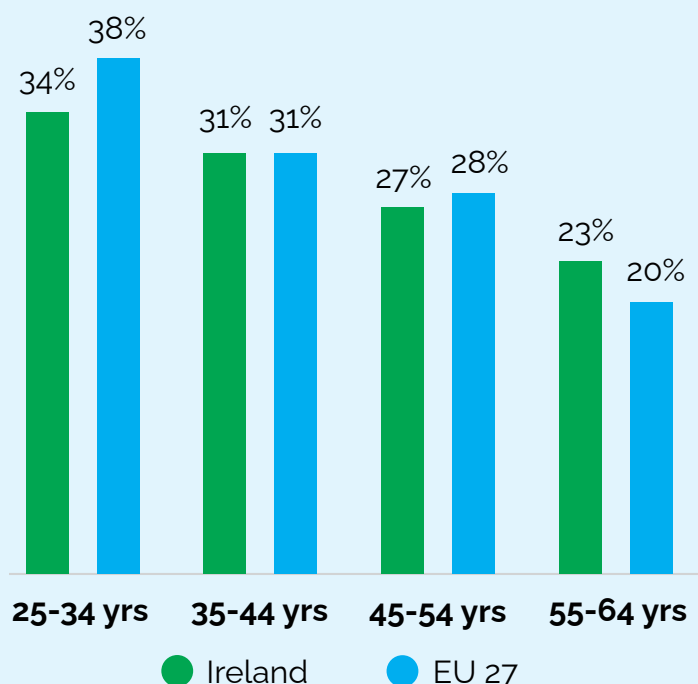


### Gender gap is wider for Ireland

In both Ireland and the EU average, females are more likely to participate in LLL than males.

But the gender gap in Ireland, at over 5 percentage points (pp), is more than twice that of the EU 27 average (less than 2 pp).

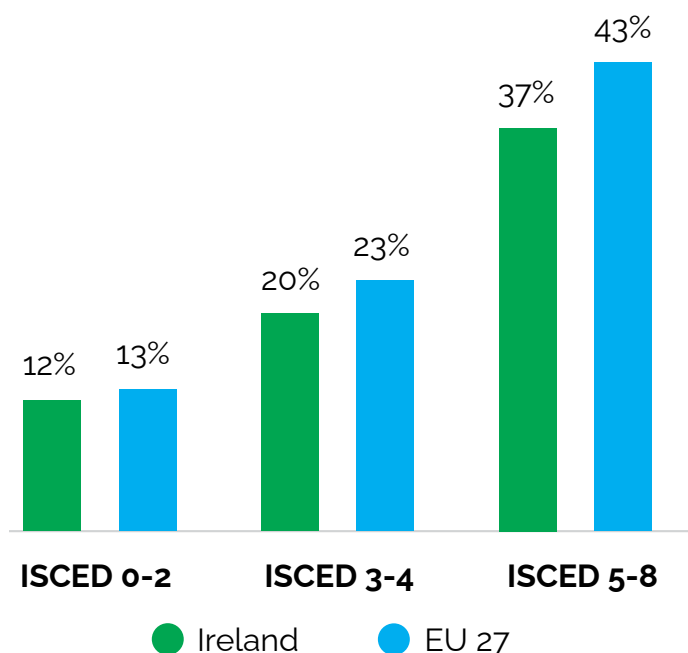
**Figure 10: Lifelong learning by age group, 2024**



### Compared to the EU, older people are more likely to participate in LLL in Ireland

While, at EU level, 25-34-year-olds are more likely than their counterparts in Ireland to participate in learning, the reverse is the case for the oldest age cohort, where 23% of 55-64-year-olds in Ireland were LLL participants, compared to just 20% across the EU.

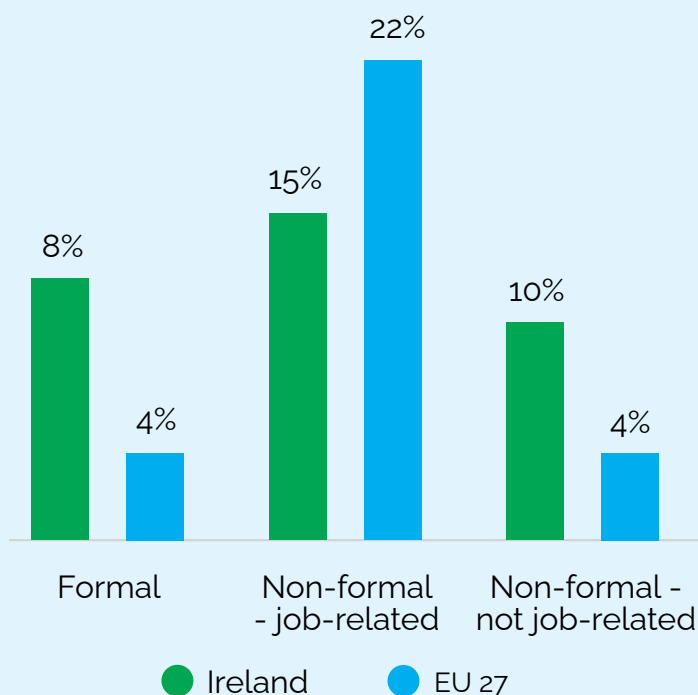
**Figure 11: Lifelong learning by education level<sup>5</sup>, 2024**



Lifelong learning among 3rd level graduates in Ireland is considerably lower than the EU average

The gap between the lowest and highest educational attainment cohorts is narrower in Ireland (25 pp) than it is across the EU (31 pp), due entirely to lower rates for those with third level education in Ireland (37%) compared to the EU average (43%).

**Figure 12: Lifelong learning by learning type, 2024**

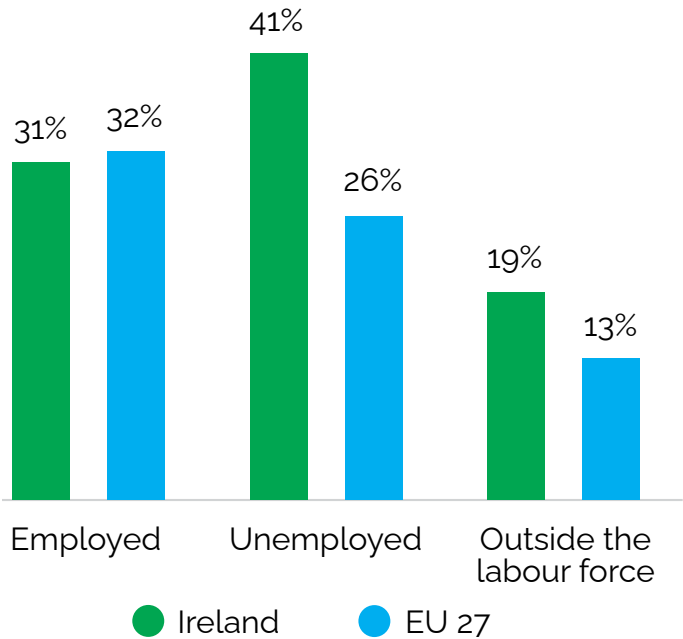


Learning for job-related reasons in Ireland is lower than the EU average

Formal learning and non-job-related learning participation rates in Ireland are higher than the EU average, but there is a 7 pp gap in **job-related non-formal** learning rates. This is one of the largest Ireland-EU gaps observed (with the exception of unemployed persons).

<sup>5</sup> ISCED 0-2 refers to those with at most lower secondary educational attainment (e.g. Junior Cert); ISCED 3-4 refers to those with upper secondary education (e.g. Leaving Cert) or post-secondary non-tertiary (e.g. PLC course or Craft Apprenticeship); ISCED 5-8 refer to those with third level educational attainment.

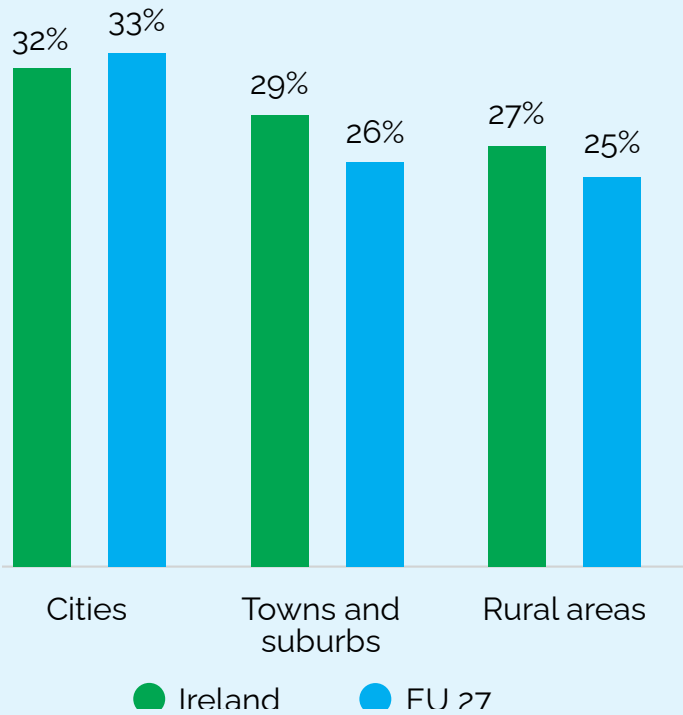
**Figure 13: Lifelong learning by work status, 2024**



LLL for employed people slightly lower than EU.

In the EU, the highest rate is for employed people (32%), but in Ireland, by far the highest rate was for unemployed persons (41%). At 15 pp, the gap between Ireland and the EU for LLL was widest of all amongst the unemployed.

**Figure 14: Lifelong learning: degree of urbanisation, 2024**



LLL in Ireland was higher than EU averages outside cities

Lifelong learning increases with degree of urbanisation, with the highest rate for city dwellers; nonetheless, the gap between urban and rural learning participation was narrower in Ireland, at 5 pp, than across the EU (8 pp).

Source: Eurostat

## Conclusion

Various measures of lifelong learning can lead to rather different lifelong learning rates. Despite the differences, however, similar patterns emerge, with lifelong learning rates being stronger than average, in both Ireland and the EU, for females, younger age cohorts, and well-educated individuals. While the data points to a need to better target lifelong learning interventions at groups who lag behind the most (males, older age cohorts, and those with low educational attainment), it also highlights the need for increased participation, especially in job-related learning, even among relatively strong performers, if individuals are to continue to develop their skills and meet the needs of a 21st century labour market and reach the EU lifelong learning targets.

It is not sufficient to simply maintain the current level of provision and participation in lifelong learning. As the size of Ireland's population and labour force increases, the numbers participating in learning activities will also need to grow just to keep the rate constant. To increase lifelong learning participation rates, and to ensure ongoing skills development in a world of rapid technological change, the numbers engaging in learning will have to considerably outpace population (and especially labour force) growth. This will require sustained engagement on the part of all stakeholders (learners, employers, education/training providers, and Government).

## Appendix: A note on various LLL measures

There are a number of surveys which capture data on adult participation in learning activities. The three main surveys - the OECD's Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC), the EU's Adult Education Survey (AES), and the EU's Labour Force Survey (LFS, conducted in Ireland by the CSO) - all cover the participation in formal and non-formal learning activities by 25-64-year-olds over a 12-month period. They differ mainly in respect of frequency, ranging from every two years for the LFS, to every six years for the AES, and approximately every 10 years for PIAAC.

Despite the application of similar concepts and definitions, the three surveys yield very different results, as outlined in Table 1. Note: The AES measure of 48.3% refers to a subset of the overall AES reported rate, which excludes the 'guided-on-the-job' component, aligning it to the CSO's LFS definition which also excludes 'guided-on-the-job' learning.

The LFS provides an additional and slightly different measure, covering adult participation in formal and non-formal learning activities **over a 4-week period** (rather than the previous 12 months); this data is available quarterly and so provides the most regular source of updates to lifelong learning rates. Due to the different reference period, the LFS measure for lifelong learning participation in the previous 4 weeks tends to be considerably lower than other measures.

**Table 1: Comparison of different lifelong learning sources and measures**

| Rate Ireland | Rate EU/ OECD      | Survey   | Learning components (for 25-64-year-olds)  | Learning timeframe        | Frequency   |
|--------------|--------------------|--|--|---------------------------|---|
| 54.8%        | 46.6%              | <b>Adult Education Survey</b>                            | Formal and Non-formal, <b>including</b> guided on-the-job training.  | Previous <b>12 months</b> | Every 6 years. Latest available: 2022               |
| 48.3%        | 39.5% <sup>6</sup> | <b>Adult Education Survey</b>                            | Formal and Non-formal, <b>excluding</b> guided on-the-job training.<br><br>Subset to derive EU's LLL target (60%). | Previous <b>12 months</b> |   |
| 51.3%        | 40.4%              | <b>OECD's Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC)<sup>7</sup></b> | Formal and Non-formal, <b>including</b> guided on-the-job training.  | Previous <b>12 months</b> | Approximately every 10 years. Latest available 2022 |
| 28.9%        | 28.1%              | <b>Labour Force Survey</b>                               | Formal and Non-formal, <b>excluding</b> guided on-the-job training.  | Previous <b>12 months</b> | Every two years. Latest available 2024              |
| 15.7%        | 14.5%              |  | Formal and Non-formal, <b>excluding</b> guided on-the-job training.  | Previous <b>4 weeks</b>   | Quarterly<br>Latest available Q4 2025               |

<sup>6</sup> This data is not typically available on the main Eurostat database tables. It is a 'special extraction', but can be found on Circbac [ETS - Library](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Where, what and how are adults learning? Trends in Adult Learning | OECD; appendix-tables.xlsx](#)



## 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](mailto:slmru@solas.ie)  
[www.solas.ie](http://www.solas.ie)