

Education Profile of Adults in Ireland 2025



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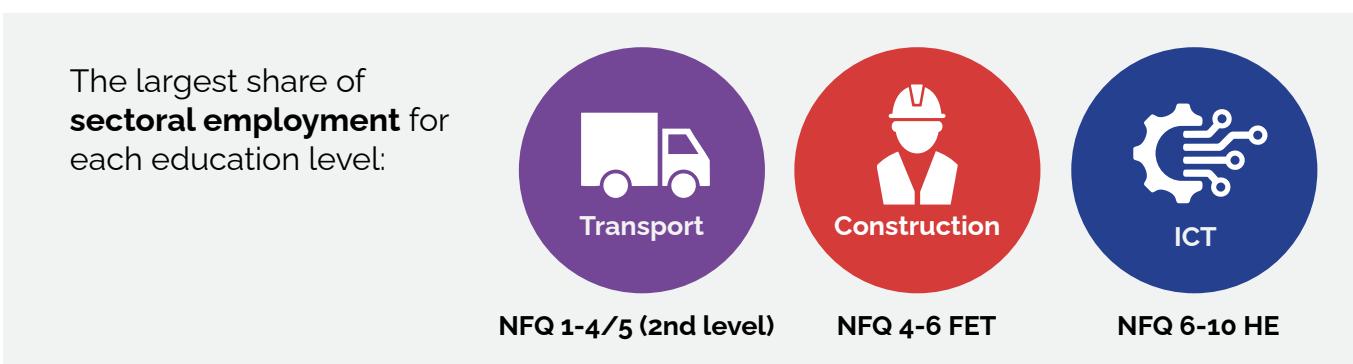
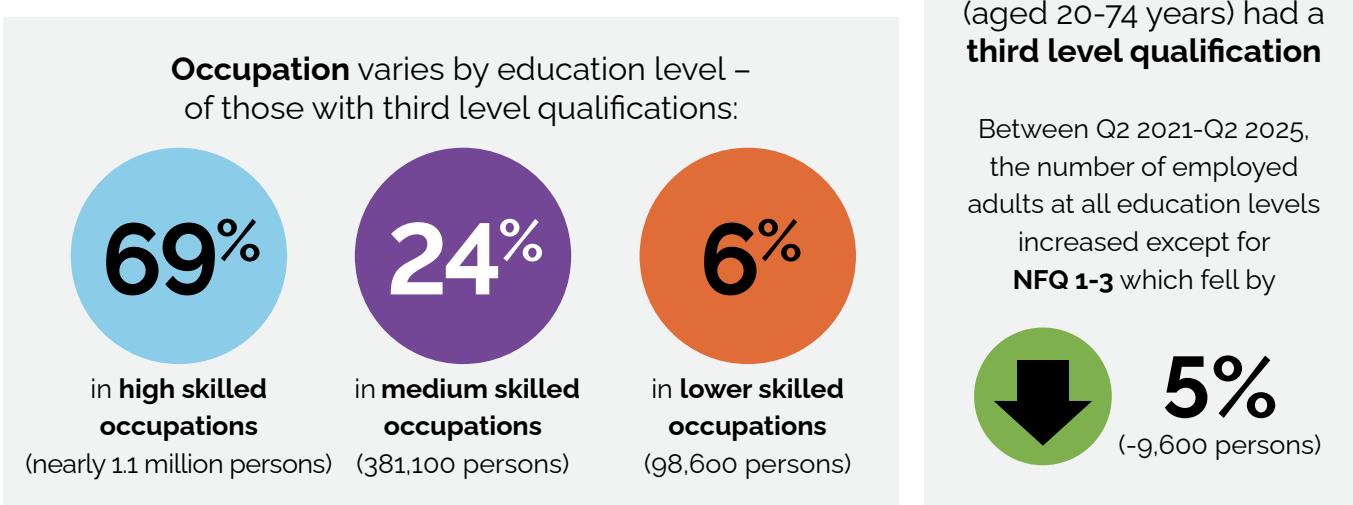
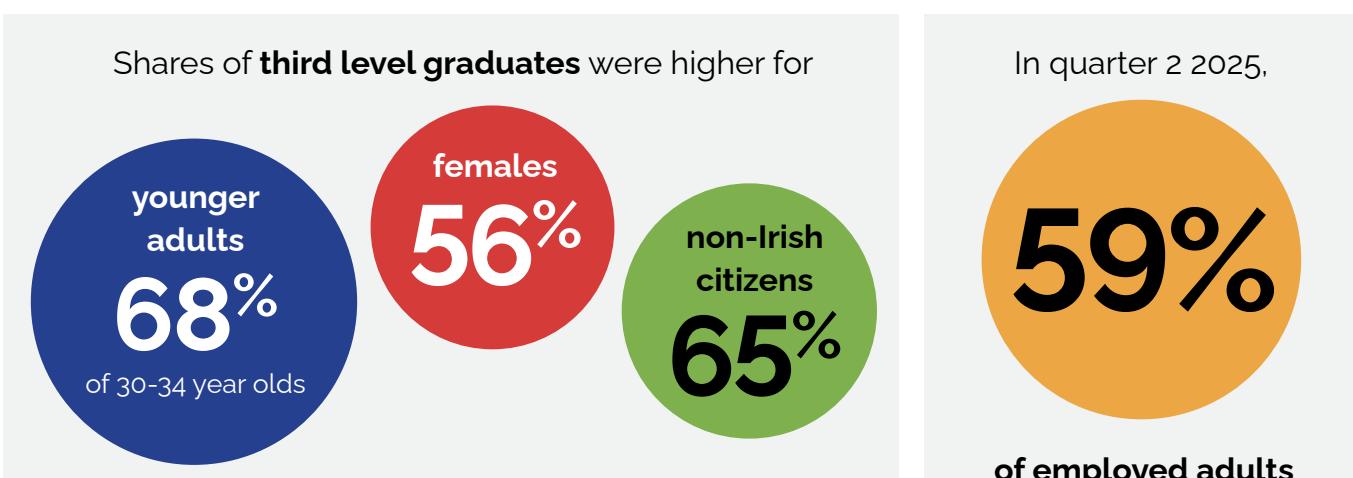
Introduction

This paper examines the educational profile of Ireland's adult population, using data from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) carried out by the Central Statistics Office (CSO).¹ An individual's level of education refers to the **highest** level of education achieved on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).² Education attainment is a key factor in contributing to employment prospects (at an individual level) and the potential supply of skills in the labour force (at a national level). This paper considers how adults' educational level varies by age, sex, citizenship and region. It also explores differences in labour force participation, employment in broad occupation and economic sector by education level.



- 1 The LFS data presented in this report is based on an analysis of strictly controlled Research Microdata Files provided by the CSO. The CSO does not take any responsibility for the views expressed or the outputs generated from this research.
- 2 For example, if a person first qualifies as an electrician (level 6 certificate) and later progresses to achieve an honours bachelor degree (level 8), their level of education is classified as level 8. On the other hand, if a person first achieves an honours degree (level 8) in arts/humanities, but later completes a PLC course in business studies (level 6), their education level is nonetheless captured as being at level 8.

Key findings



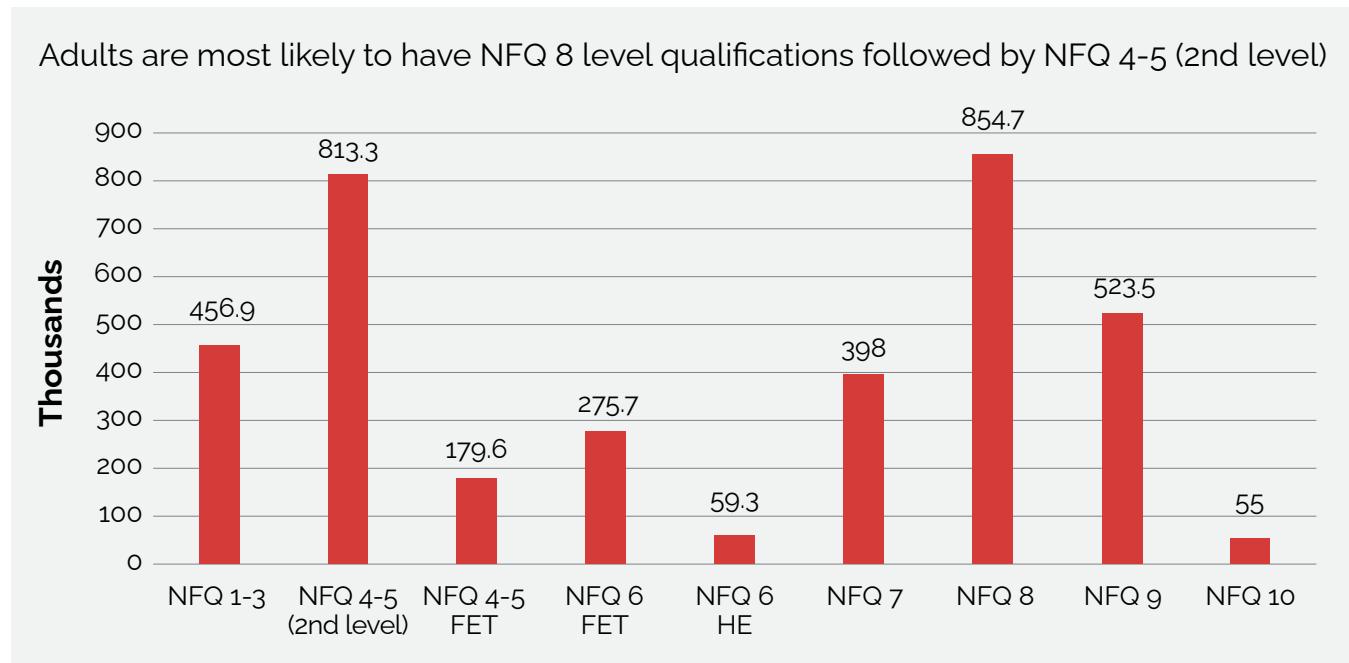
What is the education level of adults in Ireland?

In quarter 2 2025, there were just over 3.7 million adults aged between 20 and 74 years. Of those who stated their highest level of education (nearly 3.62 million persons),

- almost one quarter (24%) held a qualification at level 8 representing 854,700 persons and a further 16% attained a postgraduate qualification at levels 9 or 10 (578,500 persons) (Figure 1)

- over one-fifth of adults (22%) held a qualification at NFQ level 4/5 (2nd level), i.e. a Leaving Certificate or equivalent (813,300 persons)
- FET qualification holders (spanning levels 4-6) accounted for 455,300 persons (13% of the total age cohort).

Figure 1 Adults aged 20-74 years by highest level of education (000s), Q2 2025



Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data

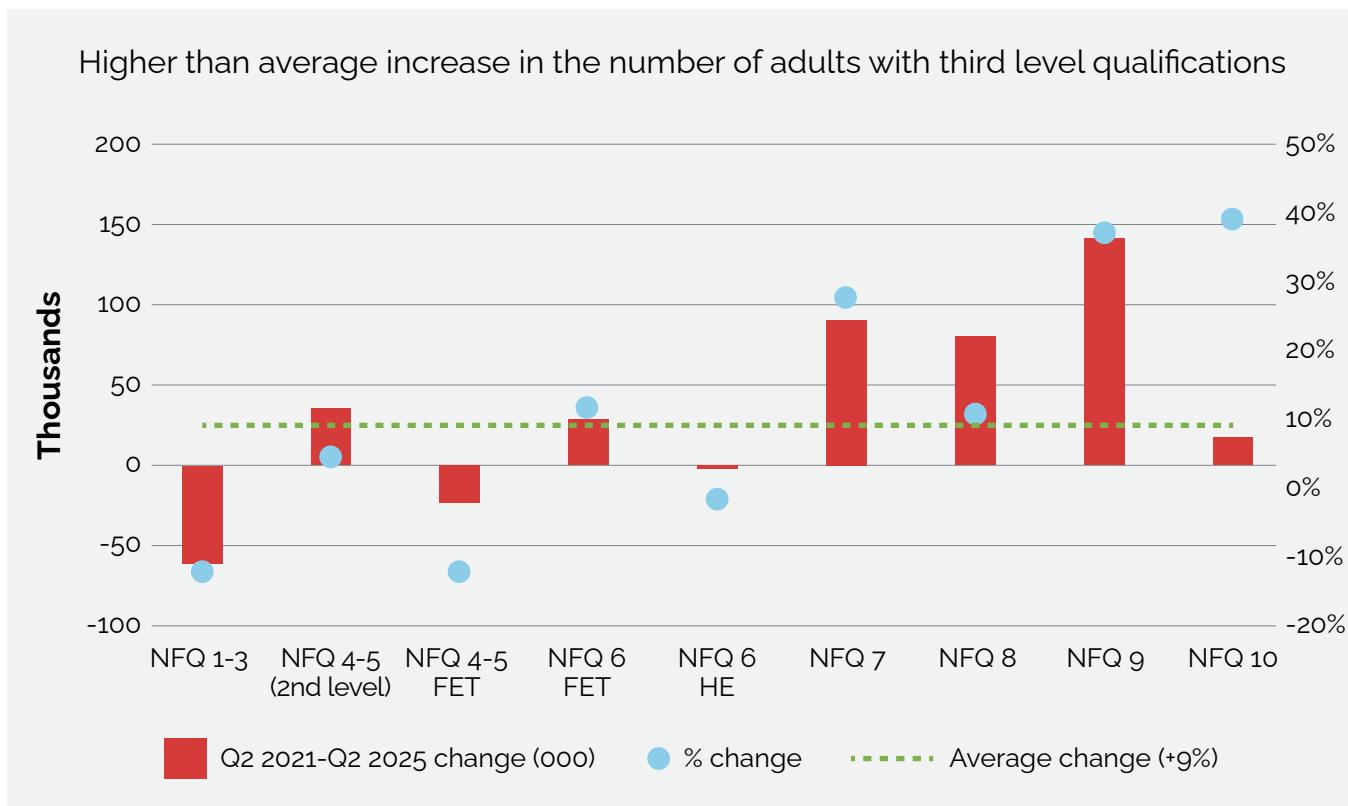
Excludes observations where NFQ level is not stated

Between quarter 2 2021³ and quarter 2 2025, the number of adults aged 20-74 years grew by 301,700 persons (excluding those who did not state an education level). Over this time, the number of adults with higher education qualifications (NFQ 6-10) increased, especially at NFQ 9

(+140,700 persons or +37%), while those with lower education qualifications fell, most notably at NFQ 1-3 (-61,400 persons or -12%) (Figure 2). As a result, the share of qualification holders in Ireland who were third level graduates increased to 52% in quarter 2 2025 (from 47% in quarter 2 2021).

³ The timeline comparison uses the year 2021 rather than 2020 in most of this report due to the negative impact of COVID-19 on employment and labour market participation.

Figure 2 Change in adults' (aged 20-74 years) highest level of education (000s and %), Q2 2021-Q2 2025



Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data

Excludes observations where NFQ level is not stated



How does the education profile of adults vary by age?

The educational profile of the population differed considerably by age group (Figure 3). With the exception of persons aged 20-24 years (for whom full-time education may still be ongoing), the older the age group, the lower the education attainment level. In quarter 2 2025,

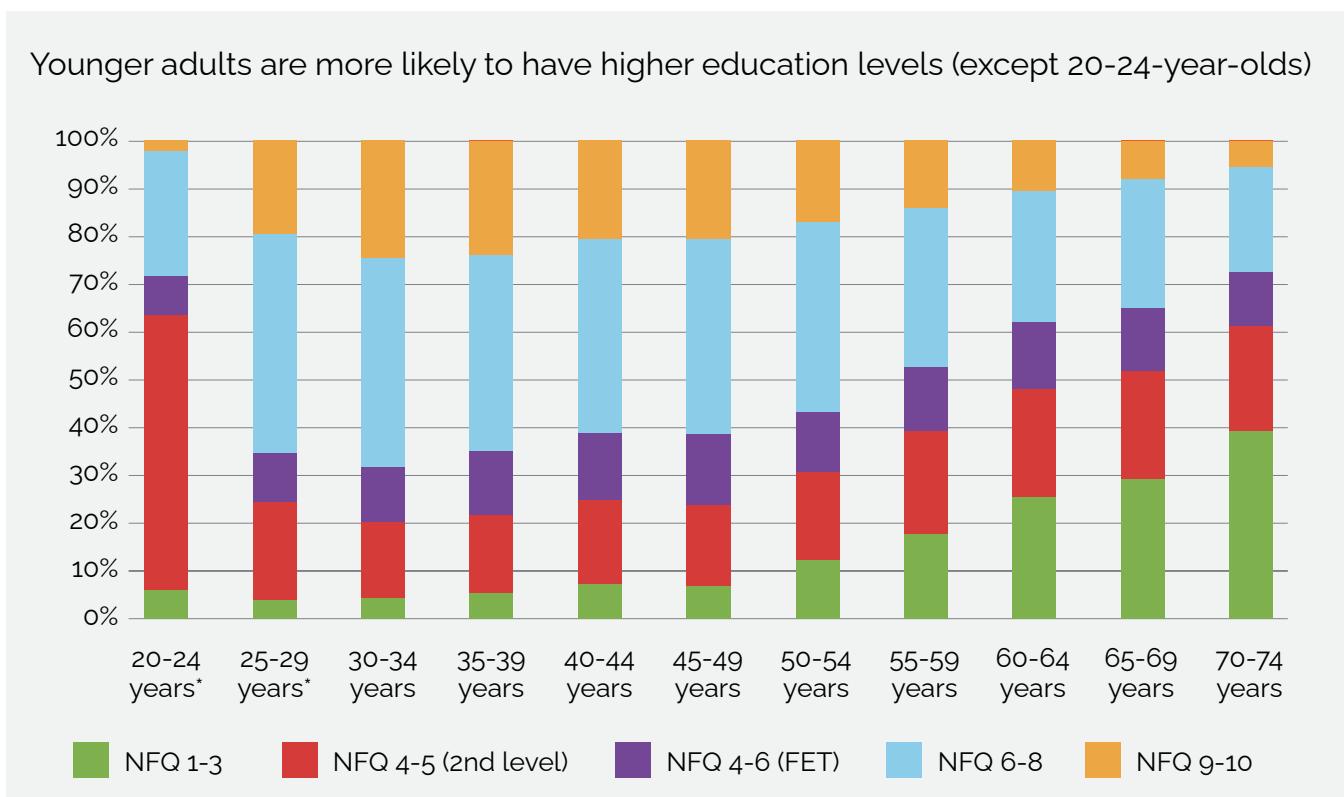
- more than half of those aged under 55 years of age (except for those aged 20-24 years) had third level qualifications, with the greatest share for those aged 30-34 years (at 68%)
- over one third of adults aged 55-59 years (39%) held at most an upper

secondary education, which rose to 61% of those aged 70-74 years.

By comparison, the share of the population with an NFQ 4-6 FET qualification was quite similar across most age groups (excluding 20-24-year-olds), ranging from 10% of 25-29-year-olds to 15% of 45-49-year-olds.

Given these results and the higher growth rates for NFQ levels 6 (HE) to 10 (reported in the previous section), it is likely that Ireland's future educational profile will continue to shift towards the higher levels of the NFQ.

Figure 3 Education profile by NFQ level and age group (20-74 years) (%), Q2 2025



Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data

Excludes observations where NFQ level is not stated

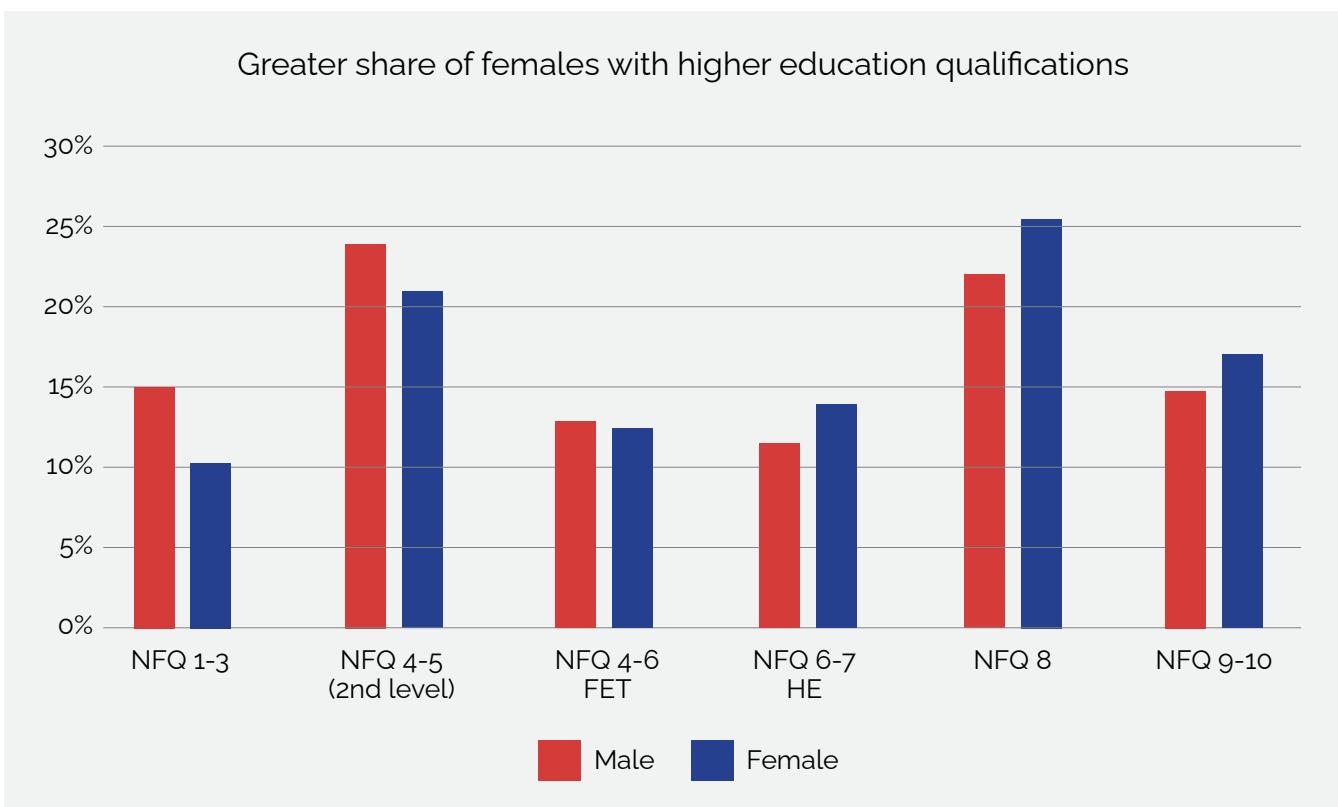
**The data for 20-24-year-olds at NFQ 9-10 and 25-29-year-olds at NFQ 1-3 are based on small numbers and should be treated with caution*

Do males and females have similar education levels?

In quarter 2 2025, at 56%, the share of females with higher education qualifications (NFQ 6 HE to 10) was greater than that of males (48%) (Figure 4). Males, on the other hand, had a higher share with upper secondary qualifications (NFQ 4-5), at 24%; the corresponding figure for females was 21%. The share of

male and female FET qualification holders was similar at 13% for males and 12% for females, although this masks the fact that 7% of females held level 4-5 FET qualifications compared to 3% of males. Similarly, 10% of males held level 6 FET qualifications compared to 5% of females.

Figure 4 Males & females (aged 20-74 years) by highest qualification level (%), Q2 2025



Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data

Excludes observations where NFQ level is not stated

Between quarter 2 2021 and quarter 2 2025,

- the growth in the number of those with NFQ 8-10 qualifications was higher for females than males; an increase of 2.7% (+45,300 persons) at NFQ 8 and 5.2% (+87,700 persons) at NFQ 9-10 for females, compared to a rise of 2.1%

(+34,600 persons) and 4.2% (+68,600 persons) for males respectively (Table 1)

- the relatively small growth in the number of adults with NFQ 4-6 FET education for both males and females masks an increase in those with NFQ 6 FET qualifications, with an additional 13,100 males (+8%) and 16,700 more

females (+17%), while those with NFQ 4-5 FET qualifications fell by 1% for both males (-12,000 persons) and females (-13,800 persons)

- there was an overall decline in those with at most a second level education, driven by those with NFQ 1-3

qualifications, which fell by 2% for both males (-32,300 persons) and females (-29,200 persons); the marginal growth at NFQ 4-5 (2nd level) was not enough to offset this decrease.

Table 1 Change in the number of males and females (aged 20-74 years) by highest education level, Q2 2021-Q2 2025

	Males		Females		Total change (males and females)
	change	% change	change	% change	
NFQ 1-3	-32,300	-2.0%	-29,200	-1.7%	-61,500
NFQ 4-5 (Upper sec)	23,700	1.4%	12,200	0.7%	35,900
NFQ 4-6 (FET)	1,200	0.1%	2,800	0.2%	4,000
NFQ 6-7 (HE)	49,500	3.0%	36,800	2.2%	86,300
NFQ 8	34,600	2.1%	45,300	2.7%	79,900
NFQ 9-10	68,600	4.2%	87,700	5.2%	156,300
Total	145,300	8.9%	155,600	9.3%	300,900

Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data

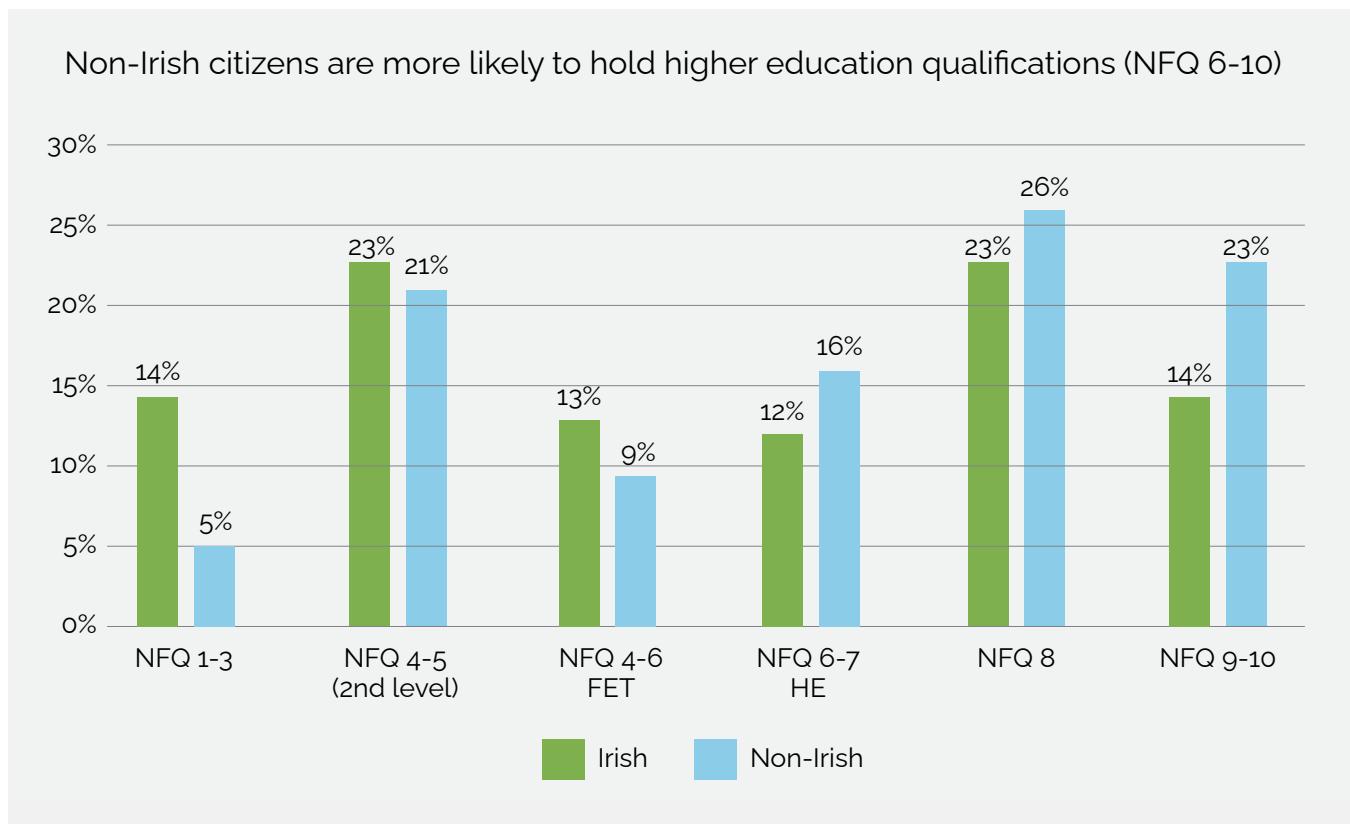
Excludes observations where NFQ level is not stated

Variations in the education profile of adults by citizenship

In quarter 2 2025, the education profile of adults in the population varied by citizenship (Figure 5). In general, non-Irish citizens were more likely to have a higher level of education compared to Irish citizens, with the widest gaps at the lowest (NFQ 1-3) and highest (NFQ 9-10)

education levels. For example, 23% of non-Irish citizens held a qualification at NFQ 9-10, while this stood at 14% for Irish citizens. In contrast a higher share of Irish citizens held NFQ 4-6 FET qualifications at 13% compared to 9% for non-Irish citizens.

Figure 5 Education profile of adults (aged 20-74 years) by citizenship (%), Q2 2025



Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data

Excludes observations where NFQ level is not stated

Table 2 shows that between quarter 2 2021 and quarter 2 2025, both the absolute and relative growth in the number of non-Irish citizens (+205,700 persons or +42% respectively) exceeded that for Irish citizens (+95,100 persons or +3%). It is clear that the downward trend in the number of adults with lower secondary education or less (NFQ 1-3) identified earlier in this paper was largely attributed to Irish citizens. Over this time, the number of Irish citizens with NFQ

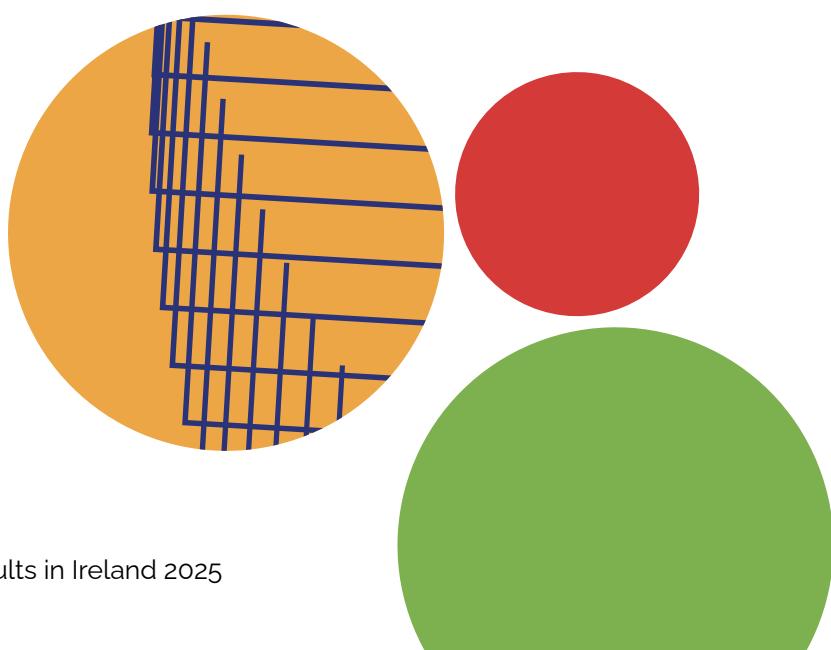
levels 1-3 fell by 72,200 persons (15%), while in contrast there was an increase of 10,600 non-Irish citizens (+39%) with this education level. Looking at higher education qualifications (NFQ 6-10), both absolute and relative growth was higher for non-Irish compared to Irish citizens at all levels, except for NFQ 9-10 where the rise in the absolute number of Irish citizens at 93,900 persons was greater than that for non-Irish citizens (62,500 persons).

Table 2 Change in the number of Irish and non-Irish citizens (aged 20-74 yrs) by highest education level, Q2 2021-Q2 2025

	Q2 2021-Q2 2025 change		Q2 2021-Q2 2025 % change	
	Irish	Non-Irish	Irish	Non-Irish
NFQ 1-3	-72,200	10,600	-15%	39%
NFQ 4-5 (Upper sec)	-2,000	37,900	0%	36%
NFQ 4-6 (FET)	-600	4,600	0%	8%
NFQ 6-7 (HE)	39,900	46,300	13%	73%
NFQ 8	36,100	43,800	6%	33%
NFQ 9-10	93,900	62,500	29%	64%
Total	95,100	205,700	3%	42%

Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data

Excludes observations where NFQ level is not stated



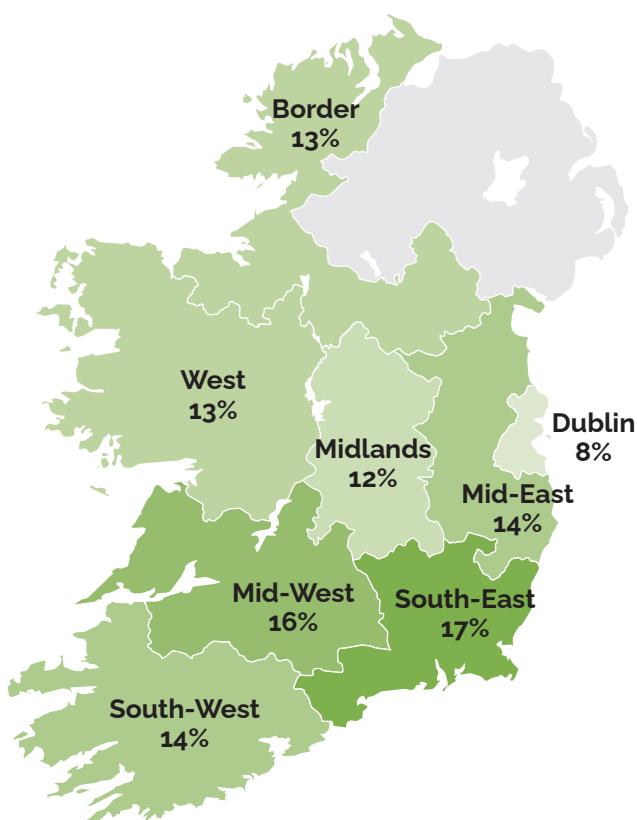
How does the education profile of adults differ by region?

Figure 6 shows the share of each region's adult population holding FET and higher education qualifications respectively in quarter 2 2025. On average, nearly 13% of adults in Ireland held FET qualifications; however, the share was highest in the South East (at 17%), followed by the Mid-West (at 16%), while it was lowest in Dublin (8%).

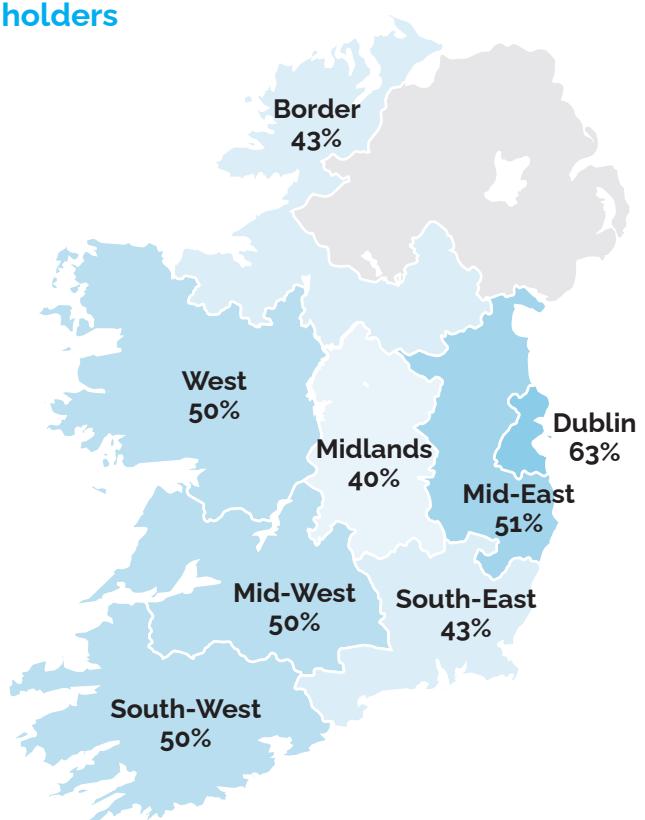
The share of higher education qualification holders was largest in the Dublin region at 63%, which was above the national average of 52%, followed by the Mid-East at 51%. At 40%, the Midlands had the lowest share of higher education qualification holders in its adult population followed by the Border and South East regions, both at 43%.

Figure 6 Shares of qualification holders by region, FET and higher education, Q2 2025

a. Share of FET qualification holders



b. Share of higher education qualification holders



Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data

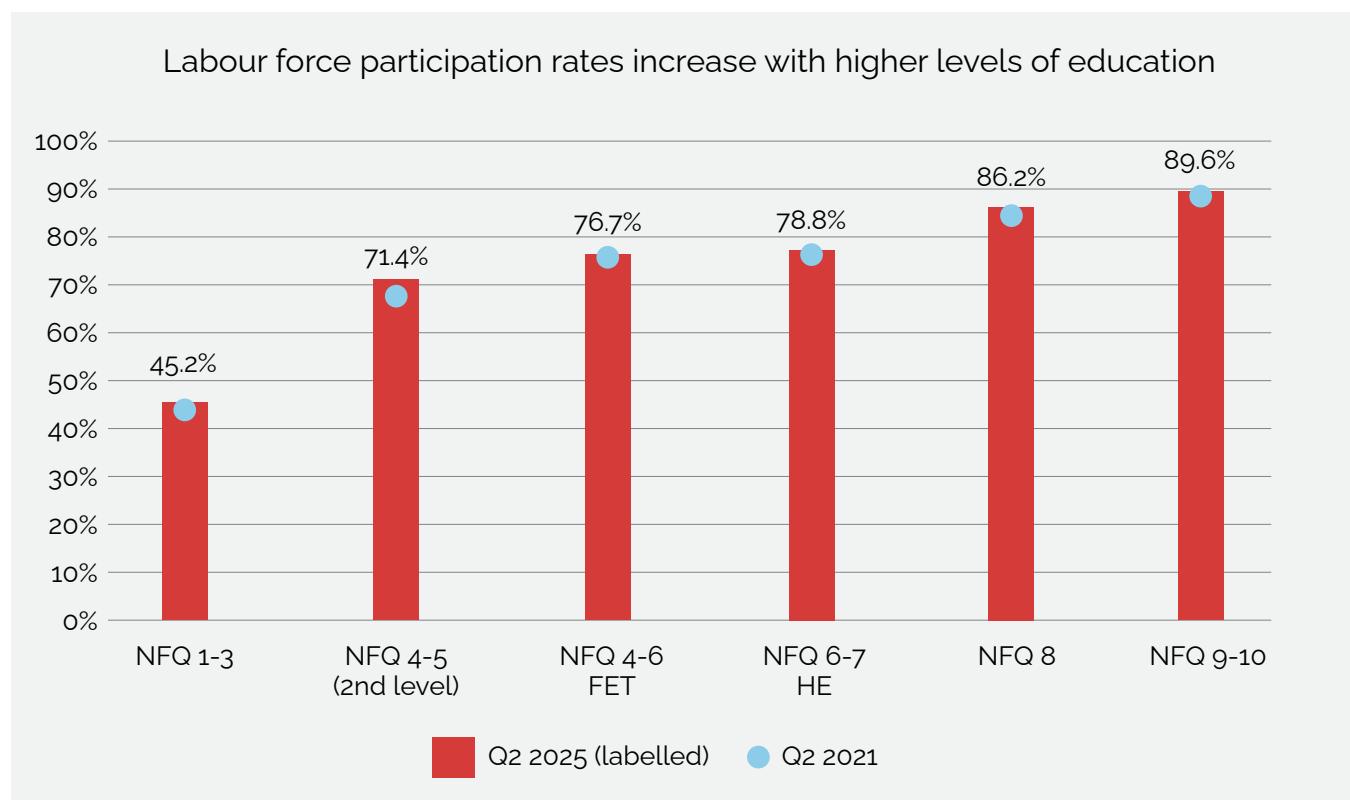
Excludes observations where NFQ level is not stated.

Labour force participation and NFQ level

In quarter 2 2025, with 2.75 million persons, Ireland's labour force participation rate (for those aged 20-74 years) was 76%, up from 72% in Q2 2021.⁴ Figure 7 shows that adults' labour force participation rate increases as the NFQ level goes up; in quarter 2 2025, the rate at NFQ 9-10, at 89.6%, was nearly twice as high as that for those with NFQ 1-3 qualifications, at 45.2%.

Between quarter 2 2021 and quarter 2 2025, there were relatively small increases in labour force participation rates at all NFQ levels (ranging from 1 to 2 percentage points), with the largest rise at NFQ 4-5 (2nd level) from 66% to 71.4% over this time.

Figure 7 Labour force participation rate (20-74-year-olds) by NFQ level (%), Q2 2025 & Q2 2021



Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data

Excludes observations where NFQ level is not stated

⁴ This comprises the proportion of the population aged 20-74 years who are economically active, i.e. either employed or unemployed, based on the International Labour Organisation (ILO) definition.

Table 3 shows that the number of employed adults (20-74 years) increased (+18% or +402,200 persons) between quarter 2 2021 and quarter 2 2025. In quarter 2 2025, there were 1.57 million third level graduates in employment, making up 59% of total employment. Over the period quarter 2 2021-quarter 2 2025, the education level with the highest

absolute increase in numbers employed was NFQ 9-10 (+147,200 persons), followed by NFQ 8, with an additional 89,700 persons employed. Adults with lower secondary or less education (NFQ 1-3) was the only category where the number of employed adults declined over this period.

Table 3 Number of employed adults (20-74 yrs) by highest education level and change over time, Q2 2021-Q2 2025

	Q2 2021	Q2 2025	Change	% change
NFQ 1-3	204,000	194,400	-9,600	-5%
NFQ 4-5 (Upper sec)	464,400	548,600	84,200	18%
NFQ 4-6 (FET)	320,200	333,200	13,000	4%
NFQ 6-7 (HE)	271,400	349,100	77,700	29%
NFQ 8	623,400	713,100	89,700	14%
NFQ 9-10	358,300	505,500	147,200	41%
Total	2,241,700	2,643,900	402,200	18%

Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data

Excludes observations where NFQ level is not stated

How does the education profile of workers vary across occupations?

Table 4 presents data on adults' (20-74 years) employment by NFQ levels across broad occupational groups in quarter 2 2025. As may be expected, persons with higher education qualifications (NFQ 6-10) mostly worked in higher skilled occupations but many worked in either medium (e.g. caring services) or lower skilled (e.g. elementary) occupations for which a third level qualification is typically **not** a pre-requisite. In quarter 2 2025,

- over two thirds of **third level graduates** (69% or nearly 1.1 million persons) worked in higher skilled occupations comprising of professional (652,100 persons), associate professional and technical (267,500 persons) and managerial (164,400 persons) roles

- a further 24% (381,100 persons) were working in medium skilled occupations; the highest in caring services (89,900 persons), followed by skilled trades (68,600 persons)
- the remaining 6% (98,600 persons) were working in lower skilled occupations in elementary (52,100 persons) or operative (46,500 persons) roles.

While mostly working in medium or lower skilled occupations, a small but significant share of **non-third level graduates** worked in higher skilled occupations, although the numbers involved are relatively small. In quarter 2 2025,

- 50% of those with **FET qualifications (NFQ 4-6 FET)** were employed in skilled trades (including farming) or caring services occupations (165,900 persons combined), while a further 19% (63,500 persons) worked in high skilled occupations (associate professionals, managers or professionals)
- out of those with **second level qualifications at NFQ 4-5**, nearly one third (32%) worked in elementary or operative roles (175,700 persons), but a further 20% were employed in high skilled occupations (107,400 persons)
- those with **lower secondary education or less (NFQ 1-3)** were concentrated in skilled trades (including farming), elementary and operative occupations, which combined accounted for 128,700 persons or 66% of all those with the lowest education attainment levels. Nonetheless, a small number (13%) worked in high skilled occupations.

Table 4 Number and share (%) of persons (20-74 years) employed by occupation and education level, Q2 2025

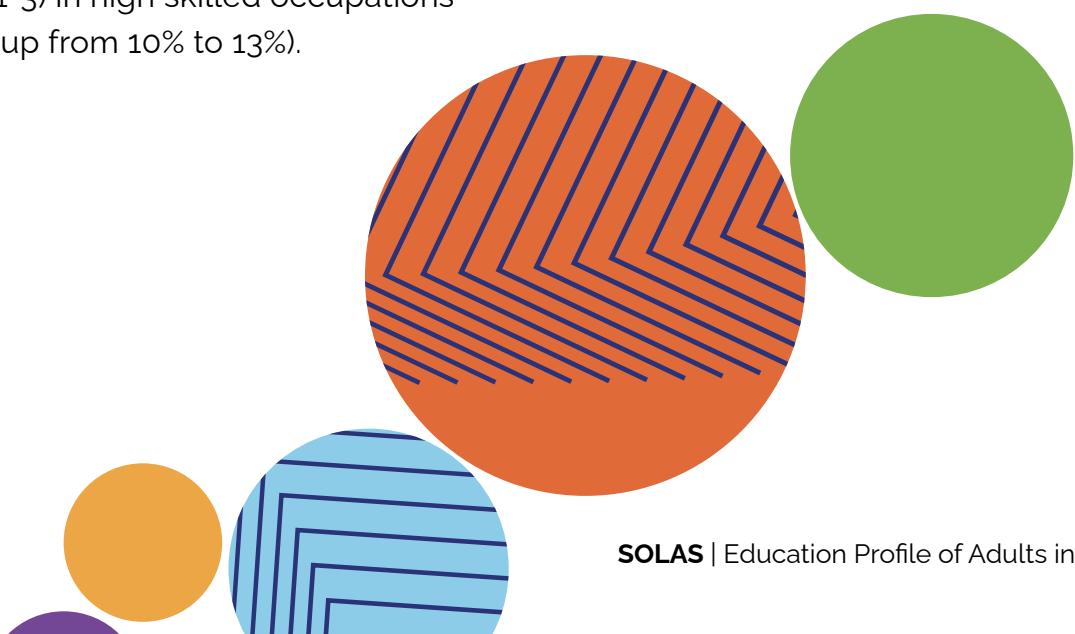
	NFQ 1-3	NFQ 4-5 (2nd level)	NFQ 4-6 FET	NFQ 6-10 HE
Share in high skilled occupations	13%	20%	19%	69%
Professionals	*	19,100	16,800	652,100
Associate profs	[8,000]	46,400	26,600	267,500
Managers	14,600	41,900	20,100	164,400
Share in medium skilled occupations	49%	48%	66%	24%
Admin	10,600	65,700	35,000	161,200
Caring services	16,500	44,700	70,200	89,900
Sales	12,800	66,400	20,000	46,700
Skilled trades	35,900	73,800	78,800	68,600
Farmers	19,900	12,200	16,900	14,700
Share in low skilled occupations	38%	32%	14%	6%
Operatives	39,000	74,100	23,600	46,500
Elementary	33,900	101,600	24,300	52,100
Total	194,000	545,800	332,300	1,563,700

Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data

*An asterisk indicates numbers too low to report and square brackets indicate small numbers that should be interpreted with caution.

Excludes observations where NFQ level is not stated

Between quarter 2 2021 and quarter 2 2025, the distribution of employment by education and broad occupation (shown in Table 4) has remained relatively stable except for an increase in the share of adults with lower secondary education (NFQ 1-3) in high skilled occupations (went up from 10% to 13%).

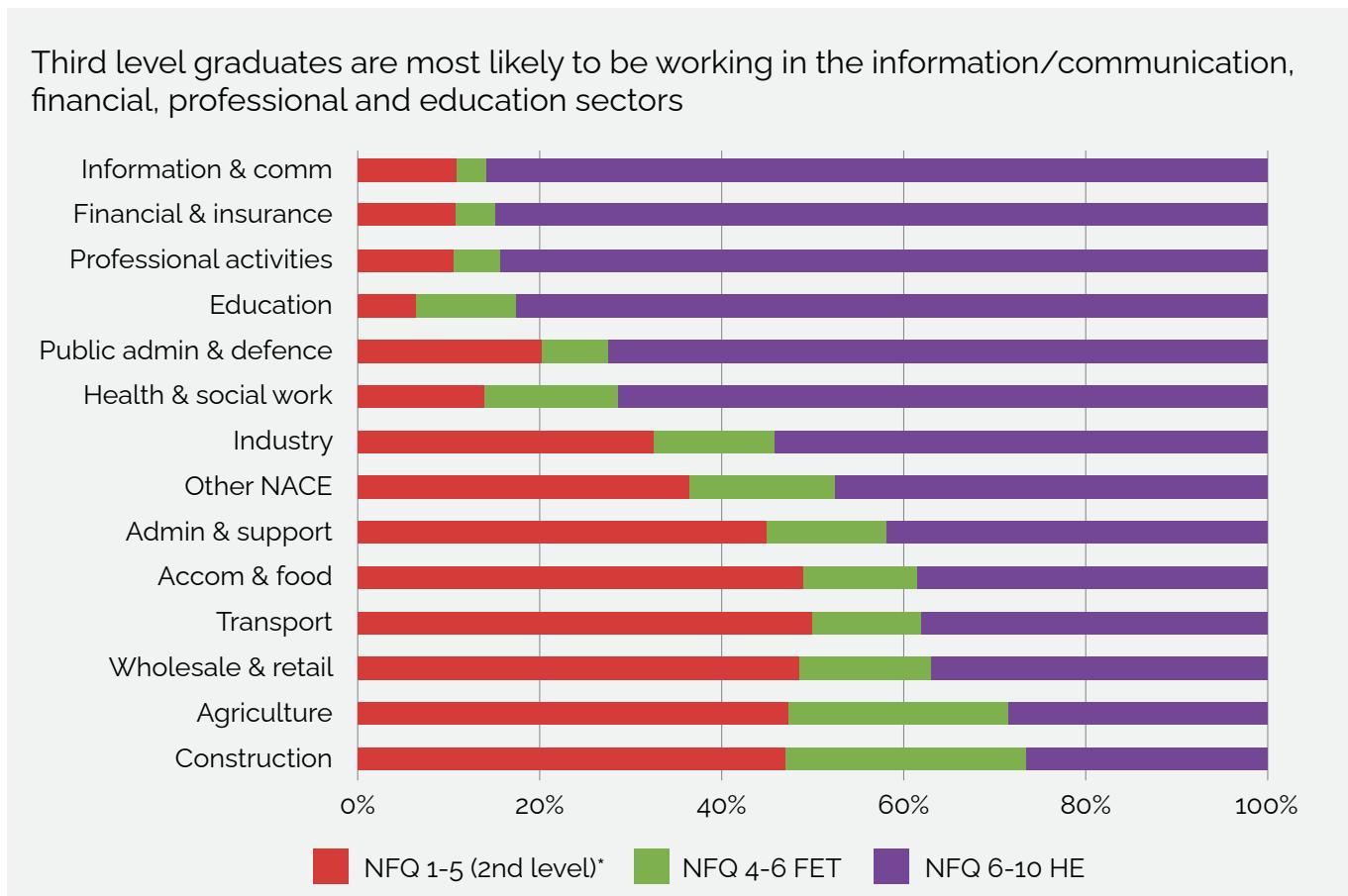


Workers' educational level and economic sector

Figure 8 shows that the educational attainment of employed adults (aged 20-74 years) varied by NACE economic sector in quarter 2 2025.

- The transport sector had the highest share of workers with a **second level education at most** (NFQ 1-3 and NFQ 4-5 2nd level) (50% or 58,100 persons), closely followed by accommodation & food (49% or 70,400 persons) and wholesale & retail (49% or 136,900 persons)
- The sectors with the highest proportion of workers with an **NFQ 4-6 FET** qualification were construction (27% or 47,400 persons) and agriculture (24% or 22,100 persons)
- In four sectors, more than eight in ten workers had a **third level qualification**; ICT (86% or 152,100 persons), financial & insurance (85% or 118,300 persons), professional activities (84% or 171,400 persons) and education (83% or 197,000 persons); these four sectors accounted for nearly half (48%) of all workers with higher education.

Figure 8 Share of employment by sector and NFQ level (%), Q2 2025



Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data

*NFQ 1-3 and NFQ 4-5 (2nd level) were combined due to small numbers for several sectors in relation to NFQ 1-3

Excludes observations where NFQ level is not stated

Between quarter 2 2021 and quarter 2 2025, the share of employed adults with at most a second level education tended to fall or remain stable across most sectors (except construction and Other NACE, both shares up 3%). The share of workers with third level education rose in many sectors over this time (except industry which remained the same and

Other NACE, where the share fell by 4%). The share of adults with NFQ 4-6 FET qualifications remained stable for many sectors, although there were declines in construction (share fell by 6%), agriculture (share fell by 3%) and public administration and defence (share fell by 7%).

Conclusion

The data in this report shows how the educational attainment level of adults in Ireland varies by individual characteristics (including age, sex and citizenship). In general, younger age groups, females, and non-Irish citizens have greater shares with higher education qualifications (NFQ 6-10) and lower shares with, at most, NFQ level 3 qualifications.

At 59% in quarter 2 2025, the relatively high proportion of employed adults with qualifications at NFQ levels 6 (HE)-10 suggests a workforce that is well-equipped to meet the demands of Ireland's high-skilled, knowledge intensive labour market. Ireland's workforce is likely to see further shifts towards higher educational attainment, as older relatively less well-educated people leave the workforce (e.g. through retirement) and are replaced by younger more highly educated individuals.

Nonetheless, educational attainment alone is not sufficient to ensure that the skills of Ireland's workforce are sufficiently aligned to meet labour market needs.

While the data shows those with a third level qualification are more likely to be working in high skilled occupations and economic sectors that employ large numbers of professionals (e.g. ICT, finance), there were nearly 100,000 higher education qualification holders employed in lower skilled occupations. At the same time, there is a small but significant share of those with lower education attainment employed in high skilled occupations. Educational attainment, in other words, is not the sole determinant of skills match in the labour market, a point also borne out in the OECD's PIAAC study⁵ where over-skilling and under-skilling occurred regardless of workers' educational attainment.

The rapid pace of change in the workplace, driven by factors such as technology (including AI), the demand for green/sustainability skills, and changing work and regulatory practices, mean that despite the increasing numbers of well-educated people, the continuous and regular upskilling and re-skilling of the workforce is a necessary priority for Ireland.

5 See Summer Skills Bulletin 2025: Prevalence of Skills Mismatch in Ireland's Labour Market (2025) <https://a.storyblok.com/f/70398/x/0c1ed7d8e8/summer-skills-bulletin-2025.pdf>

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