











# Lifelong Learning Among Adults in Quarter 4 2020

May 2021

<p>Lifelong Learning in Q4 2020</p> <p><b>302,300</b></p> <p>Lifelong Learning Participants<sup>1</sup></p>	<p>Compared to Q4 2019</p> <p> <b>-78,700</b></p>
<p> <b>171,700</b></p> <p> <b>130,600</b></p>	<p> <b>-51,000</b> females</p> <p> <b>-27,800</b> Males</p>
<p><b>12%</b></p> <p>Lifelong Participation Rate</p>	<p> from <b>15%</b></p>
<p>Formal learning</p> <p> <b>125,500</b></p> <p>Non-formal learning</p> <p> <b>195,300</b></p>	<p> <b>2,400</b> fewer learners</p> <p> <b>84,400</b> fewer learners</p>

Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data

<sup>1</sup> Some learners participated in both formal and non-formal learning activities; as a result the total number of lifelong learning participants is less than the sum of formal and non-formal.

## Introduction

Lifelong learning lies at the heart of Ireland's and the EU's education/training policy and is acknowledged as being vital for sustainable economic growth, the restoration of employment, and fostering social cohesion. This recognition of the importance of lifelong learning is reflected in the targets set both nationally and at EU level for lifelong learning participation. Ireland's National Skills Strategy set a lifelong learning target of 10% to be reached by the year 2020 and 15% by 2025. The target set by the EU was 15% for the year 2020.

This paper, produced by the Skills and Labour Market Unit in SOLAS on behalf of the National Skills Council, aims to monitor Ireland's progress in relation to the participation of adults in learning activities.

## Measuring Lifelong Learning

Currently, lifelong learning is measured in both Ireland and the EU by using the Labour Force Survey (LFS) to calculate the share of adults aged 25-64 who had engaged in formal and/or non-formal learning<sup>2</sup> in the **preceding four weeks**. However, revised targets set out in the updated European Skills Agenda (July 2020) require a measure that will look at adult engagement in learning activities in the **preceding 12 months**. Changes to the LFS will capture this change for 2021 onwards.

### Key points

- In quarter 4 2020, approximately 302,300 adults aged 25-64 years had engaged in lifelong learning, representing a **lifelong learning participation rate of 11.6%**.
- There has been a **21% decline (or 78,700 fewer learners)** in the number of lifelong learning participants when compared to quarter 4 2019; as a result, the lifelong learning participation rate has also declined (down three percentage points from 14.7%).
- The decline was mostly due to a **30% fall** in the number of **non-formal learning participants** representing 84,400 fewer learners.
- The number of **female** lifelong learning participants also **declined (by 23%, or almost 51,000 learners)**; the drop in female participant numbers was especially strong amongst the employed, where the number of female learners fell by 26% (or 44,000); part-time employed females experienced the sharpest decline, at 40%, or 19,200 fewer learners.
- As in preceding years, lifelong learning participation rates increased with greater educational attainment but declined with age.
- Lifelong learning participation rates varied by region: **Dublin and the South East had the highest rates, at 13% each**; the Border had the lowest rate, at 8%.

<sup>2</sup> Please see definitions on page 10 for the distinction between formal and non-formal learning activities.

## How many adults participated in lifelong learning in Q4 2020?

Of the 2.62 million adults who were aged between 25 and 64 years in quarter 4 2020, **302,300 had participated in formal and/or non-formal learning activities** in the preceding four weeks. Of these, 125,000 people had undertaken formal learning activities while 195,300 had engaged in non-formal learning activities<sup>3</sup>. Figure 1 provides a profile of Ireland's lifelong learning participants.

- **Females outnumbered males:** at 171,600, the number of females who participated in lifelong learning was 31% higher than for males (130,600) in quarter 4 2020.
- Lifelong learning participants tended to be in the **younger** age cohorts, with one third (about 100,000 persons) aged 25-34 years.
- Most were **well educated:** more than 72% (211,000 workers) held third level qualifications.
- Three quarters of lifelong learning participants (227,900) were **in employment**. The majority (almost two thirds) of employed lifelong learners worked as managers, professionals or associate professionals; just 7% (14,900 people) were working in lower skilled roles (i.e. as operatives or elementary workers). One third of employed lifelong learning participants worked in the health and education sectors, with 43,000 and 32,800 learners respectively.
- Just over a third of all lifelong learning participants were **based in Dublin**, followed by the Mid-East and the South West, which combined accounted for a further quarter (Figure 2).
- Of the 125,000 learners who engaged in formal learning activities, 79,000 persons (63%) had undertaken a third level programme of study; 28,900 had studied subjects in **social science, business and law** followed by 23,700 in **STEM** (not illustrated).

### Note on measures of employment and unemployment

The CSO's Labour Force Survey (LFS) is the official source of employment and unemployment measures in Ireland. As the CSO must follow international (ILO) standard definitions and methodologies, unemployment numbers and rates from the LFS do not necessarily reflect the true extent of people out of work due to the pandemic. For example, in order to be deemed unemployed, an individual must be not working, actively seeking work in previous four weeks and available for work in the two weeks after the interview. Some individuals displaced from employment, therefore, are more likely to fall into the **inactive category** purely because they were not seeking work due to the public health restrictions. To compensate for this, the CSO also produce a COVID-19 adjusted measure of unemployment, alongside the official unemployment measures. However, this adjusted measure is available at an aggregate level only and cannot be extended to lifelong learning statistics.

<sup>3</sup> Approximately 19,000 people had participated in both formal and non-formal learning activities. However, as they are counted only once, the total number of lifelong learning participants is slightly less than the combined total for formal and non-formal learning.

## What was the impact of COVID-19 on the number of lifelong learning participants?

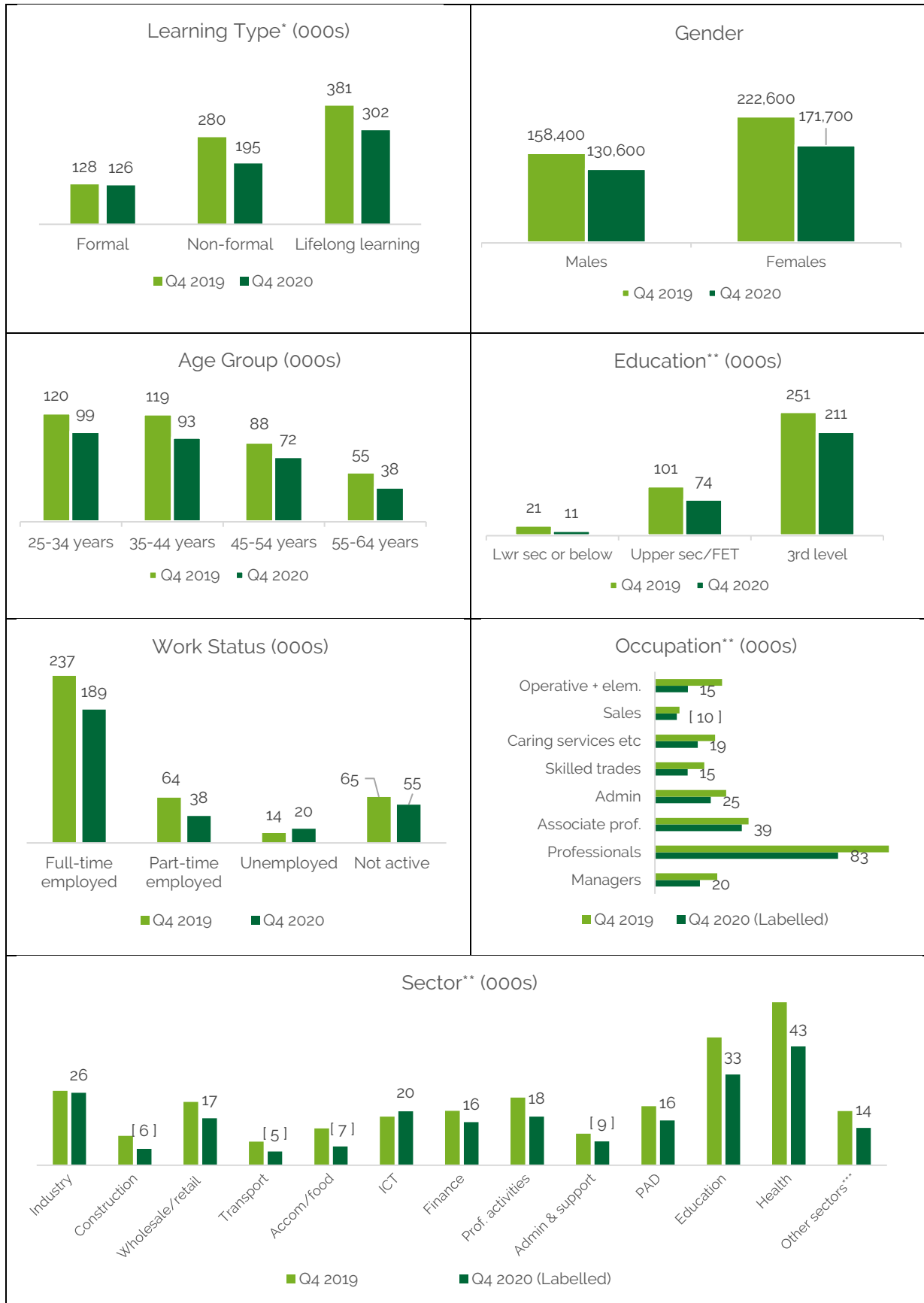
When compared to quarter 4 2019,

- There were 78,700 fewer lifelong learning participants, a fall of **over a fifth**
- Two thirds of this decline was due to the **decrease in the number of females** (-51,000 learners); the number of male learners also fell (by 27,800 persons); as a result, the gender gap narrowed, with female numbers just 31% higher than males, compared to 41% one year earlier.
- **Learning type:** formal learning was less negatively impacted than non-formal learning:
  - **Formal learning:** the 2% (or 2,400) drop in the number of learners was driven largely by a **reduced number of part-time employed female participants (-47%, or 8,400 fewer learners)**<sup>4</sup>, although this decline was partially offset by a rise in the number of full-time employed persons (both males and females) engaging in formal learning.
  - **Non-formal learning** fell by 30%, with 84,400 fewer learners; the largest fall, in absolute terms, was for **persons in employment (-78,700) making up more than 90% of the total decline in non-formal learning**; in relative terms the decline was similar (33%) for both males and females, but because the number of females is larger, the absolute difference amounted to 45,700 fewer female learners compared to 33,000 fewer male learners.
- **Age group:** declines in the number of lifelong learning participants were observed across all age groups.
- **Work status:** lifelong learning participation decreased for **full-time and part-time employed** persons, as well as the economically inactive. While the 24% fall in the number of employed lifelong learning participants was only slightly above the average, the decline amounted to 73,600 fewer persons (i.e. 94% of the overall decline in lifelong learning). While the numbers regarding the **unemployed** need to be interpreted in the context of the pandemic-related public health restrictions (see page 3), it is worth noting that the numbers participating in lifelong learning grew strongly (nearly 20%), amounting to 6,000 additional learners.
- **Occupation:** declines were observed across all occupational groups; the largest absolute decreases were for professional occupations (-23,000, or -22%) and operative/elementary workers (-15,500, or -51%).
- **Sector:** the number of lifelong learning participants declined in almost all sectors, except ICT (where numbers rose by 1,900). In **relative terms, the largest declines** were in the **accommodation & food** (-49%, or 6,500 fewer learners) **and in wholesale & retail** (-35%, or 5,900 fewer learners), although the health and education sectors had higher absolute declines.
- **Region:** the number of lifelong learning participants declined in all regions, except the South East (where numbers rose by 16%, due entirely to growth in formal learning participation). The largest fall was in the Dublin region, where the 29% decline translated into 42,200 fewer learners.

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<sup>4</sup> The number of part-time employed males was too small to report in quarter 4 2020.

Figure 1. Lifelong Learning Participants, Q4 2019-Q4-2020



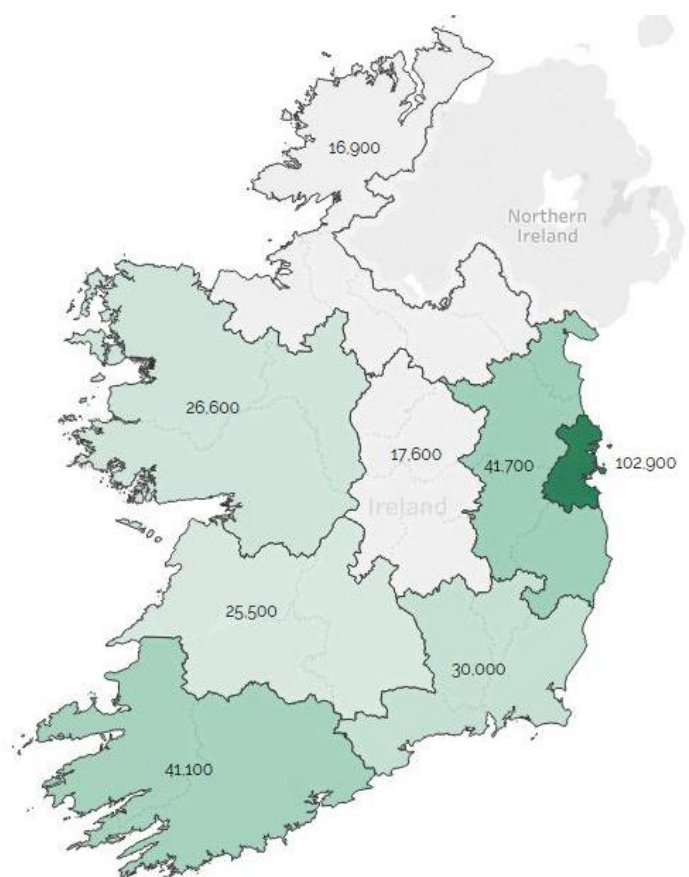
Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data

\* Some learners undertake both formal and non-formal learning, but they are counted only once in the data. As a result, the total number of lifelong learning participants is less than the sum of formal and non-formal learning.

\*\* Excludes not stated [..] Numbers are small and should be treated with caution

\*\*\* Other sectors include agriculture, arts, entertainment, and recreation, etc.

Figure 2. Lifelong Learning Participants (000s) by Region, Q4 2020



Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data

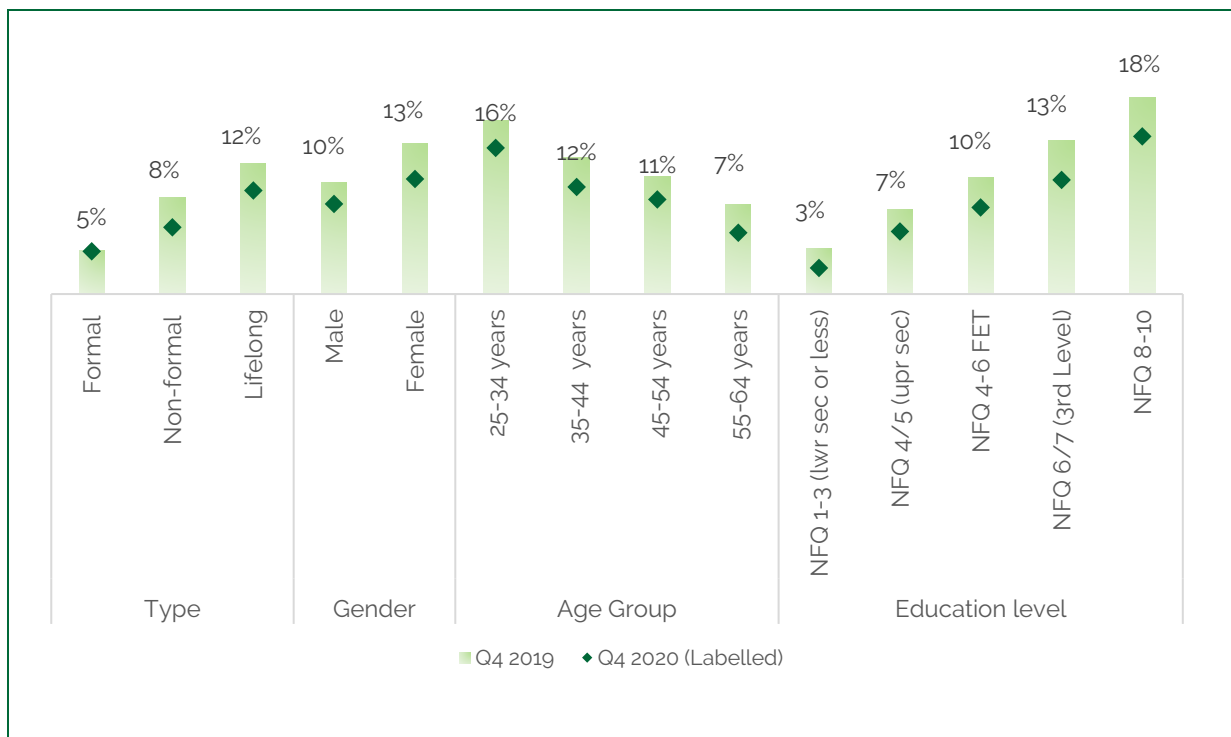
## Lifelong learning Participation Rates

Figures 3 and 4 show the participation rates for lifelong learning in Ireland.

- **Learning type:** at 8% in quarter 4 2020, participation in **non-formal learning** activities was higher than formal learning; however, when compared to the preceding year, the rate declined by three percentage points (from 11%); the **formal learning** participation rate, on the other hand, remained unchanged, highlighting the fact that participation in formal learning activities was relatively unaffected by the economic and social restrictions imposed by COVID-19.
- **Gender:** the lifelong learning rate among females was slightly higher than that of males; compared to the same period one year earlier, the gap has narrowed.
- As in previous years, participation in lifelong learning tended to decline with **age** but increase with greater levels of **education** attainment.
  - the share of level 8-10 qualification holders who had participated in lifelong learning was six times greater than adults who held a Junior Cert. (level 3) or less
  - at 16%, the participation rate for 25-34-year-olds was more than double that of 55-64-year-olds (7%).

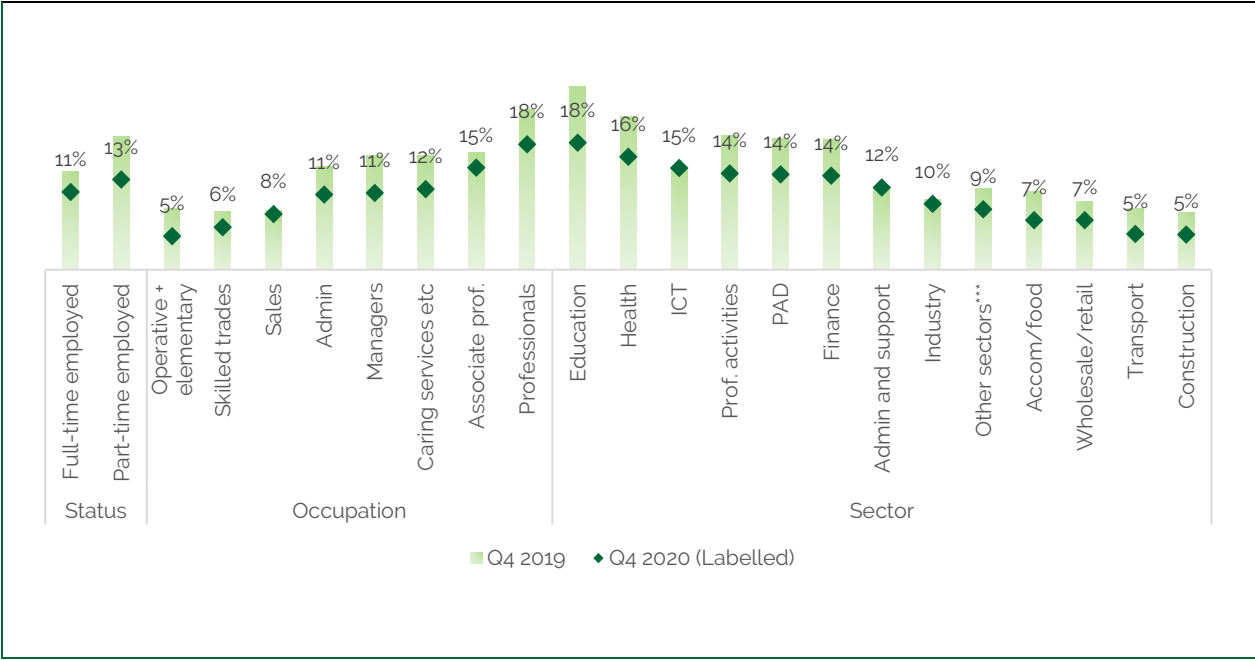
- The lifelong learning participation rate for those in **part-time employment** was only slightly higher than for those in full-time employment in quarter 4 2020, at 13% and 11% respectively. However, between quarter 4 2019 and quarter 4 2020, the gap in participation rates for the full- and part-time employed narrowed considerably: the gap in quarter 4 2020 was less than two percentage points, compared to five percentage points observed the previous year.
- **Occupation:** the highest lifelong learning participation rates were for those working in professional (18%) and associate professional (15%) occupations. Participation rates declined across almost all occupational groups, with the largest percentage point declines being for managers and professionals (five percentage point declines each).
- **Sector:** the sectors with the highest lifelong learning participation rates were education (18%), health (16%) and ICT (15%). Rates declined across all sectors except ICT and admin/support where participation rates remained static. Education and health sector workers had the largest declines; these sectors are also those where high shares of women are employed.
- **Region:** As shown in Figure 5, the South East and Dublin regions had the highest participation rates at in excess of 13% each. The Border region had the lowest lifelong learning participation rate (8%). When compared to one year earlier, rates declined for all regions except the South East, although the Border region change was negligible at less than one percentage point.

Figure 3. Lifelong Learning Participation Rates by type, gender, age and education, Q4 2019-Q4-2020



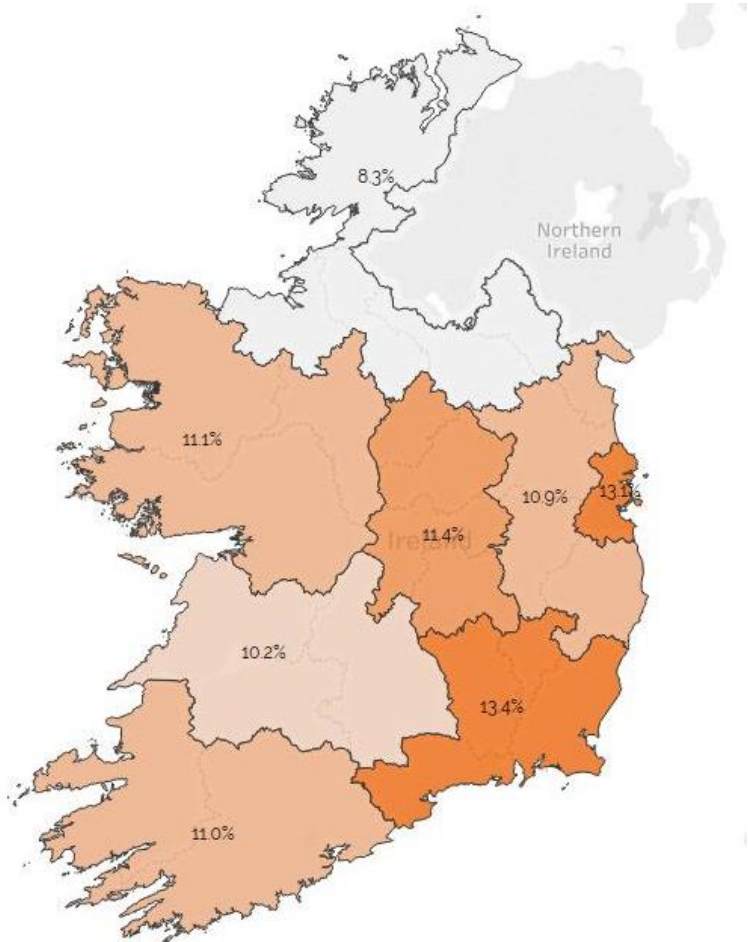
Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data

Figure 4. Lifelong learning participation rates for the employed by full-time/part-time status, occupation and sector, Q4 2020-Q4 2019



Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data

Figure 5. Lifelong Learning Participation Rates by Region, Q4 2020



Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data



## Conclusion

The findings outlined in this paper point to the following observations:

- The important role played by the **world of work** in offering learning opportunities: adults in employment account for by far the largest number of lifelong learning participants every year. While the data cannot distinguish between those who engaged in workplace training and those who undertook 'hobby' or personal interest training, it is clear from the fall in non-formal learning activity numbers that the pandemic hampered the ability for people in employment to either be offered or to avail of learning activities.
- The importance of **digital literacy**: in order to learn new skills during COVID-19, many have relied on remote learning and digital learning platforms. Paradoxically, however, many of those employed in occupations most impacted by COVID-19 (e.g. hospitality, wholesale/retail) have low levels of digital skills (SOLAS 2020<sup>5</sup>) and may struggle to access and/or learn via online learning environments. In addition, the greater the level of education attainment, the higher the lifelong learning participation rate and the smaller the impact of COVID-19: the number of lifelong learning participants who had attained at most a Junior Cert fell by almost 50% year-on-year, compared to falls of 20% or less for those with third level qualifications.
- The disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on **non-formal learning participation**: the decline in formal learning participation was relatively limited, indicating that providers and learners engaged in formal learning activities were better equipped to transfer to online learning platforms. This may be due to the nature of many non-formal learning activities, which might not readily lend themselves to remote learning platforms, either because people tend to engage in these activities for social reasons, or because the classes themselves might be less well suited to online learning (e.g. flower arranging, driving lessons, adult literacy, etc.).

It is also possible that non-formal learning providers, many of which are likely to be small and medium sized enterprises, may not have had the required technical infrastructure, skills or finances to adapt as quickly as some of the formal learning providers to remote learning environments.

Ireland has made significant progress in fostering workplace learning and training in recent years. However, the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on lifelong learning participation amongst certain cohorts highlights the importance of initiatives such as the forthcoming Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy in ensuring all persons (employed or otherwise) can access the education and training opportunities they need to reskill and participate fully in society.

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<sup>5</sup> Digital Skills Requirements of Workers in Ireland. (SOLAS 2020).  
[https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/3e4e80aef7/digitalskillsrequirements\\_june2020.pdf](https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/3e4e80aef7/digitalskillsrequirements_june2020.pdf)

## Definitions of Lifelong Learning

**Lifelong learning** comprises formal, non-formal and informal education and training; however, statistics presented in the CSO's Labour Force Survey 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.

**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.

For further information, please contact [nora.condon@solas.ie](mailto:nora.condon@solas.ie) or [nina.burke@solas.ie](mailto:nina.burke@solas.ie)  
Skills and Labour Market Research Unit, SOLAS  
An tSeirbhis Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna  
Block 1, Castleforbes House, Castleforbes Road, Dublin D01 A8N0

+ 353 (0) 1 533 2500 / [www.solas.ie](http://www.solas.ie) / [info@solas.ie](mailto:info@solas.ie)