

Qualifications in Northern Ireland 2020

Theme: Labour Market

Frequency: Ad hoc

Geographical Area: Northern Ireland

Source: Labour Force Survey

This paper examines the levels of highest qualifications held by working age adults (16 to 64) in Northern Ireland (NI) in the five years from 2016 to 2020, as sourced from the Labour Force Survey (LFS). Highest qualifications have been assigned to National Qualification Framework (NQF) levels for the purposes of this analysis. The paper also contains a lifelong learning indicator, designed to capture the level of participation in education and training following the completion of formal education (25 to 64).

Key points

- Between 2016 and 2020, there has been a general increase in the proportion of working age adults with qualifications, where 87.0% held a qualification in 2020 (and 13.0% reported having no qualification).
- A higher proportion of females and those aged 25 to 34 were qualified to Level 2 and above.
- A higher proportion of males and 16 to 24 year olds held a highest qualification between Level 3 and 5.
- The proportion of people aged 25 to 64 participating in education and training (as measured by the lifelong learning indicator) in NI was consistently lower than the UK.
- Those aged 50 to 64 were the least likely to participate in education or training, and for those who did engage, the highest participation rate was for those qualified to Level 6 and above (equivalent to first degree or higher).
- There has been an increasing proportion of working age adults holding at least a level 6 qualification since 2016, where females and those aged between 25 and 34 had higher proportions.

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National Statistics Status

National Statistics status means that our statistics meet the highest standards of trustworthiness, quality, and public value, and it is our responsibility to maintain compliance with these standards.

These statistics were designated as National Statistics in August 2010 following a full [assessment of Labour Market Statistics for Northern Ireland](#) against the [Code of Practice for statistics](#). A compliance check in March 2020 recommended the continued designation of the report as a National Statistic. These statistics were considered as part of a wider [assessment of the UK employment and jobs statistics](#).

Since the assessment by the UK Statistics Authority, we have continued to comply with the Code of Practice for Statistics, and have made the following improvements:

- Improved quality of the LFS data by boosting the sample size and improving precision around headline estimates (Please note since the COVID-19 pandemic sample sizes have decreased due to difficulty of collecting survey information from households).
- Reviewed and updated [quality protocols for release](#) for LFS data
- Improved accessibility of labour market statistics by [changing the release dates of statistics to avoid public holidays](#) and amended the format and structure of reports in line with accessibility regulations.

Highest qualification level

Analysis presented for qualification levels is based on the highest qualification obtained (assigned to National Qualification Framework (NQF) levels) as sourced from the Labour Force Survey. Further detail of the methodology used in the analysis can be found within the background information section, however qualification levels are broadly equivalent to:

Below Level 2: O-level, GCSE grade A*-C - less than 5

Level 2: O-level, GCSE grade A*-C - 5 or more

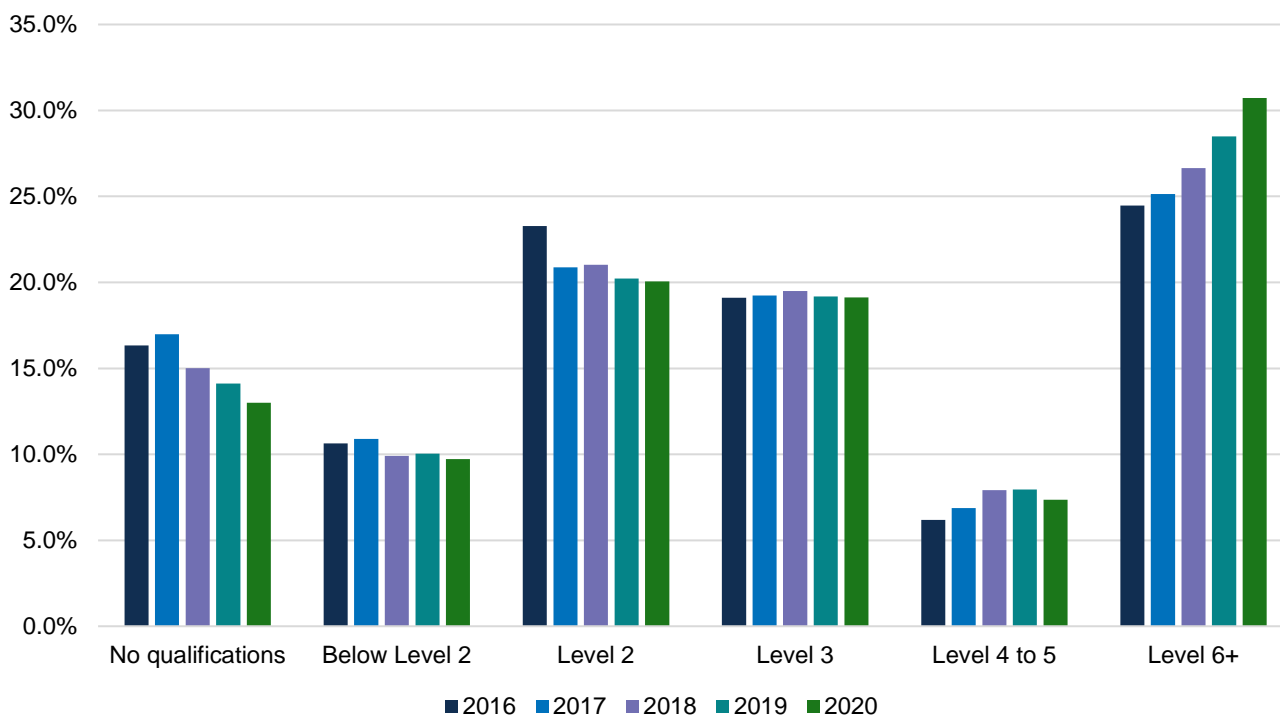
Level 3: A-level - more than 1

Level 4 to 5: Foundation degree, HNC/HND/BTEC higher

Levels 6+: First degree or higher

- In 2020, 77.3% of working age adults were qualified to Level 2 and above, where females and those aged 25 to 34 had higher proportions
- Just over one in four held a highest qualification between Level 3 and Level 5 (26.5%) in 2020, with a higher proportion for males and those aged 16 to 24
- Percentage with no qualifications highest for 50 to 64 year olds

Figure 1: Highest qualification level held by working age adults (16 to 64), NI, 2016 to 2020



[Download figure 1 data](#)

Figure 1 presents the highest qualification levels held by working age adults.

There has been a general increase since 2016 in the proportion with qualifications, to 83.0% in 2020. 13.0% of 16 to 64 year olds reported holding no qualifications in 2020, which was a decrease of around 3 percentage points (pps) since 2016.

The proportion of those with qualifications at level 6 and above has increased steadily since 2016, where 30.7% of adults held this level of qualifications in 2020. This has been driven by increases across all aged 25 and over, but the 25 to 34 age group reported the largest increase in proportion qualified to this level since 2016. There has been minimal change reported for the remaining levels over recent years, where proportion qualified to level 3 in particular has showed no change since 2016.

Considering highest qualification levels by age:

- The majority of **16 to 24 year olds** held either Level 2 or Level 3
- Level 6 and above (first degree or higher) was the most common for the **25 to 34 and 35 to 49** age groups
- Lower proportion of **50 to 64 year olds** were qualified to Level 6 and above (compared to other age groups), where this age group also had the highest percentage of those with no qualifications.

A closer look at those **qualified to Level 2 and above** (higher for females and a higher proportion qualified to Level 6 and above) shows that 77.3% of working age adults were qualified to this level in 2020. It was estimated that just over one in four (26.5%) had a **highest qualification between Level 3 and Level 5** (higher proportion for males).

For Level 2 and above, those aged 25 to 34 had the highest proportion when compared to the other age groups, where 86.9% were qualified to this level in 2020. This was around 20 percentage points higher than the 50 to 64 year olds proportion (the lowest of all age groups).

For Level 3 to 5, those aged 16 to 24 had the highest proportion when compared to older age groups (31.5% in 2020).

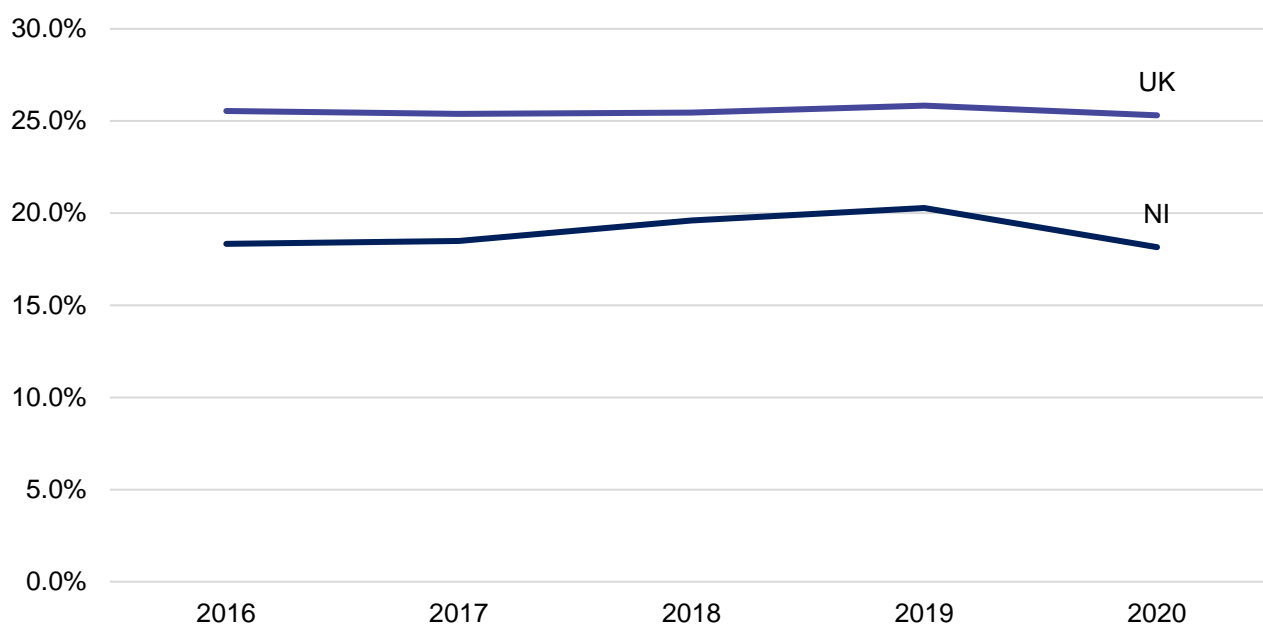
Lifelong learning indicator

The lifelong learning indicator aims to capture the level of participation in education and training following the completion of formal education and is defined as those currently participating in education or training (or job related in last 3 months) those who received informal training (tuition or other taught classes) during the last three months.

Lifelong learning figures are provided for those aged 25 to 64, to capture the participation in education and learning following completion of formal education.

- Lifelong learning rate in NI consistently lower than UK average 2016 to 2020
- Participation in education and training increases with level of qualification held
- Participation for those aged 50 to 64 is lower than those aged between 25 and 49 years. Males had a lower participation rate than females (all aged 25 to 64).

Figure 2: Proportion participating in education and training, NI and UK, aged 25 to 64, 2016 to 2020



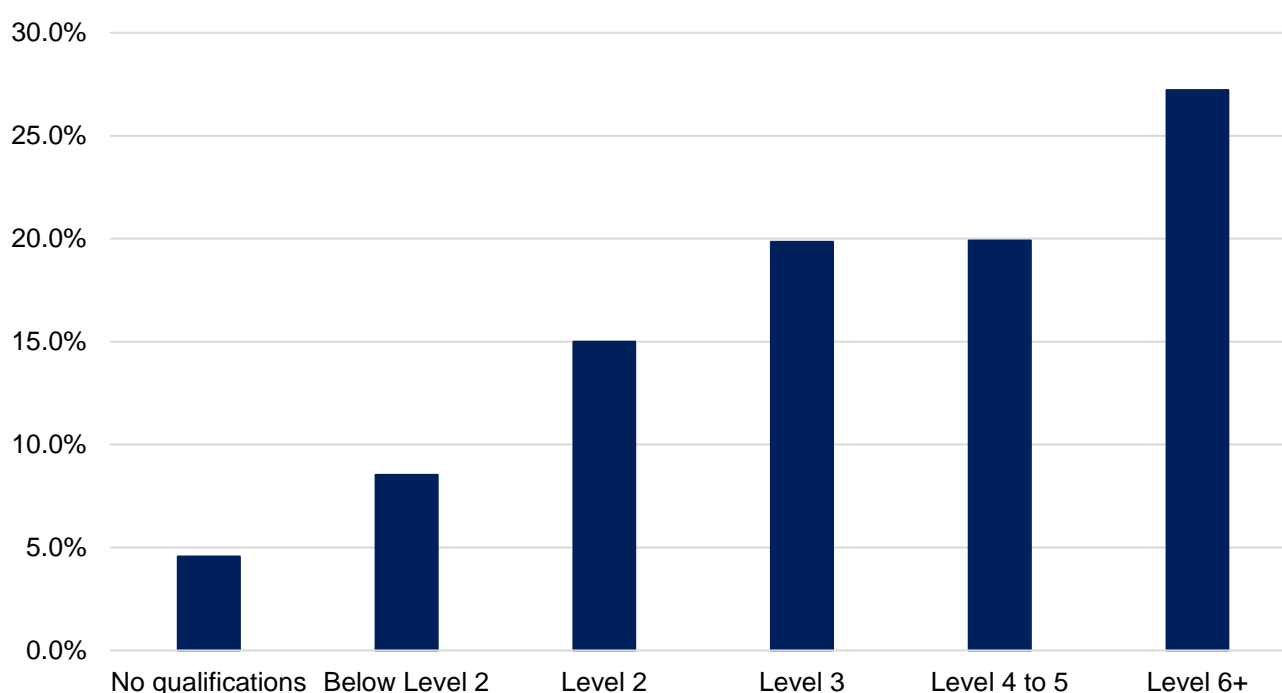
[Download figure 2 data](#)

Figure 2 presents estimates of the proportion of people aged 25 to 64 participating in education or training (as measured by the lifelong learning indicator) between 2016 and 2020 for NI and the whole of the UK.

Whilst the proportion was consistently higher for the whole of the UK compared to NI for this period, there was little change in the proportion engaged in education or training for the UK in particular. The lifelong learning rate increased from 18.3% in 2016 to a peak in NI in 2019 (20.3%). The proportion of people participating in education or training in NI in 2020 was 18.2%, compared to 25.3% in the UK

When analysed by age and gender, there is a clear difference between participation for those aged 50 to 64, which is lower than the younger age groups, and participation for males was lower than females.

Figure 3: Proportion of those aged 25 to 64 participating in education or training by highest qualification level held, NI, 2020



[Download figure 3 data](#)

Figure 3 demonstrates the proportion of people participating in education or training by highest qualification level held for 2020, where the participation increases with level of qualification held.

The cohort of working aged adults with the highest participation were those qualified to level 6 and above, where more than one in four participated in education or training (27.2%). This is in comparison to less than 5% of those with no qualifications. Those qualified to Level 3 and Level 4 to 5 reported similar levels of participation in 2020, at around 20%.

Although those aged 50 to 64 were the least likely to engage in education and training, the highest participation rate for this group was for those qualified to Level 6 and above.

Additional information

Background

The LFS annual datasets used for this publication are derived from four consecutive quarters of the LFS. Individuals in each wave are interviewed in five successive quarters, such that in any quarter one wave will be receiving their first interview, one wave their second, and so on, with one receiving their fifth and final interview. The annual dataset is created by selecting the relevant cases from each quarter and combining them to create a dataset of unique cases. Selecting all wave one and five interviews allows the maximum number of respondents over a one-year period to be included whilst avoiding double counting. The resulting sample size of the 2020 dataset is approximately 8,000 individuals.

LFS revisions due to reweighting

Typically, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) would reweight the LFS every two years to take account of updated population estimates and projections. However, investigations by ONS during 2020 showed the composition of the achieved LFS sample had changed because of the change in survey methods introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Traditionally, the survey is conducted via a face-to-face household interview with follow-up telephone interviews, but this changed to solely telephone interviews in April 2020.

In October 2020 LFS data were reweighted to include additional factors (household tenure) to mitigate the changing sample composition, and estimates were revised from January 2020. More information on the October 2020 reweighting is available on the NISRA website: [LFS Revision Note – October 2020](#).

LFS responses are typically weighted to official population projections. However, in July 2021, ONS reweighted the LFS data from January to March 2020 to February to April 2021 based on an LFS specific population that takes changes shown in HMRC's PAYE Real Time Information source into account. The ONS published the [LFS reweighting methodology](#) in an article. NISRA published the [Impact of the LFS reweighting on annual data](#) paper in August 2021, to show the impact of the new weighting methodology for 2020 headline labour market estimates.

Precision of estimates

The LFS is a sample survey and, as such, estimates obtained from it are subject to sampling variability. If we drew many samples each would give a different result. Estimates under a cell count of 3 are disclosive and therefore suppressed. In tables, estimates based on a small sample size are shaded. Small samples may result in less precise estimates, which should be used with caution, in particular should not be used to make statements on relative size when compared to similar values. Unshaded estimates are based on a larger

sample size. This is likely to result in estimates of higher precision, although they will still be subject to some sampling variability.

Reporting change

Reported change is calculated using unrounded data and presented to 1 decimal place. When a change is less than 0.05pps, it is rounded to 0.0pps and the data is reported as unchanged.

LFS definitions

Qualification level

Analysis on qualification level is based on highest qualification held, as sourced from the LFS, which have been assigned to National Qualification Framework (NQF) levels for the purposes of statistical analysis.

There has been a review of the methodology in how certain qualifications are assigned to levels and treatment of responses which are unable to be classified into levels (including don't know responses). A methodology document on Highest Qualification Levels is available on the [LFS background information](#) quality page, which provides a fuller explanation of methodology and more detail on qualifications included in all levels.

Qualification levels are broadly equivalent to:

Below Level 2: O-level, GCSE grade A*-C - less than 5

Level 2: O-level, GCSE grade A*-C - 5 or more

Level 3: A-level - more than 1

Level 4 to 5: Foundation degree, HNC/HND/BTEC higher

Level 6 and above: First degree or higher

Lifelong learning indicator

The lifelong learning indicator is designed to capture the level of participation in education and training following the completion of formal education and is defined as those currently participating in education or training (or job related in last 3 months) or those who received informal training (tuition or other taught classes) during the last three months.

Therefore, a person is considered to have engaged in education or training (as measured by the lifelong learning indicator) if any of the following apply:

- They are enrolled on an education course and are still attending or waiting for term to (re)start
- They are doing an apprenticeship
- They are on a government-supported employment or training programme
- They are working or studying towards a qualification
- They have had job-related training or education in the last three months.
- They have received tuition or attended any other taught classes during the last three months.

Where 'lifelong learning rate' is referred to with this paper, this is the percentage of the population who are participating in education and training.

The lifelong learning indicator is primarily based on the education and training elements of those Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET), but where job-related education or training has been extended from last four weeks to the last three months and also including those who received informal training (tuition or other taught classes) during the last three months.

Please note that where lifelong learning indicator analysis is presented by qualification level, the total may not sum to the figures quoted in the earlier lifelong learning analysis as only those who have answered relevant questions are included in this analysis (don't know/unknown/unable to be classified responses are excluded from qualification analysis).

Further information

If you require further information about the figures contained in this publication or the accompanying tables, please contact the Labour Force Survey team using the details below:

Jennifer McLoughlin,

Tel: (028) 9052 9228

Email: LFS@finance-ni.gov.uk

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