

A higher skills ambition for Northern Ireland:

A revised skills outlook for Northern Ireland for 2035

A Learning and Work Institute report, commissioned by Open College Network NI to provide updated projections of Northern Ireland's future qualification profile, has found that, by 2035, NI will have an internationally comparable pool of graduate workers, but one of the highest proportions of low qualified people out of 39 OECD comparators. Widening skills opportunity will be essential for prosperity, fairness and inclusion.

Where potential meets possibility

Updated projections show a mixed skills profile for Northern Ireland

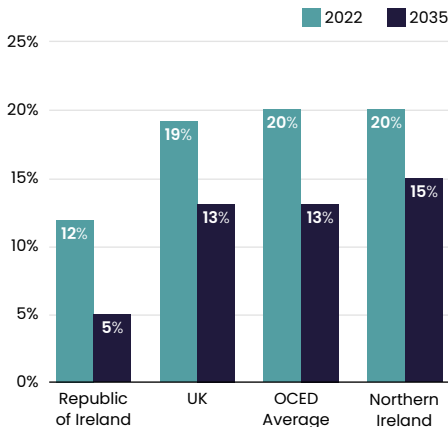
Despite strong progress increasing the proportion of people with higher qualifications, Northern Ireland is projected to continue to lag behind its peers in the skills of a large proportion of its workforce, a new report by a leading research institute finds.

The report, from Learning and Work Institute, analyses and projects NI's qualifications profile, comparing it to fellow OECD countries until 2035. Northern Ireland is projected to have a higher proportion of people than the OECD average with at least a higher education qualification (59% vs 50%), but a higher proportion of people without qualifications at GCSE level or equivalent (15% vs 12%) and substantially fewer with qualifications at this level or equivalent to A levels (27% vs 35%).

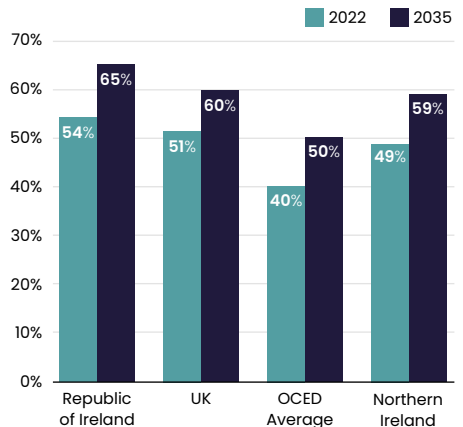
According to the new report, by 2035, Northern Ireland may rank 30th out of 39 OECD comparators in terms of the size of its low qualified workforce, maintaining its current position. It is projected to fall slightly in the rankings for high level qualifications (from 10th to 12th), but still remain in the top third of countries. Both are broadly similar to – but slightly behind – the UK's position.

In comparison, the Republic of Ireland would have the joint lowest proportion with low qualifications and be joint first for the proportion of people with high qualifications.

The proportion of people without GCSE level or equivalent qualifications in Northern Ireland will fall but is on track to remain higher than the UK, Ireland and OCED average.



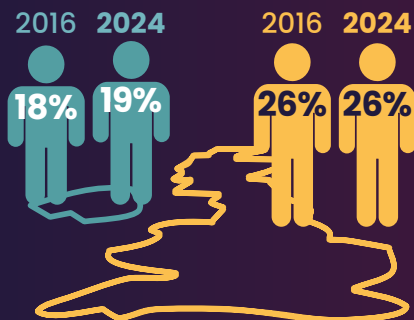
The proportion of people with higher education qualifications in Northern Ireland will increase. It is on track to remain behind the UK and Ireland but be higher than the OCED average.



Investing in a higher ambition for skills in NI

Adult participation in learning in Northern Ireland has remained relatively flat since 2016 – and is lower than the UK.

Generally, fewer than **one in five adults in NI** (aged 25 to 64) participate in education and training, compared to more than **one in four in the UK**.



As in the UK, the most common barriers to learning in NI relate to cost, feeling too old for learning and time pressures.

But individuals in **NI are more likely to report multiple barriers** to learning than those in the **UK**.



“Skills are an engine of growth and driver of social justice. It is therefore heartening that an increasing proportion of people in Northern Ireland are projected to benefit from higher qualifications by 2035. However, our findings also suggest that Northern Ireland remains likely to have one of the highest proportions of low-qualified people in the OECD. We must adopt a higher ambition here: closing inequalities in skills can build a fairer, more prosperous and inclusive Northern Ireland.”

Stephen Evans, Chief Executive, L&W

L&W LEARNING AND WORK INSTITUTE

“This research shows the progress Northern Ireland is making, supported by the Department for the Economy’s commitment to strengthening our skills system. But it also highlights that we cannot afford to stand still. Continued and increased investment is essential if we are to widen access, raise achievement at all levels, and ensure that lifelong learning becomes a reality for everyone. At OCN, we remain committed to developing qualifications that not only support a competitive economy but also foster inclusion, opportunity and resilience across Northern Ireland.”

Martin Flynn, Chief Executive, OCN

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What we need to do

Despite good progress in higher qualifications, the projections emphasise the need for action to develop skills across the population.

1

Aim for world-class learning and skills

There should be renewed focus on supporting increased attainment for people with qualifications at lower levels. The NI Executive should consider aiming for 75% of adults to be qualified to level 3+.

2

Whole government approach to skills

Lifelong learning should become a golden thread across all public services, with greater coordination between different departments and tiers of government.

3

There should be greater investment in learning and skills

Improvements can only be delivered if investment rises. Extra public investment is needed, matched by increased investment by employers and individuals.

4

Monitor progress

There should be a greater focus on collection and analysis of data on the effectiveness of skills programmes and provision.

5

Greater skills policy cooperation

There should be greater skills policy cooperation with the Republic of Ireland and with the other nations and regions of the UK, to learn from existing good practice in promoting lifelong learning.

After the launch of the report, a full copy with infographics can be viewed on both the OCN NI and L&W websites.

The OCN NI **mission** is to develop and award qualifications which engage, enrich and equip learners for life. Our **vision** is a successful, inclusive society where every learner matters.

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