

Economic Activity, Skills Development and Lifelong Learning in Northern Ireland

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Northern Ireland (NI) is currently experiencing significant labour market challenges, with 48 per cent of organisations reporting critical skills shortages in basic, essential, and technical skill areas (Open University, 2025). This issue is further compounded by low unemployment levels (2.4%) and high levels of economic inactivity, which stands at 26.6 per cent (more than one in four people), the highest across all regions in the United Kingdom (NISRA, 2025a).

Economic inactivity refers to people who are not in employment and have either not actively sought work in the past four weeks and/or are not available to start work within the next two weeks (Office for National Statistics, 2025). This may be due to a variety of factors, including long-term illnesses, health conditions, disability, caring responsibilities, and full-time education (NISRA, 2019).

Certain demographic groups are disproportionately affected by both skills shortages and high levels of economic inactivity. These include women, people with disabilities, those with long term health conditions, and those aged 50 and over. All these groups require targeted support and policy attention to address the region's workforce challenges effectively (Department for the Economy [DfE], 2023).

Historical and social contexts also continue to shape labour market

outcomes in NI. For instance, research has shown that economic inactivity rates have traditionally been higher among the Catholic community compared to the Protestant community (Rowland et al., 2021). There are also differences according to where people live. In 2024, the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) reported that rural residents were less likely to be economically inactive and more likely to possess higher skill levels than their urban counterparts (DAERA, 2024).

In response to these issues, several policy initiatives have been developed in NI. This includes the *10X Delivery Plan 2023/24* (DfE, 2023), which prioritised inclusive growth, and more recently the DfE Business Plan 2024/25 which seeks to create more good jobs and achieve regional balance (DfE, 2024). The Northern Ireland Executive *Programme for Government 2024-2027* identifies the need to address Northern Ireland's high levels of economic inactivity. This plan also highlights the need to focus more on technical and vocational qualifications and provide additional opportunities for those returning to the labour market (Northern Ireland Executive, 2025).

The Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) report *Developing Skills for Northern Ireland's Future* (2024) also identifies the need to upskill people, particularly those who are unemployed or economically

inactive, and support their reintegration into the workforce with relevant digital and employability competencies (NIAO, 2024). Further to this, *The Green Skills Action Plan* (DfE, 2025), sets out a comprehensive framework to guide Government, employers, educators and individuals on what is needed to deliver skills and the jobs for the future.

EPIC Futures NI

The persistent high levels of skills shortages and economic inactivity in NI underscore the urgent need for further research in this area. In response, *EPIC Futures NI*, a Local Policy Innovation Partnership (LPIP) led by Ulster University, is developing a comprehensive understanding of skills and employability across NI. Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), Innovate UK, and UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), EPIC Futures NI specifically targets data and knowledge gaps related to those furthest from the labour market, including women, people who are aged 50 years and older, and people with disabilities. By building a robust evidence base, EPIC Futures NI seeks to inform inclusive policy and programme development and contribute to improved access to fair and sustainable employment opportunities for all.

To better understand patterns of economic activity and public perceptions

of skills, careers advice, and lifelong learning in NI, EPIC Futures NI commissioned a set of questions in the 2024 *Northern Ireland Life and Times* (NILT) survey. This research responds to the urgent and ongoing challenge of how to address economic inactivity, and growing digital and capability gaps among individual groups. An additional challenge is the need to increase levels of lifelong learning in Northern Ireland which is the fifth lowest across the twelve UK regions (Woods, Nermond and Jones, 2024). This Research Update highlights the survey findings across different demographic groups and geographic areas, thus providing timely, evidence-based insights to inform more inclusive and targeted policy responses that better reflect the diverse needs of individuals and communities across NI.

Economic Activity

Survey respondents were asked about their current engagement with the labour market, from which we could identify

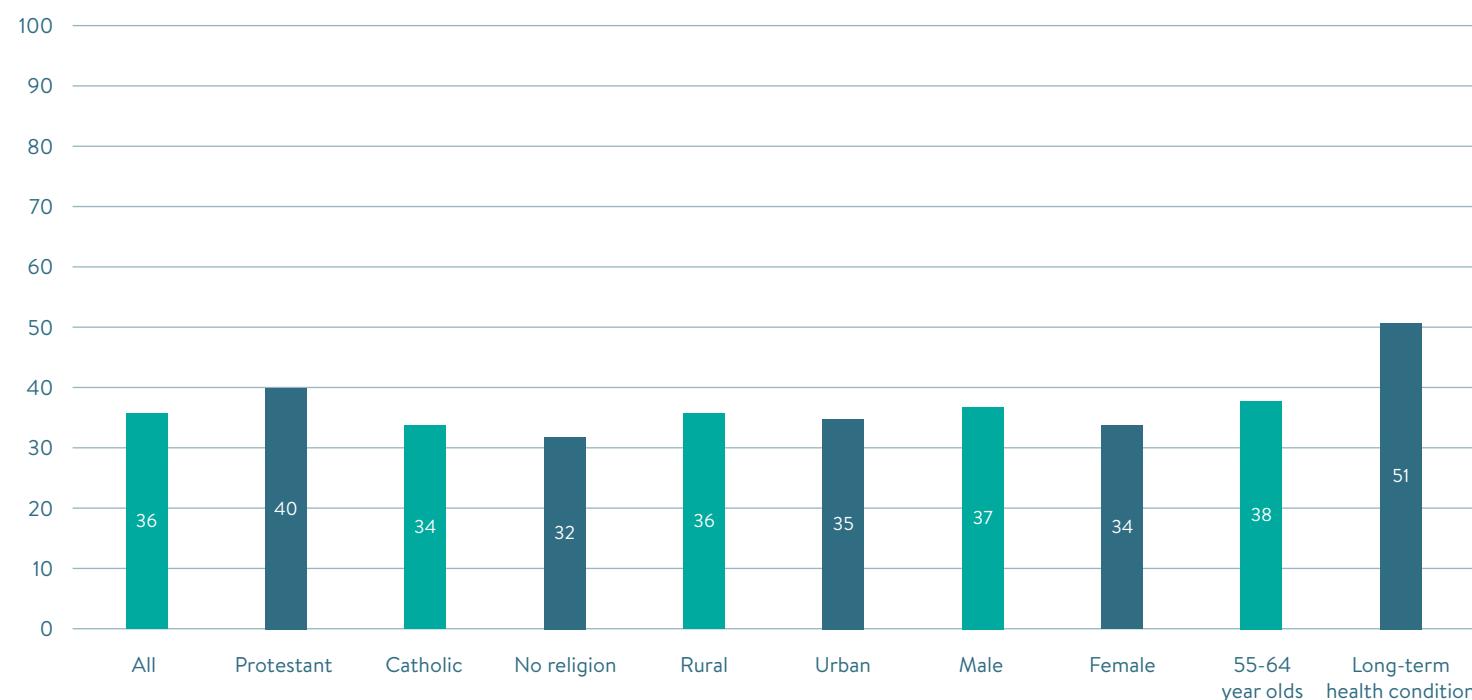
whether they were economically active or economically inactive. Overall, 36 per cent of respondents were economically inactive. Figure 1 reveals notable demographic patterns, with findings reaffirming well-established trends in NI's labour market, such as high levels of economic inactivity among older adults. Almost four in ten (38%) of 55 to 64 year olds were economically inactive, underscoring substantial challenges in sustaining labour market participation among older adults.

Gender differences, although marginal, were also observed as 37 per cent of men were identified as economically inactive in comparison to 34 per cent of women. This contrasts with previously identified trends where historically more women than men were economically inactive (Rowland et al., 2021). Although the difference in the NILT 2024 survey is relatively small, it may suggest a potential shift toward a more balanced distribution of economic inactivity between genders.

More notable is that half of the participants (51%) who reported having a long-term health condition (*i.e. a physical or mental health condition lasting, or expected to last, more than twelve months*) identified as being economically inactive. This aligns with previously observed trends in economic inactivity, including findings by NISRA (2019), which highlighted long-term physical or mental health conditions as a common reason for individuals being economically inactive.

While differences were only modest, a higher proportion of Protestant respondents also reported economic inactivity (40%) compared to those identifying as Catholic (34%) or those with no religion (32%). Rates of economic inactivity were similar among rural residents (36%) and their urban counterparts (35%).

Figure 1: Economic inactivity (%)



In examining the relationship between economic inactivity and the benefit system, 64 per cent of participants either strongly agreed or agreed that the structure of the benefit system deters

people on benefits from joining the labour market. Interestingly, there was no difference between people who were economically active and those who were economically inactive. These findings

suggests that there may be scope for reviewing and potentially reforming aspects of the benefits system to better support transitions into employment.

Qualifications and Skills

As part of the broader exploration of economic activity, participants were asked whether they felt their qualification levels had prevented them from securing 'a good job'. For the purposes of the 2024 NILT survey, a good job was defined as 'one which provides a reasonable living standard, security, career progression, equality and inclusion'.

Overall, 60 per cent of respondents disagreed with this statement, with the younger age group of respondents (18 to 24 years) least likely to disagree (46%). Nearly two thirds (64%) per cent of people without long-standing physical or mental health conditions disagreed with the statement and 53 per cent of those living with such conditions also disagreed. Disagreement to the statement varied between those living in urban areas (57%) compared to those in rural areas (64%), and variations can be seen between those who are economically inactive (55%) compared to people who are economically active (62%). Finally, a slight variance can be seen between religious groups: 56 per cent of Catholic participants felt confident that their qualifications did not prevent them in getting a good job, compared to 62 per cent of Protestant participants. These findings suggest that factors other than appropriate qualifications may be preventing people from entering the workforce.

When asked whether vocational and technical qualifications should be held in equal esteem to university degrees, 61 per cent of participants expressed agreement. A higher proportion of females (65%) supported this view compared to males (58%). This finding is particularly interesting given that, in NI, males are more likely to hold vocational and technical qualifications, suggesting a potential gap between lived experience and public perception among men. Some variation was evident in relation to age, with 69 per cent of respondents aged 55 to 64 years agreeing that vocational and technical qualifications should be held in equal esteem to university degrees, compared to 55 per cent of those aged 25 to 34 years. These findings are positive with the introduction of All Age Apprenticeships in 2023 by the Department for the Economy.

Digital Skills

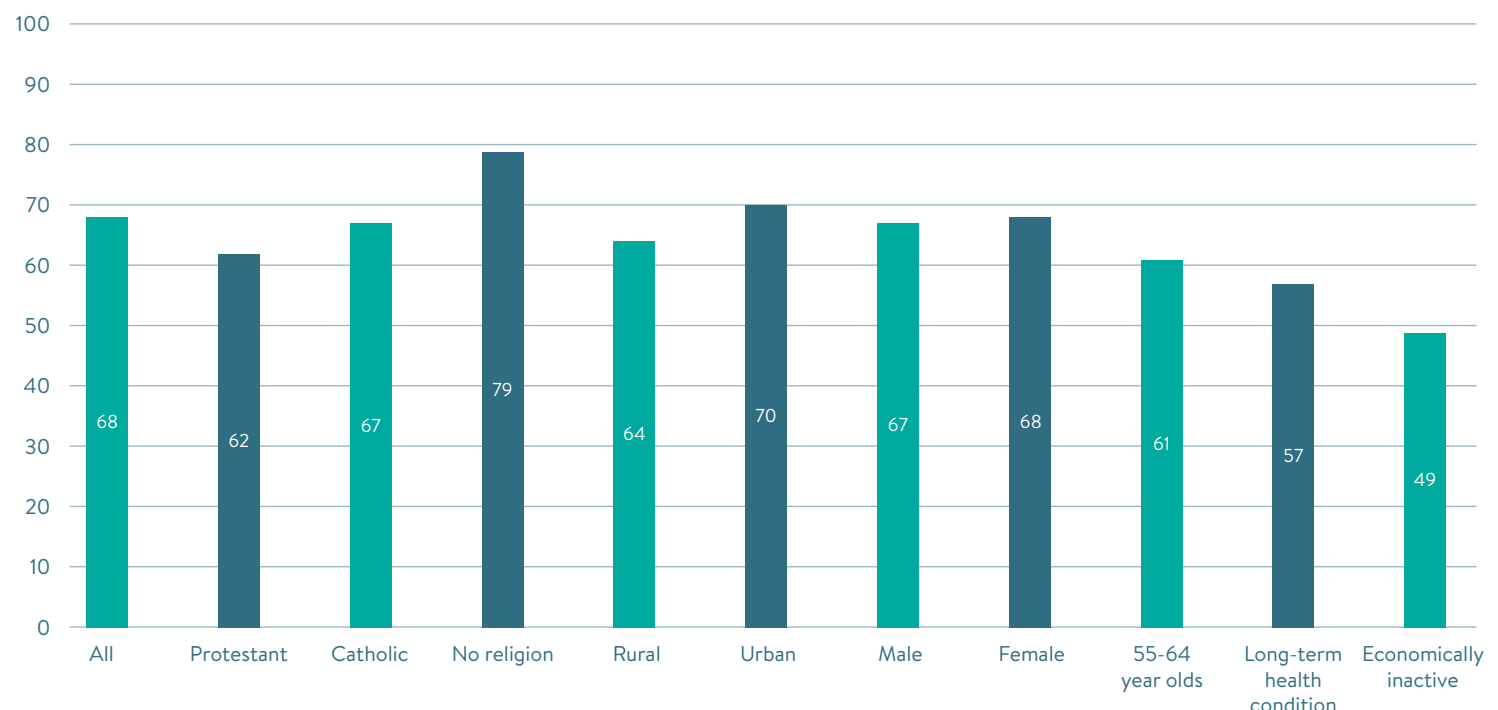
Digital skills are now essential for participating in the modern labour market. As technology rapidly transforms every sector, formal qualifications alone are no longer enough for many jobs, as workers must also be digitally competent to adapt and succeed in an evolving workplace. This will require the promotion of lifelong learning and the development of key employability skills, including digital proficiency, particularly for those furthest from the labour market.

In consideration of this, the 2024 NILT survey explored if respondents perceived their digital skills to be adequate to meet the changing needs of the workplace: 68 per cent felt that this was the case. Findings show strong confidence across most age groups, with 82 per cent of respondents aged 25 to 34 years reporting high levels of digital ability. However, 61 percent of those aged 55 to 64 years, and 41 per cent for those aged 65 years and over reported lower confidence in their digital skills.

As shown in Figure 2, other digital skills gaps remain. For example, 57 per cent of respondents with a long-term health condition felt their digital skills were adequate for today's workplace, compared to 74 per cent of individuals without such conditions. Further to this, almost half (49%) of the economically inactive participants felt confident in their digital skills, in comparison to 78 per cent among those economically active respondents.

These findings point to encouraging levels of digital readiness across NI's working-age population. However, they also highlight persistent gaps, particularly among older adults, those with long-term health conditions and people who are economically inactive, that must be addressed to ensure equitable participation in an increasingly digital and skills-driven economy.

Figure 2: Confidence in digital skills to meet the needs of the workplace (%)



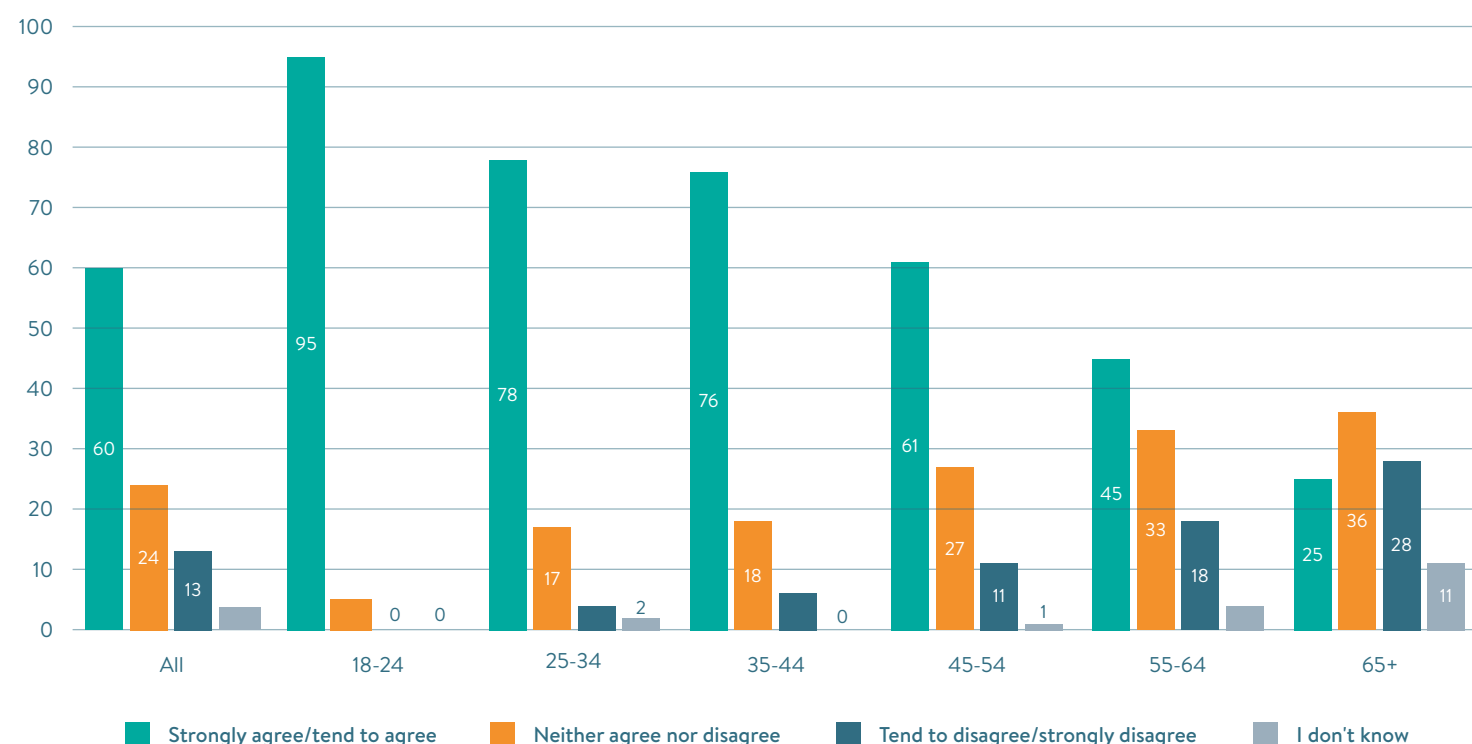
Skills Development and Lifelong Learning

The OECD *Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland* (2020) highlights the importance of promoting a culture of lifelong learning, improving access to flexible learning opportunities, and reducing inequalities in participation, particularly for those who are economically inactive, older, or facing health-related barriers. Questions exploring attitudes to online and flexible learning in the 2024 NILT survey reveal notable differences in learning preferences across these demographic groups.

Participants were asked whether they wanted to develop their skills over the next twelve months, and overall, 60 per cent of respondents expressed interest in doing this. However, economically inactive respondents were significantly less likely to want to develop their skills in the next twelve months (39%) compared to their economically active peers (71%). This is notable, as those further from the labour market may benefit most from upskilling but appear less motivated to pursue it. Figure 3 shows that younger

participants were more likely to express interest in skill development than older age groups, which may reflect career stage, existing experience, or proximity to retirement.

Figure 3: Interest in developing skills, by age (%)



There was no significant difference between those with a long-term health condition (58%) and those without (60%), in their desire to develop their skills in the

next twelve months. Notable differences can be seen between recorded religions, with Catholic (60%), Protestant (54%) and no religion (65%).

Online Learning

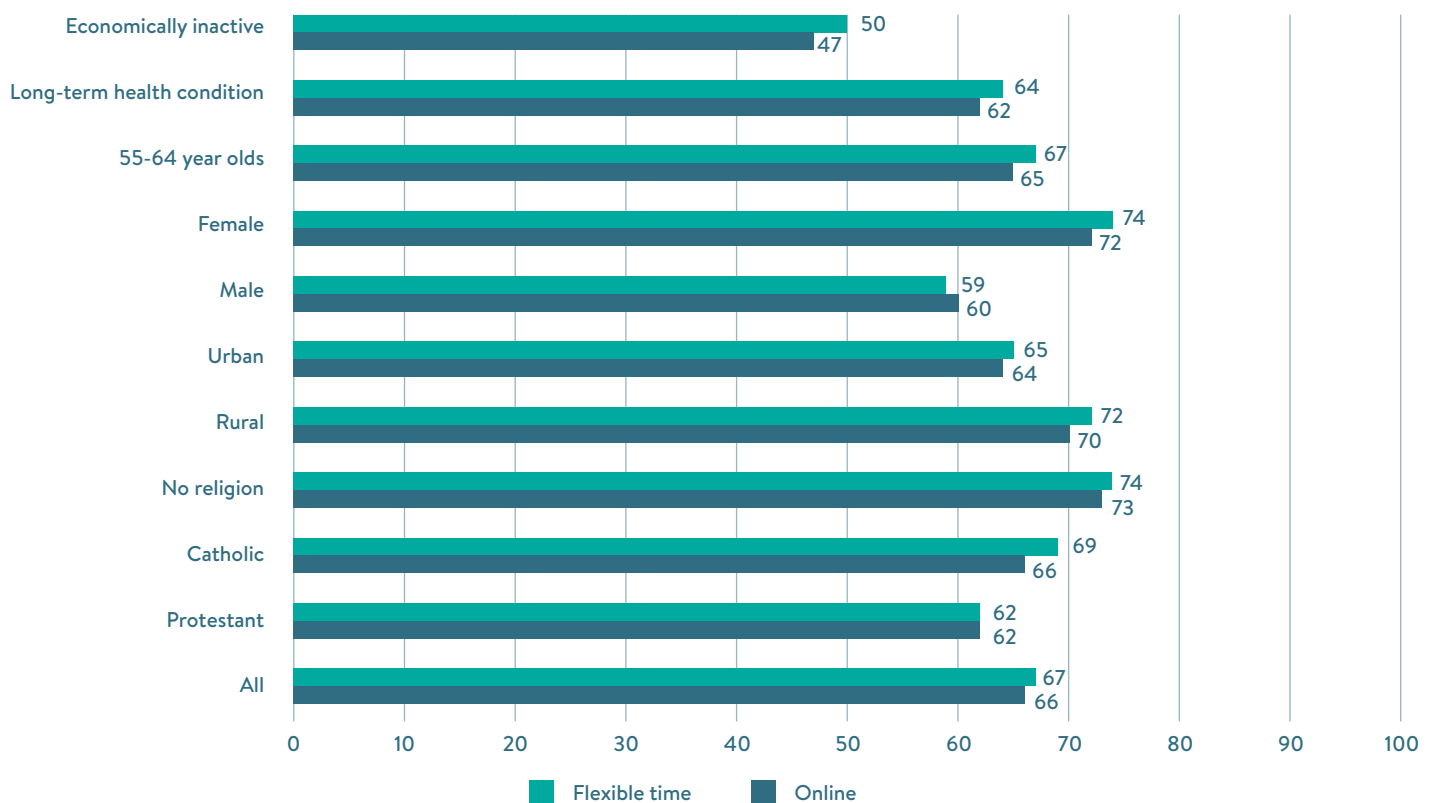
Learner preferences for online versus in-person courses remain a subject of ongoing debate, and therefore were explored within the 2024 NILT survey (see Figure 4). Two thirds of respondents (66%) felt favourable or very favourable towards undertaking a skills development course that they could do online. Around one half (47%) of economically inactive respondents expressed interest in taking courses online, compared to 77 per cent of those who are economically active. This disparity reflects broader patterns of lower digital confidence among inactive groups, a challenge directly noted in the OECD's (2020) call to enhance foundational and digital skills among adults who are furthest from the labour market.

Older age groups also showed lower enthusiasm for online learning, with only 37 per cent of respondents aged 65 and over expressing interest, possibly linked to lower self-assessed digital skills (NISRA, 2025b). Six out of ten (62%) people with long-term health conditions said they would be interested in completing online training, compared to 69 per cent of those without such conditions. Females were more open to undertaking an online training course: 72 per cent, compared to 60 per cent of males. In contrast, no significant differences were found in online training preferences across rural status or religion.

When respondents were asked about the option of flexible learning, through 'taking

a course at a time that suited their schedule, rather than at a fixed time', 67 per cent of all respondents replied positively. There were slightly more rural respondents supportive of flexible learning (72%) compared to urban counterparts (65%). Notable gender differences also emerged, with 74 per cent of women indicating that they would like to undertake courses flexibly compared to 59 per cent of men. This higher level of support among women for online and flexible skills development courses may reflect the wish for flexible learning in order to balance childcare and other responsibilities, a factor the OECD (2023) also identifies as influencing participation in lifelong learning.

Figure 4: Skills development courses (% favourable)



Participants were also asked whether individuals receiving benefits should be required to take part in a skills or employability course. A strong majority (78%) expressed support for this requirement, indicating broad recognition of the role that skills development can play in improving employment prospects. Support was slightly lower among respondents with

a long-term health condition (70%) compared to those without (82%). Differences were also observed across other demographic groups: Protestant respondents were more likely to agree (86%) than Catholic respondents (78%) and those with no religion (69%). Rural residents (86%) were more supportive than those in urban areas (73%). Notably, even among economically inactive

individuals, who may have the closest proximity to the benefits system, 74 per cent felt that people receiving benefits should be required to take part in a skills or employability course. This suggests a broadly shared understanding of the importance of employability programmes as a means of fostering greater labour market participation and reducing long-term dependency on benefits.

Advice and information

Careers advice plays a vital role in helping individuals develop workplace skills and navigate employment opportunities. Reducing skills imbalances in NI therefore requires the provision of effective career guidance, in tandem with the availability of robust and reliable information regarding the local labour market (OECD, 2020). Approximately one half (52%) of NILT respondents felt that it is easy to find reliable information and support to help develop workplace skills. This was lower among males (49%) than females (55%).

Differences were notable according to long-term health conditions: 46 per cent of those with long-term health

conditions said that it was easy to find reliable information and support to help develop workplace skills, compared to 54 per cent of those without. Notably, a lower percentage of those who are economically inactive agreed or strongly agreed that it is easy to find reliable information and support to help develop workplace skills (40%), compared to those who are economically active (58%).

Participants were also asked whether they felt the current careers advice in NI is effective in helping young people secure good jobs. Just over a third (38%) agreed that the advice is effective, while 23 per cent neither agreed nor disagreed, and 22

per cent disagreed, suggesting a degree of uncertainty or ambivalence. Age was the only demographic factor where notable variation emerged. Respondents aged 18 to 24 years were the most positive, with 52 per cent agreeing that careers advice is helpful for young people, the highest across all age groups. In contrast, only 32 per cent of those aged 45 to 54 years shared this view, indicating a possible generational divide in perceptions of the careers system's effectiveness. In particular, it is likely that this latter age group includes the parents of young people.

Conclusion

This Research Update explores differences in public attitudes and experiences relating to skills and lifelong learning, considering factors across respondents such as economic activity levels, gender, age, and experience of long-term health conditions. It also considers geography, exploring rural and urban areas, recognising how location can influence access to employment and training opportunities.

A number of final reflections can be highlighted. There was general feeling that the current structure of the benefit system is a deterrent to entry to the labour market. There was a notable difference between economically active and inactive groups intention to develop

one's skills in the next twelve months, with the economically inactive noting they are less willing to upskill. This is of significant concern and will require suitable interventions in the form of engagement and encouragement. There was also support from respondents to require those on benefits to undertake a skills development course, suggesting the potential need for enforcement interventions. Finally, with digital skills now becoming crucial, the survey reported varying levels of confidence in one's digital skills ability. Notably, economically inactive and older people expressed less confidence in their digital skills.

Economic (in)activity and skills development are shaped by social, cultural, geographical, demographic, technological, and economic factors. The findings from the NILT survey provide valuable insights to help inform more inclusive and targeted policy responses that address public perceptions in Northern Ireland and the barriers to skills development and lifelong learning. Northern Ireland faces a complex set of labour market challenges that risk constraining economic growth, productivity, and social inclusion. Insights from the 2024 NILT survey highlight both areas of progress and the persistence of inequalities in relation to economic activity, digital skills, and attitudes to lifelong learning.

Key Points:

- Almost two thirds of respondents (64%) felt that the benefits system acts as a potential deterrent to entering the labour market.
- 61% believed that vocational and technical qualifications should be held in equal esteem to university degrees.
- 60% of respondents expressed an interest in developing their skills within the next twelve months.
- 78% of respondents felt that people receiving benefits should be required to take part in a skills or employability course.
- Just over a third of participants (38%) agreed that the careers advice in NI is effective in helping young people secure good jobs.

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The Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. In 2024, 1,199 people aged 18 years or over took part.

NILT is a joint project of Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University, and provides an independent source of information on what the public thinks. For more information, visit the survey website at www.ark.ac.uk/nilt



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