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NORTHERN IRELAND SKILLS STRATEGY

SKILLS FOR A 10X ECONOMY



**1ST ANNUAL
MONITORING
REPORT**

MARCH 2023

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Foreword

The current economic realities signal further uncertainty in the time ahead with headline inflation now at elevated levels across the advanced economies. Significant challenges are faced by both SMEs and multinationals operating in Northern Ireland including further technological disruption, increased costs, talent shortages, supply chain difficulties, the impact of the climate crisis and of course the tragic circumstances in Ukraine.

Developing the talent to meet these challenges requires constant horizon scanning, policy action, collaborative system-wide partnerships and smart investments in skills.

I have had the honour of acting as interim Chair of the Skills Council since December 2021. My engagement with the Department, and the broader stakeholder network on the development of the new Skills Strategy - ‘Skills for a 10x Economy’ goes back even further. It is with pleasure, therefore, that I provide this introduction to the first Annual Report on progress.

From the Skills Council’s perspective, the first year has been productive. We have contributed to the development of the Implementation Plan, supported a refreshed emphasis on cross-departmental collaboration, and through our Skills, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (SEDI) sub-committee, we have progressed work on ensuring that there is equality of opportunity in our education and skills systems so that all individuals can succeed in the labour market.

Early progress against the Strategy’s strategic goals is encouraging, however we are aware of the challenges that lie ahead. Developments including a refreshed approach to digital education and the commissioning of skills-based research to support Northern Ireland’s net zero programme will be key to supporting our digital and green energy sectors to expand and provide new opportunities for quality jobs which will have the potential to enhance the economic competitiveness of our region.

We have been frustrated by the lack of a functioning Executive and specifically the risks of further budget cuts to our skills system here. For example, it was not possible to seek an Executive level commitment to the Strategy, including a commitment to provide sustainable financial resources to achieve its goals as recommended by the OECD. The Strategy also recommended the development of a ring-fenced skills fund to support workforce development and connect individuals with new opportunities. Such funds exist in other parts of the UK and in Ireland and have proven to work very effectively. We have welcomed investment in programmes such as SkillUp, Assured Skills, Skills Focus and InnovateUs, and in the absence of budget certainty, we would press for such funding to be preserved and expanded as key initiatives that support economic and social development.

Despite the challenges, it is clear from this report that a substantial body of work has been undertaken in year one, and there is visible evidence of strong work ongoing across the education and skills system. As the Implementation Plan is now developed and the Strategy's governance structures are firmly established, there is an opportunity to make an even greater impact on the Strategy's goals in the coming year. I am convinced that this will make a real difference to the lives of individuals and to the potential of businesses across Northern Ireland. These efforts will be greatly enhanced by stable political institutions and a whole-of-government commitment to the economic vision and Skills Strategy.

The development of the Skills Council is a clear commitment to sustained engagement across the stakeholder community, including representatives from business, trade unions, education institutions and the community and voluntary sector.

I have enjoyed the opportunity to chair the Skills Council during its first year and to influence the future direction of skills policy in Northern Ireland. Any incoming Minister must focus on the continued transformation of our education and skills system. Specifically, prioritisation should be placed on expanding the provision of apprenticeships, including the delivery of All Age Apprenticeships; embedding employability skills in the curriculum to ensure individuals have the core skills which employers need and which are integral to improving productivity in our economy; and establishing a long term flexible skills fund, which will target areas of skills needs, and support sustainable growth in our economy.

I would like to thank the Skills Council members for sharing their time and expertise to support the implementation of 'Skills for a 10x Economy' over the past year, and I wish the incoming Chair of the Skills Council every success in taking this important programme forward.



Jackie Henry,
Chairperson
Northern Ireland Skills Council

Executive Summary

'Skills for a 10x Economy' was launched in March 2022 as the economy continued its recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite some fluctuations, key labour market indicators in Northern Ireland have broadly returned to the same position as before the pandemic. That includes one of the lowest rates of unemployment across all UK regions. The employment rate, however, is comparatively poor as it is offset by higher rates of economic inactivity in Northern Ireland; this has been a feature of the NI Labour Market for many years.

This information is summarised in Section 2 of this Report, alongside a statistical assessment of our skills system. Northern Ireland continues to have a high proportion of the working age population with low or no qualifications, an issue which particularly affects workers in the 50 – 64 year old age group where the rate is almost double the UK average. This is in the face of an increasingly 'skills hungry' labour market where the proportion of the workforce in employment with graduate and post-graduate qualifications has grown significantly in recent years while the number of people in employment with low or no qualifications continues to decline.

This is broadly consistent with evidence from the Northern Ireland Skills Barometer which anticipates a decline in the number of jobs available for individuals with low or no qualifications and an increasing demand for graduates. It also forecasts that there will be more job opportunities available for those with mid-level qualifications than the number of qualifiers that join the labour market at that level. There is a need for discussion across the stakeholder community to better understand this issue, including how mid-level skills can support the delivery of our 10x ambition, particularly in the context of improving innovation potential and enhancing inclusivity. There is also clear and ongoing evidence of gender disparities associated with employment in STEM-oriented occupations which is largely offset by high levels of female participation in public administration, health and education.

'Skills for a 10x Economy' identifies the need to 'create a culture of lifelong learning' in Northern Ireland setting an initial goal to match the UK average participation of 25% of working age adults by 2030. Participation in 2021 remained at 17%, a figure which has shown little change since 2016. Again, a gender divide is evident with women more likely to participate than men and people aged between 50 – 64 much less likely to engage in education and training.

The Strategy also sets our ambition to develop digital skills for social and economic inclusion as well as to enhance the pipeline of talent entering our software engineering and computer science sectors. On this basis, we have worked with the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) to develop an evidence base on digital skills, with the first year of evidence gathering focused on digital skills for economic and social inclusion. This has highlighted significant disparities in digital capability when factors such as age, labour market status and social deprivation are considered.

Section 3 highlights progress against our strategic goals and gives an overview of the key developments in relation to the delivery of the Skills Strategy's recommendations over the year since the Strategy was launched. Progress has been made against two of the three strategic goals. The third, focusing on increasing the proportion of STEM qualifications at graduate and post-graduate level, remains static. We do note, with some concern, that little progress has been made on participation in lifelong learning and this must be considered as a key priority going forward.

Section 4 summarises the outcomes from further research that has been developed, in collaboration with NISRA, to better understand what 'quality work' looks like in Northern Ireland. Our high employment rate provides an environment in which to consider how better jobs, as opposed to more jobs, can support our ambition in areas such as improving innovation performance, economic competitiveness and social cohesion. As mentioned previously, this research further draws out some of the gender-based disparities present in Northern Ireland's labour market.

A number of labour market inequalities were identified in '*Skills for a 10x Economy*', particularly those associated with gender, disability and age. As a result, a sub-committee of the NI Skills Council – the Skills Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (SEDI) Group – was established to consider how skills policy can support a positive impact on addressing such inequalities. Work to date is highlighted in Section 5.

'*Skills for a 10x Economy*' included a recommendation to publish a 2, 5 and 8 year implementation plan, outlining when we expected to be able to deliver the Strategy's various recommendations. This is included in Section 6. **It should be acknowledged that adequate financial resource, active ministers and a functioning Northern Ireland Executive will be required to deliver this plan in full.** In their absence, the relevant government departments remain committed to working cohesively, both with each other and with the stakeholder community, to advance the skills agenda as far as possible.

Overall, this report highlights progress against all three of the strategic goals set out in '*Skills for a 10x Economy*'. A strong programme of work has been undertaken in Year One, but it is acknowledged that this is only a beginning; much remains to be achieved if we are to deliver on our strategic goals by 2030, in support of our overall vision for a '10x economy'.

Section 1: Introduction

The Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland – ‘Skills for a 10x Economy’ launched in March 2022 with an overarching focus on creating a strategic framework for the development of Northern Ireland’s skills system to 2030 which will drive economic prosperity and tackle social inequality.

The Skills Strategy is a key document supporting the Department’s 10x Economic Vision¹ which has set an ambition that a decade of innovation will encourage greater collaboration and innovation to deliver a ten times better economy with benefits for our businesses, our people and places across Northern Ireland. Three separate pillars have been identified that capture the 10X Vision for Northern Ireland, covering innovation led, inclusive and sustainable growth.

The Department has developed a 10X Performance Management Framework² in order to assess the extent to which it is achieving its 10X targets and whether key 10X metrics are moving in the right direction. This report, which the Department has committed to update and publish on an annual basis, focuses specifically and in depth on performance in relation to skills indicators and forms part of the wider 10X Performance Management Framework. The Strategic Goals within the Skills Strategy are included within this framework.

Over the first year of the Skills Strategy, local economic conditions have been less stable following a period of growth. Rising inflation, driven by higher energy prices led to a cost-of-living crisis. The available data so far on economic activity reveals an economy gently contracting but labour conditions remain relatively strong thus far.

The outlook for the NI economy has been consistently revised downwards as the cost-of-living crisis has persisted. Danske Bank’s latest Quarterly Sectoral Forecast (Q4 2022) estimates that local economic output will contract by about 1.0% in 2023.

The right skills are critically important to both the success of our economy and individual wellbeing. For the economy, it is crucial to enable businesses to reach their growth potential; to drive innovation and productivity growth; and to compete globally. For individuals, those with higher qualifications on average tend to have higher levels of life satisfaction, are more likely to participate in work and earn higher wages.

This report reflects the progress that has been made over the first year against the ambitions set out in the Skills Strategy with evidence throughout produced by NISRA. It is expected that progress will take multiple years to show given that projects are only commencing; however, the foundations of this have been laid and are reported here.

1 Department for the Economy 10x – [an economic vision for a decade of innovation](#)

2 Department for the Economy – [10x Performance Management Framework](#)

The report is set out as follows.

Section 2 provides an update on the Performance of the Northern Ireland Economy, Skills and Labour Market.

Section 3 provides an Update on Progress towards the Strategic Goals and Highlights of Activity for Year One.

Section 4 provides a Special Focus Piece on Work Quality.

Section 5 provides an update on work towards Skills Equality, Diversity and Inclusion.

Section 6 provides an Implementation Plan for the Skills Strategy.

Section 2: Performance of the Northern Ireland Economy, Skills and Labour Market

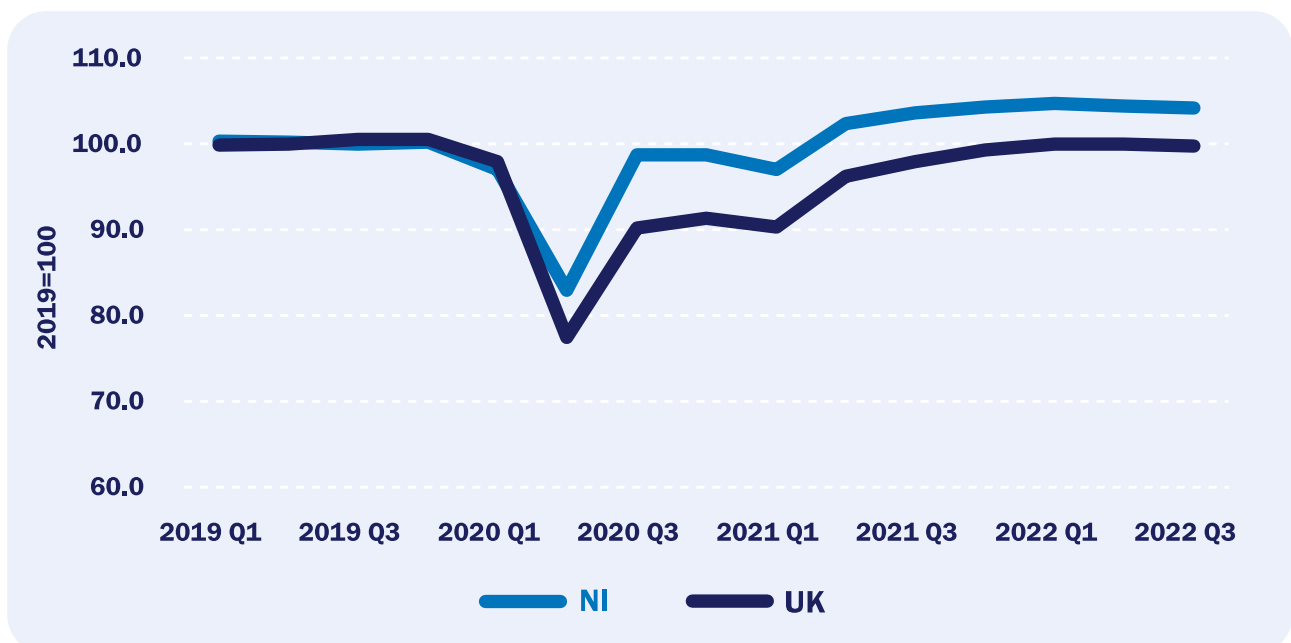
This section provides an update on local economic, labour market and skills conditions over the past year.

Economy

Economic activity, as measured by the Northern Ireland Composite Economic Index³, increased by 0.5% over the latest year of data (to Q3 2022). However, growth has slowed at the start of 2022/23 with negative growth posted over the first two quarters – a technical recession. Taking a longer-term view, the local economy exhibited a V-shaped recovery following the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 2.1) but economic performance still lags behind its all-time high, recorded in Q3 2007.

Northern Ireland had the lowest level of productivity (as measured by output per hour worked) of the 12 UK regions in 2020 at 83.2% of the UK figure. However, in terms of growth the local economy's workplace GVA has increased by 39% per cent in 'real' terms from 2010 to 2020, whilst the UK grew by 34%.

Figure 2.1 NICEI compared to UK GDP



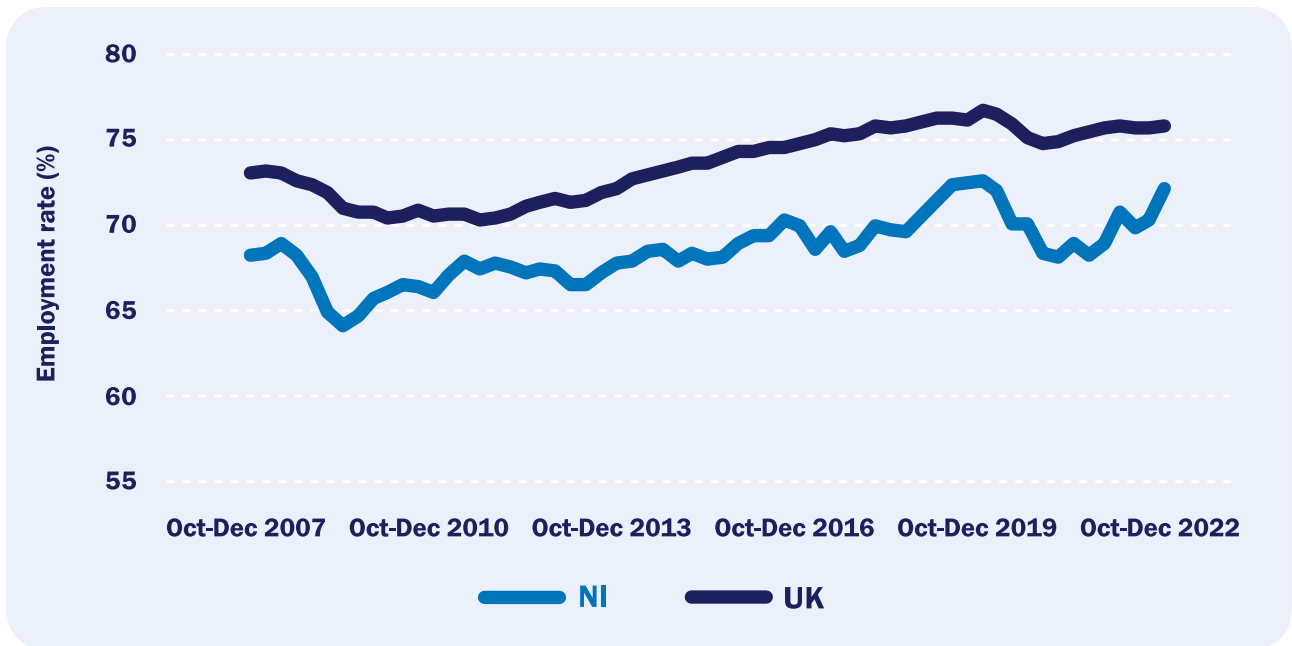
Source: NISRA NICEI Q3 2022

3 NISRA [Economic Activity in Northern Ireland by quarterly NI Composite Economic Index \(NICEI\) Quarter 3 \(July-September\) 2022](#)

Labour Market

The employment rate for Northern Ireland has been in the range of 65%-73% since 2010 and is currently 71.9% (October-December 2022). There are now an estimated 872,000 people in employment in NI (aged 16 and above) which is 41,000 more than in the same period five years previous. The employment rate falls well below that of the UK average rate of 75.6% (Figure 2.2) and performs the third worst of the 12 UK regions– driven by relatively high economic inactivity rather than high unemployment.

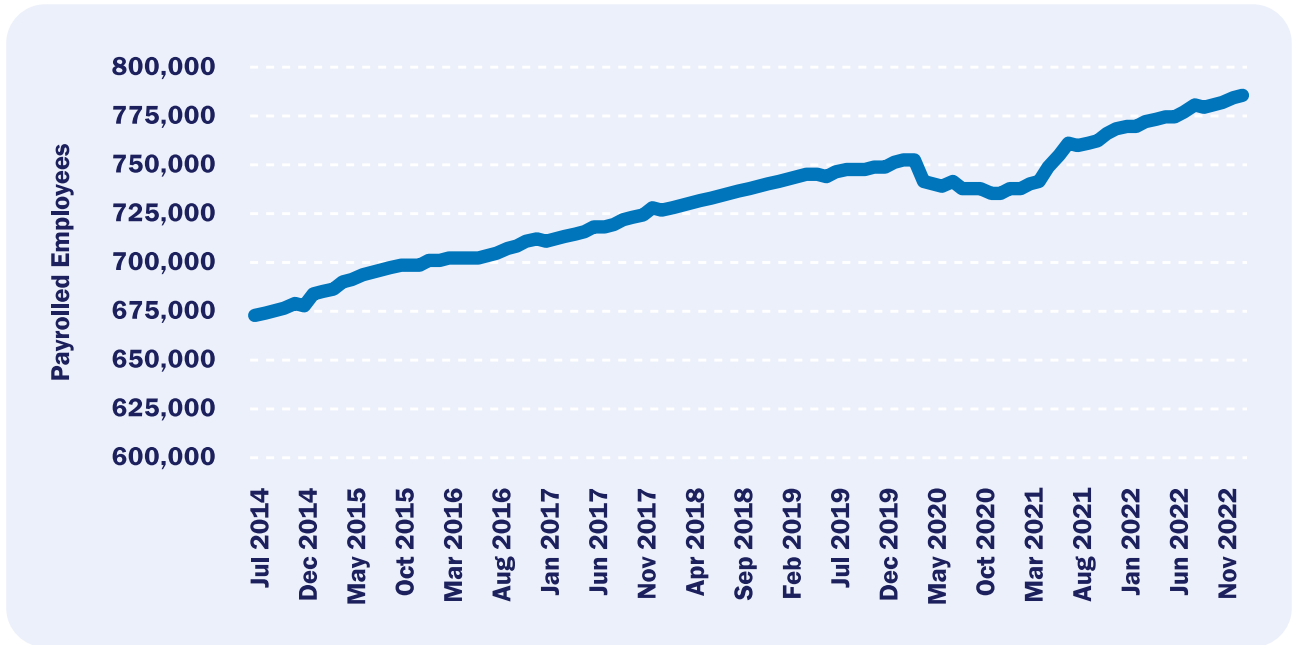
Figure 2.2 Employment rate (16 to 64), seasonally adjusted



Source: NISRA Labour Force Survey

According to HMRC statistics (January 2023), which excludes the self-employed, the number of payrolled employees locally now stands at over 785,000, 8% higher than in January 2018. Figure 2.3 shows that from 2014 onwards this exhibited a constant upward trajectory until April 2020 when it decreased by almost 11,000 in one month alone. Following a pause in employee job growth owing to the pandemic the positive trend resumed for 12 consecutive months. The number of payrolled employees is now 4.3% higher in NI than in March 2020, the largest increase of the 12 UK regions in this period.

Figure 2.3 NI payrolled employees from PAYE RTI



Source: HMRC PAYE RTI

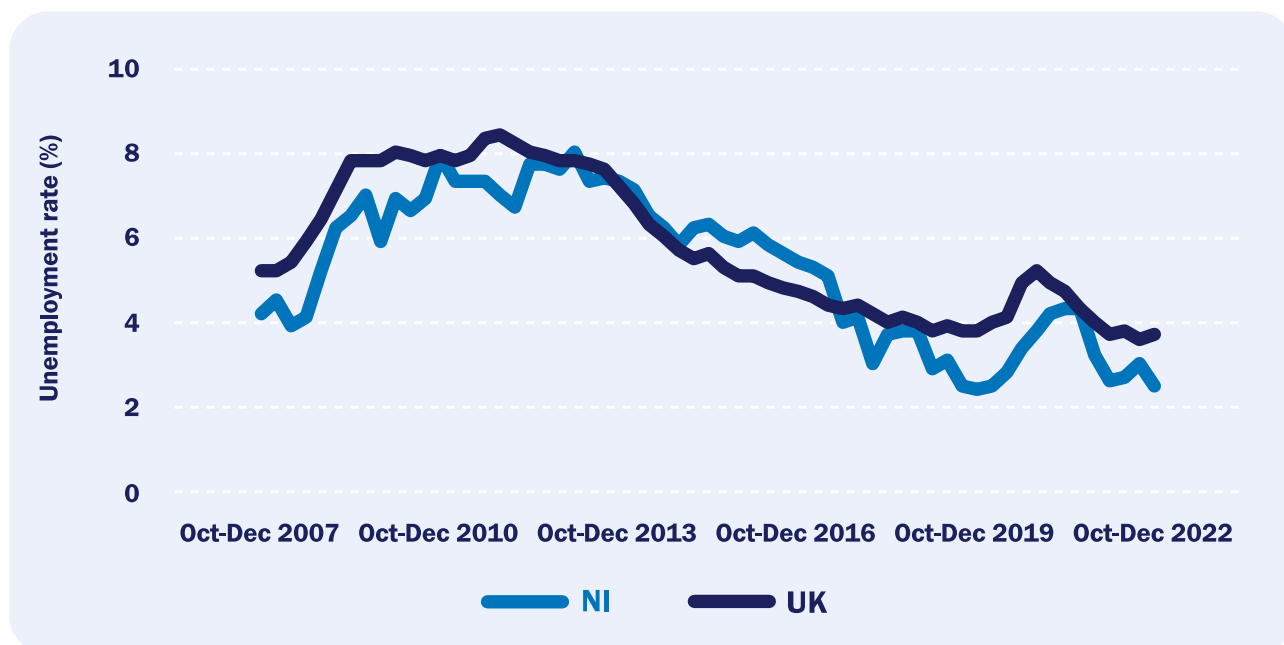
The local unemployment rate has remained relatively low for some time. For the period October-December 2022 it was 2.5%⁴, down from a recent peak of 4.3% in July-September 2021 and has shown a downward trend since then. As Figure 2.4 shows the unemployment rate is below the UK average and is the second lowest of the 12 UK regions. It was as high as 8.0% in January-March 2011. The proportion of long-term unemployed (1 year or more) is 46.3% of the total (October-December 2022), the equivalent figure in the UK being much lower at 21.3%⁵. According to research by the UUEPC the relatively low unemployment rate combined with falling inward migration from non-UK nationals has led to tighter labour market conditions⁶.

4 NISRA Labour Force Survey

5 ONS Labour Force Survey

6 UUEPC Outlook, Spring 2022: [‘Strong growth, but risks abound’](#)

Figure 2.4 Unemployment rate (16+), seasonally adjusted



Source: NISRA Labour Force Survey

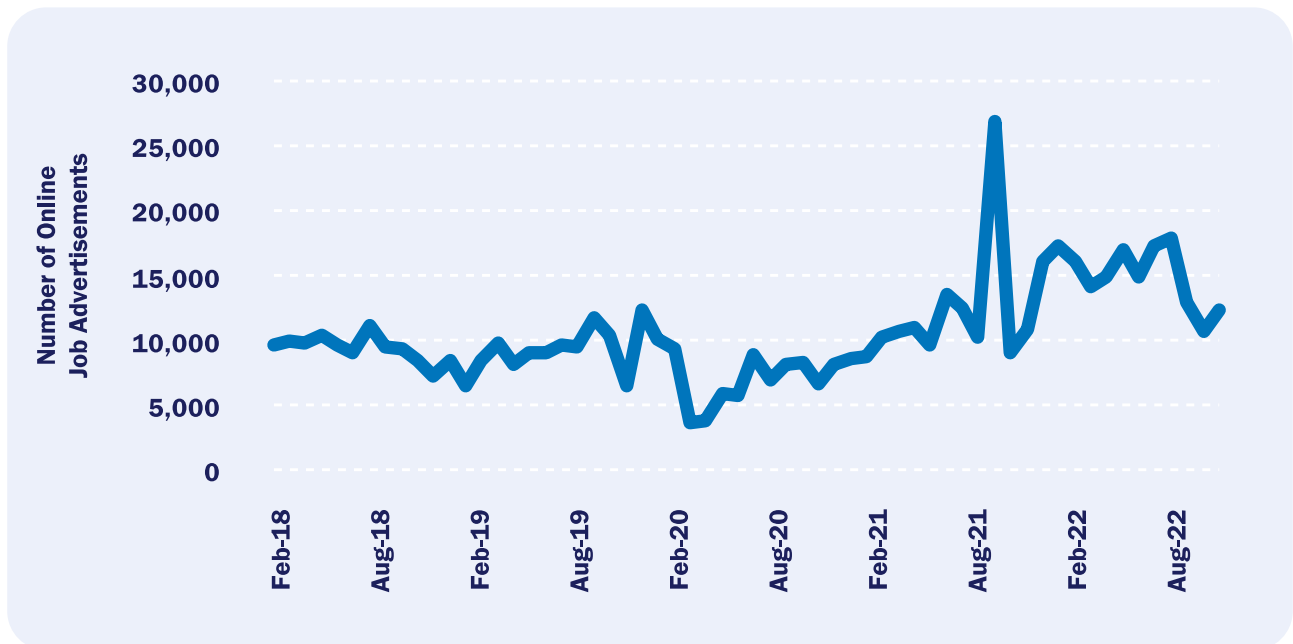
Northern Ireland has a higher economic inactivity rate than the rest of the UK and this has been consistently the case over the past 15 years. The rate has fluctuated more so in NI whilst the UK average has shown a general downward trend. The economic inactivity rate is currently 4.9 percentage points (pps) higher in NI (26.3%) compared with the UK (21.4%), with 85% of those economically inactive in Northern Ireland not wanting a job. Although both NI and UK rates remain higher than the pre-pandemic period, NI has seen a decrease of 2.6pps over the year whilst the UK rate has increased by 0.1pps over the year.

There has been a 7.5 pps increase in the proportion of economically inactive being attributed to long-term sickness from January-March 2020 to October-December 2022, as well as a 1.4pps increase due to being a student, with this re-skilling offering the possibility of long-term benefits. The reason provided for the biggest decrease in economic inactivity was due to home and family commitments (-3.0pps) which is possibly a reflection of flexible working arrangements coming to the fore due to the pandemic. There was also a fall in people retiring (-2.3pps) suggesting people are delaying retirement.

The proportion of economically inactive who wanted a job fell to a decade low in Q1 2022 (14.3%), and stands at 14.5% in the October-December 2022 period.

Demand for labour, as evidenced by trends in online job advertisement data using Lightcast, saw a surge that lasted from a low in April 2020 (related to COVID-19 lockdowns) until October 2022. (Figure 2.5). Since then, there are signs that the volume of online job advertisements is starting to level off and return to levels pre-COVID-19.

Figure 2.5 Online Job Advertisements in Northern Ireland



Source: Lightcast

Skills Performance

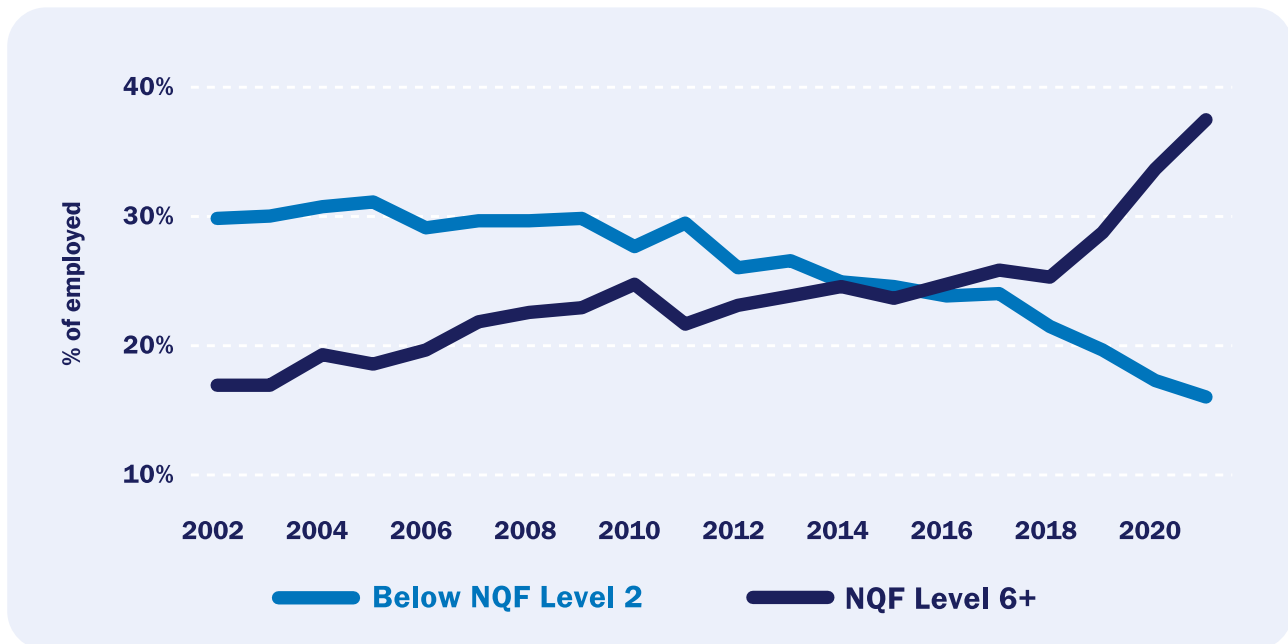
In 2021, the proportion of the working age population with no qualifications was much higher in Northern Ireland compared with the UK average (11.8% and 6.8%, respectively)⁷. The largest group without qualifications is the 50-64 category (18.3%) where it is almost double the UK average of 9.3%. Across all working age group intervals, the proportion with no qualifications is higher in Northern Ireland relative to the UK.

The local labour market is more qualifications hungry than in the past with the employment rate of those with the lowest and highest levels of qualifications moving in opposite directions. Figure 2.6 shows that the percentage of those with a qualification below Level 2 and are employed has almost halved over time. Meanwhile the proportion of those with a Level 6 and above qualification in employment has increased to 37% in Q4 2021. UUEPC research shows that employers continue to favour higher qualified individuals, squeezing those with low or no qualifications out of the labour market⁸.

⁷ NOMIS Annual Population Survey, 2021

⁸ UUEPC (2022) *Northern Ireland Skills Barometer 2021*. Available from: [Northern Ireland Skills Barometer 2021: Overview Report \(ulster.ac.uk\)](https://www.ulster.ac.uk/northern-ireland-skills-barometer-2021-overview-report)

Figure 2.6 Employed by qualification (16-64)



Source: ONS, Labour Force Survey, UUEPC

Addressing Skills Imbalances, Driving Economic Growth

The evidence centrepiece underpinning the Skills Strategy is the Skills Barometer⁹. Two key messages can be drawn from this research. Firstly, that the greatest anticipated undersupply of skills, under a high economic growth scenario, will be at levels 3 – 5, with a need to be more ambitious around these levels to meet our projected economic demand. Secondly, that the ‘narrow STEM’ target did not fully account for the scale of change required to satisfy the changing needs of the Northern Ireland economy.

STEM occupations¹⁰ are defined as those requiring knowledge and skills in Science, Technology, Engineering or Mathematics. In 2020 there were an estimated 67,000 employees in high level STEM occupations¹¹. Construction; Manufacturing; and Transport and Communication were estimated to account for almost 50% of all STEM occupations.

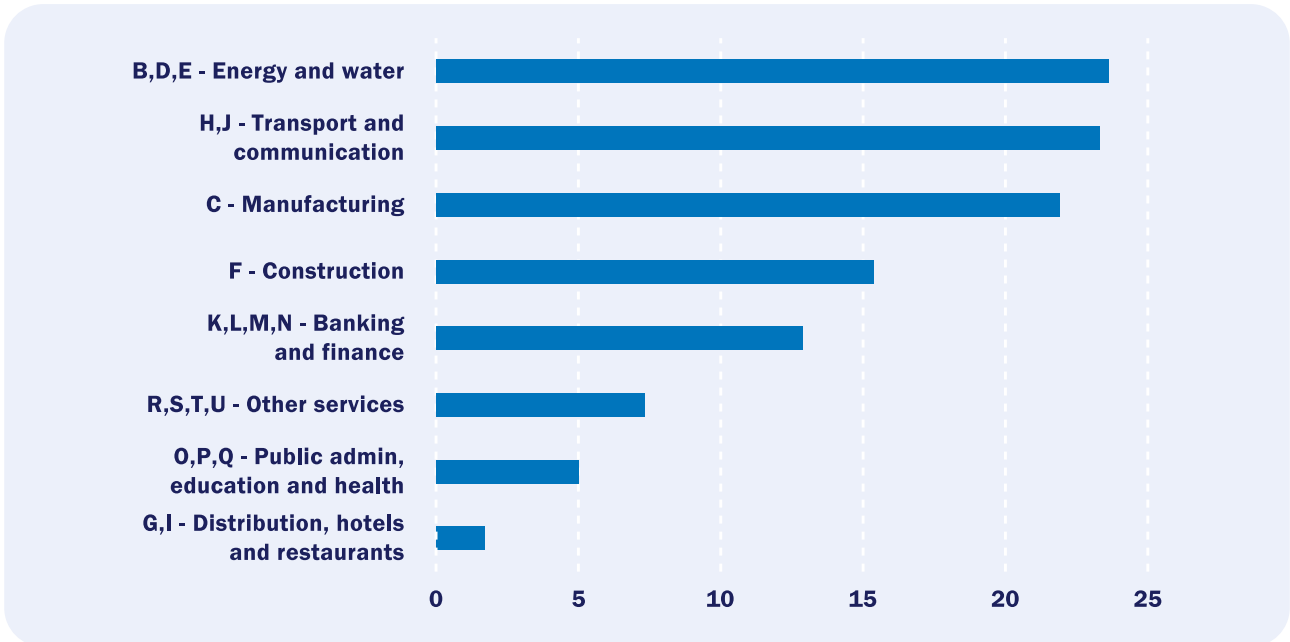
The Manufacturing sector had the highest estimated number of employees in STEM occupations (16,000) and one of the highest STEM densities (where 22% of employees were in STEM occupations). In contrast Distribution, Hotels and Restaurants had a relatively low number of employees in STEM occupations and a low density. In Construction, 15% (5,000) of employees were in STEM occupations. Although, 24% of employees in the Energy and Water sector were in STEM occupations this only equates to 2000 employees, the smallest numbers of employees in STEM occupations by industry (Figure 2.7 and 2.8).

9 UUEPC (2022) *Northern Ireland Skills Barometer*

10 Pages 45 to 46 of [Reviewing the requirement for high level STEM Skills](#), which includes a short list of 38 ‘high level STEM occupations’ based on SOC unit groups from SOC2010. UK Commission for Employment and Skills, July 2015.

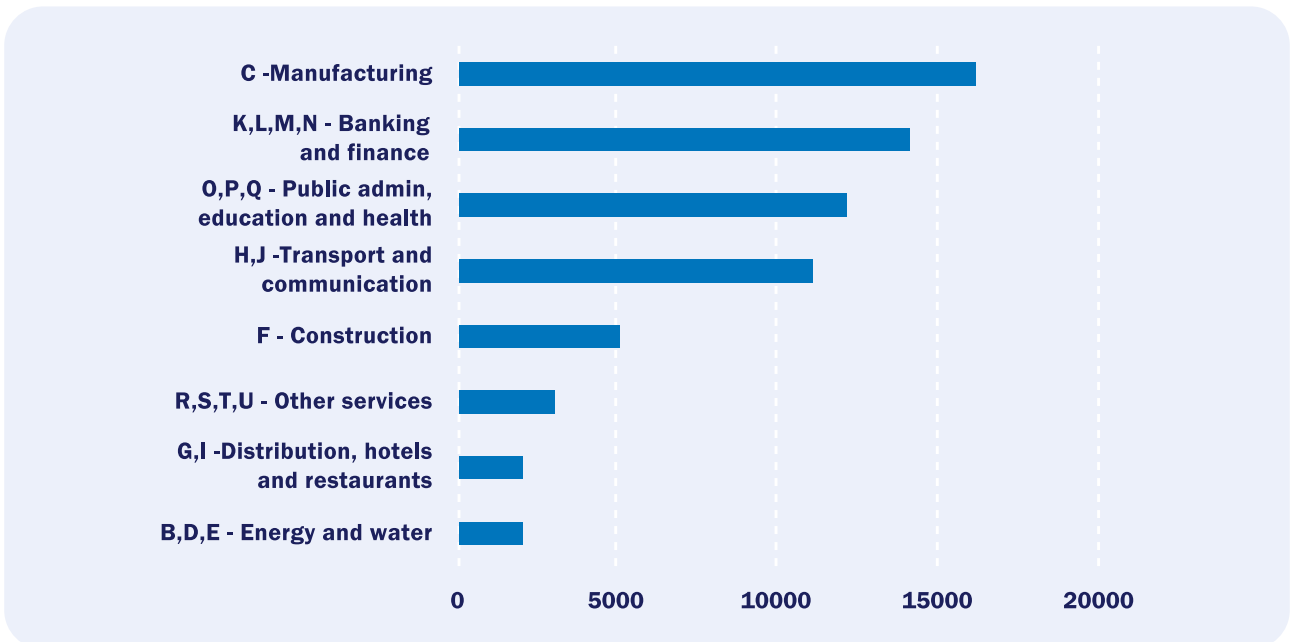
11 Labour Force Survey, NISRA

Figure 2.7 : NI employees in STEM occupations as a proportion (%) of employees in industry sector, aged 18+, 2020



Source: NISRA Labour Force Survey

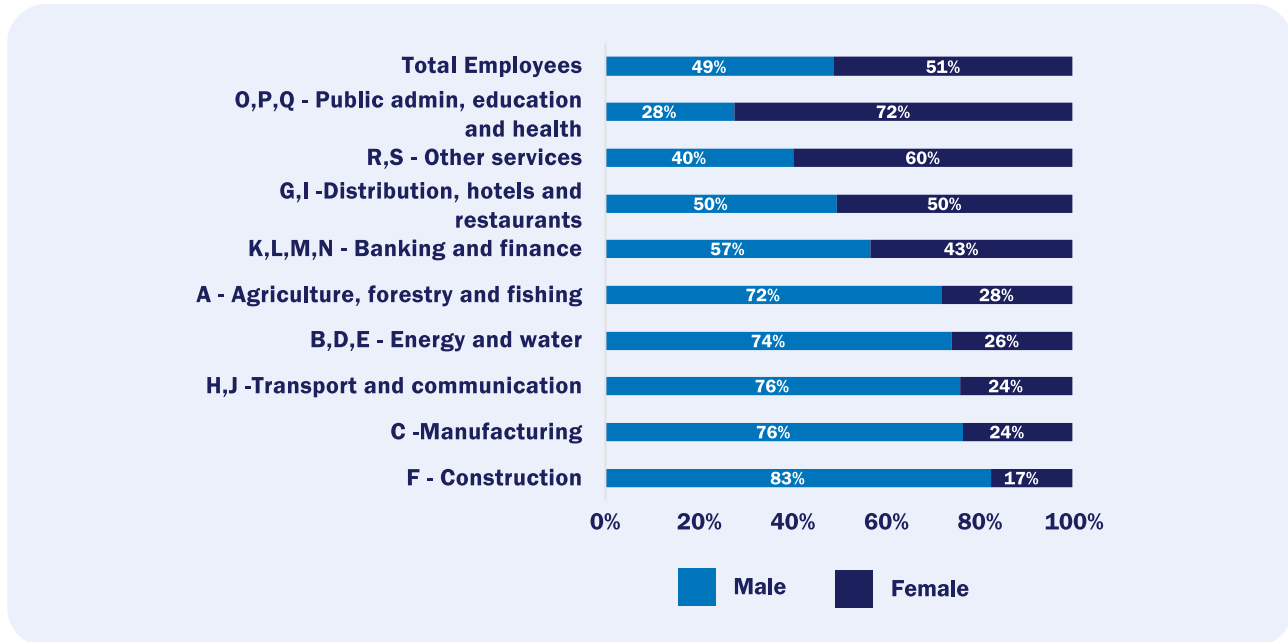
Figure 2.8: Number of NI employees in STEM occupations by industry sector, aged 18+, 2020



Source: NISRA Labour Force Survey

There is a broadly similar proportion of male and female employees in NI. However, this pattern does not hold when broken down by industry (Figure 2.9).

Figure 2.9: Industry sector and NI totals - proportion of male and female employees, NI, aged 18+, 2020



Source: NISRA Labour Force Survey

Figure 2.9 also shows that the Public Administration, Education and Health sector, the largest sector, is dominated by females (approximately seven in 10 employees are female). Five sectors are dominated by male employees including the highly concentrated STEM sectors of Construction; Manufacturing; and Transport and Communication, where at least seven in 10 employees are males.

Looking at the concentration of STEM occupations in each sector, shows that half of all STEM jobs were in the largest male dominated sectors of Manufacturing; Construction; and Transport and Communication while these sectors accounted for around one in five employee jobs (22%).

Creating a Culture of Lifelong Learning

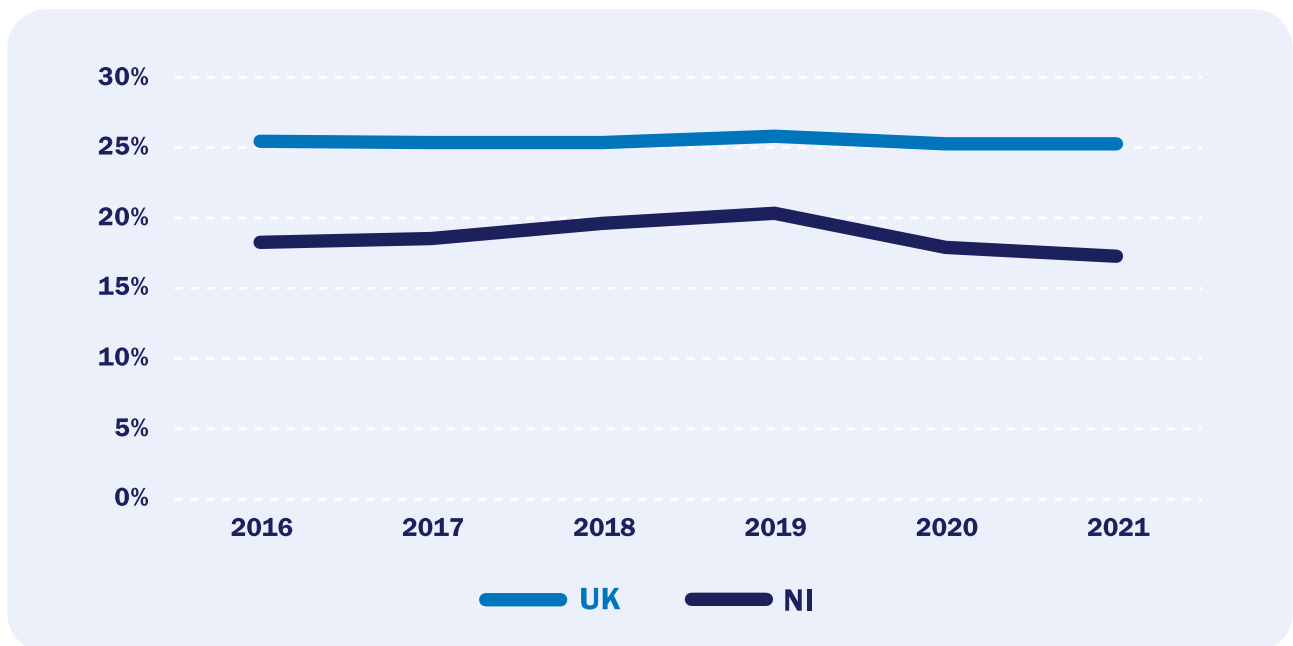
As part of developing the evidence base for the Skills Strategy, the Department for the Economy worked alongside NISRA to develop new statistics on Lifelong Learning¹². As well as forming the basis of a recommendation in the Skills Strategy, this newly developed indicator has been identified as an underpinning Tier 2 10x metric to measure success of our 10x Economic Vision for Inclusive Growth¹³.

12 [Highest Qualifications in Northern Ireland, Labour Force Survey](#)

13 [Measuring Success: 10x Metrics to Achieve a 10x Economy](#)

It reveals that in Northern Ireland, the proportion of adults (aged 25 to 64) participating in education and training lags behind the UK. Data since 2016 shows that there has been little change with an estimated 25% of adults participating in education each year across the UK as a whole compared with approximately 17% in Northern Ireland in 2021, which has also shown little change since 2016 (Figure 2.10).

Figure 2.10: Proportion participating in education and training, NI and UK, aged 25 to 64, 2016 to 2021

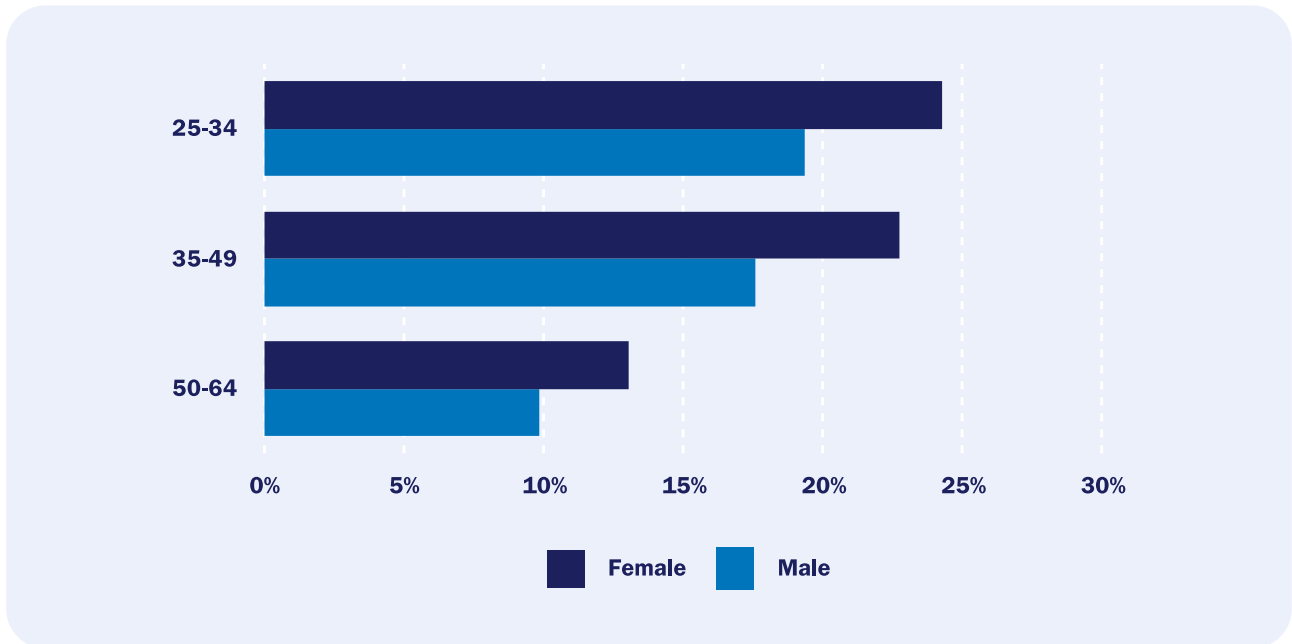


Source: NISRA, Lifelong Learning Indicator,¹⁴ Labour Force Survey

A closer look at lifelong learning by age and sex (Figure 2.11) shows that across all age groups, females were more likely to participate than males and the lowest participation rate was for males aged 50 to 64 (12%).

¹⁴ The lifelong learning indicator, as sourced from the Labour Force Survey, aims to capture the level of participation in education and training following the completion of formal education (those aged 25 to 64). It is calculated as those currently participating in education, training or job-related training in last three months and those who received informal training (tuition or other taught classes) during the last three months.

Figure 2.11: Participation in education or training by age and sex, NI, 2021



Source: NISRA Labour Force Survey

Objective 3 Enhancing Digital Skills, Developing our Digital Spine

As stated within the Skills Strategy, our focus on digital is as much about improving social equality as it is about economic growth.

Our world today is undeniably digital, from scheduling a doctor’s appointment to ordering a weekly grocery shop, the internet has transformed how we live. Although this has made life easier for some, those who lack the necessary digital skills are increasingly at risk of getting left behind.

The Department for the Economy worked with NISRA to publish new Digital Statistics. Using the Continuous Household Survey, statistics examining the level of digital skills of people aged 16 and over in Northern Ireland was published in November 2022.

Findings estimated that almost one in five people aged 16 and over in Northern Ireland had no digital skills¹⁵ (18%) in 2021/22, where in the last twelve months they had not used the internet for any function (from a list of twelve) or had access to the internet. These twelve functions related to four broader aspects of digital use: finding information online, using online services (such as internet banking or making online purchases), communicating online and using the internet safely and securely¹⁶.

15 Source: [Digital Skills in Northern Ireland 21/22](#), NISRA

16 Full range of functions can be found in table 2 of the [Digital Skills in NI publication](#) (NISRA)

There were large differences in digital skill level when comparing by age, labour market status, and deprivation quintile in particular. Those aged 65 and over, the economically inactive, and those living in the most deprived areas were more likely to have no digital skills, as demonstrated in Figure 2.12.

In contrast, those between the ages of 16 and 49, economically active and least deprived areas were more likely to have used the internet for a range of functions to find information or communicate online, use online services (such as internet banking) or to use the internet safely and securely.

The largest disparity when examining those with no digital skills was in age, where almost half (47%) of those aged 65 and over had no digital skills, compared to around 6 to 7% of those aged 16 to 49.

Selling online was the least common use of the internet (of all twelve functions) at the NI level (23%), and consistent across sex, age, labour market status and deprivation. The most common uses across the majority of cohorts examined were sending and receiving emails and online purchases (almost three in four people in NI).

When considering the use of online services, while all cohorts examined were least likely to use the internet to sell things online, internet banking was the function that showed the largest variation between age, labour market status and deprivation. The most notable difference was by age, where only 30% of those aged 65 or over used internet banking in the last twelve months, compared to 86% of those aged 25 to 34.

The three internet safety features (identifying secure websites, setting privacy settings and recognising suspicious links) were among the lowest uses of the internet at the NI level (at less than 50%) and showed large differences across age, labour market status and deprivation in particular. Almost two in five people in the most deprived areas were able to recognise suspicious links, compared to more than three in five people in the least deprived areas. There was a wide range in 'setting privacy settings' by age, which ranged from around one in ten (12%) of those 65 or over to 61% for those aged 16 to 24.

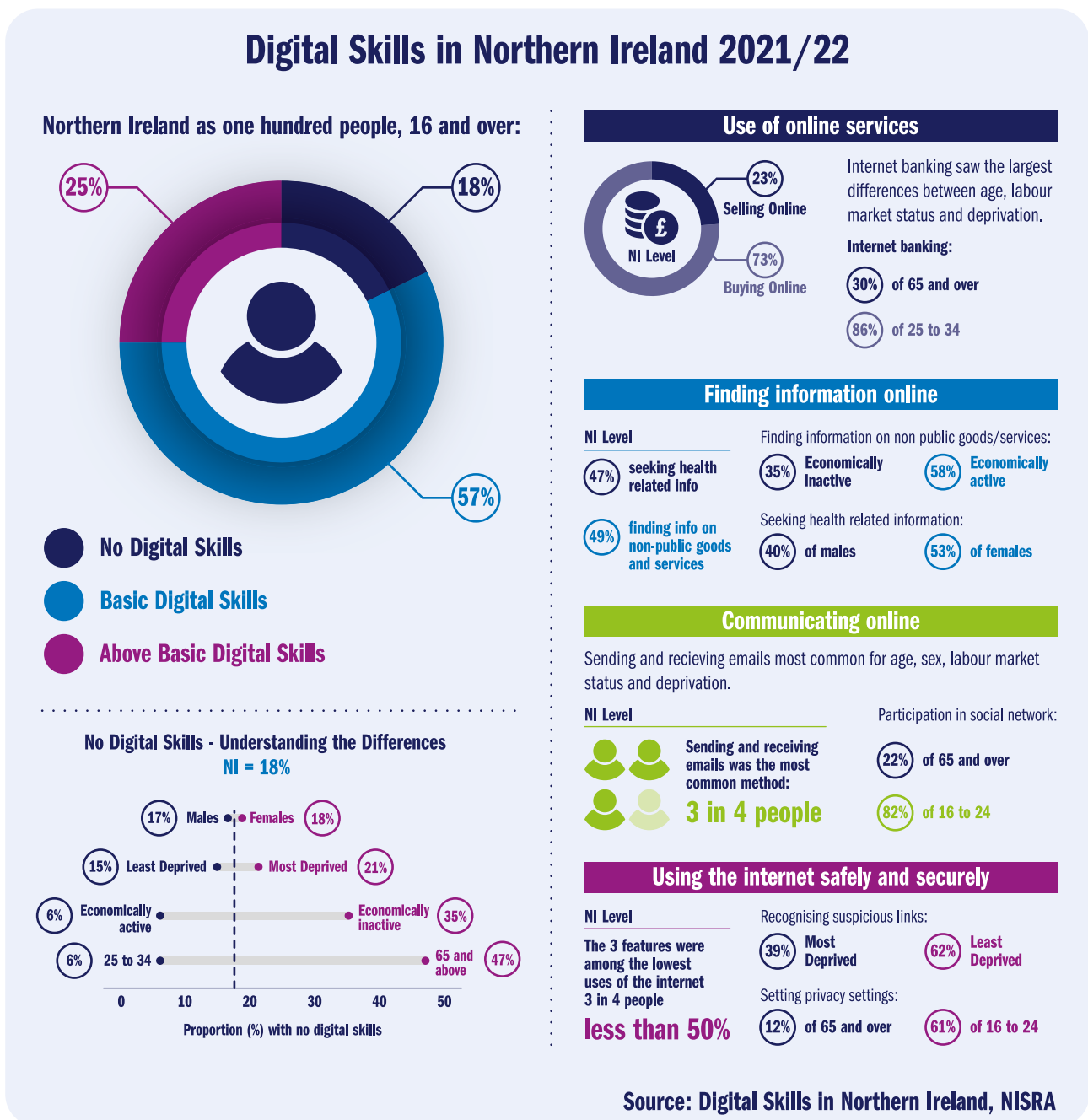
Those who were economically inactive had a significantly lower incidence of using the internet when compared to those who were economically active in all aspects of digital use considered. Similarly, there were large differences between the most and least deprived quintiles, where the most notable difference was in the use of online safety features.

Where those aged 65 and over were using the internet, they were most likely to use it to send or receive emails (42%), make online purchases (37%) and use internet banking (30%). However, there was a much lower incidence among those 65 and over compared to the younger cohorts, where at least 60% of those under the age of 65 used the internet for these three functions (ranging to at least 80% for those between 25 and 49).

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of digital skills and how these impact on daily life for everyone, from staying in touch with family and friends to internet shopping and accessing the internet safely and securely. The analysis presented demonstrates that there are some notable inequalities across age, labour market status and most and least deprived areas. It is important that individuals gain the required digital skills for social and economic inclusion.

It is planned that more advanced digital questions will be asked within the next Continuous Household Survey (April 23 to March 24 period) with findings expected to be available at the end of 2024.

Figure 2.12: Overview of Digital Skills in NI 2021/22 publication



A summary of the infographic on Digital Skills is noted here. The proportion of the Northern Ireland population aged 16 and over with certain levels of Digital Skills. 18% are estimated to have no digital skills; 57% basic digital skills; and 25% above basic digital skills.

In terms of those with no digital skills, there are large gaps between age groups and economically active status. Only 6% of those aged 25 to 34 are estimated to have no digital skills, this rises to 47% for those aged 65 and over. Only 6% of those economically active are estimated to have no digital skills, this rises to 35% for those classified as economically inactive.

It is estimated that 23% use the internet to sell online but 73% have bought online. Only 30% of 65-year-olds and over use internet banking compared with 86% of 25 to 34 year olds. Just over one in five (22%) of 65-year-olds and above participate in social media but 82% of 16- to 24-year-olds do.




Section 3: Update on Progress towards the Strategic Goals and Highlights of Activity in Year One

Progress towards Strategic Goals

The Skills Strategy contains three overarching Strategic Goals that were created to measure overall strategic progress by 2030. As this is the first year, it is anticipated that only limited progress will have been made as it takes time for recommendations to be implemented and translate into meaningful change.

Progress during the first year is set out in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1: Progress against Strategic Goals

Strategic Goal	Baseline	Year 1	Change	Target	Direction of Travel
1: Increasing the proportion of individuals leaving Northern Ireland higher education institutions with first degrees and post-graduate qualifications in narrow STEM subjects	24% (2019/20)	24% (2020/21)		27% (2029/30)	
2: Increasing the proportion of the working age population with qualifications at level 2 and above (i.e. at least 5 GCSEs at grades A* to C or equivalent)¹⁷	76.3% ¹⁸ (2020)	78.5% (2021)	2.2pps	85-90% (2030)	
3: Increasing the proportion of the working age population with qualifications at level 3 and above (i.e. at least A Levels (2 or more advanced level passes) or equivalent):	56.0% ¹⁹ (2020)	59.9% (2021)	3.9pps	70-75% (2030)	

¹⁷ There was a review of the education section of the Labour Force Survey questionnaire, impacting data from January 2022 onwards. The methodology to derive highest qualification levels will be kept under review, which may result in amendments following its conclusion. Following completion of the review and publication of 2022 data later in 2023, the targets for Strategic Goal 2 and 3 may be reviewed.

¹⁸ Baseline figures have been reweighted: In June 2022, the LFS estimates were reweighted from January-March 2020 to January-March 2022 using updated PAYE Real-Time Information data and with the introduction of the non-response bias adjustment to NI data. Full detail of the reweighting is available on the [ONS website](#).

¹⁹ Ibid.

Strategic Goal 1

In 2020/21, 24% of the 18,480 students leaving Northern Ireland higher education institutions with first degrees or post-graduate qualifications graduated in Narrow STEM subject areas; unchanged on the baseline year (2019/20). The target is to increase this proportion to 27% by 2029/30.

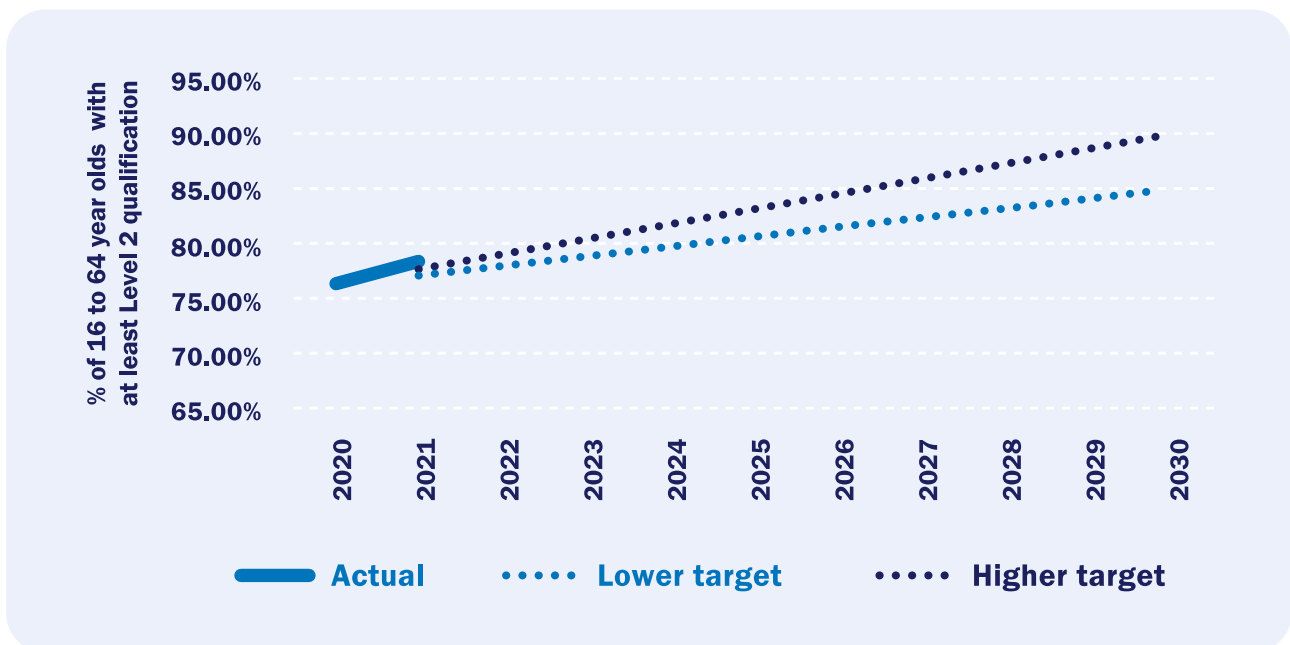
This is also included as a Tier 2 metric to measure progress towards our economic vision of 10x Innovation-led growth.

Strategic Goal 2

In 2021, it was estimated that 78.5% of the working age population (aged 16-64) were qualified to Level 2 and above following growth from the previous year²⁰. To meet the lower end of the 2030 target (85%), an estimated additional 132,000 individuals aged 16 to 64 will need to be upskilled²¹. Some of this will occur naturally as young people leaving the education system on average tend to be more highly qualified than those in older working age groups. Whilst only one year of data is available, this is currently on target to be met.

This is also included as a Tier 2 metric to measure progress towards our economic vision of 10x Inclusive growth.

Figure 3.1 Progress towards Strategic Goal 2



Source: Highest Qualification Level and Participation in Education and Training 2021, NISRA and DfE analysis

20 NISRA, Highest Qualification Level and Participation in Education and Training 2021 - <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/highest-qualification-level-2021>

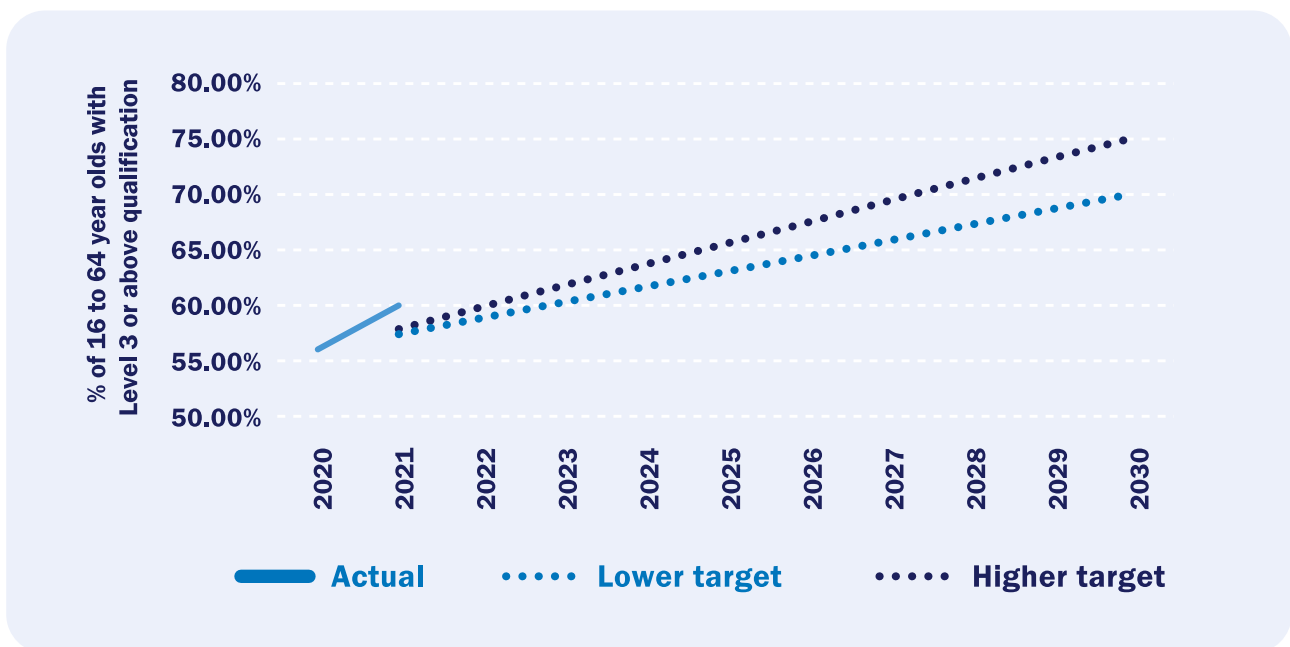
21 Assuming 16-64 year old population is size projected based on NISRA Population Projections - <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/2020-based-interim-population-projections-northern-ireland>

Strategic Goal 3

There was also an increase in the proportion of 16-64 year olds attaining Level 3 and above qualifications, an annual increase of 3.9pps to 59.9% in 2021. The target range to be qualified at Level 3 and above is 70-75%, to reach the minimum target an additional 162,000 people will need to be qualified to this level by 2030. This target is on track to be met based on the first year of data.

This is also included as Tier 1 and 2 metrics to measure progress towards our economic vision of 10x Inclusive growth.

Figure 3.2 Progress towards Strategic Goal 3



Source: Highest Qualification Level and Participation in Education and Training 2021, NISRA and DfE analysis

Lifelong Learning – Recommendation 37

Whilst not a Strategic Goal in itself, Recommendation 37 in the Skills Strategy included a target on Lifelong Learning as follows:

We will work to increase participation in adult learning from a baseline of 18.2% to the UK average of 25% by 2030.

As well as forming the basis of a recommendation in the Skills Strategy, this newly developed indicator has been identified as an underpinning Tier 2 10x metric to measure success of our 10x Economic Vision for Inclusive Growth.

Currently an estimated 167,000 adults aged 25 to 64 participate in education or training in Northern Ireland (17.3%), falling below the 2020 baseline²². This rate is also relatively low when compared with the UK overall (25.3%), and has been persistently so. By 2030 an estimated 73,000 more people aged from 25 to 64 would need to be engaged in education or training to reach the UK average; however, after one year there was a decline of approximately 6,000.

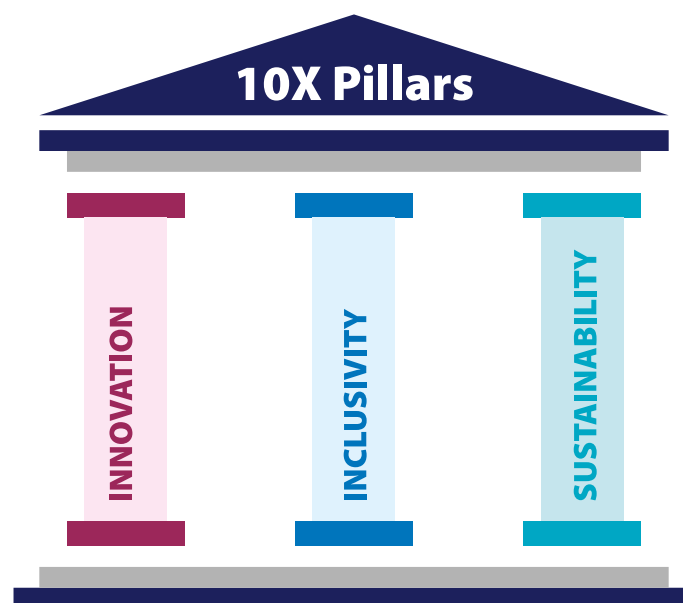
In Northern Ireland, rates of lifelong learning decline with age, falling to 11.5% for those aged 50-64 (2021). Furthermore, disability status also impacts engagement in lifelong learning, with 12.3% of persons aged 25-64 with a disability engaged compared to 19.0% of persons aged 25-64 without a disability.

10x Economic Vision Metrics

Achieving our Strategic Goals and Recommendation 37 in the Skills Strategy will feed directly into the success of the 10x Economic Vision. The three-tiered approach to measuring success examines metrics as follows:

- Tier 1: International Metrics;
- Tier 2: Underpinning Metrics; and
- Programme-Level /Policy Metrics and KPIs.

Metrics under each tier cover three pillars of innovation led, inclusive and sustainable growth.



Of the four Tier 1 metrics assigned to innovation, one is directly relevant to the work of the Skills Strategy. That is 'Percentage of Population (25-64) with Tertiary Level Education (Level 5-8)'. When considering Northern Ireland's performance against 16 selected other Small Advanced Economies, Northern Ireland placed 12th out of 17.

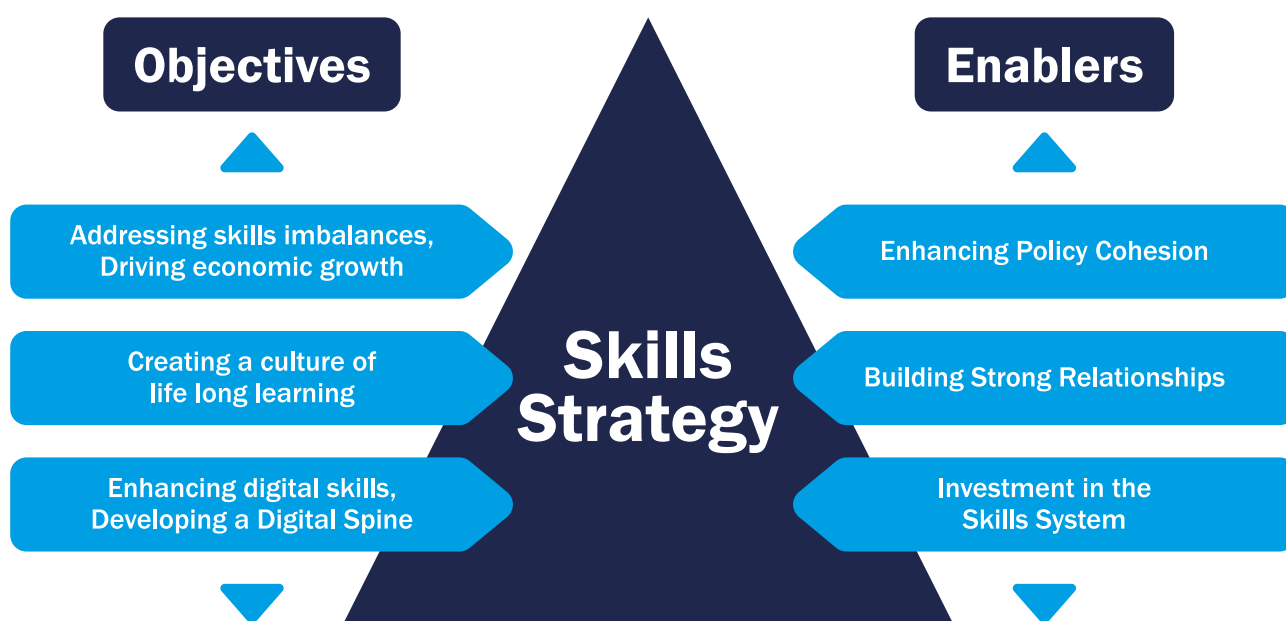
22 NISRA, *Highest Qualification Level and Participation in Education and Training 2021 -* <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/highest-qualification-level-2021>

Of the four Tier 1 metrics assigned to inclusion, one is directly relevant to the work of the Skills Strategy. That is ‘Percentage of the Population (25-64) with Level 3+ Education’. While Northern Ireland has seen improvement over time, it still placed last out of the 15 countries of which data was available. This is different to Strategic Goal 3 in the Skills Strategy which covers a different age-group (16-64 year olds). There is no international measure available for 16-64 year olds.

Under the Tier 2 metrics, all three strategic goals and Recommendation 37 are included.

Highlights of Activity in Year One

The 49 recommendations included in ‘Skills for a 10x Economy’ were aligned to the delivery of three major policy objectives and three policy enablers as set out in the following diagram. With progress against the strategic goals detailed above, this section provides a summary of key developments in relation to the delivery of the recommendations over the last year.



Following a brief recap on the context of these objectives and enablers, a summary is provided of the progress against each. Whilst progress against the strategic goals is welcome, direct ties to what has been delivered on the basis of this Strategy after one year are tenuous. Nonetheless, the work set in motion by the previous Skills Strategy – ‘Success through Skills: Transforming Futures’²³ – continues to make an impact as does the continued programme of work developed by the Department of Education (DE) and Department for Communities (DfC), not to mention the consistent progress delivered through the range of Northern Ireland’s education institutions.

23 [Success through Skills Transforming Futures \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](https://economy-ni.gov.uk)

Recap on the Policy Objectives and Enablers

‘Addressing skills imbalances, driving economic growth’ is aligned to evidence on anticipated skill demand under a high economic growth scenario, such as is set out in the Department’s economic vision: *‘10x Economy: Northern Ireland’s Decade of Innovation’*²⁴. This scenario will lead to a growing demand for mid-level qualifications and further intensification of the need for STEM-oriented graduate and post-graduate qualifications.

‘Creating a culture of Lifelong Learning’ recognises that the skills demand will not be met by the outcomes from initial education alone. There is a need to significantly increase participation in lifelong learning if businesses are to have access to the skills they need to innovate, grow and compete in international markets. Inclusivity is also a central aspect of the lifelong learning agenda as businesses and individuals who invest in their skills will be best equipped to excel in a changing labour market.

Finally, *‘enhancing digital skills, developing a digital spine’* reflects the need for transformation in the delivery of digital education. The digital challenge is twofold. Firstly, we need to ensure people of all ages have access to the basic digital education required for social and economic inclusion. In this regard, there is a key interface with the lifelong learning agenda as a recent NISRA report correlates a lack of digital skills with older age cohorts (particularly 50+), economic inactivity and individuals living in areas of high deprivation²⁵. The second strand focuses on the development of the advanced digital skills in software engineering and computer science which are in significant demand across Northern Ireland’s digital sector and knowledge economy more broadly. As the Northern Ireland Skills Barometer demonstrates²⁶, high level digital qualifications are anticipated to be amongst the most undersupplied in our economy in a ‘high economic growth scenario’. Any uncertainty associated with the achievement of high economic growth does not alleviate these concerns as an undersupply will still affect economic performance without remedial action.

The ‘enablers’ detail the need to work more cohesively across Government – *‘enhancing policy cohesion’* – and with stakeholders in business, trade unions and the third sector – *‘building strong relationships’* – to deliver more agile and responsive skills system. *‘Investment in the skills system’* points to the need to reverse the trend of falling investment in skills in both the public and private sectors if we are to achieve a skills profile that delivers inclusive and sustainable economic development and social prosperity.

24 [10X Economy - an economic vision for a decade of innovation | Department for the Economy \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

25 [Digital Skills in Northern Ireland \(nisra.gov.uk\)](#)

26 [Skills Barometer Update 2021 - information pack \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

Summary of Progress against Recommendations

Addressing Skills Imbalances, Driving Economic Growth

Within this area, it is useful, at the outset, to detail the addition of a new action which has been adopted within the programme and adds to the 49 recommendations set out in the Strategy:

- *To develop a delivery model for the FE Sector which is sufficiently agile to adapt quickly to changing economic conditions and skills needs.*

As set out in the Implementation Plan (Section 7), it is anticipated that work on the delivery model will be completed by 2027. In the interim, there are positive statistics related to FE numbers and enrolments. This includes a 13.6% increase in the number of learners undertaking FE courses over the period from 2017/18 to 2021/22. Over the same period, there were also proportionate increases in the number of enrolments in both broad and narrow STEM subjects from 27.1% to 35.8% and 18.3% to 22.1% respectively.

Recommendation 2 focused on collaboration between DfC and Department for the Economy (DfE) as Employability NI and the associated labour market partnerships (LMPs) were introduced. Both the Strategy and the LMPs are now operational. A brief case study highlighting how such collaboration between the departments, local government and employers can benefit businesses and individuals alike is included below (p.28).

Enhanced Employability Services (EES) were being developed by DfC to support individuals furthest from the labour market in overcoming individual barriers to employment (recommendation 4). Unfortunately, the development of EES was stopped before the Skills Strategy Programme was fully operational due to financial constraints.

Recommendation 7 stated that:

- *The outcomes from the ‘Transition of Young People into Careers (14 – 19) Project’, jointly led by DE and DfE, will be recognised within the developing Skills Strategy framework and action plans.*

A key milestone was reached in June 2022 with the publication of the 14 – 19 Framework²⁷. DE and DfE are now working on the implementation of the strategic actions it identifies in the areas of:

- curriculum and qualifications;
- careers;
- awareness and engagement;
- post-16 provision; and
- 14 – 19 education and training system (measuring success).

27 [Developing a more strategic approach to 14-19 Education and Training - a framework to transform 14-19 Education and Training provision | Department for the Economy \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

Substantial progress has been made on a key recommendation to introduce all-age apprenticeships (recommendation 13) which is not only key to addressing skills imbalances, but also to expanding access to lifelong learning for businesses and individuals and to meeting the anticipated demand for mid-level qualifications over the lifetime of the Strategy. All-age apprenticeships are expected to be operational during 2023, subject to budget confirmation.

Two separate consultations on ‘Level 4 and Level 5 and higher education in further education’ (recommendation 14) and ‘Principles for Vocational Qualifications in Northern Ireland’ (recommendation 15) were conducted between December 2022 and March 2023. These consultation processes reflect key milestones delivered over the year as we continue to focus on the development of mid-level qualification provision in line with forecast labour market need.

Significant progress has also been made in the context of improving graduate and post-graduate outcomes in line with forecast need under our 10x vision. It is anticipated that new outcome agreements (recommendation 16) between the DfE and the NI universities will be introduced by the 2024/25 academic year. Furthermore, it is anticipated that the Independent of Review of the Post-Graduate Studentship scheme (recommendation 17) will be complete by June 2023 when we will be examining implementation of outcomes.

The Independent Review of Careers (recommendation 19) was published in March 2022 with DfE now actioning several of the recommendations. This will incorporate some of the other careers-based recommendations in the Strategy and is interlinked with the strategic actions emerging from the 14 – 9 project noted above. As noted in the Implementation Plan, we expect that several careers-based recommendations will be delivered by March 2024.

Recommendation 25 focused on commissioning and responding to findings of a skills audit to identify the skills and training needs that are required to deliver Northern Ireland’s Energy Strategy.

In September 2022, a Green Energy Skills Industry Reference Group, acting as a subgroup of the Skills Council, was formed. It has met twice and is tasked with ensuring the planned research was informed through business intelligence and that a response to its findings is articulated.

The planned independent research was commissioned during January 2023 and is being undertaken by Energy & Utility Skills. It is titled:

Investigating the skills required for a Transition to an Advanced Zero Emission, Indigenous Diverse Energy Secure and Circular Economy in Northern Ireland.

It is anticipated that this research will form the evidence base towards the formulation of a Green Energy Skills Action Plan for Northern Ireland.

Creating a Culture of Lifelong Learning

The overarching recommendation associated with this objective is to develop a new lifelong learning project and action plan (recommendation 28). It is anticipated that the Action Plan will be delivered by March 2024, as noted in the Implementation Plan. Work has commenced on the development and definition of the Project. In addition, officials have been appointed to lead on the development of each of the other recommendations proposed under this theme and timeframes for outcomes are set out in our Implementation Plan.

As detailed in ‘Skills for a 10x Economy’, DfE continues to deliver a suite of provision aimed at business and individual participation in lifelong learning through the Assured Skills, Skills Focus, InnovateUS and SkillUp initiatives. Some key statistics on participation are as follows:

Assured Skills: *14 Assured Skills academies were delivered between April and December 2022 with 215 of the 238 individuals upskilled offered full-time employment at an estimated cost of £1.3M.*

Skills Focus: *The programme has a budget for the 2022/23 financial year of £2.7M to support businesses to upskill and reskill employees with accredited qualifications at Level 2 and above. Up to 31 December 2022, 68% of the budget has been spent by the six Further Education colleges to deliver 787 projects, with 1,355 enrolments at the colleges under Skills Focus. The programme is on target to fully spend the annual budget.*

InnovateUs: *The 2022/23 budget for the programme is £2.3M. The programme aims to help small businesses (with fewer than 50 employees) gain the skills they need to engage in innovation activities. Up to 31 December 2022, 45% of the budget has been spent and 247 projects have been completed by the six Further Education colleges.*

SkillUp: *Between April 2022 and January 2023, 6,500 individuals have commenced one of over 300 Skill Up courses offered, primarily online, through the Further and Higher education providers. It is anticipated that by the end of March 2023 this will have risen to approximately 8,000. Initial analysis has female participation at 62%, with 12% of those enrolled indicating they have a disability, with approximately half of all individuals aged between 35-50. Achievement rate for those courses which have completed is 68%. Survey data indicates that half of those who enrol on Skill Up have not undertaken learning in the last 5 years, with 86% suggesting it would improve their skills and future employment prospects. Two thirds of all individuals who completed a course have suggested they would undertake further learning in the next two years.*

It is noted, with some concern, that participation in lifelong learning has fallen in the last two years to 17%, moving away from our baseline of 20% participation in 2020 and indeed from our target of 25% participation by 2030 (recommendation 37). For this reason, progress on recommendations aligned to this objective will be prioritised over the next year.

Enhancing Digital Skills, Developing a Digital Spine

This objective was captured by a single initial recommendation (no. 38) to develop a digital skills action plan for Northern Ireland. On this basis, DE has identified digital skills as a priority area for further development within the NI Curriculum and established a Digital Skills Strategic Oversight Group. This includes a focus on using ICT up to Key Stage 3 and on Using ICT across the curriculum at Key Stage 4 and post-16, including through computer science and software engineering qualifications. The Strategic Oversight Group will focus on a number of high-level objectives including:

- to establish a baseline, including identifying what is working well and areas where improvement is required;
- improving the delivery of digital skills in the curriculum;
- to systemically and incrementally increase the uptake of digital skills related subjects at GCSE and GCE;
- to support DfE's 10x Vision; and
- to provide a clear progression pathway into digital careers.

DfE has commenced the process of establishing an expert panel of individuals to develop a Digital Skills Action Plan for Northern Ireland. The initial focus of the group is to identify and agree the needs of business, however, this will be expanded to take account of the Education Sector. The Group will work in tandem with the Department for Education to aid the development of:

- ICT pathways for social and labour market inclusion; and
- advanced digital pathways in computer science / software engineering.

Policy Enablers

There has been a focus in the Programme's first year on establishing appropriate governance and reporting structures. The Northern Ireland Skills Council (recommendation 39) was established and has been active since just before the publication of the Strategy. A competition to appoint eight members and a Chair through open competition (recommendation 42) is currently live and expected to conclude in April / May 2023. These positions are currently filled on a voluntary basis by local business representatives. A cross-departmental Programme Management Board (recommendation 43) and the Skills Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (SEDI) sub-committee (recommendation 44) have also been established. An update from the SEDI sub-committee is included in Section 5. In collaboration with these strategic management bodies, a 2, 5 and 8 year implementation plan has been agreed (recommendation 45²⁸) and is included in Section 7(?) of this Report. The publication of this Report is, in itself, in accordance with (recommendation 46).

28 Recommendation 45 proposed a 2, 5 and 10 year implementation plan. This has been adjusted to 2, 5 and 8 years due to delays in publication of the Strategy and the need to maintain 2030 as the target for delivery of the strategic goals.

Unfortunately, given the timing of the Strategy’s publication, it was not possible to attain Executive agreement (recommendation 47). Officials continue to collaborate across the relevant departments to ensure a continued focus on delivering a joined-up approach to implementation and that skills policy continues to support key objectives in other departments. It is our intention, when an Executive is reformed, that the Minister for the Economy should review and consult with Executive colleagues on the Implementation Plan to agree whole-of-government support as was the initial intention of this recommendation.

Case Study: Armagh, Banbridge & Craigavon Labour Market Partnership

HGV Training and Employment Academy

The HGV Training and Employment Academy was designed by Armagh, Banbridge & Craigavon Labour Market Partnership (LMP) to respond to a specific, local skilled labour shortage in the HGV sector.

Initially the programme aimed to support 45 participants to qualify as HGV drivers and guarantee an interview with a local employer. A multi-platform promotional campaign was undertaken to attract applicants. However, interest in taking part was much greater than forecast, with over 400 applications received. In response, the Department worked closely with the LMP to maximise their budget by using funding for another programme that was unable to secure a delivery partner and the LMP was also able to avail of funding from the Department for Economy, which covered one-third of the total costs. This secured a further 40 places, so that Armagh, Banbridge & Craigavon LMP were able to support 85 places on their programme in 2021/22.

In February 2022 Minister Hargey welcomed the announcement of the HGV Training and Employment Academy and used the opportunity as a platform to formally launch Labour Market Partnerships.



Pictured above: Minister Deirdre Hargey and Lord Mayor of Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon, Alderman Glenn Barr pictured along with Mervyn Lynn and Joanna Lynn who are amongst the first to participate in the programme.

One of the big success stories was a local couple, Mervyn and Joanna Lynn who applied for the HGV Academy as they were both unemployed at the time. As they were both in receipt of Universal Credit, and given the high cost of obtaining an HGV licence it would have been very challenging to afford this employment route without the support of the LMP programme. They were interviewed separately and both achieved top marks during the assessment with the passion for driving shining through. Once selected the married couple contacted the LMP to explain how much it meant to them, and their family to have been given this opportunity. Both Mervyn and Joanna, upgraded their licences with the provisional aspect; they both completed and passed the three-part theory examination first time round, a feat only 66% of candidates achieve. Once this was complete, Mervyn and Joanna moved onto the practical examination with a bit of friendly rivalry between the two – this must have pushed each one on as once again first time round they passed all elements of their practical examination. Mervyn and Joanna have now completed CV's and are preparing for their scheduled interviews. They are very grateful to the LMP and the two Departments for the opportunity, but it is through their own hard work and dedication that they achieved their goal.

The HGV Academy is still running and to date, results have been impressive, with 41 participants having gained an HGV licence qualification and 30 people (73% of those who have completed so far) gaining new employment.

Section 4: Work Quality

The Skills Strategy set out our intentions to introduce a business pledge, where employers formally endorse a number of principles regarding employee engagement and empowerment. These principles will reflect key aspects of a series of work quality indicators to recognise and promote companies that are fully engaged in the development of their staff, the economy and the wellbeing of our society. As such, Recommendation 33 was:

We will introduce a business pledge to recognise and promote employers who actively engage with the principles of the work quality indicators.

In accordance with OECD recommendations, we stated that we would examine the potential to make subscription to the pledge mandatory for medium and large companies (50 or more employees), before receipt of support through NI Executive funded skills programmes. While we will actively encourage businesses of all sizes to take and promote the principles of the ‘Better Jobs Pledge’, we must ensure that it does not become a further constraint on small business growth. To promote fairness, we will ask business leaders and employee representatives to co-design the ‘Better Jobs Pledge’.

Delivery of this Recommendation is expected by March 2027 (see Section 6). However, whilst this will not be introduced for some years, we have worked with NISRA to measure a suite of Work Quality indicators²⁹. This allows us to track, from a worker’s perspective, work quality across eight domains: secure employment; meaningful work; neither under/over employed; job satisfaction; earnings above Real Living Wage; involvement in decision making; career progression; and flexible work. Additional analysis, not included within the NISRA publications is presented here.

Work Quality – a STEM perspective

Figure 4.1 illustrates the relative size of all sectors, represented by the size of the bubble against Real Living Wage (RLW) and the proportion of male and female employees. Relative to the NI average, five industry sectors performed well in terms of the proportion of employees earning above the RLW. The Public Administration, Education and Health sector (which is female dominated) had the highest proportion of employees earning above the RLW.

29 [NISRA Work Quality Indicators](#)

Figure 4.1: Earnings above Real Living Wage (RLW) by industry sector and proportion of male/female employees

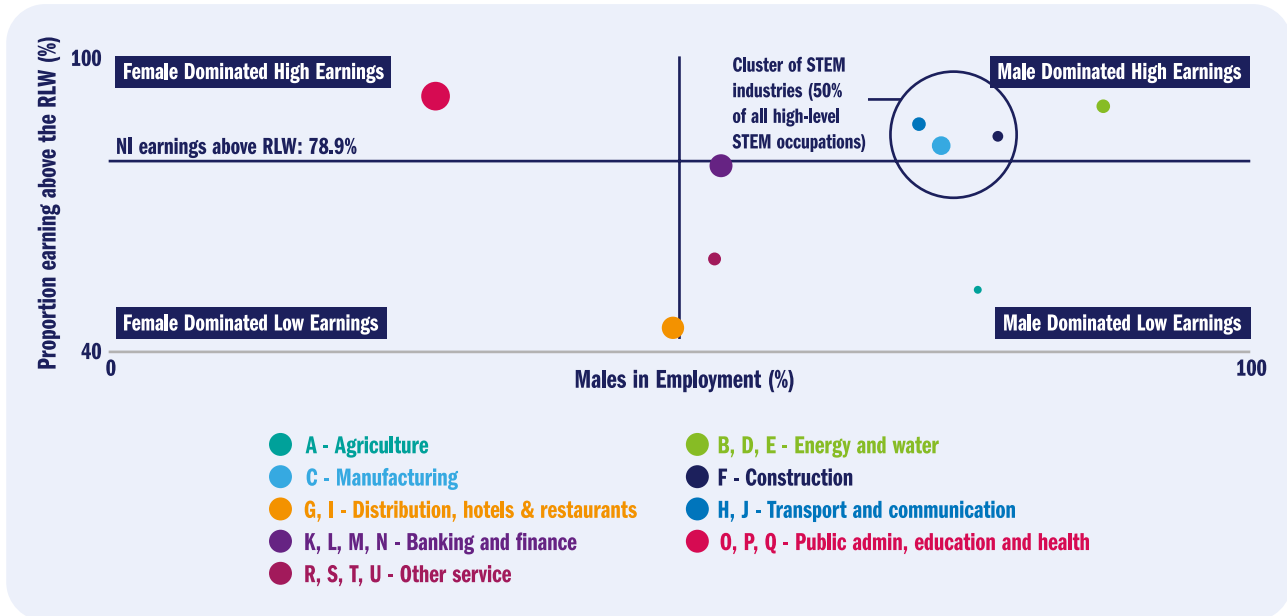


Figure 4.1 also shows that more than 80% of employees earned above the RLW in the largest (male dominated) STEM sectors (Construction; Manufacturing; and Transport and Communication), accounting for 50% of all STEM jobs.

While STEM sectors performed well in terms of earnings, an examination across the other Work Quality Indicators shows that there are differing work quality experiences in the STEM sectors.

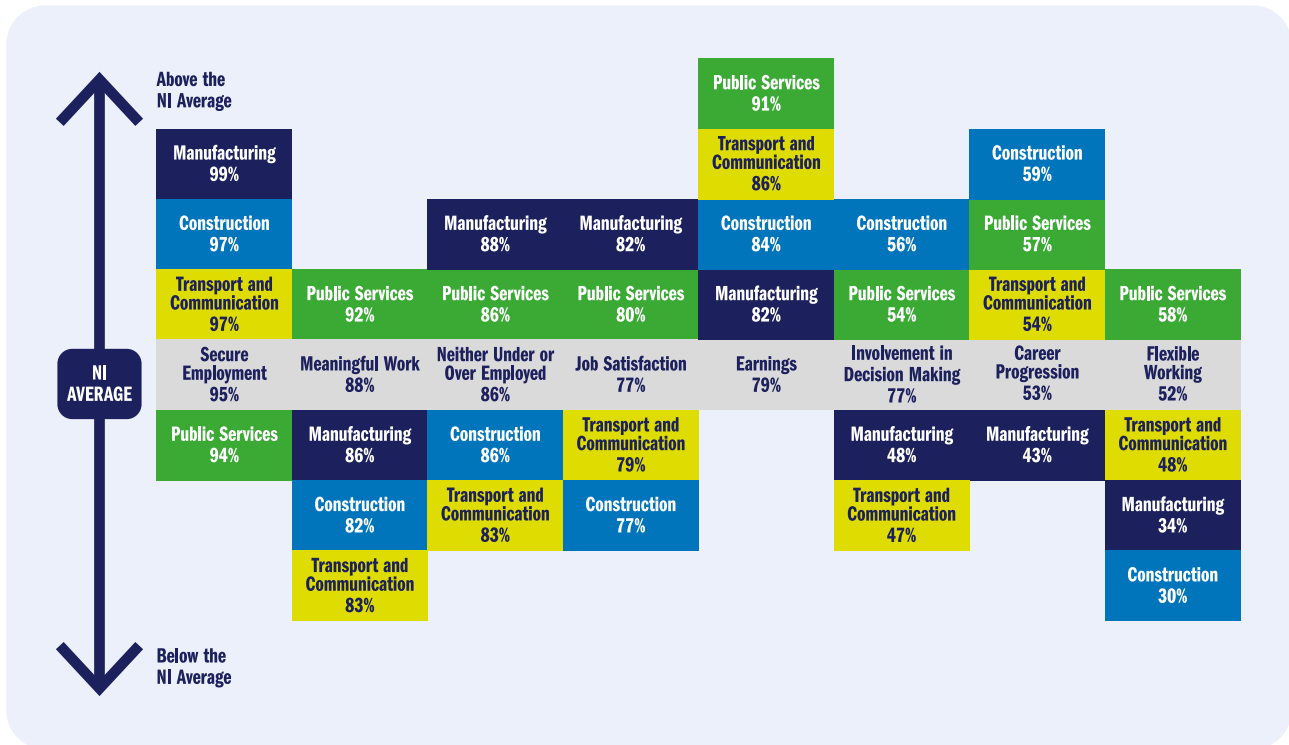
As well as having a relatively high proportion of employees earning above the RLW, employees in STEM sectors were more likely to be in secure employment than the other sectors, but least likely to be availing of flexible working. This reflects the lower incidence of part-time working among males than females³⁰. Employees in the STEM sectors also reported below average levels of employees agreeing their work was meaningful.

There were differences within the STEM sectors, notably where employees within the construction sector reported the highest levels of career progression and the manufacturing sector had the highest proportion agreeing that they were neither under nor over employed.

These results can be compared to the Public Administration, Education and Health sector which also showed a high proportion of employees earning above the RLW and ranked above the NI average in 7 of the eight work quality indicators (all apart from secure employment - 94% of employees stated they were in a permanent job or in a temporary job who did not want a permanent job).

30 In 2020, more than a third of all employed females worked part-time (37%), compared to 13% of all employed males.) [LFS Annual Tables 2020](#), NISRA

Figure 4.2: Work quality indicators – public services³¹ and high-level STEM industries



The figure shows the Northern Ireland average across each of the eight Work Quality indicators as well as the findings for high level STEM industries and Public Services.

For Secure Employment, the Northern Ireland average was 95%. It is ranked highest by Manufacturing employees at 99%, followed by Construction employees at 97%. Public Services ranked Secure Employment lowest at 94% although this was still only one percentage point lower than the Northern Ireland average.

For Meaningful Work, the average across Northern Ireland employees was 88%. It was higher for Public Services at 92% but lower across Manufacturing at 86%, Construction at 82% and Transport and Communication at 83%.

For Neither Under Nor Over Employed, the average across Northern Ireland employees was 86%. It was higher for Public Services at 92%, the same for Manufacturing at 86% but lower for Transport and Communication at 83%.

For Job Satisfaction, the average across Northern Ireland employees was 79%. It was higher for Manufacturing at 82% and Public Services at 80%. It was lower for Transport and Communication at 79% and Construction at 77%.

31 Public services include “Public administration, education, and health”.

For Earnings, the average across Northern Ireland was 79%. For all sectors examined, it was higher than the average. Public Services was 91%, followed by Transport and Communication at 86%, Construction at 84% and Manufacturing at 82%.

For Involvement in Decision Making, the Northern Ireland average was 54%. Construction was slightly higher at 56% while Public Services was the same as the Northern Ireland average. Manufacturing was lower than the average at 48% and Transport and Communication was 47%.

For Career Progression, the average across Northern Ireland was 53%. Manufacturing was well lower at 43% while Construction was highest of the sectors examined at 59%. Public Services was 57% and Transport and Communication was 54%.

For Flexible Working, the average across Northern Ireland was 52%. Public services scored the highest at 58% whilst Transport and Communication (48%), Manufacturing (34%) and Construction (30%) all scored below the average.

Section 5: Skills Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

We must develop a skills system which addresses inequality, providing everyone with the access to the education and training opportunities that will enable them to fulfil their potential.

This section provides an insight to the work of the Skills Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Sub-Committee during the past year as well as providing a statistical update on some of the inequalities that exist in the labour market and skills system.

The Skills Equality Diversity and Inclusion Sub-Committee

The Skills Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (SEDI) Sub-Committee of the NI Skills Council was established under recommendation 44 of the Skills Strategy. It aims to inform, advise on, and positively influence policy, interventions and behaviours across government, business and with other sectors and stakeholders, to increase and enhance more equitable access, opportunity, and participation in relation to skills and employment.

Approach

An analysis of the current labour market characteristics of the Section 75 categories in Northern Ireland provided a baseline from which to focus initial attention. This work progressed during 2022/23 via a “Deep-Dive” approach into the data, evidence and current landscape on specific issues – Disability, Gender, Young People - to identify gaps, barriers and areas on which there is potential to bring positive influence and change.

Progress to Date

Labour Market Analysis of Section 75 Categories in Northern Ireland

Key Findings:

- Gender – whilst headline indicators are closer than ever before, there remain distinct differences. Gender diversity remains an issue in certain occupations and sectors.
- Disability – those with a disability generally have lower employment rates and lower levels of qualifications. Around one-in-four who are inactive state that they want to work.
- Age – recent impacts of COVID-19 have been largely felt by those younger (16-24). For longer term issues, those older (50-64) tend to be lower qualified and have higher rates of inactivity (compared with other age groups and with UK average for age group).
- Religion – the employment rate between the two main religions is similar, with the gap closing over the last decade.
- Race – Those workers classified as white are estimated to have a much higher employment rate than those classified as ‘other’.
- Marital Status and family units– Lone parents, with either dependent or non-dependent children report the lowest employment rate of any family unit category.
- Dependents – Older mothers have much higher rates of economic activity. This trend is not

replicated across males, where economic activity rates in the 16-24 and 25-34 age groups are similar regardless of having a dependent child.

Disability

The SEDI Disability deep-dive, which was timed to take place before the Harkin International Disability Employment Summit in Belfast in June 2022, looked closely at current provision, participation and progression, as well as the extensive evidence base in relation to the disability employment gap. Some important statistics were noted such as:

- the disability employment gap – 38.1% for those with a disability and 80.3% for those without
- a high incidence of low / no qualifications for those with disabilities (26%) compared to those without disabilities (9%)
- higher levels of disability among the older age working population (50-64 years)
- differences in attainment of qualifications between those with and those without a disability with specific reference to achievement and progression at higher levels
- increase in those reporting a disability in higher education

Areas identified for action included for example:

- role of employers in providing access to training and employment for those with a disability
- promoting the value of social clauses and social value in procurement
- enhancing accessibility to existing programmes and provisions e.g. Assured Skills Academies, and learning opportunities at Further and Higher Education

Gender

The deep-dive into Gender considered data on the differences in education, training and employment by gender and looked at some of the skills initiatives / programmes working to enable greater equality in these areas. Some issues to note:

- women are significantly under-represented in narrow STEM occupations
- issues of gender stereotyping and cultural norms
- women are under-represented at Director/Senior Management level
- significantly more women work part-time
- the majority of carers are women
- there are 50,000 fewer self-employed women compared with men
- more males in apprenticeships
- males are under-represented in HE but there are marginally more males than females in FE

Discussion points included:

- importance of an ambitious funded early learning and childcare Strategy
- potential need for Employment Rights legislative reform
- access to finance for female entrepreneurs
- culture change required to challenge gender stereotypes in certain subjects, career pathways and opportunity available to both genders
- consideration of how the value of the caring profession can be raised
- gender budgeting and policy development

Young People (16-24 years)

The deep-dive into issues relating to young people explored the type of provision available and being accessed by young people, the additional challenges and barriers being faced by particular cohorts, including for example, those from a care experience background and young people with special education needs. The challenges with the end of the NI ESF programme were also highlighted, as they had been previously during the disability discussion. The work to reform careers, to develop new provision at Entry Level- Level One and the need for greater coherence in relation to pathways, transition and progression opportunities were all discussed, as were employability skills and the longer term impact of COVID-19 in terms of the development of skills.

In addition to the workshops and research activity, work continues on improving our communications both internally and externally to raise awareness of these issues, draw a sharper focus into the areas of disadvantage and / or under representation and to challenge ourselves and employers to strive for change and improvement on diversity and inclusion. Opportunities have been taken to raise these issues through meetings, conferences and other events as well as through initiatives such as a new diversity and inclusion category for the NI Apprentice of the Year 2023.

Labour Market Inequalities Statistical Update

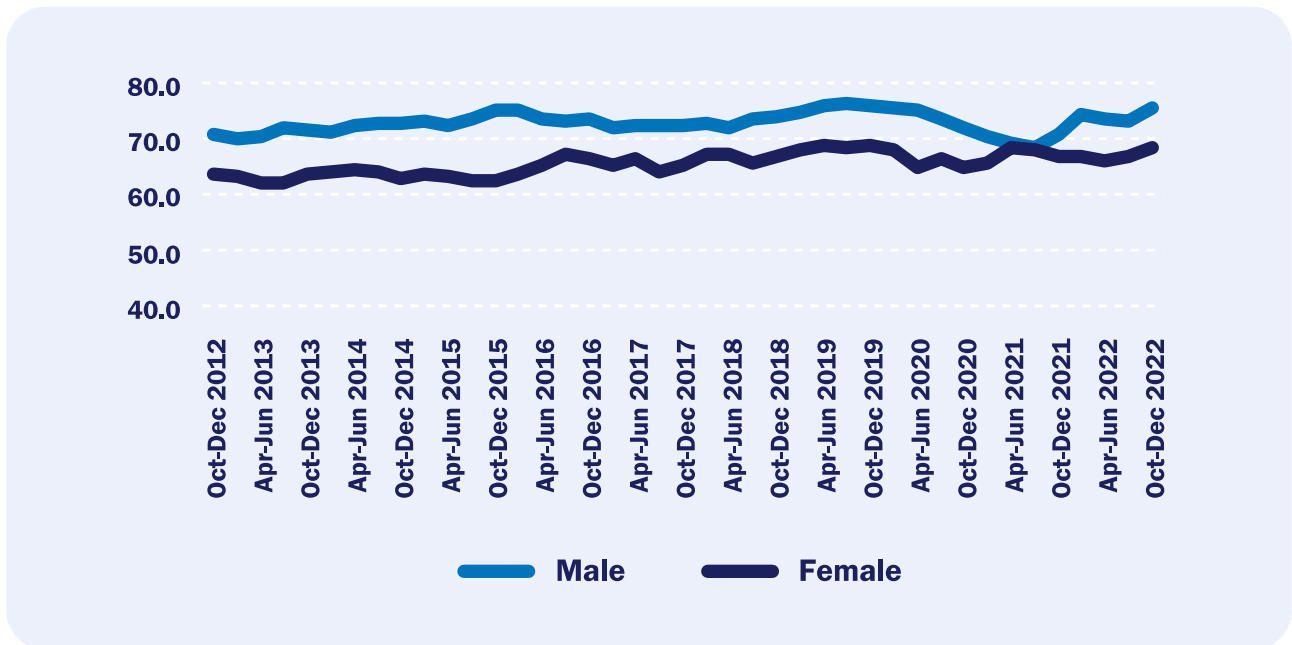
Section 2 showed that towards the end of 2022, the local employment rate had not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels (refer to figure 2.2). The economic inactivity rate also remains above the pre-pandemic level. This section aims to delve further into inequalities (including Section 75 groups) in employment, economic inactivity and earnings.

Gender based inequalities

There has been a consistent trend of females experiencing a lower employment rate than males. Similarly, females experience higher levels of economic inactivity than males (Figure 5.2).

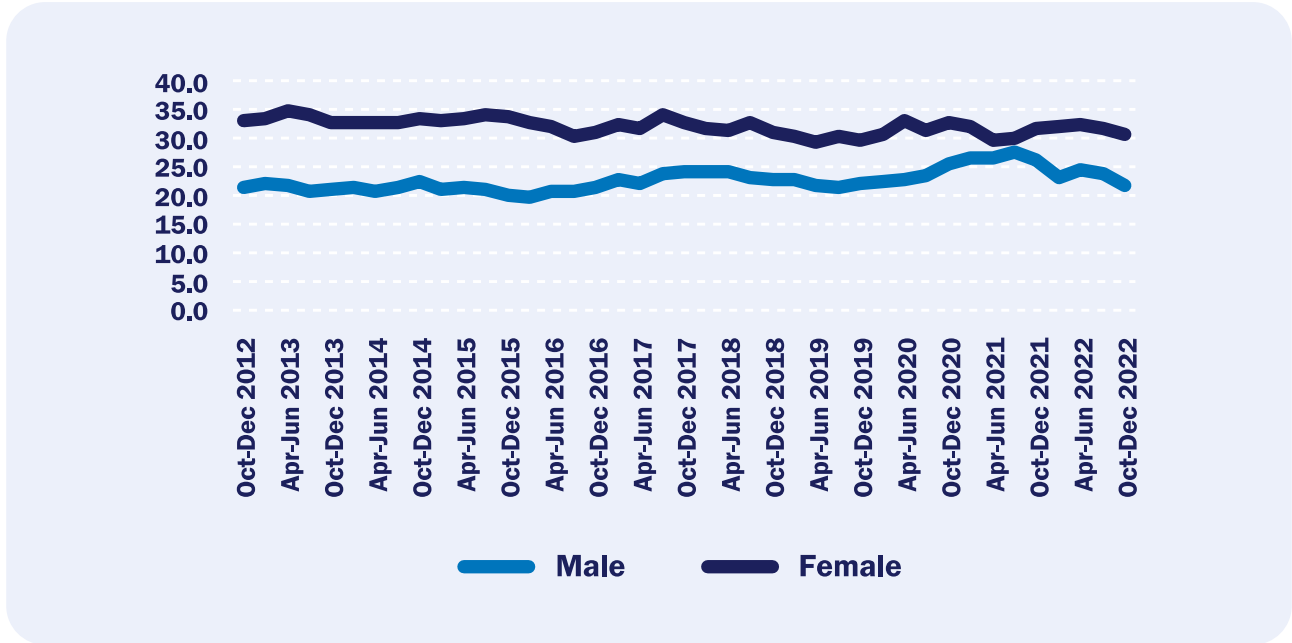
In 2021, the gap between males and females in both employment and economic inactivity rates was at its lowest. The female economic inactivity rate in 2021 (29.7%) was the lowest since 2006, whilst the male inactivity rate (24.2%) was the highest since the same point. Further analysis showed that males were more impacted by the COVID-19 crisis than females. However, recent quarterly data (up to October to December 2022) indicates that the gaps have widened to levels similar to those shown before the pandemic. This has been driven by a sharp increase in the male employment rate and steady decline in the male economic inactivity rate (see Figures 5.1 and 5.2), alongside increasing female inactivity and a fall in employment rates.

Figure 5.1: Employment rate by sex, aged 16 to 64, Oct to Dec 2012 to Oct to Dec 2022



Source: NISRA, Labour Force Survey

Figure 5.2: Economic inactivity rate by sex, aged 16 to 64, Oct to Dec 2012 to Oct to Dec 2022



Source: NISRA, Labour Force Survey

A variety of different measures can be used to consider the Gender Pay Gap, but it is instructive to consider hourly pay for all employees, full and part-time combined, where females earned 8.4% less than male employees in 2022; a gap where NISRA suggests the main explanatory factor is the part-time effect, as full-time work has higher hourly rates of pay on average than part-time employment.

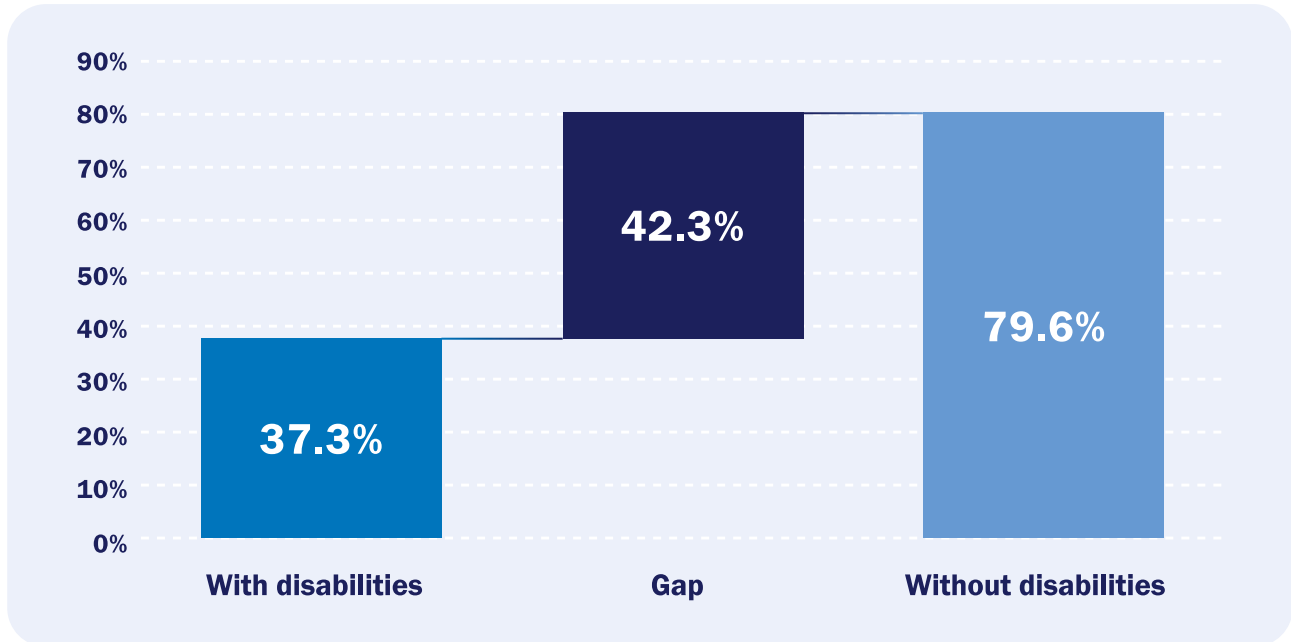
Non gender based inequalities

Aside from key disparities in the labour market for males and females, there are other notable inequalities.

When analysing key labour market indicators, the largest inequality exists for those with and without disabilities. There has been a broadly consistent, and large, disability employment gap since 2014³² (between 41% and 46%) and minimal improvement over time has been recorded. Figure 5.3 presents the 2021 data, demonstrating the rates and the subsequent 42pps gap.

32 [NISRA Disability Employment Gap in Northern Ireland 2020](#)

Figure 5.3: Employment rates by disability status and the disability employment gap (pps), NI, aged 16 to 64, 2021



Source: NISRA, Labour Force Survey

A similar picture is shown for economic inactivity rates, where there was a fairly consistent gap of around 40pps for those with and without disabilities.

There are also large differences between employment and economic inactivity rates by age groups. Those aged between 25 and 49 consistently have the highest employment rates, which have been higher than 80% since 2018. Since 2008, the youngest cohort (16-24) has continually experienced the lowest employment rate. Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, young people in particular have faced significant challenges due to the sectors they typically work in being hugely impacted by closures and restrictions. The 2021 gap in employment rate by age (39pps) was the largest since 2013 (40pps), driven by a sharp fall in the employment rate for 16-24 year olds between 2020 and 2021. When considering the 2021 data, the only age group to surpass pre-pandemic rates were 35-49 year olds.

Labour market data also shows varying experiences depending on geographical location. Derry City and Strabane District Council has generally had the lowest employment rate since 2009 (stands at 65% in 2021), and the highest economic inactivity rate since 2009. At the other end of the scale, higher employment rates have generally been seen for Antrim and Newtownabbey and Lisburn and Castlereagh council areas (rates estimated at around 75% for 2021). There has also been an increase in the employment rate gap between those in the most and least deprived areas between 2014 and 2017, where a fairly consistent gap of 22pps has been evident since this point.

Further inequalities exist when examined by other Section 75 groups such as religion and racial group³³. This also highlights where the inequalities are estimated to have widened in some cases.

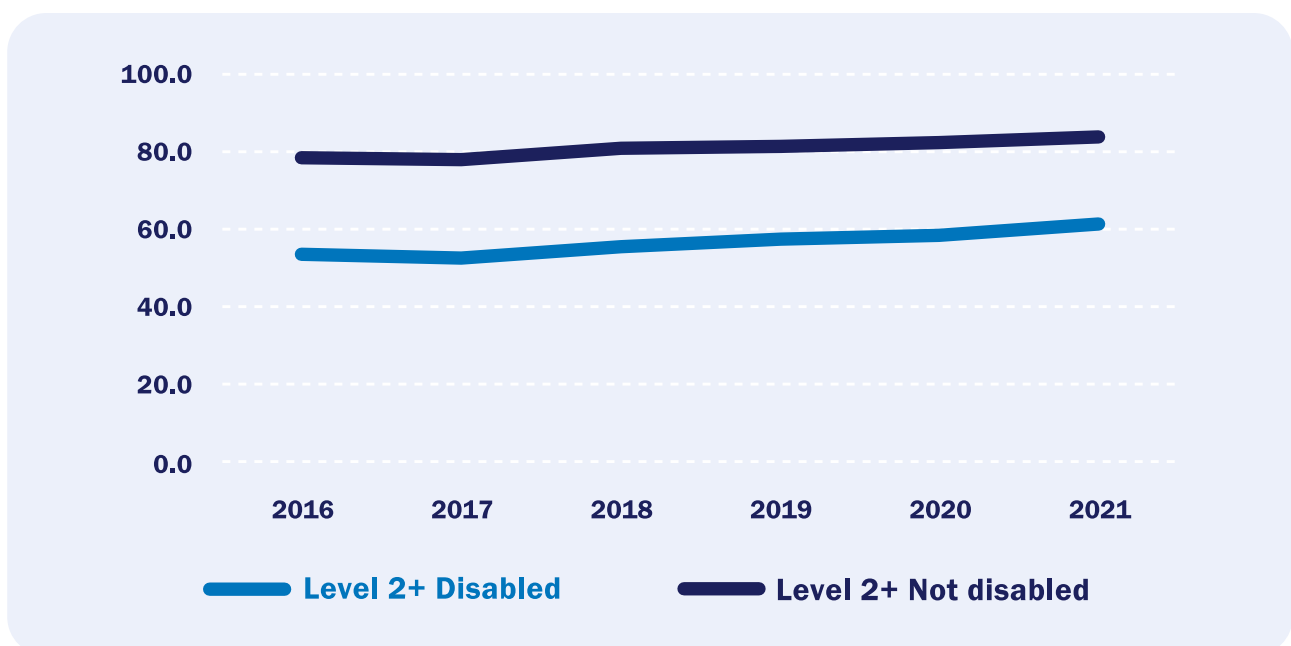
Qualification level inequalities

As highlighted in the Skills Strategy consultation, improvement in qualifications remain central to Northern Ireland’s economic development. The Strategy aims to increase the proportion of working age people in Northern Ireland who are qualified to Level 2 and above and Level 3 and above. At the NI level, there has been a general trend of growth in those qualified to Level 2 and above and Level 3 and above since 2016, driven in particular by steady growth in those holding a qualification equivalent to first or higher degree level (Level 6 and above), alongside a decline in those with no qualifications or where the highest qualification held was Level 2 or lower.

Females are estimated to be more qualified than males at both Level 2 and above and Level 3 and above, and the gap between males and females at Level 2 and above and Level 3 and above has been increasing since 2016. The gap between males and females was highest in the latest year (2021) at almost 7pps for Level 2 and above and L3 and above.

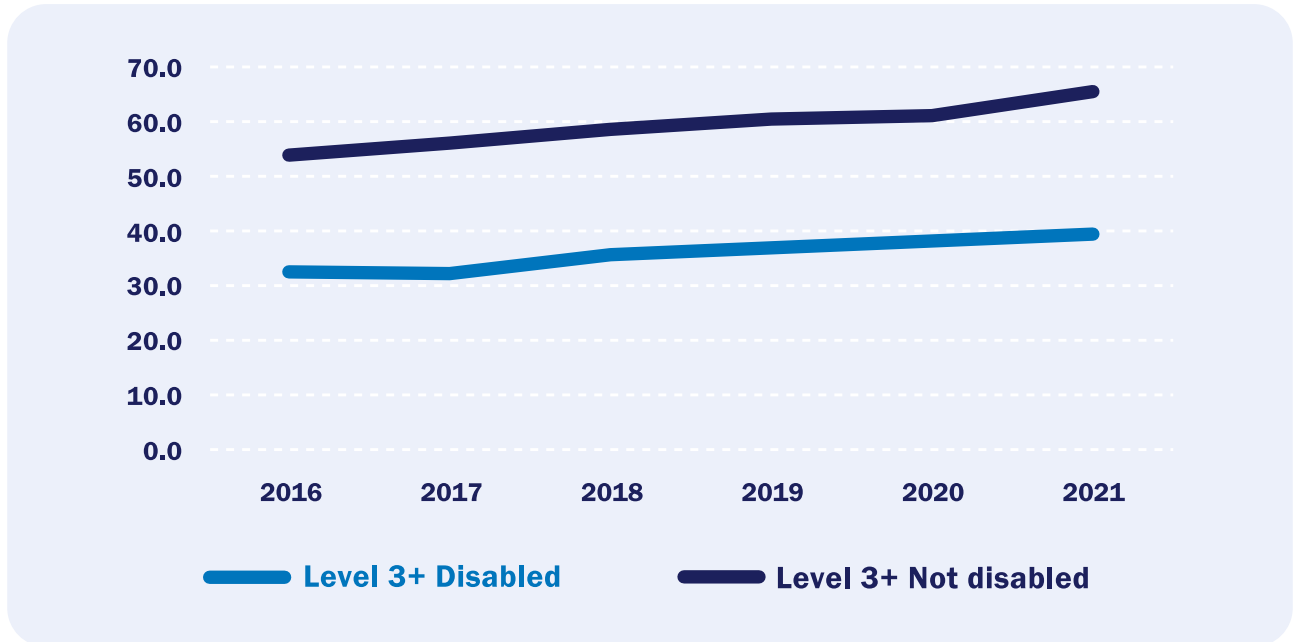
There has been a consistent trend of growth at Level 2 and above and Level 3 and above since 2017 for those with and without disabilities. However, disability status shows the largest inequality across all groups analysed, where there has been a similar gap (between 23-26pps) for those with and without disabilities qualified to Level 2 and above and Level 3 and above since 2016 (Figure 5.4/5.5)

Figure 5.4: Proportion of working age population aged 16 to 24 qualified to Level 2 and above by disability status 2014 to 2021



33 [Labour Force Survey Annual Tables 2021, NISRA](#)

Figure 5.5: Proportion of working age population qualified to Level 3 and above by disability status 2014 to 2021



Since 2016, 25 to 34 year olds consistently had the highest proportion qualified to Level 2 and above and Level 3 and above of all age groups examined (16 to 24, 25 to 34, 35 to 49, and 50 to 64). However, the only cohort which has seen consistent growth each year since 2016 at Level 2 and above and Level 3 and above are those aged 35 to 49, where the proportions of this age group qualified to these levels were similar to 25 to 34 year olds in 2021.

Those aged 16 to 24 and 50 to 64 have generally shown similar proportions qualified to Level 3 and above since 2016, which are considerably lower than those aged between 25 and 49. In 2021, it was estimated that almost 70% of 25 to 34 and 35 to 49 year olds were qualified to this level, compared to around 50% of 16 to 24 and 50 to 64 year olds.

There has been a trend of growth when examining Level 2 and above obtainment for 50 to 64 year olds (to 69% in 2021). However, this age group is consistently the lowest qualified to this level and there has been a broadly consistent gap with the highest qualified age group (25 to 34).

When comparing those who live in the most and least deprived quintiles, the gap of those qualified to Level 2 and above and Level 3 and above has been reducing since 2019 (which showed the largest gap for both levels). This is primarily being driven by an increasing proportion qualified to Level 2+ and Level 3+ in the most deprived areas than the least deprived areas.

Across all council areas, there has been a higher rate of growth at Level 3 and above since 2016 than at Level 2 and above. However, there are key disparities in the level of growth across council areas for both Level 2 and above and Level 3 and above.

Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council area had the largest proportion of people qualified to Level 2 and above and Level 3 and above for the majority of the time period since 2016, with high proportions also seen consistently in Antrim and Newtownabbey. On the other hand, lower proportions for Level 3 and above in particular were generally seen in Derry City and Strabane; Causeway Coast and Glens; and Fermanagh and Omagh council areas in the last few years.

Skills System inequalities

In 2021/22, females accounted for the vast majority of regulated Further Education (FE) sector enrolments in Health, Public Services and Care (84%); Education and Training (74%); and Retail and Commercial Enterprise (70%); while male-dominated subject areas included Construction, Planning and the Built Environment (97%); Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies (93%); and Information and Communication Technology (70%).

STEM related enrolments accounted for 36% of all regulated FE College enrolments in 2021/22, with the Narrow STEM share being 22%; it should be noted, however, that 45% of students enrolled on regulated FE courses were doing at least one STEM subject.

Although almost half (48%) of students on regulated FE courses in 2021/22 were female, males accounted for 73% of all STEM enrolments, including 78% of those in Narrow STEM. This reflects the fact that male students (60%) were over twice as likely as female students (28%) to enrol on a STEM subject; and three times as likely (42% vs 14%) to enrol on a Narrow STEM subject.

The contrast between female and male participation in STEM was even more marked in FE sector higher education (HE-in-FE). Despite females forming a slight majority (51%) of HE-in-FE students, males accounted for 76% of HE-in-FE STEM enrolments, including 83% of those in Narrow STEM. Male HE-in-FE students (59%) were over three times as likely as their female counterparts (18%) to enrol on a STEM subject; and five times as likely (50% vs 10%) to enrol on a Narrow STEM subject.

Females accounted for 83% of 2020/21 enrolments at Northern Ireland HE Institutions (NI HEIs) in Subjects allied to medicine, 80% of those in Psychology and 73% of those in Education and teaching. In contrast, males accounted for 77% of those studying Engineering and technology, 75% of Computing enrolments and 70% of Architecture, building and planning enrolments.

In 2020/21, 55% of all HE students at NI HEIs were studying a STEM related subject, with the Narrow STEM share being 25%. However, male students (38%) were more likely than female students (16%) to be enrolled on Narrow STEM subjects. As a result, although their share of STEM enrolments (58%) was close to their three-fifths (60%) share of all NI HEI enrolments, females accounted for under two-fifths (37%) of Narrow STEM enrolments.

In 2021/22, 15% of all FE sector enrolments related to students declaring at least one disability. The equivalent 2020/21 figure for HE enrolments at NI HEIs was 13%.

In part related to a demographic dip in 16-19-year-olds, and, more recently, pandemic-related GCSE and GCE grading arrangements, the FE sector student population is becoming older. Since 2017/18, the aged 25 and over share of regulated FE enrolments has increased from 25% to 28%; conversely, the proportion of those aged 19 and under has decreased from 63% to 57%.

pandemic-related A level grading arrangements in 2020 were also a factor in the 12% (7,170) increase in student enrolments at NI HEIs between 2019/20 (59,075) and 2020/21 (66,245), the largest annual increase over the past decade. Although this was also reflected in a notable increase in the HE Age Participation Index, from 51% to 56%, complementary increases in part-time and post-graduate enrolments saw the aged 25 and over share of NI HEI enrolments increase from 39% in 2019/20 to 40% in 2020/21.

NI Multiple Deprivation Measure (MDM) quintiles 4 and 5 (the least deprived areas) accounted for the joint largest share (24%) of NI domiciled enrolments at UK HEIs in 2020/21, and quintile 1 the lowest share (13%). In contrast, regulated FE sector enrolments were distributed quite evenly across quintiles 1 (21%) to 4 (19%) in 2021/22, with the lowest representation from quintile 5 (13%).

The relative deprivation picture varies considerably across and within FE colleges. For instance, MDM quintile 1 accounted for 38% of regulated enrolments at North West Regional College (NWRC) and 29% of those at Belfast Metropolitan College (BMC). Whereas quintile 5 accounted for the second highest proportion (23%) of BMC enrolments, its share of NWRC enrolments was 4%. In addition, quintile 1 enrolments were most likely to be concentrated at lower qualification levels, ranging from 29% of entry level to 17% of HE-in-FE enrolments.

Section 6: Implementation Plan

‘Skills for a 10x Economy’ included a commitment to the publication of 2, 5 and 10 year action plans developed in conjunction with the Northern Ireland Skills Council. The purpose was to recognise and address feedback related to the delivery of the previous Skills Strategy ‘Success through Skills – Transforming Futures’ that flexibility and agility was required in implementation. This first implementation plan marks out our intentions for the implementation of the 49 recommendations originally included in the Strategy and adds a 50th which has since emerged as a key piece of the strategic jigsaw: *‘to develop a delivery model for the FE Sector which is sufficiently agile to adapt quickly to changing economic conditions and skills needs.’*

In the context of delivering flexibility and agility, however, the Implementation Plan will be refreshed annually ensuring that this is a document which recognises and publicises the need for an evolving programme of work. The Skills Strategy Programme Board is committed to ongoing consultation with stakeholders, particularly through the NI Skills Council, to deliver an evolving programme of work which recognises, prioritises and responds to emerging economic and labour market need.

Due to some delay in the publication of the Strategy, the long-term timeframe of 10 years has been reduced to eight, thereby maintaining our objective to deliver on the strategic goals by 2030. **It should also be noted that, in the current context of resource uncertainty, the timeframes for the delivery of these recommendations is based on what we believe we can deliver if the requisite financial and human resources are made available.** Should this not be the case, decisions will need to be taken on prioritisation in consultation with stakeholders and reported through subsequent annual reports. **Furthermore, this Implementation Plan remains subject to change when a new minister and Executive are appointed. We anticipate that any amendments will be published.**

To provide context, this Implementation Plan cross-references the policy objectives and enablers set out in ‘Skills for a 10x Economy’.

By March 2024 we will deliver:

Addressing Skills Imbalances, Driving Economic Growth

Individuals with low or no qualifications – delivering on the Level 2 target

- DfE will continue to support and collaborate with DfC as Employability NI and the associated LMPs are implemented.
- DfC will continue to monitor the effectiveness of JobStart and collaborate with DfE to consider pathways to work for young people.

Mid-Level (Professional and Technical) Qualifications

- DfE will undertake a Review of the Survey of FE College Leavers.
- Working in conjunction with DoH we will look to pilot public sector apprenticeships for care experienced young people, aiming to tackle barriers to employment faced by this cohort and support workforce development in key public sector roles.
- Recognising the growing demand for highly skilled professionals in our health system, DfE will consider any funding proposal submitted in relation to the development of a new Nursing Higher Level Apprenticeship Framework, to support the diversity of entry points into the profession with clearly defined career progression routes.
- We will explore opportunities for public sector apprenticeships in new roles, widening our cadre of professional pathways within the Northern Ireland Civil Service.
- In line with our objective to create a culture of lifelong learning, we will introduce all age apprenticeships.
- A review of level 4 & 5 ‘HE in FE’ will conclude in Spring 2022. Recommendations and actions arising from the review will be incorporated in the implementation of the Skills Strategy³⁴.
- We will review vocational education provision in Northern Ireland to ensure that the future offer can support our vision for a 10x Economy³⁵.

Graduate and Post-Graduate Qualifications

- Recommendations on delivering better alignment between higher education outcomes and economic need will be produced by December 2022³⁶.
- We will review the Post Graduate Studentship scheme, with a strong focus on linking funding awards to the strategic clusters and enabling technologies set out in ‘10x Economy’.
- Recommendations emerging from the Women in STEM Working Group will be fully recognised in the Skills Strategy and subsequent Skills Action Plans³⁷.

Careers Provision

- We will work across the skills system to develop a set of common quality standards for the delivery of careers guidance in all settings.
- We will work to increase the quality of customer feedback and publish careers performance data in a user-friendly format.
- Working with employers and sector representatives, we will develop careers occupational information on key sectors important to the NI economy to raise awareness, among people of all ages, of skills needs, careers pathways and future job roles³⁸.

34 The review is now complete and the Department has moved to consultation in order to inform next steps regarding future policy recommendations.

35 The review is now complete and the Department has moved to consultation in order to inform next steps regarding future policy recommendations.

36 Recommendations have been developed. Engagement ongoing on implementation.

37 The Skills Strategy Programme Board will look specifically at the skills-based element of the Women in STEM Action Plan as described under the Leading Change Strand.

38 Publication has commenced and this remains an ongoing exercise: [Careers occupational information | Department for the Economy \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](https://economy-ni.gov.uk)

Creating a Culture of Lifelong Learning

- We will examine the potential to extend funding of ‘Skillup – The Flexible Skills Fund’ beyond the agreed three-year period.
- We will develop a new lifelong learning project and action plan, directly aligned to the achievement of the strategic goals set out in the new Skills Strategy.
- Under the auspices of the new Skills Strategy, DfE will develop a renewed approach to management and leadership in Northern Ireland.
- The NICS will take steps to mark itself out as a leader in the adoption of High-Performance Working Practices and the development of management and leadership skills in Senior Civil Service grades.
- We will develop a discrete, collaborative project to define what employability skills means in the NI labour market and propose a series of actions to improve the performance of our education system.
- Relevant departments, partners and stakeholders will support the development of the forthcoming Disability Employment Strategy, which will include education and skills-based actions relevant to the needs of deaf and disabled people. These actions will be incorporated in the implementation plans for ‘Skills for a 10x Economy’³⁹.

Enhancing Digital Skills, Developing Our Digital Spine

- An expert panel of individuals from business and education will be appointed to develop a specific Digital Skills Action Plan for Northern Ireland, to be jointly implemented by DfE and DE, recognising two distinct digital education pathways of ICT and Computer Science / Software Engineering.

Enhancing Policy Cohesion / Building Strong Relationships

- New stakeholder advisory groups, as related to skills policy, should only be formed in agreement with, and under the auspices of, the NI Skills Council.
- The Chair and at least eight additional members of the NISC will be appointed after open competition, conducted in accordance with CPANI guidelines.
- We will publish an annual report on progress with the implementation and emerging outcomes from Skills for a 10x Economy⁴⁰.

Investment in the Skills System

- Relevant Government departments and ALBs will contribute fully to the Independent Review of Education, announced by the Minister of Education in December 2020, to ensure our education system is sustainable, economically relevant and equipped to deliver the best outcomes for our children, young people and society as a whole.

39 The Disability Employment Strategy cannot be finalised in the absence of an Executive / relevant minister. Subject to the restoration of the Executive, we anticipate that the Disability Employment Strategy will be published by March 2024 and will incorporate a number of education and skills-based actions. The Department for Communities and the Department for the Economy continue to collaborate on the development of the Programme and, where possible, to make progress on the implementation of relevant actions.

40 This is the first Annual Report. This will be delivered each year for the lifetime of the Strategy.

By March 2027 we will deliver:

Policy Objective: Addressing Skills Imbalances, Driving Economic Growth

Individuals with low or no qualifications – delivering on the Level 2 target

- We will explore the introduction of a lifetime guarantee of access to level 2 education.
- DfE will introduce a revised Entry Level and Level 1 Programme, co-designed and informed by best practice, and our experiences on Skills for Life and Work and United Youth.
- We will examine the potential to mainstream remote learning provision in key areas of Essential Skills, employability skills and digital skills for individuals and employers.

Mid-Level (Professional and Technical) Qualifications

- DfE will complete collaborative work with the FE Sector to develop the new advanced technical award at Level 3.

Careers

- We will develop a new Careers and Skills Portal to offer more personalised and targeted careers support (BAU as reporting will come under 14 – 19 project).

Supporting Our 10x Economy

- We will develop bespoke skills action plans to support Northern Ireland's key strategic clusters.
- We will commission and respond to the findings of a skills audit to identify the skills and training needs that are required to deliver Northern Ireland's Energy Strategy.
- To develop a delivery model for the FE Sector which is sufficiently agile to adapt quickly to changing economic conditions and skills needs.
- The outcomes from the 'Transition of Young People into Careers (14 – 19) Project', jointly led by DE and DfE, will be recognised within the developing Skills Strategy framework and action plans.

Creating a Culture of Lifelong Learning

- We will develop, and consult on, legislation to introduce training leave allowances for Northern Ireland employees.
- We will work with the FE Sector to examine the development of remote / blended modular learning approaches, tailored to the needs of individuals and employers.
- We will introduce a business pledge to recognise and promote employers who actively engage with the principles of the work quality indicators.

Enhancing Policy Cohesion / Building Strong Relationships

- The NISC should undertake a review and rationalisation exercise to minimise duplication and ensure clarity of purpose among existing advisory bodies.

Investment in the Skills System

- A ring-fenced skills fund will be introduced to provide new opportunities in the labour market and support the skills development of the working age population, as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic and prepare for the economic changes brought about by our exit from the EU.

By March 2030 we will deliver:

Creating a Culture of Lifelong Learning

- We will continue to develop data and implement new, evidence-based approaches to address educational underachievement in areas of socio-economic disadvantage. (This focuses on continued implementation of the response to Fair Start (DE) and development of LEO (DfE)).
- All relevant government departments will support the development of the Executive's Childcare Strategy.
- We will work to increase participation in adult learning from a baseline of 18.2% to the UK average of 25% by 2030.

Delivered

Addressing Skills Imbalances, Driving Economic Growth

Careers Provision

- We will commission an independent review of how careers support is delivered across the skills system. *Report published in March 2022. Need to consider whether a further project should come under Programme.*

Investment in the Skills System

- A Northern Ireland Skills Council will be established to support the implementation of 'Skills for a 10x Economy'.
- A cross-departmental NICS Management Board will sit under the NISC to advise on policy and ensure actions are operationalised in a cohesive way, which maximises impact for citizens.
- A Skills Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Sub-committee of the NISC will be established.
- The new Skills Strategy will be underpinned by 2, 5, 10-year action plans, developed in conjunction with the NISC.

Not Progressing

Policy Objective: Addressing Skills Imbalances, Driving Economic Growth

Individuals with low or no qualifications – delivering on the Level 2 target

- DfC will develop and implement EES.

Enhancing Policy Cohesion / Building Strong Relationships

- The Skills Strategy will be endorsed, as a whole-of-Government Strategy, by the Northern Ireland Executive, recognising the key strategic importance of education and skills development to our social and economic prosperity.