Lifelong learning amongst adults in Ireland¹

Quarter 4 2024

May 2025



457,900

lifelong learners

+18%

(or 69,200 extra people)

Learning type²

153,400 Engaged in formal learning

345,200 Engaged in non-formal learning

The number of adults engaging in lifelong learning activities has grown by

76,800 since quarter 4 2019

and by

141,300

since quarter 4 2022



Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data. Excludes not stated.

- 1 The SLMRU are grateful to the CSO for facilitating access to the Labour Force Survey Research Microdata Files. The results in this report are based on analysis of strictly controlled Research Microdata Files provided by the Central Statistics Office (CSO). The CSO does not take any responsibility for the views expressed or the outputs generated from this research.
- 2 Some learners participate in both formal and non-formal learning activities but are counted only once in the data. As a result, the total number of lifelong learning participants is less than the sum of formal and non-formal (job-related and other) learning. Excludes not stated.

Introduction

Adult engagement in lifelong learning activities offers possibilities for individuals to upskill, retrain, or pursue new career paths, which in turn fosters occupational mobility, supports economic growth, and promotes social cohesion. Continuous skilling in the workplace is needed more than ever as workers and employers adapt to new challenges arising from technological advancements, shifts in global economics, as well as priorities including the green economy, innovation and economic resilience.

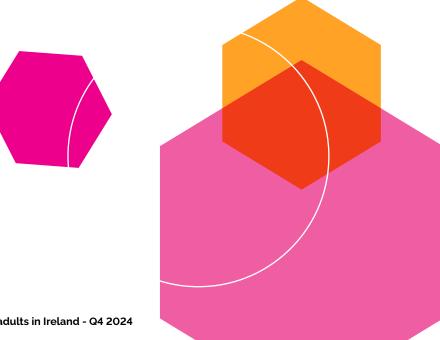
This paper, produced by the Skills and Labour Market Unit in SOLAS aims to monitor Ireland's progress in relation to the participation of adults in learning activities. Using the CSO's Labour Force Survey (LFS), we provide a profile of lifelong learning participants in Ireland and monitor the extent to which different population cohorts vary in terms of the share that engaged in lifelong learning (participation rate). EU data for quarter 4 2024 is from Eurostat.

Definitions

EU and CSO measures of lifelong learning activities and their components are based on Eurostat's Classification of Learning Activities and comprise formal, non-formal and informal education and training. However, statistics presented in the CSO's Labour Force Survey as well as in the Eurostat data refer to individuals aged 25-64 years who had engaged in formal and/or non-formal learning activities only.

Formal education corresponds to education and training in the regular system of schools, universities, colleges and other formal educational institutions that normally constitute a continuous 'ladder' of full-time education for children and young people.

Non-formal education and training is defined as any organised and sustained educational activities that do not correspond to the definition of formal education. It may or may not take place in educational institutions and cater to persons of all ages. It may cover educational programmes to impart adult literacy, basic education for out-of-school children, life skills, work skills and general culture.



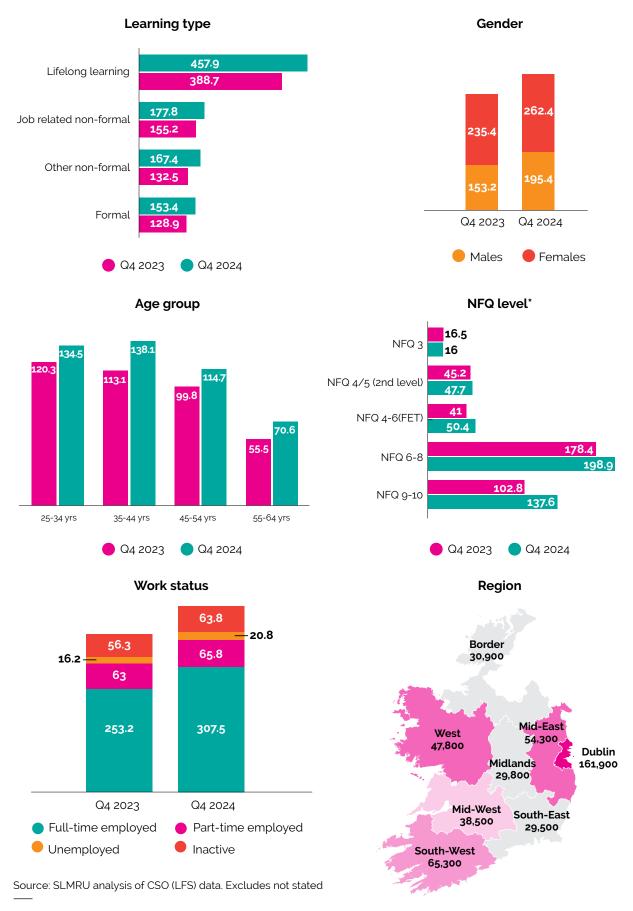
Who are Ireland's lifelong learning participants?

As shown in Figure 1,

- There were 457,900 lifelong learning participants (aged 25-64 years) in quarter 4 2024; of these the largest number (177,800 persons, representing nearly two fifths of the total) had engaged in job-related non-formal learning activities. The number of learners increased across all learning types when compared to quarter 4 2023.
- Females outnumbered males: in quarter 4 2024, females accounted for over one half (57%, or 262,400 persons) of all lifelong learning participants; while there were increases in the number of both male and female learners in the year since quarter 4 2023, the increase for males was stronger, with 42,200 additional male learners (+28%) compared to 27,000 additional females (+11%).
- The majority were aged less than 45 years: in quarter 4 2024, there were 272,000 learners aged between 25 and 44 years, accounting for 60% of total learners. Numbers increased in all age groups when compared to one year earlier, but the largest absolute increase was for 35-44-year-olds (+25,000 learners), while the largest relative growth was for persons aged 55-64 years (+27%).
- Most lifelong learners were well educated:³ in quarter 4 2024, nearly three quarters (73%, or 336,500 persons) held higher education qualifications, spanning levels 6-10 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). More than one half of the total increase in lifelong learning that occurred between quarter 4 2023 and quarter 4 2024 was due to a 34% rise (34,800 additional learners) for those holding postgraduate qualifications at levels 9 or 10. The only group to experience a fall in participant numbers was those with at most NFQ level 3 qualifications (for whom the 3% fall translated into just 500 fewer learners).
- More than two thirds of participants were in full-time employment: with 54,300 additional lifelong learning participants, persons in full-time employment accounted for nearly four fifths (78%) of the total increase in lifelong learning observed between quarter 4 2023 and quarter 4 2024.
- More than one third of lifelong learning participants (35%, or 161,900 persons) were in the **Dublin** region, with a further 14% and 12% in the **South West** region and **Mid-East** region, respectively. When compared to quarter 4 2023, the largest relative increase in lifelong learning participants was in the Midlands region (+43%) but given that this region has one of the smallest populations, this translated into just 8,900 additional learners.

³ Excludes lifelong learning participants who did not state their highest level of education attained.

Figure 1. Lifelong learners (000s) by type⁴, gender, age, NFQ level, work status & region, Q4 2023

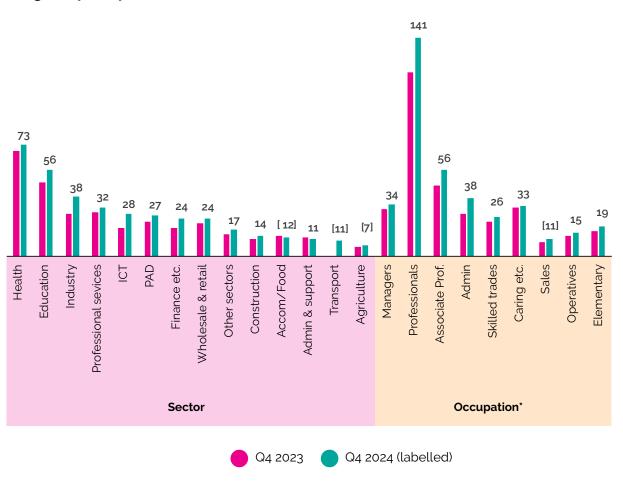


⁴ Nearly 41,000 persons participated in both formal and non-formal learning in quarter 4 2024 (up from nearly 28,000 one year earlier). As a result, the total number of lifelong learning participants is less than the sum of formal and non-formal (job-related and other) learning. Excludes not stated.

Figure 2 provides a profile of learners in employment by occupation and sector:

- Occupation: the majority (62%, 230,300 persons) worked in high skilled occupations
 (i.e. managers, professionals or associate professionals). When compared to one
 year earlier, the largest increase in participant numbers was for those in professional
 occupations, where there were an additional 22,100 learners, although in relative terms
 the increase for administrative occupations was strongest (+36%, or 10,000 additional
 learners).
- Sector: nearly one fifth (72,500 learners) worked in the health sector. Industry and health
 had the largest absolute increases in the number of lifelong learning participants, at
 10,000 and 8,000 extra learners respectively.

Figure 2. Employed lifelong learning participants by occupation and sector, Q4 2023 & Q4 2024



Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data. *Excludes not stated. Numbers in square brackets are based on small cell values and should be interpreted with caution. Numbers for transport in Q4 2023 were too small to report and therefore do not appear in the graph.

Who was most likely to participate in lifelong learning in Q4 2024?

The overall **lifelong learning rate in quarter 4 2024 was 16**%, two percentage points (pps) higher than in quarter 4 2023. The largest component was job-related non-formal learning, at 6.2%, followed by other (non-job-related) non-formal learning (5.9%). As shown in Figure 3, lifelong learning participation rates

- were higher for females (at 18%) than for males (14%).
- declined with age: the older the age cohort, the lower the lifelong learning participation rate, with the rate for persons aged 55-64 years (11.4%) being almost half that of 25-34-year-olds (20.4%).
- increased with educational attainment: at 18.4% in quarter 4 2024, adults with third level qualifications at NFQ levels 6-8 were more than three times more likely to participate in lifelong learning compared to those with, at most, a level 3 (e.g. Junior Cert) qualification (5.6%). Persons with postgraduate qualifications (NFQ levels 9 and 10) had the highest lifelong learning rate at 26%.
- were highest for unemployed persons: more than one quarter of all unemployed persons had engaged in lifelong learning activities in the preceding four weeks, although in absolute terms they represent the smallest numbers (see Figure 1).

When compared to quarter 4 2023, lifelong learning participation rates increased for all groups outlined in Figure 3: the largest percentage point increases were for

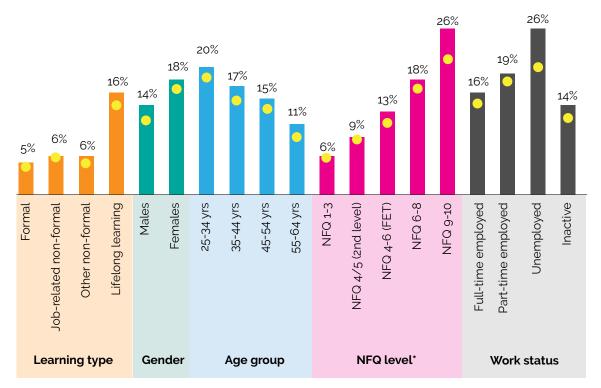
- the unemployed (+6.3 pp), although the numbers involved are small (see Figure 1)
- postgraduate qualification holders at NFQ levels 9 & 10 (+4.0 pp)
- and persons aged 35-44 years (+2.9 pp)

Figure 4 shows lifelong learning rates amongst the employed:

- Sector: lifelong learning participation rates tended to be highest for those working in the public sector related areas of health, education and public administration and defence (PAD) and lowest amongst those working in the construction, transport and wholesale/retail sectors.
- Occupations: at 22.7% and 17.6% respectively, professional and caring occupations
 (e.g. healthcare & childcare workers) had the highest rates in quarter 4 2024, well above
 the average for all employed persons of 16.1%. Associate professionals (17.1%) and
 administration occupations (16.9%) also had above average participation rates.

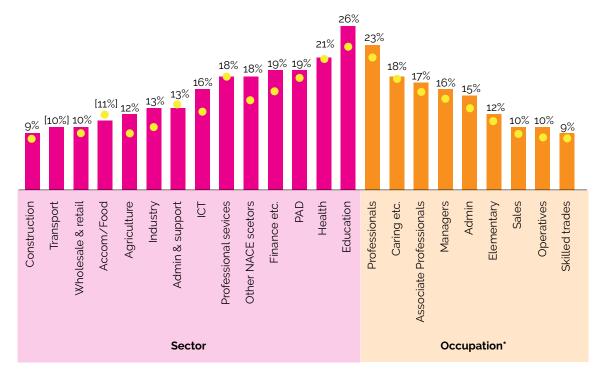
When compared to quarter 4 2023, lifelong learning rates increased across all occupational groups and most economic sectors. The only sectors to experience a decline in lifelong participation rates were accommodation/food (-1.5 pp) and administration/support activities (-0.9 pp).

Figure 3. Lifelong learning participation rates by type⁵, gender, age group, NFQ level, work status, Q4 2023 (dots) & Q4 2024 (Labelled)



Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data. *Excludes not stated.

Figure 4. Lifelong learning participation rates amongst the employed by sector and occupation*, Q4 2023 (dots), & Q4 2024 (Labelled)

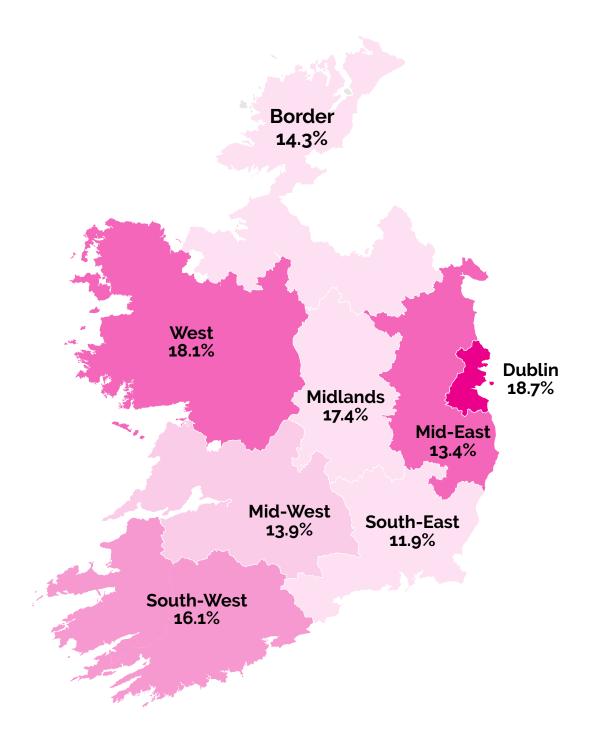


Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data. *Excludes not stated; Numbers in square brackets are based on small cell values and should be interpreted with caution. Numbers for transport in Q4 2023 were too small to report and therefore do not appear in the chart above.

⁵ Some learners participated in both formal and non-formal learning activities and as a result the total lifelong learning rates is slightly lower than the sum of rates by learning type.

Lifelong learning rates varied by region (Figure 5). Four regions had lifelong learning rates that exceeded the 15% target set out in the National Skills Strategy: Dublin (18.7%), West (18.1%), Midlands (17.4%), and South West (16.1%).

Figure 5. Lifelong learning participation rates by region, quarter 4 2024



Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data; Excludes not stated

How has lifelong learning in Ireland changed since before the pandemic?

Key Points

At nearly 458,000 persons in quarter 4 2024, **the number of lifelong learners** (aged 25-64 years) in Ireland reached its highest level to date in quarter 4 2024, with most of the increases occurring in the two years between quarter 4 2022 and quarter 4 2024.

The lifelong learning **participation rate** also reached its highest level ever, at 16% in quarter 4 2024.

When compared to quarter 4 2019, lifelong learning participation rates grew for most cohorts, regardless of learning type, gender, age group or work status. Due to shifts in the education profile of Ireland's adult population, however, there was little change in the participation rates amongst the different educational attainment groups.

In terms of numbers, the increases were driven in particular by

- adults who had engaged in non-formal learning activities: when compared to quarter 4 2019, there were an additional 65,500 non-formal learners (compared to just 25,500 extra formal learners).
- those in employment: with 71,800 additional learners, workers accounted for over 90% of the total growth in lifelong learning participant numbers over the period quarter 4 2019-quarter 4 2024; of these, the vast majority were in full-time employment.
- third level qualification holders (NFQ 6-10): there were 85,300 additional learners
 (compared to quarter 4 2019) with third level education, which was more than enough to offset declines that occurred in the number of participants at lower levels of the NFQ.⁶

Over the period quarter 4 2019-quarter 4 2024, lifelong learning participant numbers in Ireland fluctuated considerably. Numbers (and rates) declined sharply in quarter 4 2020 (coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic) but in the two years **since quarter 4 2022**, **an additional 141,300 additional persons engaged in lifelong learning activities**, more than offsetting the declines observed during the pandemic. At nearly 458,000 learners in quarter 4 2024, the number of 25-64-year-olds in Ireland who had engaged in formal and/or nonformal learning activities in the preceding four weeks reached its highest level to date.

While the population aged 25-64 years has also grown during that period (+10%, representing 271,900 extra persons)⁷, the growth in the number of lifelong learners has been stronger at 20% (+76,900 persons), with the result that the lifelong learning rate, at 16% in quarter 4 2024, reached its highest level to-date, and exceeded the 15% target set out by the then Department of Education and Skills in Irelands National Skills Strategy 2025.⁸

⁶ However, because the overall population with at most NFQ 3 and NFQ 4-5 (upper secondary) education attainment also fell in this time period, the fall in participant numbers did not translate into a fall in participation rate.

⁷ Eurostat: <u>Population by sex, age and educational attainment level</u>

⁸ National Skills Strategy 2025

Learning type: participant numbers increased for both formal and non-formal learning types, but the increase was particularly strong for non-formal learning, with 65,500 additional learners in quarter 4 2025 compared to quarter 4 2019.

Gender: females consistently had higher lifelong learning rates than males throughout the period quarter 4 2019-quarter 4 2024. The percentage point (pp) gap between males and females narrowed during the pandemic due to a particularly sharp fall in the number of females participating in lifelong learning activities during that period (especially in quarter 4 2020, but again in quarter 4 2022). However, while the pp gap widened since again to 4 pp in quarter 4 2024, it is slightly below the 4.5 pp gap observed in quarter 4 2019.

Education (NFQ) level: there was very little change in the rates observed in quarter 4 2019 and quarter 2024, with differences of just half a percentage point or less observed across education levels between the two time periods.

However, it should be noted that there have been notable shifts in the education attainment profile of Ireland's adult population over this period, with 413,500 additional third level qualification holders in this age cohort and 122,700 fewer persons with at most NFQ level 3 qualifications⁹ when compared to quarter 4 2019. As a result, even though the lifelong learning participation rates across education levels showed little change, **the absolute numbers of learners who held third level qualifications increased by 85,300** (+34%), while the number holding at most an NFQ level 3 qualification fell by 5,000 (-24%).

Age group: participation rates and numbers increased for all age groups, albeit only marginally for 25-34-year-olds, with rates of 19.6% and 20.4% in quarter 4 2019 and quarter 4 2024, respectively (an additional 14,700 learners). The largest percentage point increase was for 45-54-year-olds (+1.9 pp), which corresponded to an additional 27,000 learners over the five-year period.

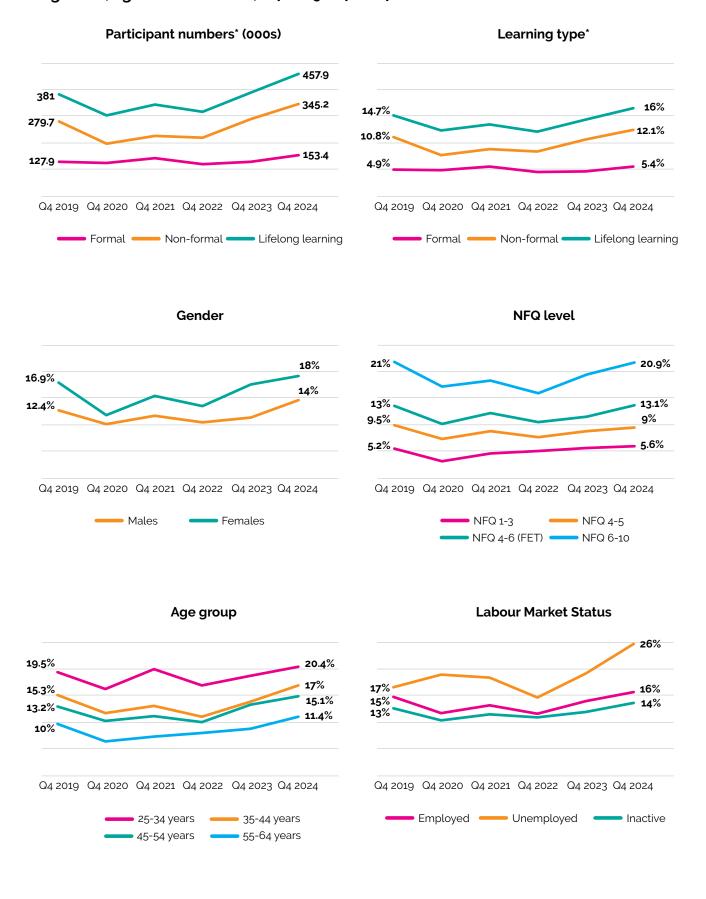
Work status: regardless of work status, lifelong learning rates grew for each group between quarter 4 2019 and quarter 4 204. At nearly nine percentage points, the increase was strongest in relative terms for the unemployed, although, given the low unemployment levels in Ireland at present, this translated into just 6,800 extra learners.

The largest absolute increase was for the employed, with 71,800 extra learners, despite a comparatively small percentage point increase of just one point to reach 16.1%. Although the rate for economically inactive persons also grew (+1.2 pp), the number of learners actually fell slightly (by 1,600 people); this was due to the fact that the total number of economically inactive people aged 25-64 years fell over the five-year period (by 10%, or 54,500 fewer people).¹⁰

⁹ Source: Eurostat: Population by sex, age and educational attainment level (1 000), Data extracted 04.04.2025. https://doi.org/10.2908/LFSQ_PGAED

¹⁰ Source: Eurostat Population by sex, age, citizenship and labour status (1 000). https://doi.org/10.2908/LFSQ_PGANWS_

Figure 6. Lifelong learning participants by type & participation rates by type, gender, age and NFQ level, Q4 2019-Q4 2024*

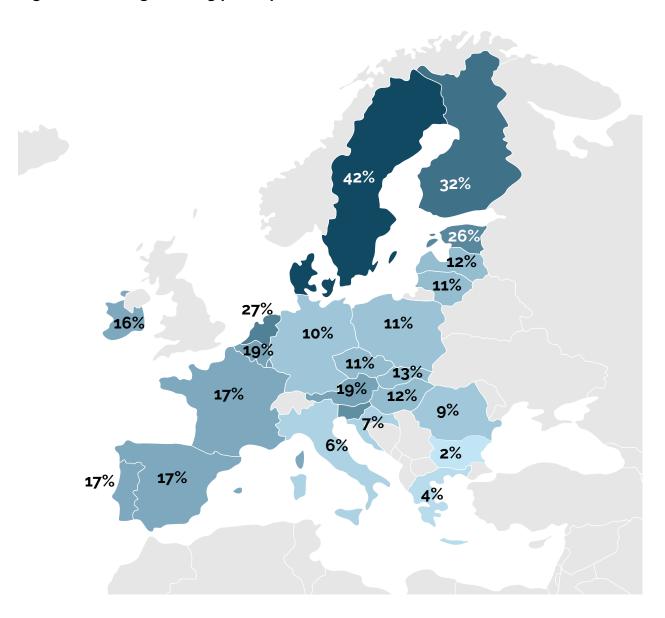


Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS data). *Excludes not stated *Note: in Q4 2021, there was a break in time series (mostly related to types of non-formal learning)

How did Ireland compare to other EU countries in quarter 4 2024?

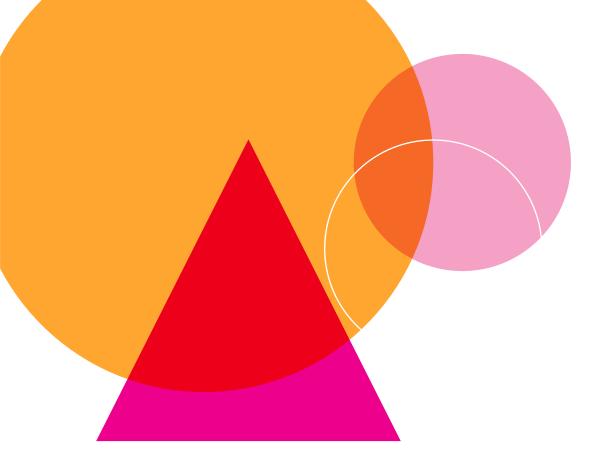
Figure 7 shows lifelong learning participation rates across EU 27 countries in quarter 4 2024. Rates ranged from 2% in Bulgaria to 42% in Sweden. At 16%, Ireland ranked in 14th place, just above the EU average of 14% but well behind the top performing countries of Sweden (42%), Finland (32%), and Denmark (32%).

Figure 7. Lifelong learning participation across EU 27 countries, Q4 2024



Source: Eurostat¹¹

¹¹ Population by sex, age and participation in education and training (last 4 weeks). https://doi.org/10.2908/LFSQ_PGAIED



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