

Expert Group publishes report on Lifelong Learning participation in Ireland

Ireland's rates below EU average

Early implementation of measures in the National Skills Strategy key to improving participation levels

The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN), today 29 July 2016, published a report on Lifelong Learning in Ireland. The report, which was prepared by the Skills and Labour Market Research Unit in SOLAS on behalf of the Group, finds that the participation rate of adults in Ireland in Lifelong Learning lags behind the European average. In 2014, our participation rate of just under 7% was well below the EU average of almost 11%. Furthermore, the gap between Ireland's participation rate and the EU average widened between 2009 and 2014.

More recent data from the CSO's Quarterly National Household Survey shows that in Quarter 4 of 2015, Ireland's participation in Lifelong Learning was 7.2%. Other key findings in the EGFSN report are:

- of the population of almost 2.5 million adults aged 25-64 in Ireland, 177,300 people participated in Lifelong Learning activities in Quarter 4 2015;
- the majority of these (amounting to 116,700 persons) participated in formal learning activities (i.e. education and training in the regular system of schools, universities, colleges and other formal educational institutions);
- the remainder participated in non-formal learning activities (i.e. other organised and sustained educational activities which may or may not take place in educational institutions);
- with a participation rate of 8%, females were more likely than males (at 6.3%) to participate in Lifelong Learning, particularly in non-formal learning activities;
 - o lifelong learning participation rates tend to decline with age, but participation is greater amongst those with higher educational attainment levels;
- participation rates were above the national average for the economically inactive and the unemployed, while the rate was below the national average for those in employment;
- Ireland's participation rate in non-formal learning is particularly low, although its rate of formal learning is amongst one of the highest in the EU.

Speaking at the publication of the report *Lifelong Learning Participation Amongst Adults in Ireland*, the Chair of the EGFSN, Una Halligan, said:

“The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs is concerned that Ireland’s participation in Lifelong Learning has been consistently below the EU average, particularly for those in employment. We have a well-educated and highly skilled labour force, but it is important that people of all ages and at all educational levels participate in learning and upskilling on an on-going basis in order to sustain their employability. All forms of learning, whether formal or non-formal, contribute to the skills enhancement and personal development of individuals.

The continuous training and up-skilling of people in the workforce is particularly important in maintaining the competitiveness of Irish-based businesses and in ensuring that employees’ skills do not become obsolete. For wider society, research points to positive social effects of Lifelong Learning on personal development, health and quality of life, and on civic participation.

Ms. Halligan added: “If anticipated skills needs or shortages in the economy are to be addressed, there is a need for industry and Government to invest more in this area. There are proven returns from investment in on-going employee training and development in terms of productivity, job satisfaction and staff retention. We need to create a culture of Lifelong Learning in Ireland, with shared responsibility on the part of employers, education and training providers, Government, and learners themselves. The greatest progress towards improving our Lifelong Learning rate could be expected to come from expanding opportunities for non-formal learning, especially in the workplace.”

The National Skills Strategy, published in January 2016, recognises the importance of Lifelong Learning and includes a target of increasing the participation rate amongst adults to 10% in the medium-term.

Commenting on the Skills Strategy, Ms. Halligan concluded: “The Expert Group welcomes the emphasis which is placed on Lifelong Learning in the National Skills Strategy 2025 and calls for the early implementation of the measures set out in the Strategy as key to improving Ireland’s Lifelong Learning participation rates. These include increased promotion of the benefits of Lifelong Learning among the general population, benchmarking the level of investment by businesses in workforce training, appropriate approaches to funding of education and training providers that support flexible learning opportunities, and promoting the dissemination of good practice in the Recognition of Prior Learning.”

The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs will continue to monitor participation rates in Lifelong Learning on an annual basis.

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NOTES FOR EDITORS

About the EGFSN

The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) advises the Irish Government on current and future skills needs of the economy and on related labour market issues. It has a central role in ensuring that labour market needs for skilled workers are anticipated and met. Established in 1997, the EGFSN reports jointly to the Minister for Education and Skills and the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation.

The Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, in conjunction with the Skills and Labour Market Research Unit in SOLAS, provide the EGFSN with research and analysis support.

Report on Lifelong Learning

The EGFSN/SOLAS report on *Lifelong Learning Participation Amongst Adults in Ireland* is available on the EGFSN's website, www.skillsireland.ie.

Lifelong Learning comprises formal, non-formal and informal education and training. However, statistics presented in the QNHS and Eurostat data do not cover informal learning and the data in the EGFSN publication refers to the individuals aged 25-64 years who engaged in formal and 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.

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, life skills, work skills, or skills for social and/or personal purposes.

The European Union has set a target for 15% of adults (aged 25-64) to participate in Lifelong Learning by 2020. According to Eurostat, the average participation rate for the EU-28 in 2014 was 10.7%¹.

Continuing technological advances, shifts in business processes, an ageing workforce and the globalisation of markets, amongst other factors, are placing new and more sophisticated skills demands on the labour force. Almost all occupations are becoming more knowledge-based, requiring an increasing mix of generic and domain-specific skills. With the shelf life of skills becoming shorter, engagement in Lifelong Learning for those in employment will be key to their continued employability.

¹ See: <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=tsdsc440&plugin=1>

Research shows that low skilled and older workers are less likely to be offered or to seek upskilling from employers, but they are also the most vulnerable to ongoing changes within the workplace.

National Skills Strategy 2025

Ireland's new National Skills Strategy 2025 – Ireland's Future – was published in January 2016. The Strategy identifies Ireland's current skills profile, provides a strategic vision and specific objectives for Ireland's future skills requirements, and sets out a road map for how the vision and objectives can be achieved.

The Strategy has been developed around six key objectives and a set of actions and measures aimed at improving the development, supply and use of skills over the next 10 years. The six key objectives set out in the Skills Strategy are:

1. Education and training providers will place a stronger focus on providing skills development opportunities that are relevant to the needs of learners, society and the economy.
2. Employers will participate actively in the development of skills and make effective use of skills in their organisations to improve productivity and competitiveness.
3. The quality of teaching and learning at all stages of education will be continually enhanced and evaluated.
4. People across Ireland will engage more in lifelong learning.
5. There will be a specific focus on active inclusion to support participation in education and training and the labour market.
6. Support for an increase in the supply of skills to the labour market.

The National Skills Strategy is available at http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/pub_national_skills_strategy_2025.pdf.