

Adult Participation in Learning Survey 2023: Northern Ireland

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Learning and Work Institute

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Summary

Learning is crucial for life, work and society. It can help people find work, progress in or change careers, support health and wellbeing, promote social integration, and many more benefits besides. Lifelong learning will only grow in importance as the UK's population ages, people have longer working lives, and our economy and society changes.

Since 1996, Learning and Work Institute has been undertaking the Adult Participation in Learning Survey on an almost annual basis. The survey provides a unique overview of the level of participation in learning by adults, with a detailed breakdown of who participates and who does not.

Year-on-year the survey finds stark and persistent inequalities, with some groups more likely to learn as an adult than others. The 2023 survey also indicated that differences between geographical regions may be widening. With greater devolution of learning and skills policy and funding, it is important to better understand patterns of participation at a regional level.

Geographical differences in adult participation in learning can be explained by demographical differences, in other words, who lives in the nation or region concerned. But other factors, such as policy interventions, can also result in these differences. This report provides insights on adult participation in learning in Northern Ireland.

Key findings for Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, just under half (46 per cent) of adults said they have learned over the past three years, which is statistically significantly lower than the England average. Northern Ireland has the fifth lowest participation in learning rate out of the 12 UK nations and regions.

The lower participation rate in Northern Ireland can partly be explained by demographic differences. For example, in Northern Ireland only 27 per cent of the survey respondents were in the AB social grade¹, compared with 31 per cent in the UK sample. People in AB social grade are more likely to participate in learning than people in other grades.

Within Northern Ireland and as seen in the UK as a whole, there are significant inequalities between demographic groups:

- Adults in the highest social grade (AB) are significantly more likely to participate in learning than adults in other social grades.

¹ AB social grade corresponds to adults in higher and intermediate managerial, administrative, and professional occupations.

- Younger adults are significantly more likely to take up learning than older adults.
- The longer individuals remain in full-time education, the more likely they are to learn as an adult.

These inequalities are fairly similar in the other regions: the demographic groups that are less likely to participate in learning in Northern Ireland are also those that are less likely to learn in the other regions. However, **in Northern Ireland, adults aged 25-49 are significantly less likely to take part in learning than in the rest of the UK.**

In Northern Ireland, adults' motivations for learning and their method of learning are similar to the UK overall: they are more likely to be learning for work than for leisure; they are mainly learning independently or through work; and most are doing at least some of their learning online.

Survey respondents who have engaged with learning in the past three years have experienced fairly similar challenges while learning than in the rest of the UK – most commonly work and other time pressures.

Nearly four in five (78 per cent) of survey respondents who said they haven't engaged with learning in the past three years were significantly more likely to identify at least one barrier preventing them from learning than in the rest of the UK (71 per cent). Survey respondents in Northern Ireland were also significantly more likely to report dispositional barriers (58 per cent) than the rest of the UK (51 per cent).²

The survey included questions about career change. More than two in five (45 per cent) would like or need to change their career/industry/occupation in the next one or two years. In Northern Ireland, respondents were significantly more likely to say they believe people like them can change career (78 per cent), compared to the UK average (71 per cent). In Northern Ireland, **respondents are significantly more likely to say that financial support towards costs of learning/training would be most helpful to change career than in the rest of the UK.** While adults in Northern Ireland reported similar motivations and barriers to change career than in the rest of the UK, **respondents were significantly more likely to say they would go to Jobcentre Plus for advice than the UK overall (15 per cent).**

² Dispositional barriers relate to the attitudes, perceptions and expectations of adult. They include barriers such as feeling too old to learn, being put off by tests and exams, not feeling confident enough to learn.

Introduction

Learning is crucial for life, work and society. It can help people find work, progress in or change careers, support health and wellbeing, promote social integration, and many more benefits besides. Lifelong learning will only grow in importance as the UK's population ages, people have longer working lives, and our economy and society changes.

The Adult Participation in Learning Survey provides a unique insight into how many adults are taking part in learning each year, the benefits people see from learning, and the reasons why some adults say they have not taken part in learning. It does so based on a broad definition of learning, including but not limited to formal learning, courses and qualifications.

The 2023 survey shows almost one in two adults in the UK took part in learning in the last three years, the highest rate since the survey started in 1996. This continues the step change in learning participation seen since the pandemic, which followed a decade of declines in adult education budgets across the UK nations as austerity hit services.

The increase in participation since the pandemic has been driven by a rise in self-directed learning, including online. This is often for personal or leisure reasons or general interest. This is clearly positive, but other opportunities to learn have become more limited over time: employer and Government investment are down in the last decade.

There is more positive news in the narrowing over time of some inequalities in learning participation between groups. This includes by age, important given our aging population. Nonetheless, these inequalities remain stark and persistent and, in the case of regional differences, may in fact have widened in recent years.

Growth in learning participation since 2019 shows an innate interest in learning among adults. However, fewer opportunities to learn at work or take part in formal learning or courses means people face limits in the types of learning they can pursue. Learning in all its forms has value and benefits.

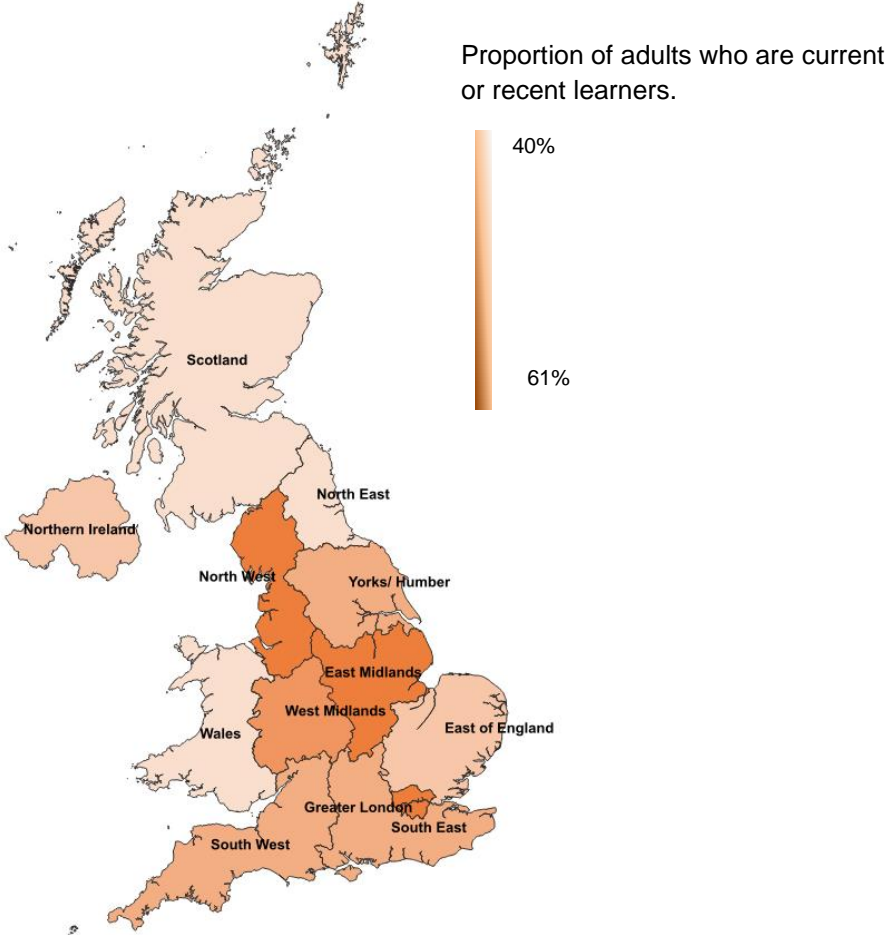
To engage more adults in learning, policymakers, commissioners and those working in learning providers need to look at people's motivations for learning. The biggest reasons adults give for not taking part in learning are cost, feeling too old, time pressures and also not wanting to / not seeing the benefits. That points to the need to build a culture of learning and offer people a range of flexible learning options.

Analysing UK's nations and regions

While increased participation in learning is encouraging, there are stark differences between the nations and regions of the UK and the survey indicates that these

inequalities have been growing since 2017.³ For example, while more than three in five adults in London have learned within the past three years, only two in five adults say are either a current or recent learners in the North East of England. Furthermore, participation rates are also lower for Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales than for England.

Figure 1: Adult participation in learning by English regions and UK nations



Source: Adult Participation in Learning Survey 2023.

However, there are also important inequalities within regions and nations, with some groups less likely to take part in learning than others. With greater policy variation across the UK, and devolution to areas of England in skills policy and funding, it is important to better understand patterns of participation across the UK nations and regions. This can help inform where interventions and support are best targeted and may make the greatest impact.

³ Hall, S., Jones E., Evans, S. (2023) [Adult Participation in Learning Survey 2023](#), Learning and Work Institute.

About the Adult Participation in Learning Survey

Since 1996, Learning and Work Institute has been undertaking the Adult Participation in Learning Survey on an almost annual basis.⁴ The survey provides a unique overview of the level of participation in learning by adults, with a detailed breakdown of who participates and who does not.

The survey deliberately adopts a broad definition of learning, including a wide range of formal, non-formal and informal learning, far beyond the limits of publicly offered educational opportunities for adults. Each year, a representative sample of approximately 5,000 adults aged 17 and over across the UK are provided with the following definition of learning and asked when they last took part, as well as how likely they are to take part in learning during the next three years:

'Learning can mean practising, studying, or reading about something. It can also mean being taught, instructed or coached. This is so you can develop skills, knowledge, abilities or understanding of something. Learning can also be called education or training. You can do it regularly (each day or month) or you can do it for a short period of time. It can be full-time or part-time, done at home, at work, or in another place like college. Learning does not have to lead to a qualification. We are interested in any learning you have done, whether or not it was finished.'

Like most of our surveys in recent years, the 2023 survey explores who participates in learning; motivations and barriers; how learning is undertaken; and benefits experienced as a result of learning. It also includes questions on learning for career change.

Unlike previous years, the 2023 survey sample includes regional boosts to achieve a minimum sample size in each UK nation and region (600 for all regions apart from Northern Ireland, where the sample was boosted to 400 respondents). The boosted sample consists of 9,506 adults aged 17 and over (8,906 weighted). A total of 401 adults in the Northern Ireland took part in the survey (249 weighted).

Fieldwork was conducted between August and September 2023 by a market research company via their UK online omnibus survey. The sample has been weighted to provide a UK representative dataset, but this was not weighted to be representative of Northern Ireland's population.

To find out more about the survey series and explore trend data through our interactive charts, visit www.learningandwork.org.uk.

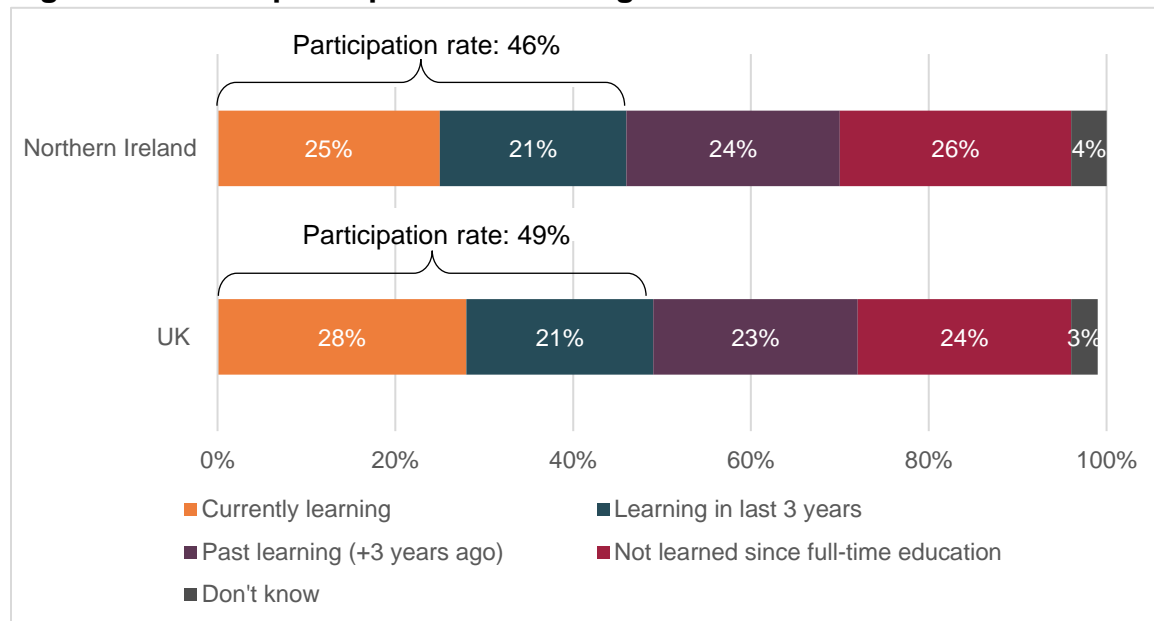
⁴ Surveys were undertaken annually from 1996 except in three years: 1997, 1998 and 2016.

Adult participation in learning in Northern Ireland

Participation in learning is slightly lower in Northern Ireland compared to the UK overall. Just under one in two adults (46 per cent) in Northern Ireland stated they are currently learning or that they have taken up learning within the past three years, compared to 49 per cent in the UK. However, the difference is not statistically significant.

One in four (25 per cent) adults in Northern Ireland said they are currently learning, with a further one in five (21 per cent) saying they have done some learning over the past three years (Figure 2). Just over one in four adults (26 per cent) said they have not done any learning since full-time education, while just under one in four (24 per cent) said they have been in learning over three years ago.

Figure 2: Overall participation in learning in Northern Ireland



Base: Northern Ireland respondents. Weighted base: = 249, unweighted base = 401.

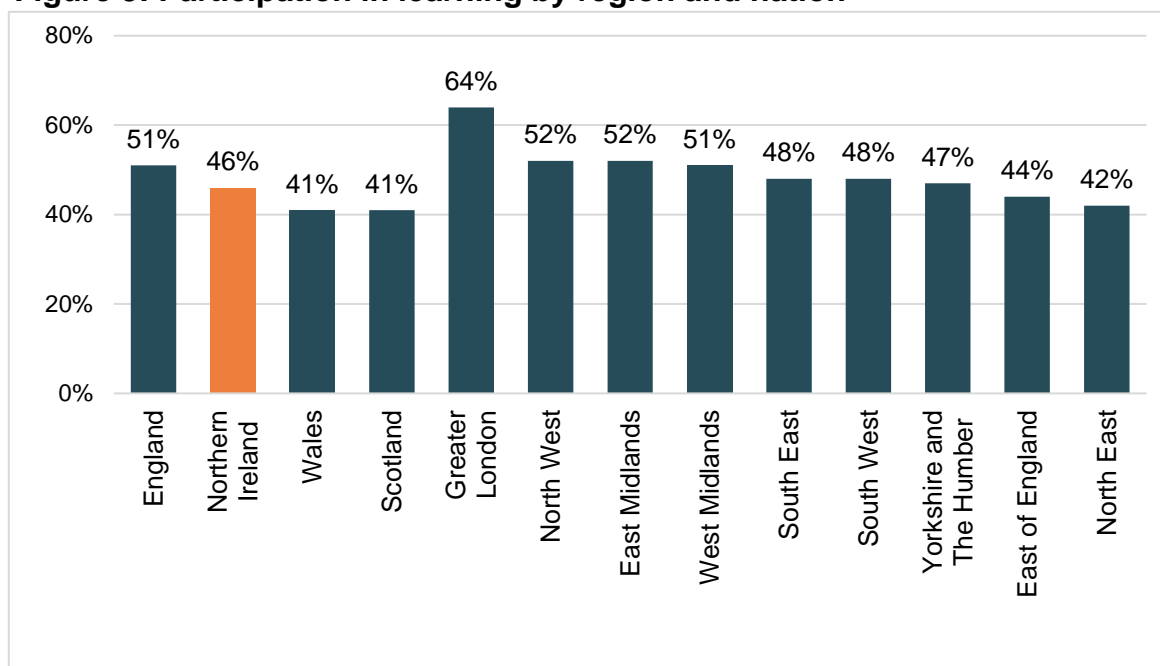
When comparing levels of participation in learning across the UK in 2023, the survey shows that the participation rate in Northern Ireland is significantly below the average in England (51 per cent). Despite being slightly higher than Wales (41 per cent) and Scotland (41 per cent), the differences aren't statistically significant (Figure 3). It should be noted that there is a bias in the sample, with a greater proportion of Northern Ireland respondents in employment compared to the other UK nations (despite Northern Ireland having a lower employment rate than other UK nations in the three months preceding January 2023).⁵ Adults in work are more likely to participate in learning than people who

⁵ Office for National Statistics (2023) Labour market in the regions of the UK: March 2023. Retrieved here: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/regionallabourmarket/march2023>

are out of work.⁶ This difference could partly explain why a higher rate of adult participation in learning rate was measured in Northern Ireland than in Wales or Scotland.

Northern Ireland has the fifth lowest participation in learning rate out of 12 regions and nations of current or recent learners. However, the proportion of current or recent learners is only statistically significantly lower than those of three other UK regions: Greater London (64 per cent), North West (52 per cent) and East Midlands (52 per cent). These regional differences can be partly explained by compositional factors – who lives in this region – as some demographic groups are more likely to participate in learning than others.

Figure 3: Participation in learning by region and nation



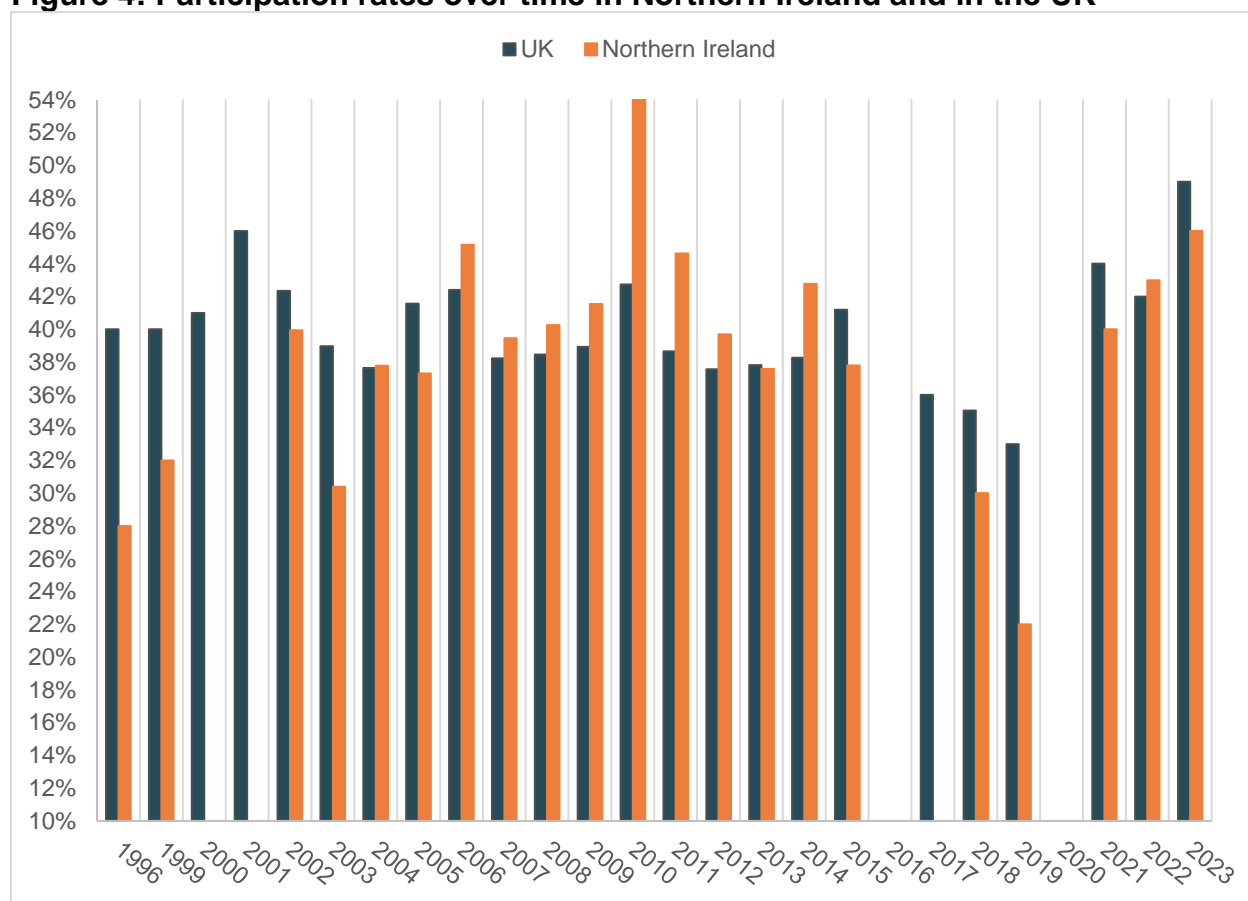
Base: all respondents. Total weighted base = 8,906, North East = 359, North West = 975, Yorkshire and The Humber = 730, East Midlands = 651, West Midlands = 782, East of England = 832, Greater London = 1,173, South East = 1,216, South West = 772, England = 7,491, Northern Ireland = 249, Scotland = 744, Wales = 422. Total unweighted base = 9,506, North East = 598, North West = 1,045, Yorkshire and The Humber = 786, East Midlands = 709, West Midlands = 834, East of England = 814, Greater London = 1,328, South East = 1,083, South West = 711, England = 7,908, Northern Ireland = 401, Scotland = 600, Wales = 597.

In the 27-year history of the survey, the participation rate in Northern Ireland has fluctuated, with no consistent level of participation in comparison to the UK average

⁶ Hall, S., Jones E., Evans, S. (2023) [Adult Participation in Learning Survey 2023](#), Learning and Work Institute.

(Figure 4).⁷ The year-on-year changes should be interpreted with caution as the volatility of the estimates are partly due to the smaller sample size at a regional level.

Figure 4: Participation rates over time in Northern Ireland and in the UK



Base: all respondents to each survey. Weighted base for 2023 = 8,906, unweighted base for 2023 = 9,506.

Demographic breakdown

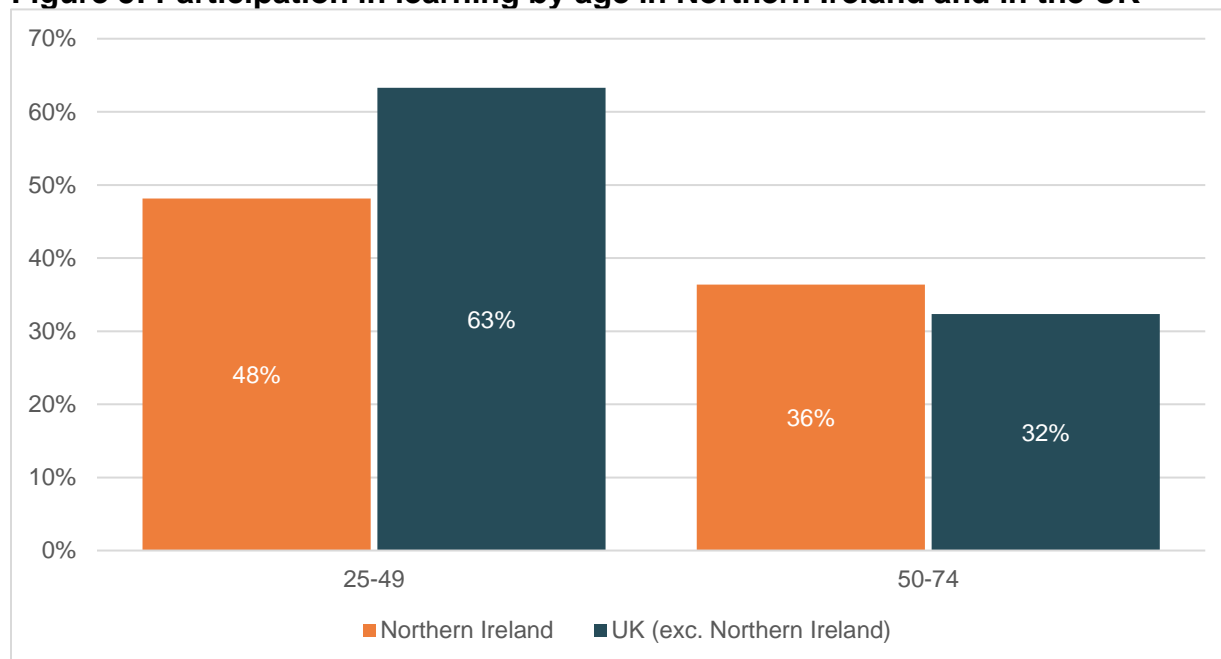
Age

The UK survey consistently shows that participation in learning decreases with age. In Northern Ireland, adults aged 25-49 are significantly more likely to say they are current or recent learners than older adults aged 50-74 (Figure 5). Just under half adults aged 25-49 (48 per cent) said they are current or recent learners, compared with just above one in three adults aged 50-74 (36 per cent).,

⁷ Note that data is available for 23 out of 27 years. The survey did not run in 1996, 1997 or 2016 and the survey did not run in Northern Ireland in 2000, 2001, 2017. The survey in 2020 was carried out using a different methodology and is therefore not comparable.

The participation rates by age in Northern Ireland are similar to the UK overall for adults aged 50-74. However, **in Northern Ireland adults aged 25-49 are significantly less likely to take part in learning than in the rest of the UK.**

Figure 5: Participation in learning by age in Northern Ireland and in the UK



Base: Northern Ireland respondents. Note 19-24 and 75+ were removed because of small sample sizes. Total weighted base = 246, 25-49 = 108, 50-74 = 110. Total unweighted base = 397, 25-49 = 181, 50-74 = 175. UK respondents. Total weighted base = 8394, 25-49 = 3448, 50-74 = 3476. Total unweighted base = 8843, 20-49 = 3637, 25-49 = 3857, 50-74 = 3573.

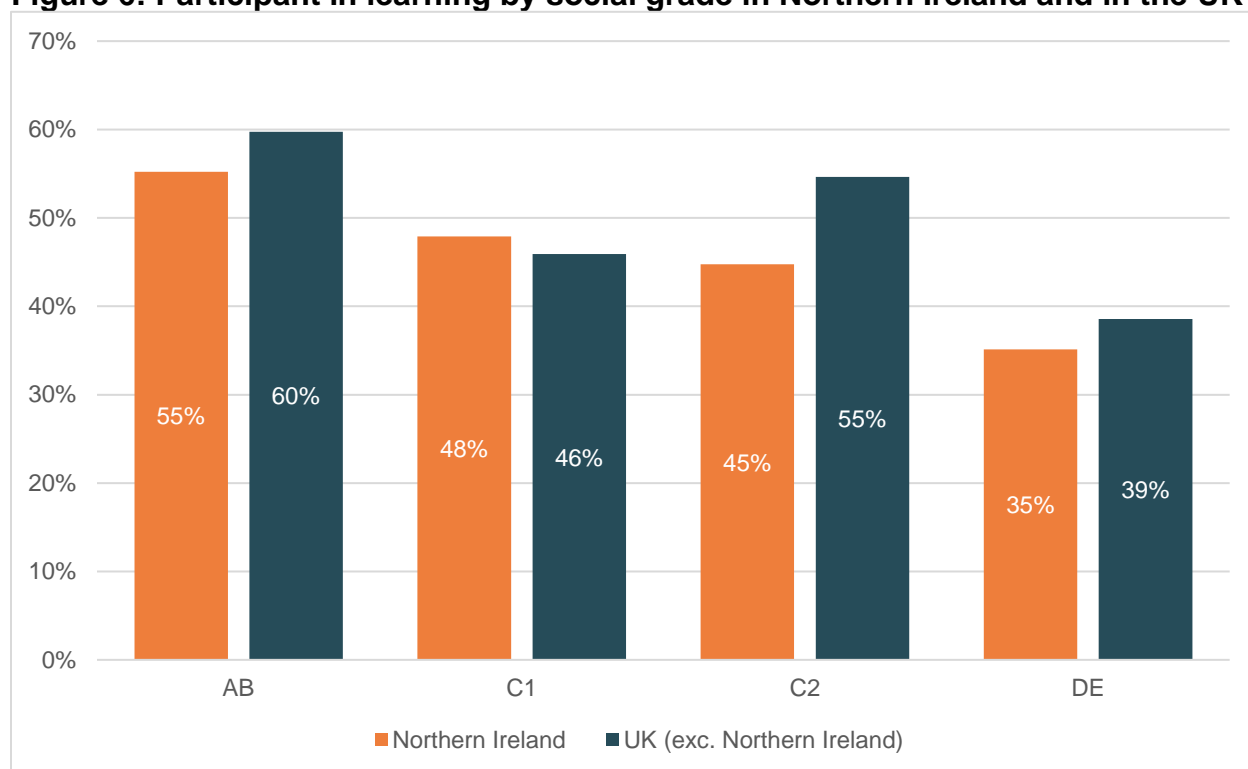
Social grade

The Adult Participation in Learning Survey consistently shows that social grade⁸ is a key predictor of participation in learning. In Northern Ireland, over half of adults (55 per cent) in the AB social grade said they are current or recent learners, compared to 48 per cent in the C1, 45 per cent in the C2 grades and 35 per cent in DE (Figure 6). Respondents in the AB social grade are significantly more likely to say they are current or recent learners compared to C2 and DE (Figure 6). Caution should be taken when interpreting these findings due to small sample sizes.

The participation rates by social grades are fairly similar to the rates in the rest of the UK for those in the AB grade (60 per cent) and C1 grade (41 per cent). While the participation rate for adults in the C1 and DE social grades are below the UK average, none of the differences are statistically significant.

⁸ Social Grade: AB: Higher and intermediate managerial, administrative, and professional occupations. C1: Supervisory, clerical, and junior managerial, administrative, and professional occupations. C2: Skilled manual occupations. DE: Semi-skilled and unskilled manual occupations; unemployed and lowest grade occupations plus economically inactive and retired.

Figure 6: Participant in learning by social grade in Northern Ireland and in the UK



Base: Northern Ireland respondents. Total weighted base = 250, AB = 67, C1 = 71, C2 = 38, DE = 74. Total unweighted base = 401, AB = 106, C1 = 114, C2 = 63, DE = 118. Base: UK (excluding Northern Ireland) respondents. Total weighted base = 8656, AB = 2716, C1 = 1952, C2 = 1468, DE = 2565. Total unweighted base = 9105, AB = 2797, C1 = 2066, C2 = 1560, DE = 2682.

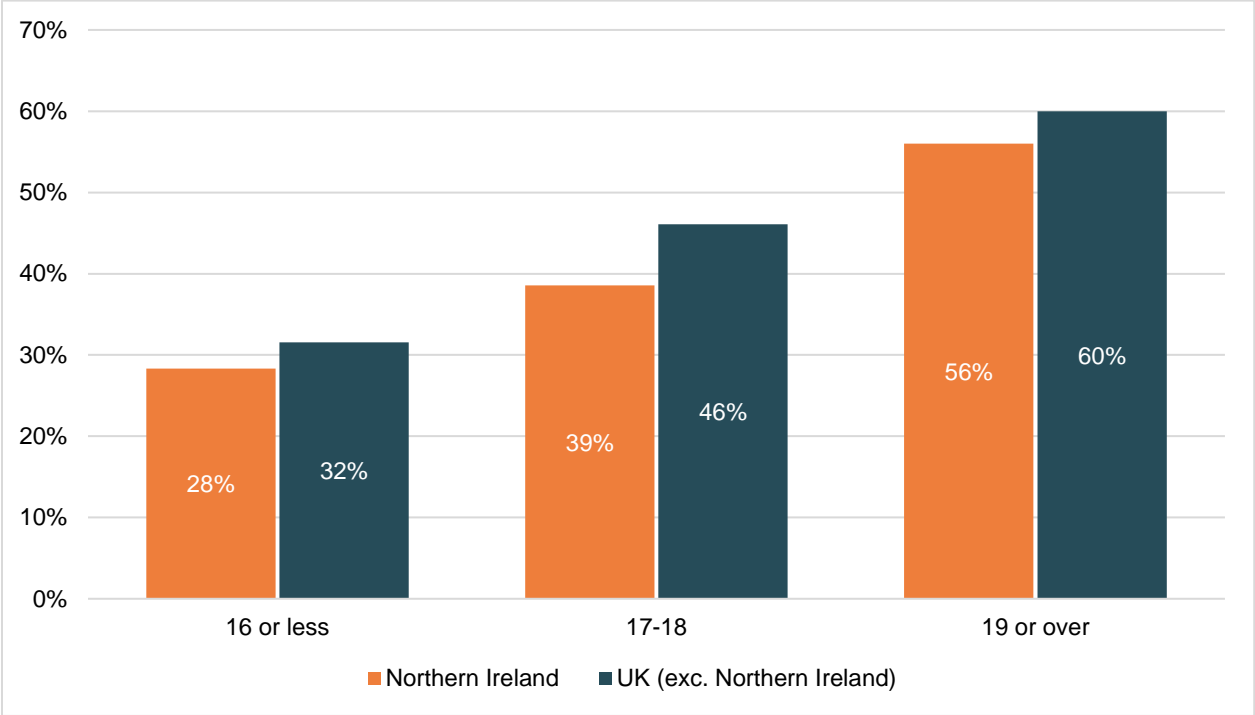
Age completed full-time education

The survey uses the age someone left full-time education as a proxy for highest level of qualification. The UK survey shows that the longer individuals remain in full-time education, the more likely they are to learn as an adult. **In Northern Ireland, adults who stayed in education until at least 19 years old are significantly more likely to learn as an adult than those who left education aged 16 or under** (Figure 7).

Just under three in ten adults (28 per cent) who left education aged 16 or under are current or recent learners, compared with two in five (39 per cent) for those who left aged 17 or 18, one in two (48 per cent) for those who left education aged 19 or 20, and 56 per cent for those who left education aged 19 or over.

In Northern Ireland, the participation rates are fairly similar to the rate for the UK overall. The participation gap between adults who left full-time education aged 16 or under and those who left aged 19 or over is 28 percentage points in both the UK and in Northern Ireland.

Figure 7: Participation in learning by age of completing full-time education in Northern Ireland and in the UK



Base: Northern Ireland respondents. Total weighted base = 244, 16 or less = 60, 17-18 = 70, 19 or over = 114. Total unweighted base = 391, 16 or less = 95, 17-18 = 111, 19 or over = 185. Base: UK respondents. Total weighted base = 8040, 16 or less = 2483, 17-18 = 1919, 19 or over = 3685. Total unweighted base = 8622, 16 or less = 2602, 17-18 = 2056, 19 or over = 3964.

Gender

In Northern Ireland, women (48 per cent) are more likely than men (44 per cent) to say they are current or recent learners. However, the differences between the two proportions are not statistically different. This is slightly different to the UK overall, where men (51 per cent) are more likely than women (47 per cent) to say they are current or recent learners.

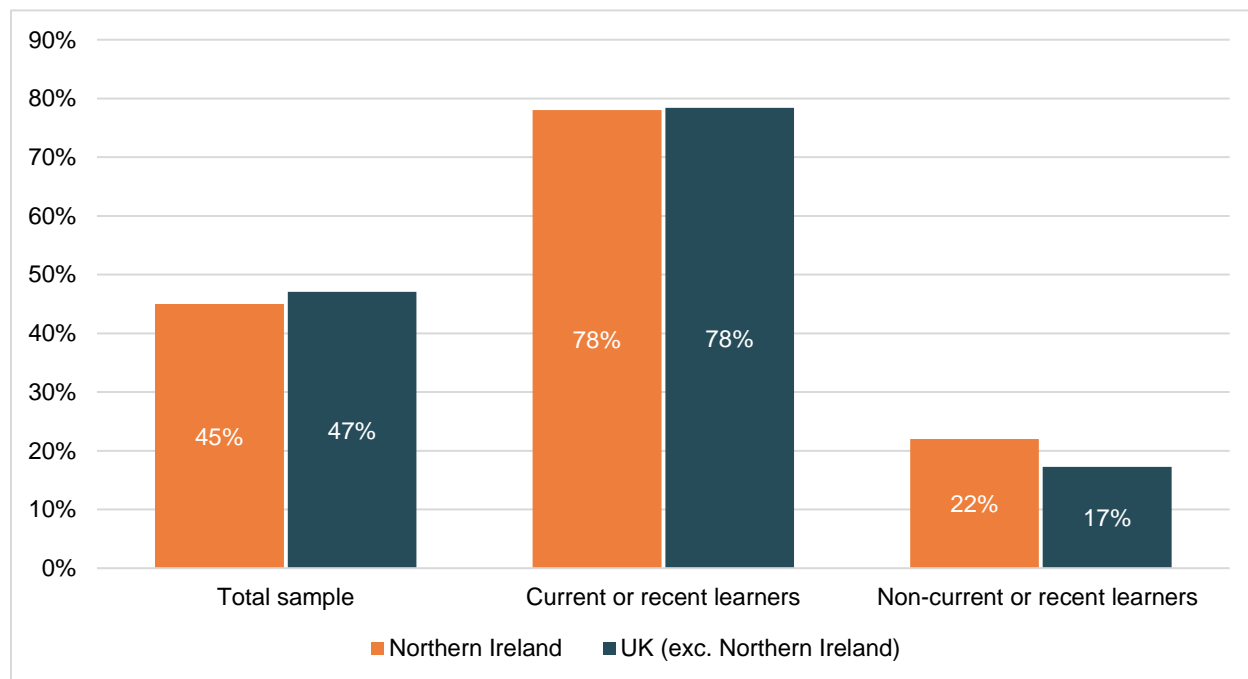
Future intentions to learn

As well as patterns and experiences of current/recent learning, the survey captures future intentions to learn. Respondents were asked about their likelihood of taking up learning in the next three years.

In Northern Ireland, 45 per cent of adults said that they are either very likely or likely to take up learning in the next three years (Figure 8). However, adults' intention to learn is highly influenced by their current learning status. Recent and current learners are significantly more likely to say they are likely to learn in the future than adults who haven't engaged with learning in the past three years. Just under four in five (78 per cent) current or recent learners said they are likely or very likely to learn in the future, compared with one in five (22 per cent) of adults who haven't engaged with learning in the past three years.

These proportions are fairly similar to the UK overall: 78 per cent of the current or recent learners said they are likely to learn in the future compared with only 17 per cent of adults who have not taken up learning over the last three years.

Figure 8: Future likelihood of learning by current learning status in Northern Ireland and in the UK



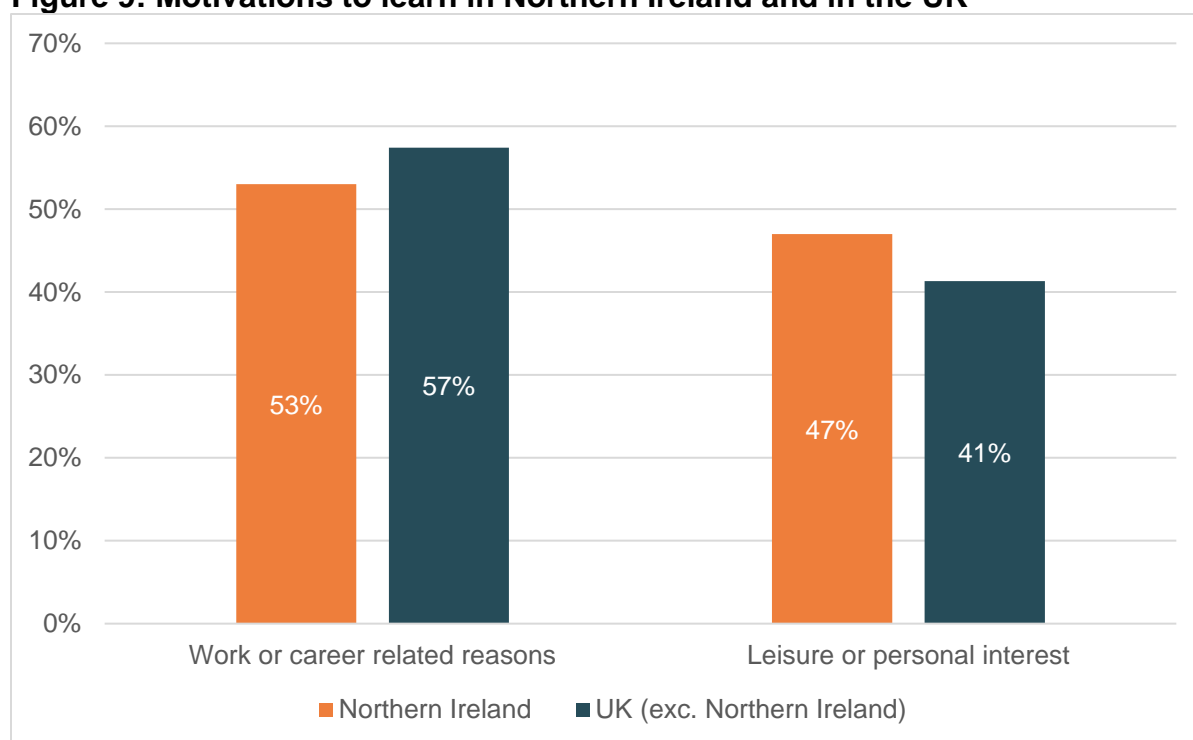
Base: Northern Ireland respondents. 'Don't know' responses have been taken out. Weighted base = 215, Current or recent learner = 105, Not current or recent learner = 110. Unweighted base = 401, Current or recent learner = 185, Not current or recent learner = 216. Base: UK (excluding Northern Ireland) respondents. Weighted base = 8691, Current or recent learner = 4291, Not current or recent learner = 4089. Unweighted base = 9105, Current or recent learner = 4673, Not current or recent learner = 4618.

Motivations to learn

Respondents who have engaged with learning within the previous three years were asked to state whether they started their main learning for work or career related reasons. In Northern Ireland, just over two in four adults (53 per cent) said they took up learning for work or career related reasons, while just under two in four (47 per cent) said they took up learning for leisure or personal interests (Figure 9).

These proportions are similar to the rest of the UK: 57 per cent of respondents in the rest of the UK said they took up learning for work or career related reasons compared 41 per cent who say they did it for leisure or personal interest.

Figure 9: Motivations to learn in Northern Ireland and in the UK



Base: all current or recent learners in Northern Ireland. Weighted base = 114, unweighted base = 185. 'Don't know' responses have been taken out due to the small sample size. Base: all current or recent learners in the UK (excluding Northern Ireland). Weighted base = 4282, unweighted base = 4593.

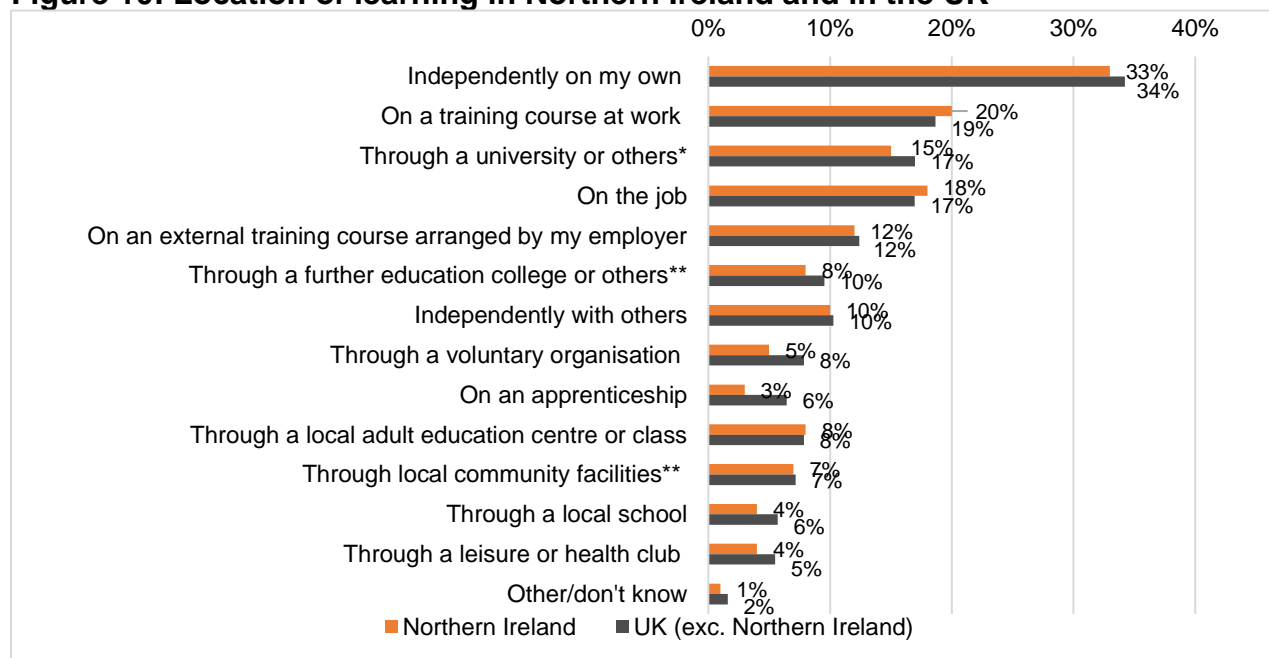
Learning delivery

Adults who reported that they are currently learning or have done so in the last three years were asked how they did or are doing their main learning. In Northern Ireland, one third (33 per cent) of current and recent learners said they learned independently on their own (Figure 10).

Work related learning was also commonly reported, with one in five adults learning through a training course at work (20 per cent), nearly one in five learning on the job (18 per cent) and one in ten (12 per cent) through an external training course arranged by their employers. Only three per cent reported doing an apprenticeship.

Also commonly reported was a course with a university higher education institution (15 per cent). Just under one in ten learners (8 per cent) said they did their learning through a further college. Other provision reported by learners included voluntary organisation (5 per cent), local adult education centre (8 per cent), community facilities (7 per cent), local school (4 per cent), or leisure or health club (4 per cent). These proportions are similar to the UK overall.

Figure 10: Location of learning in Northern Ireland and in the UK

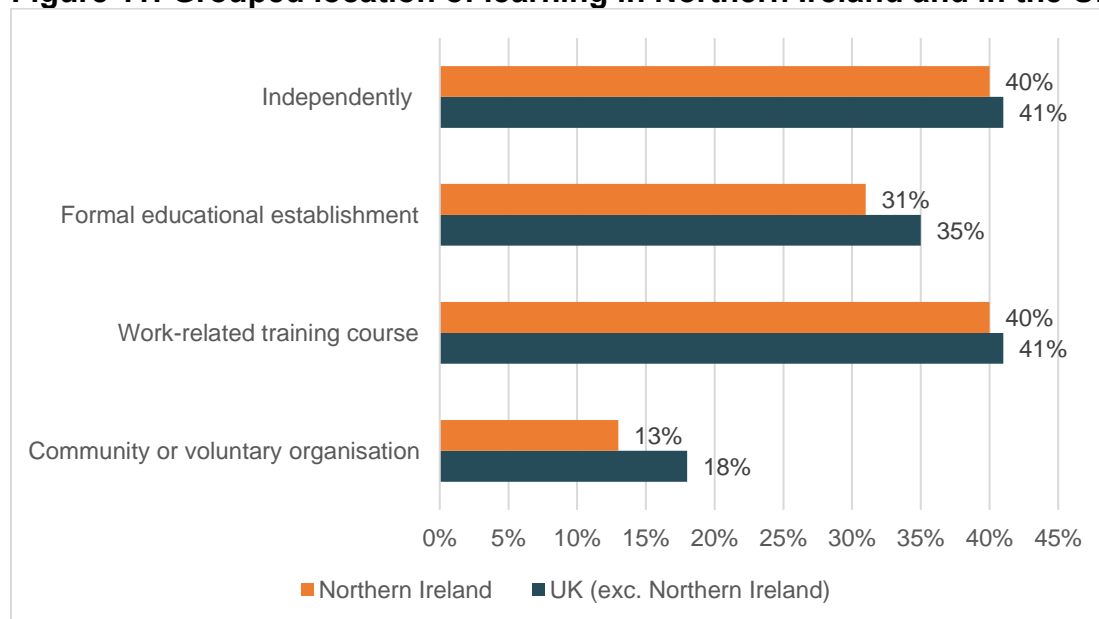


Base: All current or recent learners in Northern Ireland. Weighted base = 114, unweighted base = 185. To note: the sample sizes are small for some of these categories, so they need to be interpreted with caution. Base: all current or recent learners in the UK (excluding Northern Ireland). Weighted base = 4282, unweighted base = 4593 *higher education institution/Open University **tertiary/6th Form college *** such as a library, museum, place of worship, bookshop etc.

To help with comparison, these delivery methods could be grouped in four categories: independently; formal education establishment; work-related training course and community or voluntary organisation.⁹ In Northern Ireland, two in five participants said they have done their learning independently (40 per cent) or on a work-related training course (40 per cent), nearly one in three (31 per cent) said they have done their training through a formal establishment and 13 per cent said they have done their training through a community or voluntary organisation (Figure 11).

The delivery methods are fairly similar to the rest of the UK, with 41 per cent of current or recent learners doing their learning either independently or through a work related course, 35 per cent doing it through a formal educational establishment and 18 per cent through a community or voluntary organisation.

Figure 11: Grouped location of learning in Northern Ireland and in the UK



Base: all current or recent learners in Northern Ireland. Weighted base = 114, Unweighted base = 185.
 Base: all current or recent learners in the UK (excluding Northern Ireland) Weighted base = 4282, unweighted base = 4593.

Online and face to face

Adults who reported that they are currently learning or have done so in the last three years were asked whether their main learning took place online or face-to-face. In

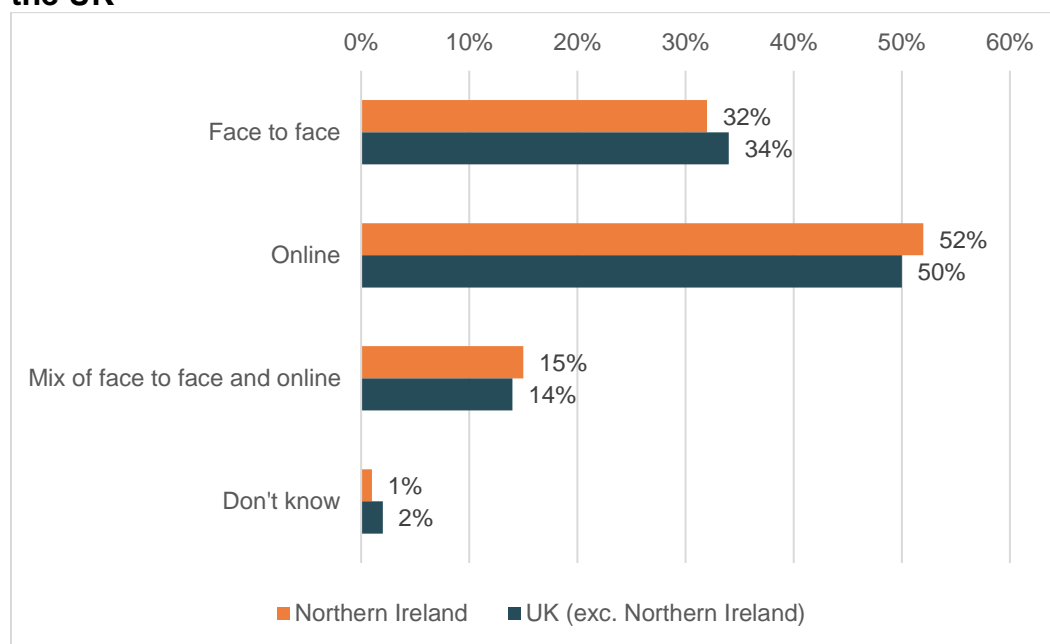
⁹ The response options were categorised as follows:

- Work-related, including: On the job; On a training course at work; On an external training course arranged by my employer; On an apprenticeship
- Independently, including: Independently on my own; Independently with others
- Formal educational establishment, including: Through a university/higher education institution/Open University; Through a further education college/tertiary/6th form college; Through a local adult education centre or class; Through a local school
- Community or voluntary organisation, including: Through a voluntary organisation; Through local community facilities e.g. library, museum, place of worship, bookshop etc; Through a leisure or health club.

Northern Ireland, just over one half (52 per cent) of current or recent learners said they completed at least some of their learning online (Figure 12). Nearly one in three (31 per cent) said they have taken up their learning face to face and 15 per cent said their learning has involved a mix of online and face to face learning.

The proportions are similar to the UK overall: 50 per cent of learners in the rest of the UK said they have done their learning online and 34 per cent said they have done it face to face.

Figure 12: Participation in learning by mode of delivery in Northern Ireland and in the UK



Base: all current or recent learners in Northern Ireland. Weighted base = 114, unweighted base = 185.
 Base: all current or recent learners in the UK (excluding Northern Ireland). Weighted base = 4282, unweighted base = 4593.

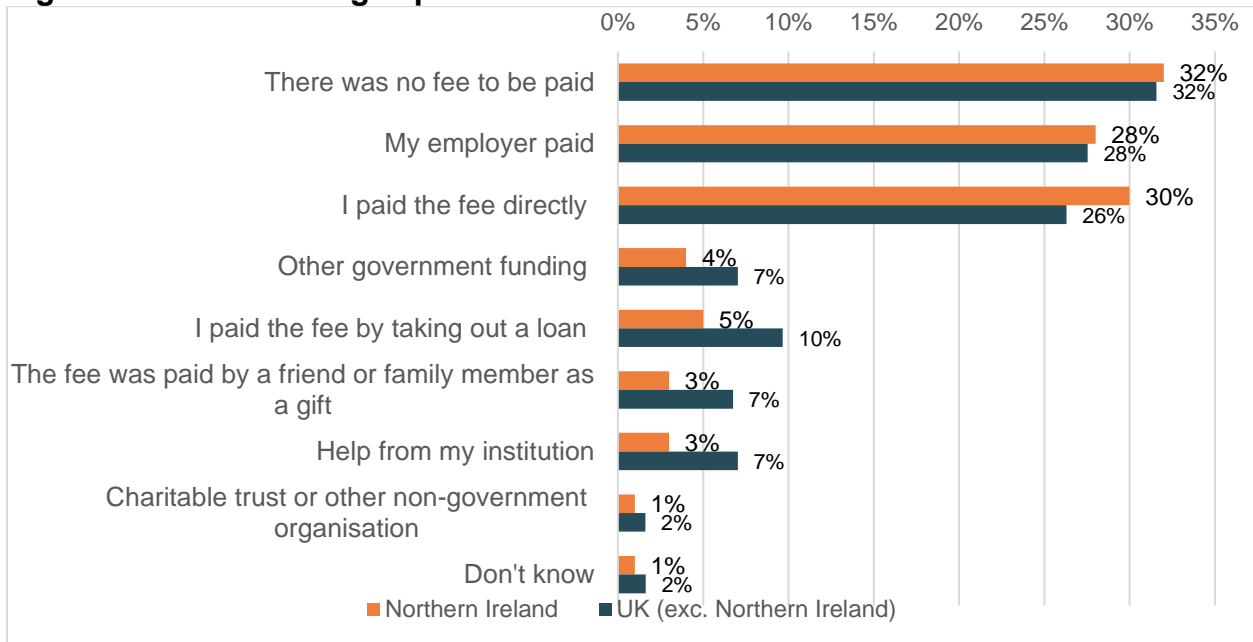
Fees

In Northern Ireland, nearly seven in ten (68 per cent) current or recent learners said a fee was attached to their main learning (Figure 13). Most commonly, learners reported they paid the fee directly (30 per cent). Nearly three in ten (28 per cent) learners said their employer paid the fee. A small minority of learners said they paid their fee with other government funding (4 per cent), by taking out a loan (5 per cent), with support from their friend or family member (3 per cent), with help from institution (3 per cent). Support by charities or non-governmental organisation was reported by just one per cent of learners.

The proportions of people who reported paying for their learning In Northern Ireland was equal to the rest of the UK (68 per cent). Although the way in which learners paid for their

learning are marginally, these differences are not statistically significant to the rest of the UK.

Figure 13: How learning is paid for in Northern Ireland and in the UK



Base: all current or recent learners in Northern Ireland. Weighted base = 114, unweighted base = 185.

Base: all current or recent learners in the UK (excluding Northern Ireland). Weighted base = 4282, unweighted base = 4593.

Barriers to learning

Each year, current or recent learners are asked to state any challenges that they have encountered while learning, and adults who have not participated in learning for at least three years are asked to identify the barriers that prevent them from doing so. These provide insights on the types of obstacles that policy and practice can seek to remove to ensure that more and different adults are able to engage in learning throughout their lives.

Challenges current or recent learners have experienced

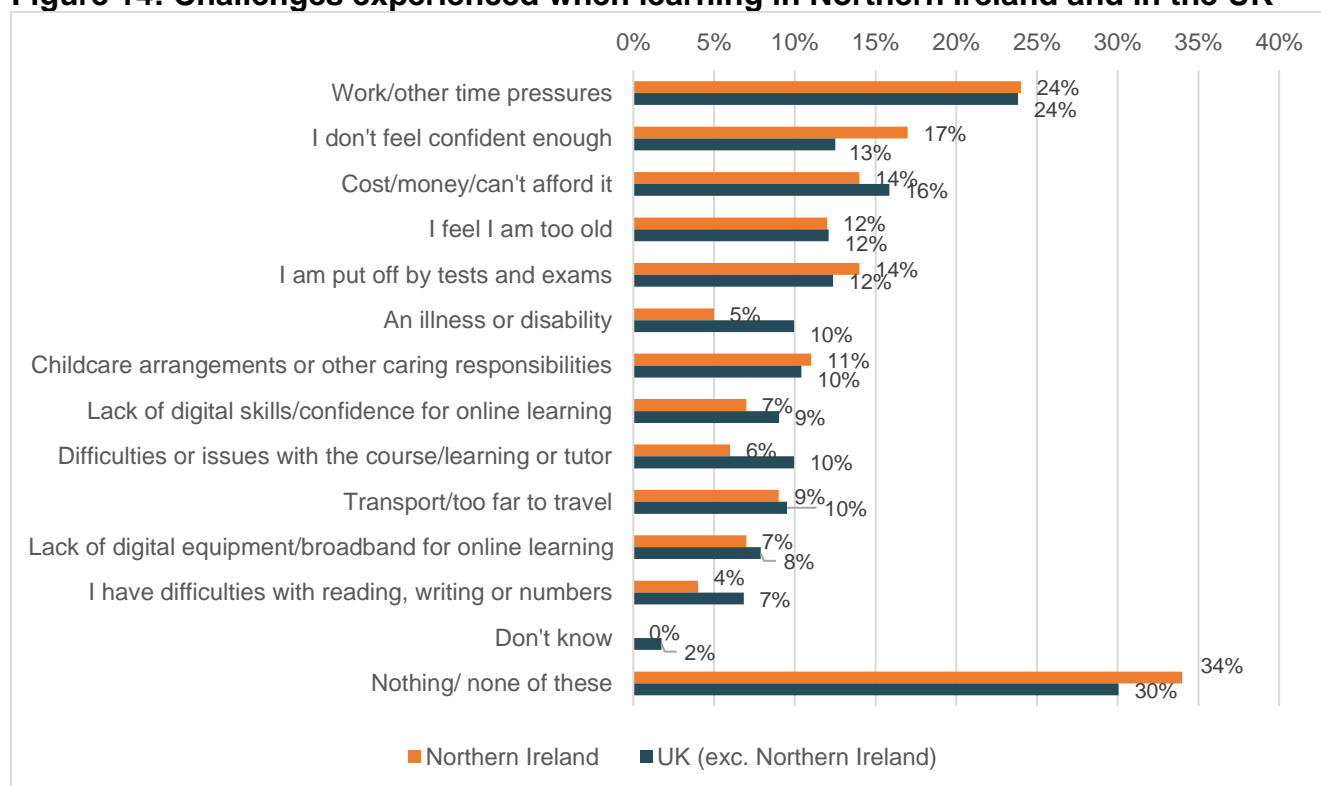
In Northern Ireland, two in three (66 per cent) current or recent learners identified at least one challenge while learning. This is slightly lower than the rest of the UK (70 per cent) and this difference is not statistically significant.

Most commonly, current or recent learners identified work and other time pressures as a challenge, with one in four (25 per cent) of adults in Northern Ireland identifying these as a challenge (Figure 14).

Other common challenges relate to people's attitudes or perceptions of learning, such as lack of confidence to learn (17 per cent), being put off by tests/exams (14 per cent) or feeling too old (12 per cent). Respondents identified challenges related to their situation, including the cost of learning (14 per cent), childcare arrangements or other caring responsibilities (11 per cent), transport (9 per cent) or illness or disability (5 per cent). Participants also said they experienced digital barriers while learning due to a lack of digital skills or confidence for online working (7 per cent) or lack of digital equipment (7 per cent).

The reported challenges in Northern Ireland were fairly similar to those identified by learners in other UK regions.

Figure 14: Challenges experienced when learning in Northern Ireland and in the UK



Base: all current or recent learners in Northern Ireland. Weighted base = 114, unweighted base = 185.

Base: all current or recent learners in the UK (excluding Northern Ireland). Weighted base = 4282, unweighted base = 4593.

Challenges encountered by learners can be grouped into those that are:

- **Situational**, arising from an adult's personal and family situation, including: cost/money/can't afford it; Childcare arrangements or other caring responsibilities; Transport/too far to travel; Work/other time pressures; lack of digital equipment/broadband for online learning
- **Dispositional**, relating to the attitudes, perceptions and expectations of adults, including: I feel I am too old; An illness or disability; I am put off by tests and exams; I have difficulties with reading, writing or numbers; I don't feel confident enough; lack of digital skills/confidence for online learning
- **Institutional**, arising from the unresponsiveness of educational institutions, including: Difficulties or issues with the course/learning or tutor.

In Northern Ireland, 46 per cent of learners said they have experienced situational challenges (Table 1). Two in five (40 per cent) reported dispositional challenges and a further 6 per cent identified institutional challenges. These proportions are fairly similar to the UK overall (see Table 1).

Table 1: Grouped challenges experienced by current or recent learners in Northern Ireland and in the UK

Group	Northern Ireland	The UK (excluding Northern Ireland)
Situational	46%	48%
Dispositional	40%	42%
Institutional	6%	10%
No challenges encountered	34%	30%

Base: all current or recent learners in Northern Ireland. Weighted base = 114, unweighted base = 185.

Base: all current or recent learners in the UK. Weighted base = 4396, unweighted base = 4778.

Barriers faced by people who haven't engaged with learning within the past three years

Nearly four in five (78 per cent) adults in Northern Ireland who said they have not engaged in learning within the past three years identified at least one barrier. This is statistically significantly higher than in the rest of the UK where 71 per cent of adults identified at least one barrier to learning.

The top barrier identified by the adults in Northern Ireland who haven't taken up learning within three years is the cost of learning (32 per cent) (Figure 15). This was followed by three in ten adults (30 per cent) saying they feel too old to take up learning.

Other barriers included not feeling confident enough (15 per cent), a disability or illness preventing them from taking part in learning (14 per cent), being put off by test and exams (13 per cent), and childcare arrangements or other caring responsibilities (11 per cent).

One in five adults (22 per cent) said they did not want to engage with learning or that nothing was preventing them from doing so.

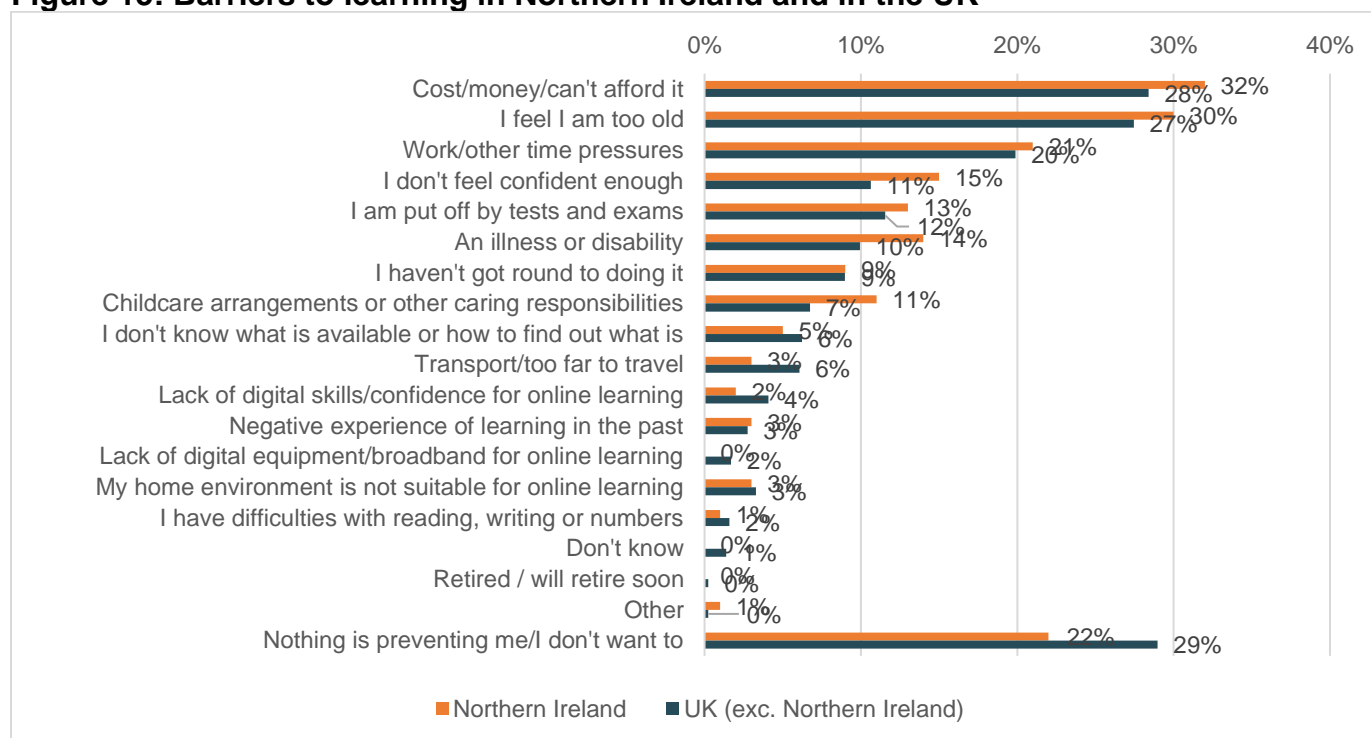
The barriers people faced in Northern Ireland are similar to the barriers experienced in the other regions. However, adults in Northern Ireland are significantly more likely to report illness or disability (14 per cent) as a barrier to take part in learning than the UK average (10 per cent).¹⁰ This could be explained by the poorer health outcomes people in Northern Ireland face compared to England.¹¹

¹⁰ These proportions need to be taken with caution as the sample sizes for these subgroups are very small (below 50 individuals in each group).

¹¹

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandlifeexpectancies/bulletins/healthstatelifeexpectanciesuk/between2011to2013and2020to2022>

Figure 15: Barriers to learning in Northern Ireland and in the UK



Base: respondents who have not participated in learning within the last three years in Northern Ireland. Weighted base = 126, unweighted base = 202. Base: respondents who have not participated in learning within the last three years in the UK (excluding Northern Ireland) Weighted base = 4073, unweighted base = 4196.

Barriers can be grouped into those that are:

- **Situational**, including: Cost/money/can't afford it; Childcare arrangements or other caring responsibilities; Work/other time pressures; Lack of digital equipment/broadband for online learning; My home environment is not suitable for online learning; Transport/too far to travel
- **Dispositional**, including: I don't know what is available or how to find out what is; I feel I am too old; An illness or disability; I haven't got round to doing it; I am put off by tests and exams; I have difficulties with reading, writing or numbers; I don't feel confident enough; Lack of digital skills/confidence for online learning; Negative experiences of learning in the past.

In Northern Ireland, nearly half of adults (49 per cent) who have not taken part in learning recently said situational barriers prevent them from doing so.

In Northern Ireland, nearly three in five (58 per cent) adults who say they haven't engaged in learning within the past three years reported that dispositional factors were preventing from doing so. This proportion is statistically significantly higher

than the proportion in the UK overall, with 51 per cent of adults in the UK identifying dispositional barriers to learning. This is mainly driven by factors such as illness or disability, with adults in Northern Ireland being significantly more likely to report this barrier than the rest of the UK. Furthermore, adults in Northern Ireland were more likely to report lacking confidence to learn than adults in three UK regions: Greater London, South East and the South West.

Table 2: Grouped barriers faced by adults who haven't engaged with learning within the past three years in Northern Ireland and in the UK

Group	Northern Ireland	The UK (excluding Northern Ireland)
Situational	49%	46%
Dispositional	58%	51%
No challenges encountered	22%	29%

Base: respondents who have not participated in learning within the last three years in Northern Ireland. Weighted base = 126, unweighted base = 202. Base: respondents who have not participated in learning within the last three years in the UK (excluding Northern Ireland) Weighted base = 4073, unweighted base = 4196.

Learning for career change

Advances in technology, including Artificial Intelligence, alongside longer working lives will see more people needing to change jobs and careers. The Coronavirus pandemic also had a profound effect on the labour market, with an increase in the number of people who are economically inactive and job vacancies at record levels.

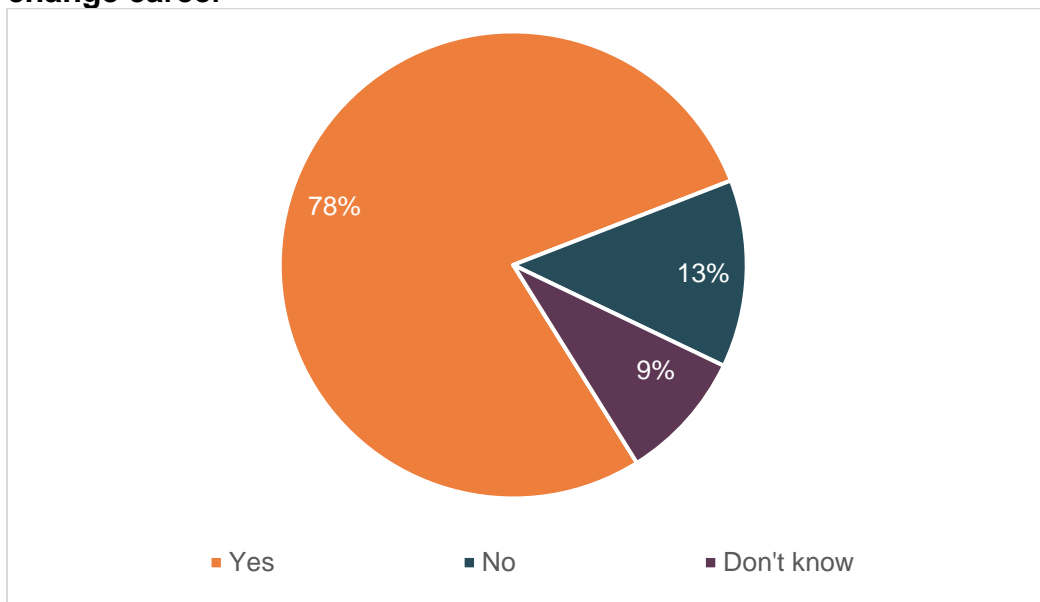
Many workers will therefore need to reskill into different careers to ensure they can make the most of the opportunities ahead. Within this context, this year's survey asked adults whether they are planning to change job or career in the near future. The survey also explored motivations to change career, barriers to changing career and what support people would find helpful.

Changing job or career

All respondents who are working or unemployed and seeking work were asked whether they thought people like them could change careers or change the occupation/industry they were in. In Northern Ireland, around four in five adults (78 per cent) believe that people like them can change career (Figure 16). Just over one in ten (13 per cent) said they did not think that people like them could change careers and one in ten (9 per cent) said they don't know.

Adults in Northern Ireland were significantly more likely to say that they believe people like them can change career, compared to the UK average (71 per cent).

Figure 16: Respondents in Northern Ireland who believe people like them can change career



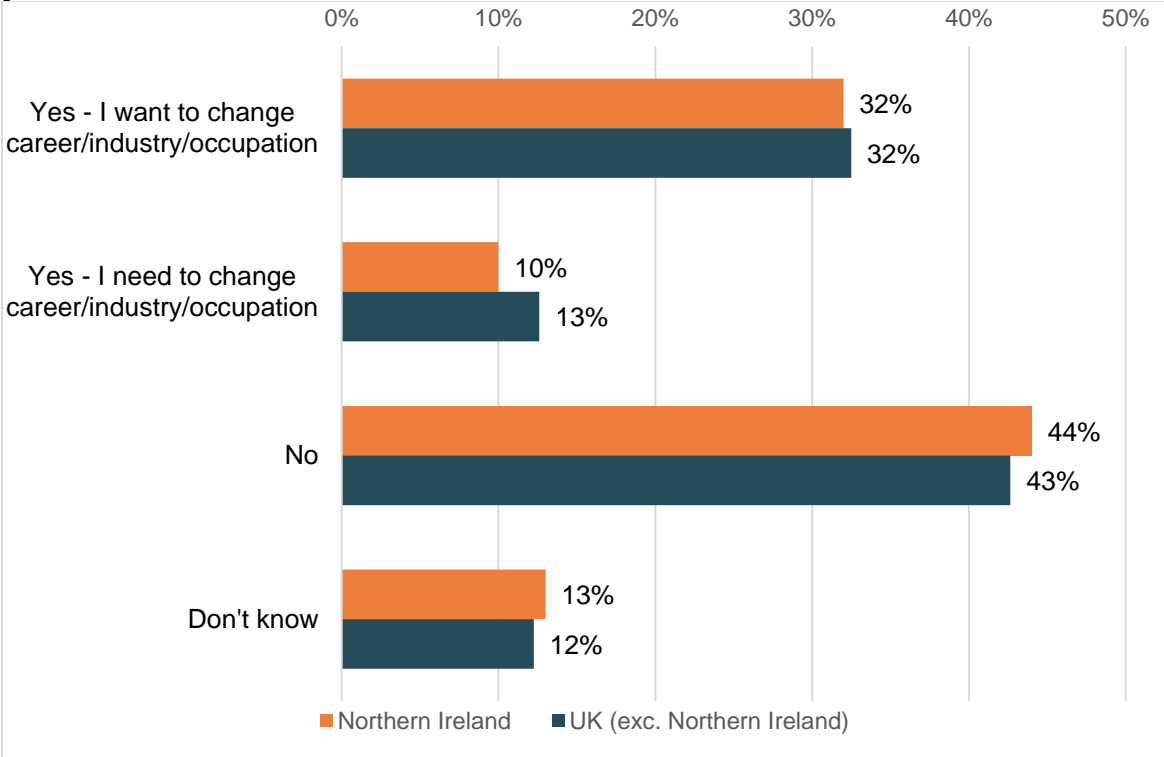
Base: respondents who are employed, unemployed and seeking work or in full-time education in Northern Ireland. Weighted base = 177, unweighted base = 292.

In Northern Ireland, one in three adults (32 per cent) want to change their career, industry or occupation. An additional one in ten adults (10 per cent) say they need to change their career, industry or occupation in the next one or two years (Figure 17). Over two in five (44 per cent) said they do not need or want to change career and 13 per cent don't know.

These figures are similar to the rest of the UK, with 32 per cent of adults who said they want to change career, industry or occupation in the next one of two years, 13 per cent who said they need to, 43 per cent who said they do not want or need to and 12 per cent saying they don't know.

Wider research indicates that around six per cent of adults change occupation or sector each year.¹²

Figure 17: Whether adults want or needs to change career in the next one or two years



Base: respondents who are employed, unemployed and seeking work or in full-time education in Northern Ireland. Weighted base = 177, unweighted base = 292. Base respondents who are employed, unemployed and seeking work or in full-time education in the UK (excluding Northern Ireland). Weighted base = 5789, unweighted base = 6297.

¹² Evans, S. and Vaid, L. (2023) [All change: Understanding and supporting retraining and career change](#)

Motivations for career change

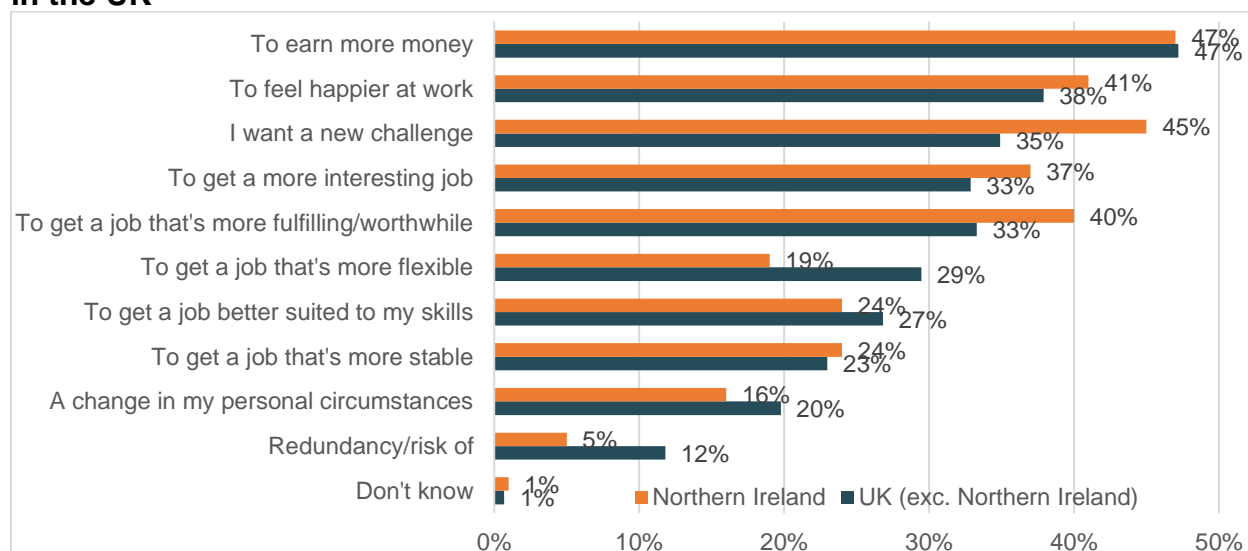
Respondents who indicated that they either want to or need to change career in the next one to two years were asked the reason for this change (Figure 18). In Northern Ireland, the main reason cited was to earn more money (47 per cent). This was followed by wanting a new challenge (45 per cent).

Respondents also reported wanting to feel happier at work (41 per cent), to get a job that would be more fulfilling or worthwhile (40 per cent), more interesting (37 per cent), better suited to their skills (24 per cent), more stable (24 per cent), or more flexible (19 per cent).

More than one in ten respondents (16 per cent) reported that a change in personal circumstances was the reason for wanting a career change or that they feared or were at risk of redundancy.

The motivations for career change in Northern Ireland are fairly similar to the other UK regions and nations (Figure 20). However, **adults in Northern Ireland are significantly more likely to say their motivation for a career change is for a new challenge (45 per cent) than the UK average (35 per cent).**

Figure 18: Reasons for wanting or needing career change in Northern Ireland and in the UK



Base: respondents who want to change job/career in the next 1-2 years in Northern Ireland. Weighted base = 76, unweighted base = 125. Base: respondents who want to change job/career in the next 1-2 years in the UK (excluding Northern Ireland). Weighted base = 2610, unweighted base = 2856.

Barriers to career change

Respondents who indicated that they want or need to change career were then asked what was stopping them from doing this (Figure 19). In Northern Ireland, the most cited barrier was not being able to afford to stop work to retrain (26 per cent). Other financial

barriers include not being able to afford training costs (19 per cent) and not being able to afford a pay cut (18 per cent).

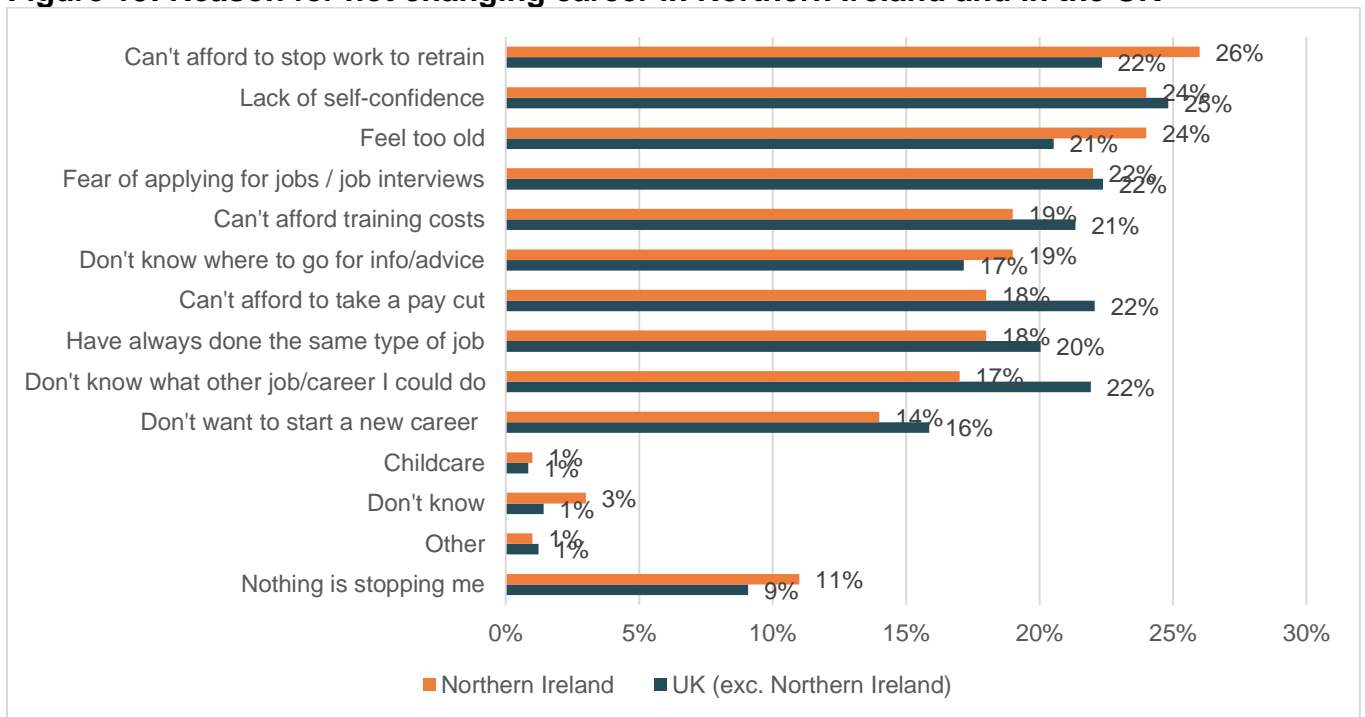
In Northern Ireland, dispositional barriers were also commonly cited, including a lack of self-confidence (24 per cent), feeling too old (24 per cent) and a fear of applying for jobs/job interviews (22 per cent).

Some barriers relate to a lack of awareness of opportunities or guidance, with one in five adults (19 per cent) identifying that they don't know where to go for information and advice. In addition, nearly one in five adults (17 per cent) in Northern Ireland don't know what other job or career they could do.

One in ten respondents (11 per cent) who say they want or need to change career say that nothing is stopping them from doing this.

The barriers to career change identified by respondents in Northern Ireland are fairly similar to the ones identified in the rest of the UK (see Figure 21). While some of the figures are slightly different, none of the differences are statistically significant.

Figure 19: Reason for not changing career in Northern Ireland and in the UK



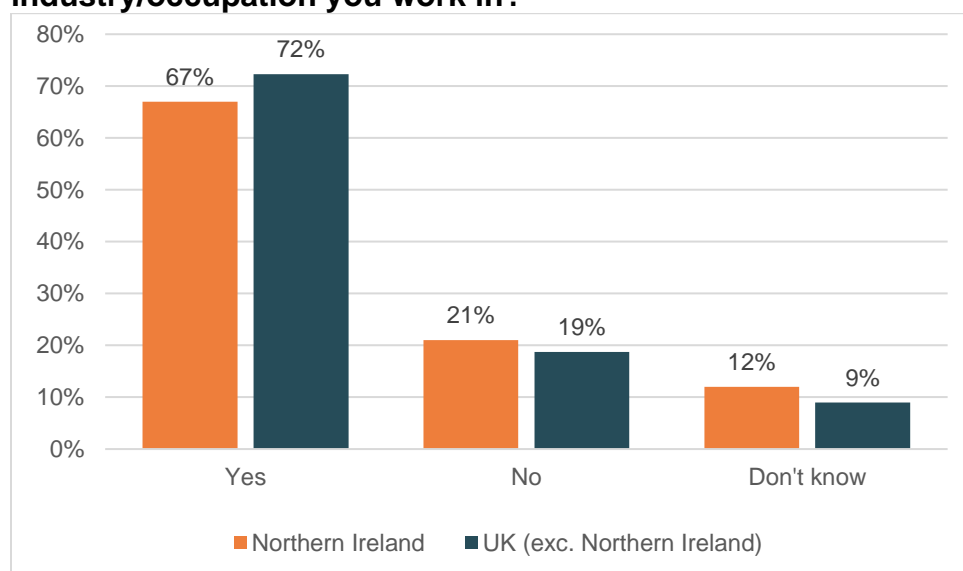
Base: respondents who want to change job/career in the next 1-2 years in Northern Ireland. Weighted base = 76, unweighted base = 125. Base: respondents who want to change job/career in the next 1-2 years in the UK (excluding Northern Ireland). Weighted base = 2610, unweighted base = 2856.

Developing skills for career change

Respondents who indicated that they want or need to change career were asked if they need to develop their skills in order to change career or the industry/occupation they are in (Figure 20).

In Northern Ireland, nearly seven in ten adults (67 per cent) said they need to develop their skills, while 21 per cent said they don't and 12 per cent said they don't know. These proportions weren't significantly different from the UK overall.

Figure 20: Do you need to develop your skills to change career or change the industry/occupation you work in?



Base: respondents who want to change job/career in the next 1-2 years in Northern Ireland. Weighted base = 76, unweighted base = 125. Base: respondents who want to change job/career in the next 1-2 years in the UK (excluding Northern Ireland). Weighted base = 2610, unweighted base = 2856.

Support for career change

Respondents were asked to select, from a list of options, what support they would find helpful if they wanted/needed to change career (Figure 21). In Northern Ireland, respondents most commonly indicated that they would need financial support towards costs of learning/training (33 per cent). Similarly, three in ten adults said they would need financial support towards living costs while learning/training (30 per cent).

Respondents also commonly said they would find advice useful – on learning or training (32 per cent), advice their transferable skills (25 per cent), to choose the right job/career for them (23 per cent), to choose the right learning or training they need to change job/career (22 per cent), or coaching to help them get a job (18 per cent). Nearly one in five respondents (18 per cent) said that they would like coaching and support when they first start a job.

Respondents in Northern Ireland identified similar elements to what they would find helpful, if they wanted or needed to change career, to the rest of the UK (see Figure 23). While similar to the UK, **adults in Northern Ireland are significantly more likely to say that financial support towards costs of learning/training would be most helpful than the rest of the UK.**

Figure 21: What would be the most helpful for changing career



Base: respondents who are employed, unemployed and seeking work or in full-time education in Northern Ireland. Weighted base = 177, unweighted base = 292. Base respondents who are employed, unemployed and seeking work or in full-time education in the UK (excluding Northern Ireland). Weighted base = 5789, unweighted base = 6297.

Respondents were asked where they would go for information and advice if they wished to change career (Table 3). In Northern Ireland, two in five respondents (42 per cent) said they would use a general online search to find information and advice. This was followed by friends, family and colleagues (23 per cent). These findings highlight the need for credible and trustworthy information being available and easy to find online, as well as the importance of social networks in providing information.

Other sources of information and advice include a recruitment consultant/agency (20 per cent), an education provider such as a college or university (19 per cent) or Jobcentre Plus (19 per cent).

Other sources of advice included social media (16 per cent), professional, sector or trade organisation (13 per cent), their current employer (13 per cent), and their prospective

employer (12 per cent). One in ten adults (10 per cent) said they do not know where they would go for information or advice about changing job or career.

These figures are similar to the rest of the UK (see Table 3). However, **adults in Northern Ireland are significantly more likely to say they would go to Jobcentre Plus for advice (19 per cent), than the UK overall (15 per cent).**

Table 3: Where respondents go for advice on career change

Source of information/advice	Northern Ireland	UK (excluding Northern Ireland)
General online search	42%	37%
Friends, family or colleagues	23%	23%
Education provider such as a college or university	19%	16%
Social media	16%	16%
Recruitment consultant/agency	20%	16%
Professional, sector or trade organisation	13%	15%
Jobcentre Plus	19%	15%
Prospective employers	12%	12%
Your current employer (e.g. HR, line manager)	13%	11%
Citizens' Advice	7%	8%
Local community, voluntary or religious centre	5%	5%
Local or national charity	3%	5%
Unionlearn representative or Workplace Learning Advocate	3%	5%
Don't know	11%	12%

Base: respondents who are employed, unemployed and seeking work or in full-time education in Northern Ireland. Weighted base = 177, unweighted base = 292. Base respondents who are employed, unemployed and seeking work or in full-time education in the UK (excluding Northern Ireland). Weighted base = 5789, unweighted base = 6297.